

BELOW The cave of Vela Spila lies on the Croatian island of Korčula. Chunks of the cavern have collapsed over the passing millennia, but traces of human activity dating back at least 25,000 years are preserved within.

VELA SPILA

THE MILLENNIA-LONG STORY OF A CROATIAN CAVE

Patricia Duff delves into a remarkable cavern on the Dalmatian coast.

Magnificent Vela Spila overlooks the town of Vela Luka, which spreads around an L-shaped bay on the island of Korčula on Croatia's Dalmatian coast. The imposing cavern yawns to accept the visitor down into its depths, where archaeologists from the EUH2020-funded Mend the Gap project have been finding evidence of human activity in each of its long sequence of strata to their current depths some 25,000 years ago. Such a lengthy, almost unbroken, sequence is one of the reasons that Vela Spila is special among archaeological sites.

Admiring, from the mouth of the cave, the panoramic view of the harbour, neighbouring islands, and the Adriatic, a visitor may find it hard to imagine that, at the height of the last Ice Age, the sea would have been a distant shimmer: a glimmer on the horizon. In the Upper Palaeolithic, the humans sheltering in the cave looked out over plains, which provided a rich resource of animals to hunt and plants to gather. Migrations of red deer and aurochs along the rivers from the snowy tundra to the Adriatic temperate plains provided ample sustenance for those who followed and butchered them with fine flint tools, flaked from river pebbles. Evidence from hearths in Vela Spila shows that the hunters chiefly caught red deer and aurochs, with some ass, wild boar, roe deer, wolf, lynx, and hare; and that they mostly hunted in the autumn and winter. Birds too were caught: not only for

their meat, but also for their claws and feathers, which may have had utilitarian as well as decorative uses.

Sea shells found in Vela Spila indicate that they were collected or traded from the shore some 20km distant. These, together with teeth from red deer, were painstakingly pierced, perhaps for wearing as pendants, braiding into hair, or stitching onto garments.

Fired figurines

Around 17,000 years ago, an extraordinary event occurred. Someone discovered, probably by accident, that if clay was put in a fire, it became hard and would not return to mud when wet. We do not know why or for how long people had been making clay figurines beforehand. Perhaps one, drying by the fire, simply fell in. When it had been recovered, the change in its structure would have been clearly apparent. Many figurines of animals and people were made. In a 2m² trench, archaeologists have found more than 40 pieces. There are only five sites in Europe where fired clay figurines dating to the Palaeolithic have been found. They were made for some 1,500 years – nothing else of clay was fired: no pots or cookware – and then the technology was forgotten and disappeared completely until 10,000 years later, when pottery reappeared in the cave, mostly in utilitarian forms.

Researchers have found a thick stratum of volcanic ash here, identified as being from an eruption around 14,500 years ago in

BELOW The modern town of Vela Luka, spreading out around its bay, as seen from Vela Spila.



the area of what is now Naples. Those using the cave would have seen cloudy, red skies for a few days before the ash started to fall like snow, slowly smothering the life out of the landscape.

It was this (or perhaps another event) that led the cave to be abandoned for several centuries. Two large apertures, which today give a welcoming light that makes the enormous expanse within less foreboding, are the result of a rock fall. The dating of strata around and below a large rock from the roof of the cavern suggest it collapsed around 11,000 years ago. Perhaps an earthquake or even several tremors dislodged the massive rocks, as similar falls appear in other caves in the area. The resulting fear or superstition may have kept survivors from returning.

By the time humans began once more to use Vela Spila, about 9,500 years ago in the Mesolithic, the ice was receding, and the sea was approaching. With a rise of around a metre every ten years, people would certainly have been aware of the encroaching waters. As Korčula became an island and the Adriatic plain submerged beneath the sea, large game was no longer available and hunters had to be satisfied with hares, goats, lynx, and foxes. Large quantities of fishbones, mostly mackerel, show a massive exploitation of this new resource. The presence of some tuna and swordfish bones suggests that people fished in the open sea, presumably from boats.

Although they had easy access to an abundance of sea shells, these Mesolithic people only chose one type of shell, the *Columbella rustica*, to pierce for threading as decorative beads. These shells are found throughout the central Balkan and Adriatic settlement sites, indicating a shared tradition among widely spread groups of people.

Rare Mesolithic burials, dating to around 9,000 years ago, have been found towards the back of the cave. The partial skeleton of a 40-year-old man was discovered buried at the cave wall. Many pierced sea shells were found with his bones, indicating that he was buried in beaded garments. He may have worn a beaded headdress or the shells may have been braided into his hair. Missing from

his skeleton are the cranium from the skull, the pelvis, the femurs and tibia of both legs, and the humerus and ulna from one arm. After burial, his flesh was allowed to decompose before these larger, important bones were exposed and removed. There is no evidence that animals disturbed his grave, indicating people took his bones for some particular purpose. Remains of food: fish, shellfish, sea and land snails were found in the same area, perhaps vestiges of celebratory feasting. The man was about 40 years of age, making him old for the period: perhaps he was a person of special significance. Well-preserved burials of children have also been found: a foetus close to term and three children less than four years old. These children's burials are the only ones found in Mesolithic Dalmatia, while that of the adult male is the only ▶

BELOW As well as being a shelter for humans and animals over thousands of years, a destination for the living and the dead, Vela Spila is also a stunning natural feature.





LEFT Excavations within the cave are gradually peeling back the millennia. Thousands of years of human activity are compressed into the strata that have gradually built up in the cave (**ABOVE**). Note the thick black layer towards the bottom, which has been identified as an area used for hearths.

example of a grave that was opened for a purpose and then the body reburied.

Finds of Italian flint from Gargano and obsidian from the Lipari islands indicate that overseas trade flourished, while a piece of volcanic rock placed in the emotional context of a child's grave hints at its symbolic value.

Trade in goods leads to the exchange of ideas: new tools, new materials, new traditions and the spread of pastoralisation and cultivation. As the Neolithic appeared in Dalmatia, pottery was introduced, and its use for containers and domestic ware became widespread. Some found in Vela Spila show sophisticated incised decoration, others (of a buff clay) are painted with red swirls, dots, and lines. The cultivation of cereals was introduced and the discovery of grinding stones to make flour indicates food preparation may have been carried out in the cave, although it is thought the people usually lived in shelters or houses outside. From the animal remains, we know that the herding and consequent domestication of animals, another significant feature of the Neolithic, became established around Vela Spila.

The discovery of 'layer cakes' – layers of dark and light grey dung – in a section of the cave show it was used as animal shelter in winter. The dung would have partially dried during spring and summer, enabling the herders to return in autumn to burn it, fumigating and ridding the cave of insects before they reintroduced their sheep and goats for the winter months. The wetter dung beneath the dried layer would have remained a darker grey than that which was burnt.

Higher living

Vela Spila does not seem to have been inhabited during the Bronze and Iron Ages. The people probably moved to higher areas – several hillforts are known nearby. These areas afforded better views of the channels and islands. Stone-built houses have been found on Kopila hill about 5km to the east of Vela Spila, with a large and complex stone necropolis at its foot. The people of the time, whom the Romans called the Illyrians, were renowned for their piracy – particularly of Roman ships trading in the area. They were such a nuisance that, according to Appian's *Roman History*, Octavius (the future Augustus) eradicated the entire population

in retribution when he was Governor. It was a lesson to all their neighbours not to disrespect the Romans and their ships.

More recently, Vela Spila continued to be used for various activities – a wartime hiding place, somewhere for picnics, games, and courting – until it was finally fenced a few years ago. Representing so much to so many people, in the present and the past, ongoing excavations are set to reveal even more of Vela Spila's human story. ■

CONTRIBUTOR

Patricia Duff is project director of ArchaeoLink (www.ArchaeoLink.org), a non-profit organisation whose purpose is to liaise with the communities in which archaeologists work. It enables knowledge-exchange and helps those communities to obtain educational, societal and economic benefits through being active participants in the development and protection of their archaeology and cultural heritage.

INFORMATION & FURTHER READING

Vela Spila is 120m above the town of Vela Luka on the island of Korčula, Croatia. It is a 30-minute walk up a gently sloping path from the town centre. The site is open daily in summer; during winter months, a key is easily obtained from the Tourist Office for visits.

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