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THE DISCOVERY OF THE OLDEST NEANDERTHAL FOSSILS IN SERBIA

*The discovery of the Serbian-Canadian team was published in the prestigious scientific venue **Journal of Human Evolution***

Press release of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade

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BELGRADE – Four Neanderthal teeth belonging to at least two individuals (one adult and one child) have been uncovered in Velika Balanica Cave in Sićevo George near Niš. An analysis of the teeth has been published in the *Journal of Human Evolution* by an international collaboration between experts from Serbia and Canada, led by Professors Dušan Mihailović from the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade and Prof. Mirjana Roksandic from the University of Winnipeg, and financed by the NEEMO project of the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia (project no. 7746827).

The teeth have been dated to approximately 300 thousand years old, making them the oldest Neanderthal (*Homo neanderthalensis*) fossils in Eastern Europe and the second oldest human fossils in Serbia, after a half-million-year-old human mandible found at Mala Balanica Cave in 2006. Previously Neanderthal remains had only been identified at one site in Serbia, the nearby Pešturina Cave, where a single Neanderthal tooth and fragment of arm bone were discovered in 2015. The most ancient remains Neanderthal remains, between 300–500 thousand years old, have been identified in Western Europe, and over time, their range has expanded to Western Asia. Their presence at Velika Balanica Cave 300 thousand years ago represents the earliest evidence of their eastward expansion.

The Velika Balanica teeth were also found in association with evidence of fireplaces and stone tools for processing leather known as Quina scrapers. In contrast to the fossil remains, the oldest evidence for these types of tools is found in the East, at Qesem Cave in Israel, and only much later are they found further west. This suggests that during the Middle Paleolithic era, the Balkans may have been a place of cultural contact between the populations of Europe and those of the Middle East. It is still not possible to say with certainty whether the spread of these cultural innovations was due to migrations of people or to the transmission of cultural knowledge between communities, nor can we identify the original bearers of this technology (Neanderthals or some other species). It is certain, however, that these innovations later led

to the final shaping of cultural patterns characteristic of the Middle Paleolithic - a period that represents one of the major turning points in the early prehistory of the humankind.

Archaeological excavations of the caves near Niš (Pešturina, Mala and Velika Balanica) are undertaken in cooperation between the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade and the University of Winnipeg and financed by the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia.

The Journal of Human Evolution is one of the leading academic journals in the field of human evolution. The published paper can be found at:

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