

Fossil finds ages Europeans by 200,000 years

EXPERTS on prehistoric man are rethinking their dates after a find in a southern French valley suggested our ancestors may have reached Europe 1.57 million years ago - 200,000 years earlier than we thought.

What provoked the recount was a pile of fossilised bones and teeth uncovered 15 years ago by local man Jean Rouvier in a basalt quarry at Lezignan la Cebe, in the Herault valley, Languedoc.

In the summer of 2008, Mr Rouvier mentioned his find to Jerome Ivorra, an archaeological researcher at France's National Centre for Scientific Research.

The subsequent dig uncovered a large variety of ancient animal bones: cattle, deer, horses and also of carnivorous animals related to cats and dogs.

More importantly however, about 10m down and under the basalt layer, the team found 20 or so tools, most of which bore traces of use.

The surprise came when argon dating showed the site went back 1.57 million years - substantially older than many other prehistoric sites - according to a paper published in the specialist journal, *Comptes Rendus Palevol*.

It is older, for example, than the Spanish site at Atapuerca, which dates back a mere 1.2 to 1.1 million years.

And as the paper pointed out, the existence of such manmade objects in Europe was extremely rare in this period.

In comparison, the first such tools in East Africa date back to 2.5 million years ago, while human settlements in the Transcaucasia region date back to a 1.8 million years ago.

"A discovery as rich as the one in the Herault Valley offers a real opportunity to better understand the Europe of this period," the CNRS said.

More digs were planned for 2010 to discover more about the site.