

Tele-hobbits start small war

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Tele-hobbits start small war

By Deborah Smith, Science Editor

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Circus ... access to the bones of tiny humans found on Flores is in dispute.

A new stoush has erupted over the "hobbit" bones, with Australian researchers coming under fire for examining the priceless remains while they are being held illegally by an Indonesian researcher.

Alan Thorne, an archaeologist at the Australian National University, and Maciej Henneberg, an anatomist at Adelaide University, studied the bones of the new species of tiny people this week in Yogyakarta, while being filmed for an Australian television program.

A German researcher has also reportedly taken parts of the bones in an attempt to extract some DNA.

Iain Davidson, professor of archaeology and palaeoanthropology at the University of New England, said he was extremely disturbed by the behaviour of the three researchers. "No scientist should have any truck with stolen remains, no matter how interesting they may be," Professor Davidson said.

Peter Brown, a member of the Australian and Indonesian team that found the bones of *Homo floresiensis* on the Indonesian island of Flores, said the team was outraged by the developments. Professor Brown, of the University of New England, said the researchers should be disciplined by their universities.

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AdvertisementDuring excavations on Flores in 2003 and 2004 the team unearthed the remains of seven "hobbits", people only a metre tall with

brains the size of grapefruits who hunted pygmy elephants and giant rats and survived until at least 12,000 years ago.

In December an Indonesian palaeoanthropologist, Teuku Jacob, removed all of the hobbit remains from their storage place in Jakarta to his own laboratory in Yogyakarta, without the permission of the scientists who found them and before they had had time to study them all closely.

Although Professor Jacob, of Gadjah Mada University, signed an agreement to return them by January 1, he has kept them and missed other promised return dates since.

Professor Jacob in Indonesia and Professor Henneberg in Australia said last year in the media, before they saw the bones, that the hobbits were not a new species but just modern humans with a brain deformity called microencephaly.

This was dismissed as "ill-informed" by Professor Brown, who said the description of the new dwarfed species had gone through intensive review by international experts in the field before it was accepted for publication in the journal Nature in October.

Professor Davidson, who is not a member of the discovery team, said scientists working in other countries expected there to be cultural differences. But it was unusual for a scientist not involved in a project to gain control over discoveries part way through it.

Professor Jacob's action is in breach of an agreement between the University of New England and the Indonesian Centre for Archaeology, where the bones were originally stored. He said Australian scientists should live up to the high standards of behaviour that are normal here.

Professor Jacob would not say last night when he would give the bones back. He said he had the right to allow the Australian scientists and a researcher from the Max Planck Institute access to the remains. Scientists from around the world should be able to examine the hobbit bones and "make up their own mind what it is".

He said he would be criticised whatever he did.

But Professor Davidson said it was the sole right of the team finding the remains to decide who had access to them. He said the appearance of Professor Henneberg and Dr Thorne on the TV program 60 Minutes would "turn physical anthropology into a circus". Professor Henneberg and Dr Thorne were unavailable for comment.