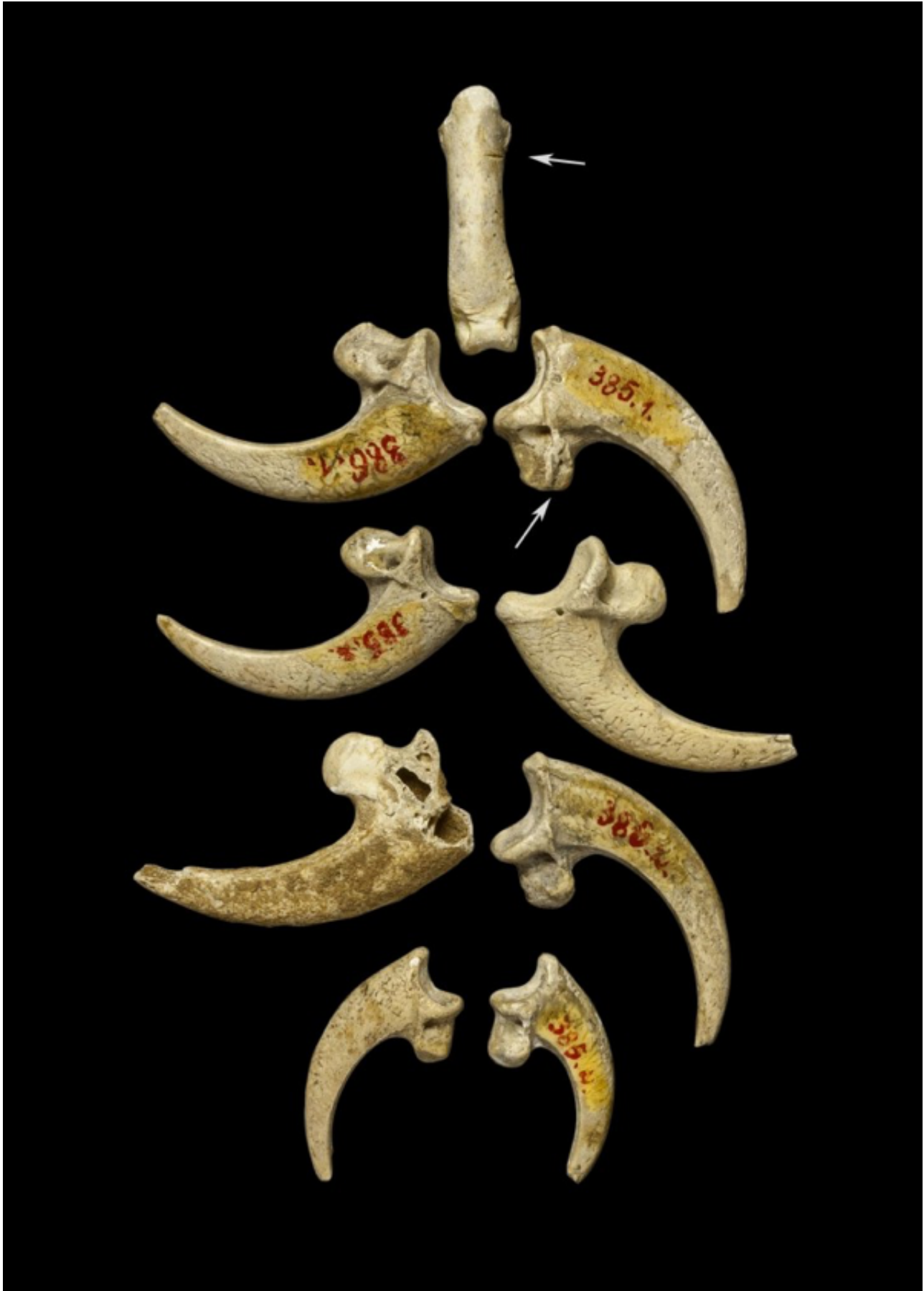


Neandertals Turned Eagle Talons into Jewelry 130,000 Years Ago

As longtime readers may have noticed, I have an abiding interest in Neandertals. To help me keep up with the latest scientific insights into these mysterious relatives of ours, I have a Google alert set for "Neandertal" (and the alternate spelling, "Neanderthal").

[Kate Wong](#) March 12, 2015



Eagle talons from the site of Krapina in Croatia were harvested by Neandertals and worn as jewelry 130,000 years ago. Image: Luka Mjeda, Zagreb

As longtime readers may have noticed, I have an abiding interest in [Neandertals](#). To help me keep up with the latest scientific insights into these mysterious relatives of ours, I have a Google alert set for “Neandertal” (and the [alternate spelling](#), “Neanderthal”). I’m always excited to see the email notification that a new story about our closest relative is available for my reading pleasure. There’s just one problem: nearly half the time, the story isn’t about Neandertals at all. Rather the word appears as an invective hurled at whichever politician or other despised figure has attracted the writer’s ire.

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Neandertals are the Rodney Dangerfields of the human family—they don't get no respect. Despite mounting evidence that our prehistoric cousins hunted with great skill, made beautiful stone tools, showed compassion toward one another and [buried their dead](#), among other advanced behaviors, the word Neandertal remains a widely used pejorative. Disdain toward Neandertals lingers even after the revelation several years ago that most people today carry their DNA, thanks to [long-ago hook-ups](#) between Neandertals and anatomically modern *Homo sapiens*.

Now a stunning new discovery underscores that it is time to welcome Neandertals in from the cold. Researchers have found markings on eagle talons from a well-known Neandertal site in Croatia that indicate Neandertals harvested the claws and wore them as jewelry. Such evidence attests to a capacity for symbolic thought, long considered a hallmark of modern humans. Davorka Radovčić of the Croatian Natural History Museum in Zagreb, David Frayer of the University of Kansas and their colleagues describe the find in a [paper](#) published March 11 in *PLOS ONE*.

This find is not the first to show Neandertals used raptor claws. Researchers have previously described isolated talons from several

Neandertal sites in Europe. But the new discovery, from the site of Krapina in northern Croatia, includes eight talons from at least three white-tailed eagles. The cut marks and polished facets on the talons suggest human modification rather than, say, trampling by animals. The researchers suggest that the talons were part of a single piece of jewelry, possibly a necklace, tied together with string or sinew.

What makes this discovery additionally important is that it predates by a long shot the arrival of anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* in Europe some 45,000 years ago. Many previous finds suggestive of Neandertal symbolism date to the interval during which Neandertals and moderns overlapped in Europe, leaving open the possibility that Neandertals simply copied the newcomers or that modern items got mixed in with Neandertal remains. But the Krapina assemblage dates to around 130,000 years ago—tens of thousands of years before moderns reached Europe. If the Neandertals there were making jewelry, their endeavor cannot be chalked up to modern influence. They must have conceived of this form of symbolic expression on their own.

Ultimately, such adornments feed into the million-dollar question of whether Neandertals had language, because both art and language stem from the ability to think symbolically. Archaeologists used to hold that symbolic thinking and other elements of so-called behavioral modernity emerged only within the past 50,000 years or so and in anatomically modern humans alone. But traces of symbolic behavior far older than that have emerged at early modern human sites in Africa. The fact that Neandertals decorated their bodies ([and their cave homes](#)) suggests that both Neandertals and moderns inherited this capacity for symbolic thinking—and, by extension, language—from an even older common ancestor.

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For more on Neandertal cognition, check out my [feature article](#) in the

February 2015 *Scientific American*.



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