

Kimberley cave reveals ancient bone tools

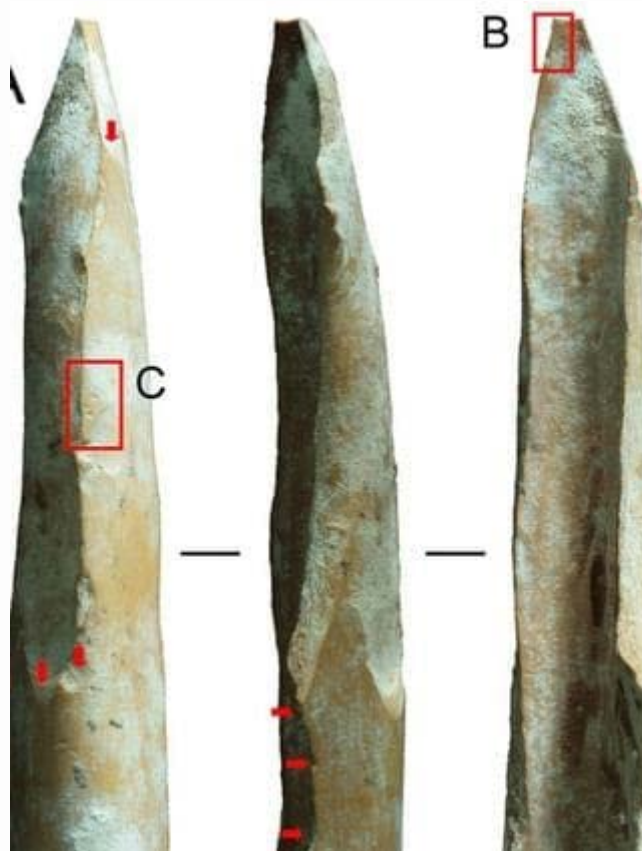
- Victoria Laurie
Senior Reporter
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Aboriginal people in north Australia were making sharp tools from kangaroo leg bones as far back as 46,000 years ago, based on dating of bone tools found in limestone caves in the Kimberley region.

New research has reappraised the age of bone artefacts found in the cave site as being more than 35,000 years old, and in some cases up to 46,000 years old, ranking them among the oldest bone tools found in Australia.

Traditional owner Rosemary Nuggett says she and her relatives helped a team of researchers retrieve eight bone artefacts from the Riwi Cave in Mimbi country between Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek. "They're pretty old and part of our heritage."

Analysis of the artefacts revealed her ancestors were fashioning bone tools earlier than thought and adding them to their toolkit. Artefacts believed to be of similar age were found inside the ill-fated Juukan Caves further south in the Pilbara, before the site was destroyed by mining company Rio Tinto last year.



Ancient bone tools found in a Kimberley cave system.

A previous finding at Carpenter's Gap in the Kimberley was also older than 46,000 years.

However, most bone artefacts were thought to be confined to the cold southern regions of Australia and Tasmania, where sharpened bones were used to skin animals for clothing against the cold.

Michelle Langley, from Griffith's Australian Research Centre for Human Evolution, says it was originally thought bone tools were "not so important in the north of Australia and were only brought into the toolkit relatively recently".

"These tools show that wasn't the case," Dr Langley said.

"We hadn't found them because they haven't been surviving long time periods in hostile preservation conditions of northern Australia."

Published in the International Journal of Osteoarchaeology, the study is illustrated with pointed kangaroo thigh bones used for hunting, the manufacture of plant fibre items and collecting of resins from termite mounds.

Jane Balme, from the University of Western Australia, said the tools showed the importance of organic materials in early technologies of First Nations people.