

## Uranium series dating of the Neanderthal footprint at Vârtop Cave, Romania

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Early human footprints are rare in the fossil record. A survey of the literature reveals only two well documented and dated cases. The first, from ~325 kyr in Italy, represents a very early, pre-Neanderthal human. The other, from ~117 kyr in Africa, is probably a *Homo sapiens* print. Here we report the first clear *Homo neanderthalensis* footprint. It was found in Vârtop Cave, Romania. The individual stepped into calcareous mud that later hardened. The 22 cm long print suggests a body height of ~1.46 m; a gap of 1.6 cm marks the separation of big and second toes. The date of the footprint is constrained by the date of the deposition of the mud (~97 kyr, dated by U-Th isochron method) and the date on the base of a nearby stalagmite on top of the mud (~64 kyr). Thus the Vârtop Cave individual lived in Romania sometime between 97 and 64 kyr, long before the appearance of *Homo sapiens* in Central and Eastern Europe, the earliest records of which date from only ~40-30 kyr. To our knowledge, this is the first recognised and dated *Homo neanderthalensis* footprint.

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Zeitschrift/Journal: [Berichte des Institutes für Geologie und Paläontologie der Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz](#)

Jahr/Year: 2004

Band/Volume: [8](#)

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