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Stone Age clothing more advanced than thought



Venus of Willendorf wore a woven basket hat, not an elaborate hairdo. [CLICK](#) for a look at the weaving on the hat.

By Gloria Chang, February 3, 2000

Think of life for women in the Stone Age and you've probably got them in crudely fashioned dresses made of animal skin, perhaps being dragged across the cave floor by their hair. Or hovered over a hot fire tending to a dinner of mastodon or mammoth. Now think finely woven hats, belts and skirts - and a place in the highest echelons of society. That's what a new discovery tells us about women and their clothes in the upper Paleolithic.

"It all began when we discovered and studied impressions of textiles and basketry and nets on little pieces of hard clay," explains Olga Soffer, an archeologist at the University of Illinois. "We saw an enormous diversity in loom-weaving, including plain weave, twining, and a good deal of basketry as well as nets."

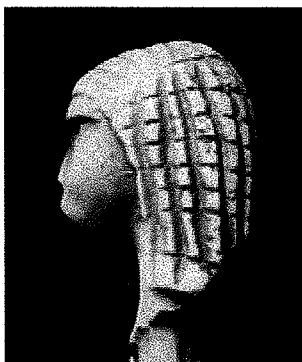
The signs of the sophisticated weaving technologies were found on over 90 pieces of clay in the Czech Republic dated at about 27,000 years ago. That makes them the earliest evidence of weaving. It was previously assumed that weaving didn't come about until 5,000 to 10,000 years ago during the Neolithic period.

Soffer then compared the clay pieces to the so-called "Venus" figurines, which are also dated to about the same time, about 25,000 years ago.

"It suddenly struck us that what we were looking at under the microscope on these little fragments was precisely what was being shown as clothing on some of these 'naked ladies'."



Venus of Kostenki wore a woven hat and a 'bandeau' with straps. [CLICK](#) for a larger view.



Venus of Predmosti, found

After careful study, she and her team identified fine detailing showing different weaving methods. And different items of clothing depending on which part of Europe the Venus figurines came from. Those from western Europe were adorned with basket hats or caps, belts worn at the waist and what Soffer calls a bandeau - a strap of cloth that wrapped around the body right above the breast. Eastern European women wore belts, hung low on the hips and sometimes string skirts.

Though there's no one single meaning to the Venus women, they are very well-known, especially for their large breasts

in France. **CLICK for a map showing where the Venuses have been found.**

and full stomachs depicting pregnancy. Up until now, the ones that did have clothing, were thought to have elaborate hairdos rather than hats, or tattoos on their bodies.

"We always sort of noticed them, we just considered them secondary in importance, saying maybe they're hairdos, maybe they're tattoos without anyone ever really sitting down and studying them," offers Soffer as an explanation as to why no one had noticed that they might be clothing.

Finding the same weaving technologies depicted on the Venus women, who most probably wore them in rituals, rather than as everyday wear, also tells Soffer that women associated with weaving probably held a high position in society.



Venus of Kostenki. Tummy shows the woven belt (left) and head shows the woven hat. [CLICK for a larger view.](#)

"We know from the textile impressions that the weaving can be very very fine. We know the fine weaving takes a lot of time," says Soffer. "What the Venus figurines is telling us, is that this technology of making clothes was important enough to be immortalized in stone.

A lot of us suppose that if it's important enough to be in iconography, it is very important in those societies, likely giving these women positions of status."

Soffer and her team have also found some tools made of bone and ivory of about the same age. Although they are still working on the tools, they appear to be net gauges, spindle needles and weaving sticks.