

Hunter-gatherers cared for first known ancient invalid

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He was too old to hunt, a hunchback probably needing a cane for support, and suffered terrible lower back pain. But a member of the human family who lived 500,000 years ago is the most elderly ancient human ever found. The individual of the species *Homo heidelbergensis* has been named "Elvis" after his pelvis and lower backbone were uncovered in [Atapuerca](#), northern Spain. The hunter-gatherer was about 45 years old when he died.

"His spine was bent forward so, to keep an upright posture, he possibly used a cane, just like elderly people today," says Alejandro Bonmatí of the Complutense University of Madrid, Spain.

The fact that Elvis was so infirm suggests he was looked after by his contemporaries, which Bonmatí's team say is good evidence that hunter-gatherers didn't abandon the weak. He could not have been an active hunter, nor could he carry heavy loads. "For food he would have depended on sharing what members of the group had caught," says Bonmatí.

"But rather than being a burden, he may have had valuable knowledge that he shared with other members of the group that helped them survive, providing evidence for a highly socialised group with bonds of solidarity."

Bad back

That much is speculation, but we do know that *H. heidelbergensis* was an upright-walking species that [preceded modern humans](#) and which [gave rise to Neanderthals](#). In his prime, Elvis was something of a hunk, as were many of his species, coming in around 1.7 metres tall and weighing at least 90 kilograms.

But analysis of his lower vertebrae show that he was in poor shape in his dotage. As well as being hunched, he had a slipped vertebra which must have constantly and painfully rubbed against its neighbour. He'd also developed a bony growth on another vertebra which, in modern humans, is known to be very painful.

A year ago, the same team [reported evidence from Atapuerca](#) that a 12-year-old child with skull malformations [was cared for by the same group](#).

"We have evidence building up that these people were caring," says Chris Stringer, an anthropologist at the Natural History Museum in London. "This individual probably could move around, but couldn't get his own food, so it implies a level of social support, and that he was valued by his contemporaries."

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