

The Guadeloupe Skeleton Controversy: A Moratorium

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There always comes a time in any controversy debated in the pages of a scientific journal when a moratorium must be called in the interests of all concerned. Such is now the case with the controversy over the Guadeloupe skeleton.

THE DEBATE SO FAR

The debate began in January 1983 when Bill Cooper in England drew our attention to the existence of this fossilised human skeleton from Guadeloupe now housed in the British Museum (Natural History) in an article that was published in the magazine *Ex Nihilo*.¹ Given the nature of Bill's comments about the skeleton and their devastating implications for uniformitarian geology and theories of human evolution, it was not surprising that others began to evaluate Bill's claims and the data they were based on, and it wasn't long before the debate began in earnest, initially in the pages of *Ex Nihilo*, but then continuing in the pages of the *Ex Nihilo Technical Journal* as the arguments became more lengthy and technical.

In a nutshell, the focal point of the controversy is the age of the rock that encases the skeleton, and thus the age of the skeleton itself. Bill Cooper has maintained that the available geological data suggests the limestone is Miocene age, between approximately five and 25 million years old according to the uniformitarian geological timescale. As the skeleton of a 'modern' human, this of course appears to create somewhat of a dilemma for theories of human evolution. Thus it was inevitable that the first 'salvo' in the debate was fired by Dr Chris Stringer of the British Museum (Natural History) itself.² Bill Cooper replied.³ Dr Stringer, of course, is the scientist at the museum responsible for the study of fossil material relevant to the evolution of man, and is therefore the one most interested in the Guadeloupe skeleton in the museum's own collection.

But it hasn't been someone from the ranks of the evolutionists that has really stirred up the controversy. In the ensuing years, creationists David Tyler and Dr Kurt Wise both made contributions twice to the debate in these pages,⁴⁻⁷ insisting that the skeleton is the remains of an Indian buried in beach sands that later hardened to beach

rock, that is, sand grains cemented by calcium carbonate crystallised from infiltrating ground and sea waters. Both Bill Cooper and Malcolm Bowden have twice retorted,⁸⁻¹¹ strongly insisting that the geological descriptions given for the excavation site of the skeleton suggest the enclosing rock is definitely Miocene limestone. Indeed, much of the debate to-date has centred around the exact location of the skeleton's excavation site, obviously the key to understanding the identity and age of the rock from which the skeleton was excavated. It was at this stage that in order to attempt the resolution of these points, John Mackay visited Guadeloupe in 1985 and attempted to locate both the geological layer from which the skeleton came and the excavation site itself. He insisted that his investigations ruled out the Clerc archaeological site that Dr Kurt Wise maintained was the source of the controversial Guadeloupe skeleton.¹²

TOO PERSONAL

That, in brief summary, was the status of the debate before the publication of this volume of this journal. The preceding pages in this volume present the latest contributions from the protagonists. Dr Kurt Wise takes to task the research methodology of his opponents, and in excruciating and hair-splitting detail dissects almost sentence by sentence the various arguments of Cooper and Bowden, particularly where he feels that they have either misunderstood or misconstrued geological details because of their lack of geological expertise, or where he feels their argumentation is erroneous or misleading. Understandably both Cooper and Bowden respond as if stung by a hornet, questioning whether Wise is not somehow a closet evolutionist. This is why I have allowed Kurt to respond with a personal note of testimony as to his Christian and creationist stand.

So now I must call for a moratorium in this debate for the following two reasons. First, the debate has become far too personal, with misunderstandings on both sides as to the character and motives of the opposite parties in the debate. There is no question that we all want to resolve the truth of the matter, but these misunderstandings have only served to blur and detract from the main details to be resolved. On the one hand, we are grateful to Bill Cooper

for bringing the details of the case to our attention, and on the other hand, we can be grateful to Kurt Wise for endeavouring to keep the argument on a sound scientific basis. However, Kurt's now well-known propensity to dissect any weaknesses in any creationist's argument has only served yet again to ensure that he has been misunderstood. While one regrets such misunderstandings and some apologies may be in order, our counsel obviously has to be that participants in a debate of this nature need to be extra-careful about what they write to ensure that their motives and character are not misunderstood. Until both sides cool down and the dust settles on this debate, it would be unwise for any further contributions toward resolving the true age of this Guadeloupe skeleton.

INSUFFICIENT GEOLOGICAL DATA

However, there is a second very important, and perhaps more important, reason why a moratorium in this debate is necessary — **we simply do not have sufficient geological data from which to conclusively resolve this controversy.** Whatever the failings of the earlier investigators, at the time of the skeleton's removal and subsequently, we simply do not have the necessary geological maps and stratigraphic sections and descriptions from which we can categorically state which geological layer and outcrop of that layer was the source of the skeleton fossil and hence therefore the age of the skeleton itself. This is not to denigrate the Mackay report in the last volume of this journal either, but it can only be regarded as a first-effort introduction to a thorough geological investigation, which should the next time be undertaken by a qualified, professional geologist. Preferably, by two such professionals to ensure cross-checking of details in order to remove any bias in their perception and interpretation of the data. Until we have an unambiguous thorough picture of the geology of the area it will not be possible to resolve this debate.

For those who have been following the debate in the literature up until this point, no further elaboration on this second reason for a moratorium would be necessary, since the various arguments going backwards and forwards regarding what various observers did or did not write about, or worse, deliberately (?) chose not to comment upon, the actual layer from which the skeleton came, only serve to highlight my point about the inadequacy of the geological descriptions and data hithertofore. However, to those who thought the Mackay report offered progress, let me just show briefly how one new detail only serves to remind us of the very preliminary nature of the data and interpretations there reported.

MICROSCOPE EXAMINATION OF GUADELOUPE ROCKS

As part of the documentation of his investigations,

Mackay brought back from Guadeloupe a collection of rock samples from various outcrops and strata. Some time previously we had written to Dr Chris Stringer at the British Museum (Natural History) politely asking if it was possible for us to have a sample of the rock encasing the controversial skeleton in the care of his museum in exchange for some appropriate Guadeloupe samples that were about to be collected during Mackay's forthcoming visit to Guadeloupe. To his credit Dr Stringer graciously responded, and he subsequently received Guadeloupe rock samples from us. But as a consequence, I have been able to have microscope thin sections made of the samples brought back from Guadeloupe by Mackay, and the sample of the rock encasing the skeleton in the British Museum (Natural History). These I have now examined.

The rock which encases the skeleton unquestionably has all the appearance of a sand composed of rounded carbonate grains and microfossils cemented by carbonate (see Figure 1). On its own as one small sample, one could not categorically decide whether it was a type of detrital limestone (calcareous sandstone or sandy limestone) or a beach rock, although the latter would be a feasible description.

Next comes the question as to which of the Mackay samples the British Museum (Natural History) sample best matches and ironically, while in many respects the suite of samples all look very similar, upon examination under the microscope the sample that best matches the rock encasing the Guadeloupe skeleton is a Mackay sample from west of the village of Moule, from a rock layer that Mackay described as 'in situ beach rock' (see Figure 2). Photographs of this outcrop appear as Figure 13 in his report, the sample coming from what he also described as 'laminated beach rock underlying coral reefal limestone' in the outcrop appearing in the photograph labelled as part (c) of that Figure 13. Interestingly, even the macroscopic description of this layer seems to reasonably coincide with the descriptions of the layer from which the skeleton was excavated.

Now it needs to be firmly stated at this juncture that in identifying this comparison of samples under the microscope, I do not wish this to be seen as any sort of 'conclusive proof'. Such comparisons can at best be only preliminary and tentative, given that I've barely examined one square inch of each rock under the microscope when each rock sample shows some textural and other variations at the hand specimen scale, not to mention the probable variations at the outcrop scale. To be more conclusive thorough investigation under the microscope really requires multiple thin sections from multiple representative examples from the same layers in many correlatable outcrops. Yet my initial microscope finding still stands with some validity.

This disclosure really answers none of our vital questions at all, even though it gives some credence to the identification of the rock encasing the Guadeloupe skeleton as

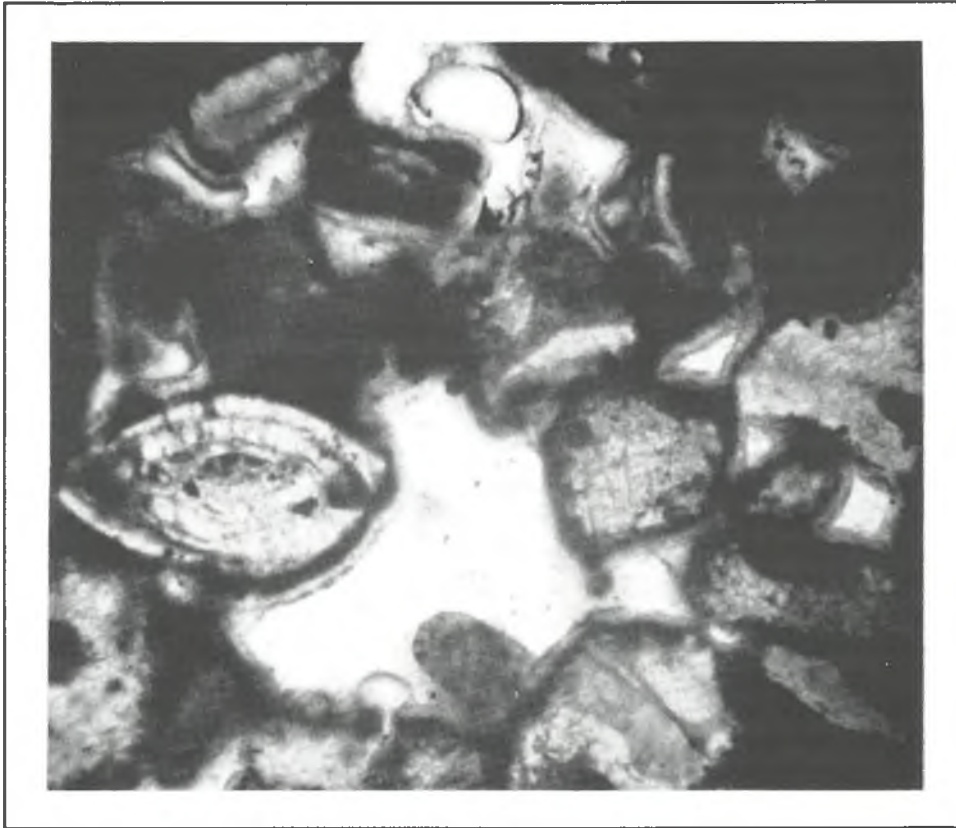


Figure 1. Photomicrograph of a sample of the limestone which encases the Guadeloupe skeleton in the British Museum (Natural History) (sample per courtesy of Dr Chris Stringer). The photomicrograph shows rounded carbonate grains and a fusulinid foraminifera cemented by carbonate. (The field of view is approximately 1.5mm across, so the magnification is about 75X.)

beach rock. However, it should be kept in mind that the excavation site is described in all the reports as being to the east of the village of Moule, not to the west. Only by inference can this beach rock layer west of Moule be possibly identified with the beach rock layer presumed to underlie the reefal limestone layer under the sand dune of the so-called Clerc site east of Moule, as depicted by Mackay in his Figures 8 and 14 and suggested by him as the beach rock layer from which the British Museum skeleton came. But Mackay did not, and perhaps was not able to, physically and continuously trace this beach rock layer west of Moule, past the village of Moule, to the east as far as the Clerc site. Consequently his preliminary report is still far from adequate in enabling us to resolve this whole debate. As already indicated, what is needed is a further and more detailed geological investigation of the area taking into account all the existing data, but an investigation which produces comprehensive geological maps and stratigraphic sections. If Cooper were right, one could even hope for the finding of further skeletons!

A MORATORIUM IMPOSED

Enough said. With these reasons given, we will

therefore be imposing a moratorium on this debate until such time as we have new leads that enable us to come to a fitting conclusion as to the identity of the layer from which this skeleton came, and therefore the age of this skeleton itself. I think those on all sides of the debate will agree with this moratorium, but it is our hope that the debate will not just end here, and that geologists of the right calibre will be able to make the necessary journey and undertake the necessary detailed investigations in the not too distant future.

Nevertheless, we can thank all those who have contributed to the debate thus far. While it has proven to be a lively topic, I believe we have all learnt a few lessons, not the least of which are that creationists can disagree, and that all research and writing efforts undertaken need to be done so with the clearest of logic and scientific reasoning, no confusion of the data or terminology, and the utmost clarity in written expression. Surely we can all agree with Dr Kurt Wise that if creationist research is to receive any sort of recognition, even within just Christian scientific and creationist circles, then it must be done with the utmost rigour and care, only calling into question interpretations based on the opposing framework, and not the raw geological data itself, lest we run the risk of ap-

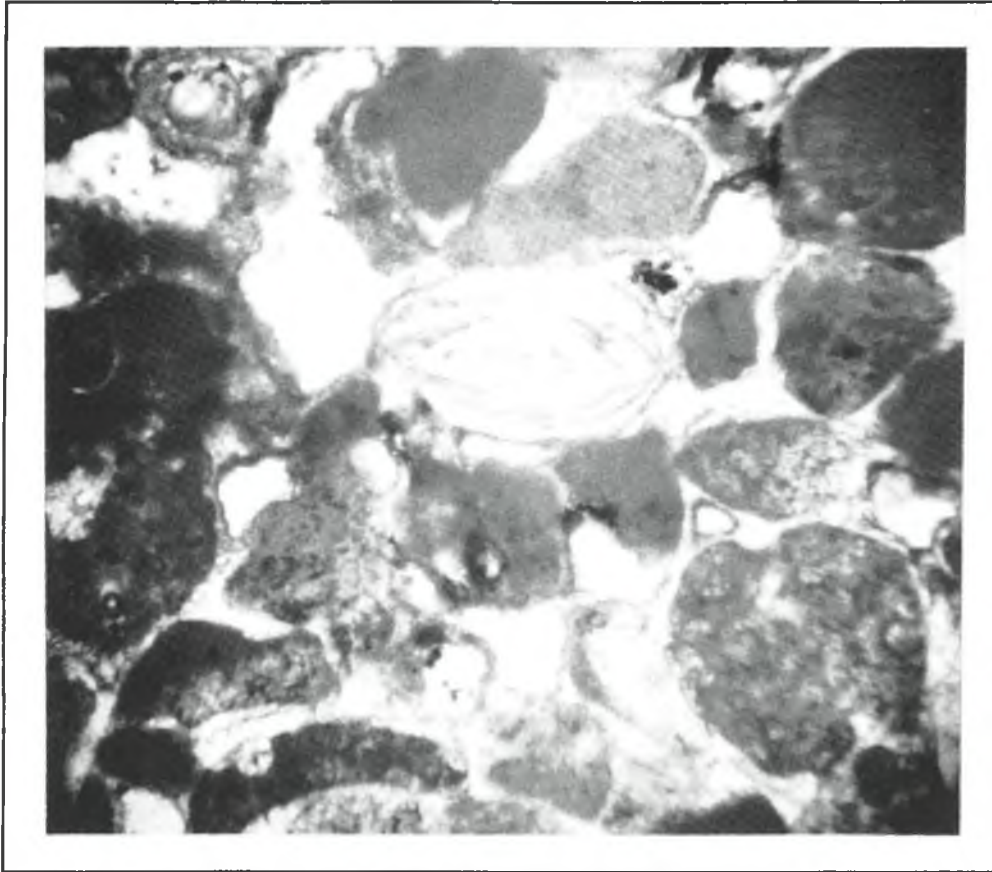


Figure 2. Photomicrograph of a sample of limestone from east of the village of Moule on Guadeloupe, which Mackay described as in situ laminated beach rock. Notice the similarities to the photomicrograph of Figure 1. This photomicrograph here also shows rounded carbonate grains and a fusulinid foraminifera cemented by carbonate. This assemblage and texture is consistent with the field description. (The field of view here is also approximately 1.5mm across, so the magnification is again about 75x.)

pearing to be anti-science.

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