

A mammoth sensation in Serbia - no matter how old

Wading through the swamps that hundreds of thousands of years later would become eastern Serbia, Vika became stuck, never managing to pull herself free, and eventually died. Now Vika, a mammoth whose skeleton was found perfectly preserved in a crouched position, has been hailed as a 'sensational' find despite disputes over her age, species and even sex.

In the millennia since the animal's death, 27 metres of earth were deposited on her until May when a digger in the Kosolac mine pit, 60 km east of Belgrade, exposed her skeleton.

Fortunately, no damage was done during the surprise discovery and now Vika's remains, preserved at the site by a climatized tent, have been made accessible to scientific visitors.

'Our geologists dated Vika's age at 4.8 million years, based on the age of the surrounding stratum,' said the director of the Belgrade Natural Museum, Zoran Markovic.

If Serbian experts are correct, Markovic says, the mammoth remains are 'the oldest ever found in Europe'.

Serbian scientists say that Vika was a 'southern mammoth' (*Mammuthus meridionalis*), standing four metres tall and weighing seven tonnes, with 2.5 metre long tusks.

Dutch mammoth expert Dick Mol however disputes these claims. After visiting Vika in August, he insists the specimen isn't a female southern mammoth but a male 'steppe mammoth' (*Mammuthus trogontherii*), herds of which roamed between 300,000 and a million years ago. Mol points to skeletal characteristics and massive grinding teeth.

But even if the find is less spectacular than what the Serbs claim, the discovery of Vika is 'clearly a sensation, a treasure for science', says Mol, who has taken part in the excavation of mammoth remains in Siberia, Western [Europe](#) and Canada.

In Mol's opinion, the remains of Vika represent the first unearthed complete skeleton of a steppe mammoth.

Yet, Germany's Sangerhausen mammoth was thought to be a male steppe mammoth when it was first discovered in the early 1930s, but then it turned out to be a female southern mammoth.

There are exceptionally well-preserved mammoth remains throughout Western Europe, but these are mostly 'woolly mammoths' (*Mammuthus primigenius*), which lived until as recently as 8,000 years ago. Many of these have been discovered in Siberia and North America.

Serbian scientists decided to leave Vika exactly where she (or he) was and in the crouched position in which she was found. This was due to one last posthumous event. Shortly after she died in the mud of Kostolac, Serbian experts say, her stomach literally exploded, breaking her spine and scattering a few ribs.

Leaving the ancient skeleton as it was found allows scientists to continue arguing over her age, species and gender, while also allowing tourists to create their own picture of Vika's final days long

ago.

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