



Skeleton Reveals Oldest Case of Leprosy

Randolph E. Schmid,
Associated Press

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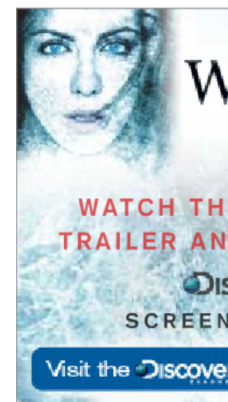
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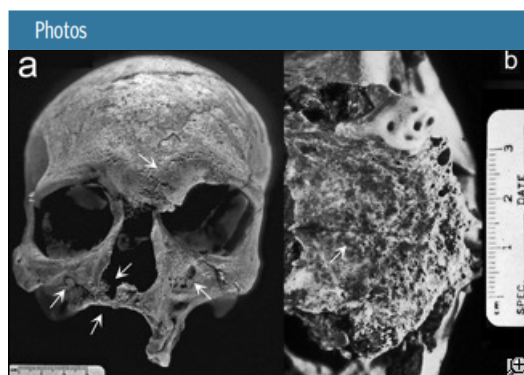
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May 27, 2009 -- Leprosy is one of mankind's most [ancient scourges](#), mentioned in writing from ancient India to the Bible to the Middle Ages. Now researchers have uncovered what they say is the oldest case of the disease yet found.

Analysis of a 4,000-year-old skeleton from India shows traces of leprosy, researchers [report in Wednesday's edition of PLoS One](#), a publication of the Public Library of Science.

The skeleton was buried about 2000 B.C. at the site of Balathal, a large settlement in what is now Rajasthan, according to Gwen Robbins, an anthropologist at Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C.

Balathal thrived from about 3700 to 1800 B.C.

While leprosy is infectious, it is relatively hard to catch, requiring prolonged association with someone who has the disease. It has only one other animal host, the armadillo.

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Scientists have speculated that [leprosy](#) originated in India or Africa and may have spread from Asia to Europe with the returning army of [Alexander the Great](#).

Previous skeletal evidence for the disease has been dated to 300 to 400 B.C. in Egypt and Thailand.

While leprosy is relatively easy to treat today, the World Health Organization estimates there were about 212,000 new cases worldwide last year, a rate that has been gradually falling. It is a bacterial disease affecting the skin and nerves, especially of the hands and feet.

Robbins' team said the presence of leprosy at Balathal supports early texts that refer to the disease as early as 1550 B.C. in India and Egypt.

The research was funded by the American Institute of Indian Studies, the George Franklin Dales Foundation, the Fulbright Program and the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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