

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

The Big Night in Prehistory

“Archaeologists Rediscover Cannibals” by Ann Gibbons, in *Science* (Aug. 1, 1997), 1200 New York Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

When Arizona State University bioarchaeologist Christy G. Turner II first examined the jumbled heap of human bones in Arizona, he thought: *cannibalism*. They had, for example, cut marks and burns like those found on animal bones that had been roasted and stripped of their flesh. But Turner was working in the legendary '60s, when the new conventional wisdom held that all Indians, particularly the ancient Anasazi, were gentle, peace-loving folk. Moreover, in the eyes of most scholars, the fossil evidence for earlier claims of cannibalism had come to seem extremely weak, writes Gibbons, a *Science* contributing correspondent. So Turner's contention was greeted with, in his words, “total disbelief.”

Today, however, Gibbons reports, even skeptics concede that the evidence for cannibalism has grown a lot stronger, as Turner and others have developed criteria for distinguishing the marks of cannibalism. Just within the last 2,500 years, it appears, not only the Anasazi but the Aztecs of Mexico and the people of Fiji may well have feasted on their own kind—and often enough to indicate that it was not only at times of extreme hunger. Researchers in Europe have been coming to similar conclusions about the Neanderthals, who lived between 45,000 and more than 130,000 years ago.

After Turner's initial cannibalism thesis was hooted down, he and his late wife, Jacqueline Turner, systematically studied tray after tray of prehistoric bones in museums and private collections in the United States and Mexico. In several hundred specimens, they identified a pattern of bone processing that showed little respect for the dead. “There's no known mortuary practice in the Southwest where the body is dismembered, the head is roasted and dumped into a pit unceremoniously, and other pieces get left all over the floor,” Turner says.

Meanwhile, paleoanthropologist Tim D. White of the University of California, Berke-

ley, focused on Mancos, a small Anasazi pueblo on the Colorado Plateau from around A.D. 1150, where archaeologists had recovered the scattered and broken remains of at least 29 individuals. In *Prehistoric Cannibalism at Mancos* (1992), Gibbons says, White “describes how he painstakingly sifted through 2,106 bone fragments, often using an electron microscope.” He distinguished marks left by butchering from those left by animal gnawing or trampling; defined a new category of bone damage he called “pot polish,” shiny worn areas on bone tips resulting from the bones being stirred in pots; and compared the human remains with those of ordinary game animals at other sites, to see if they had been treated in the same way.

White concluded, Gibbons writes, that the Mancos remains “were the leavings of a feast



Goya's *Les Cannibales* (1812)

in which 17 adults and 12 children had their heads cut off, roasted, and broken open on rock anvils. Their long bones were broken—he believes for marrow—and their vertebral bodies were missing, perhaps crushed and boiled for oil. Finally, their bones were dumped, like animal bones.”

Though White's book has become the unofficial guidebook for the field, his and Turner's case for cannibalism among the Anasazi hasn't swayed all the critics. “It's still just a theory,” insists Museum of New Mexico archaeologist Peter Bullock.