

CHILEAN "ELEPHANT" FOSSILS HINT AT ANCIENT HUMAN SETTLEMENT

Contributed by Emmanuelle Lebhar
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Stegomastadons (above) roamed southern Chile 13,000 years ago
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Scientists Think They May Have A New Monte Verde On Their Hands

Archeologists in southern Chile's Region X are continuing to revel in the chance 2007 discovery of molars and bones belonging to a stegomastodon, a species of prehistoric elephant. Their ongoing research suggests that the site, known as La Plata, could eventually rival nearby Monte Verde in terms of historical significance.

The stegomastodon (gonfoterio in Spanish) is a prehistoric mammal that looks like a stronger version of the modern elephant. It lived in the Andes region approximately 13,000 years ago.

When scientists first began to search the famous archeological site of Monte Verde in 1976, it was originally to look for stegomastodon bones. But a close look revealed man-made markings on the bones, which led to the historical discovery of the oldest human settlement in the Americas.

That finding had a tremendous impact on the understanding of when and how human beings first arrived in the Americas. Indeed, before Monte Verde, the oldest known settlement was located in New Mexico, which backed the hypothesis that humans arrived by crossing over from Asia to Alaska via the Bering Strait. People then gradually migrated south, according to the long-standing premise. The discovery of even older human remains so far south raised serious questions about that theory, suggesting the possibility that humans may have instead arrived from some Pacific island or even from Antarctica.

More than 30 years later, in December 2007, a resident found old bones on a construction site near Lago Ranco. The bones turned out to have belonged to a stegomastodon. Scientists from the Universidad Austral rushed to the site (La Plata) to look for more fossils, and soon discovered remains of other prehistoric species. The concentration of the remains suggests the possibility that there was a human settlement close-by. Convinced they may have another Monte Verde on their hands, researchers are urging officials to classify the zone as an official archeological site.

Mario Pino, a geologist from the Universidad Austral, explained in an interview to La Nación that "it is very unusual that three distinct species of mammals would have died naturally in such a small sector."

"It could be the product of human activity," he added.

However, performing a thorough search of La Plata is a huge operation in terms of money and time. The scientists are therefore in the process of collecting the necessary funding that will allow them to go beyond the stegomastodon discovery, and possibly to make a new breakthrough in the history of the human populating process of our planet.

By Emmanuelle Lebhar (patagoniatimes@gmail.com)