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MINISTRY FOR SPORTS, CULTURE, HERITAGE & YOUTH
310 Main Street
Gibraltar

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Work in Gorham's Cave starts next week

The annual excavations at Gorham's Cave commence next week but scientists have already been working in Vanguard Cave, sister cave to Gorham's, for about a month and with spectacular results.

The excavations at Vanguard Cave commenced in 2012. Previously, small-scale soundings had indicated the site's potential. Radio-carbon results from last year revealed that the youngest levels at this site were on the limit of radio-carbon dating, over 40 thousand years ago (kyr), which meant that the entire 17-metre deep sequence would have to be dated by other means. Sampling has been done this year for dating sand grains using the technique of optically stimulated luminescence (OSL); the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, and the Gibraltar Museum came to a collaborative agreement recently and samples have been taken from the areas so far excavated. This will permit us to know the time frame that Vanguard Cave represents.

Vanguard Cave is revealing a fine stratigraphy with a high resolution revealing individual events in the cave. Several camp fires made by the Neanderthals have been found, with stone tools left behind as well as remains of food eaten. These Neanderthals seem to have had a taste for shellfish in particular. High resolution climatic evidence is also revealing alternating periods of high rainfall and drought. The dried up remains of several ponds, over 40 kyr, have been found. This degree of resolution is unique and is allowing scientists to understand past climate change in great detail.

Work is also being undertaken in parallel so as to have the site ready for World Heritage nomination in 2015. This work includes plans to repair the steps leading down to the site and to create a series of walkways that would permit access to limited and guided groups of visitors while not affecting the archaeological deposits themselves. Large items of metal and other rubbish that have accumulated on the beach as a result of winter storms will also be removed.

Meanwhile a paper in the international journal PLoS One last month has revealed that Gorham's Cave acted as a "mother cave" for the Neanderthals while other caves around Gibraltar, including Vanguard Cave, were visited for short periods, possibly while going for specific food resources like shellfish or ibexes. The paper, co-authored by a team from the Gibraltar Museum, the University of Queensland in Australia and the University of Oxford, looked at the stone tools made by the Neanderthals in the different sites around the Rock. The nature of the raw materials used, the type of tool made and the density in each site permitted the conclusions reached. The work also showed that the last Neanderthals retreated to home territory around Gorham's Cave, where they would have felt at home, concentrating their activities close to the site.

This paper also shows the importance of looking at Gibraltar as a unique example of a Neanderthal territory. Ideas to create a Neanderthal Park that would tell the story of the way of life of these enigmatic humans now receive further support from these latest findings. Gibraltar is in the privileged position of having Gorham's and Vanguard Caves, caves that are unique in the world, situated within the wider context of a spectacular Rock that was a Neanderthal territory. The opportunity to tell this story to a wide audience is unrivalled and work at Gorham's and Vanguard Caves, and other sites around the Rock, provides the factual basis that will allow us to tell this incredible story and take visitors to the Rock on a real journey of discovery – a theme park like no other.

For further information please contact Professor Clive Finlayson at the Gibraltar Museum: Tel 200 74289; email clive.finlayson@gibmuseum.gi