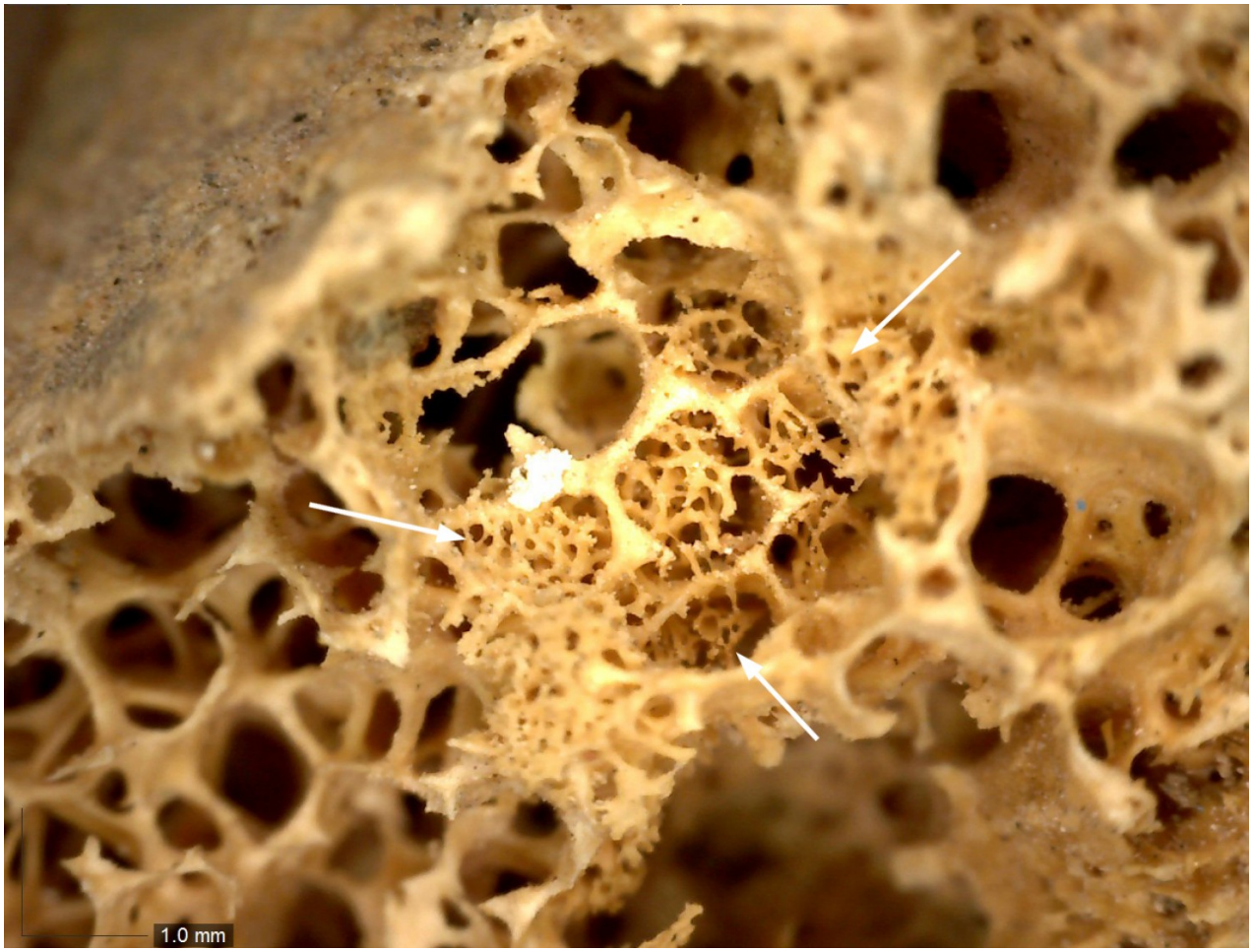
Ancient Egyptian skeleton shows signs of breast cancer

Researchers working in Egypt say they have found the oldest example of breast cancer in the 4,200-year-old remains of an Egyptian woman — a discovery that casts further doubt on the common perception of cancer as a modern disease associated with today's lifestyles.

This evidence, reported by the news agency Reuters, comes a year after another team announced its own discovery farther south in the Nile Valley. Those archaeologists had examined a 3,000-year-old skeleton that a Durham University researcher found in modern-day Sudan and said it was the oldest complete example of a human suffering from metastatic cancer.



Durham University researchers examined these bones for signs of cancer in 2014. The close-up shows a focus of new bone formation indicated by arrows in a lytic lesion in the iliac crest. (Durham University/British Museum)

They published their findings last year in the journal PLoS ONE, writing that cancer's relative absence in the archaeological record had given "rise to the conclusion that the disease is mainly a product of modern living and increased longevity."

[*Human and Neanderthal love affair is traced back to Israel, 55,000 years ago*]

The newest ancient example of cancer, discovered by an anthropological team from Spain's University of Jaen, was found in the bones of a woman thought to have been an aristocrat from southern Egypt, Reuters reported.

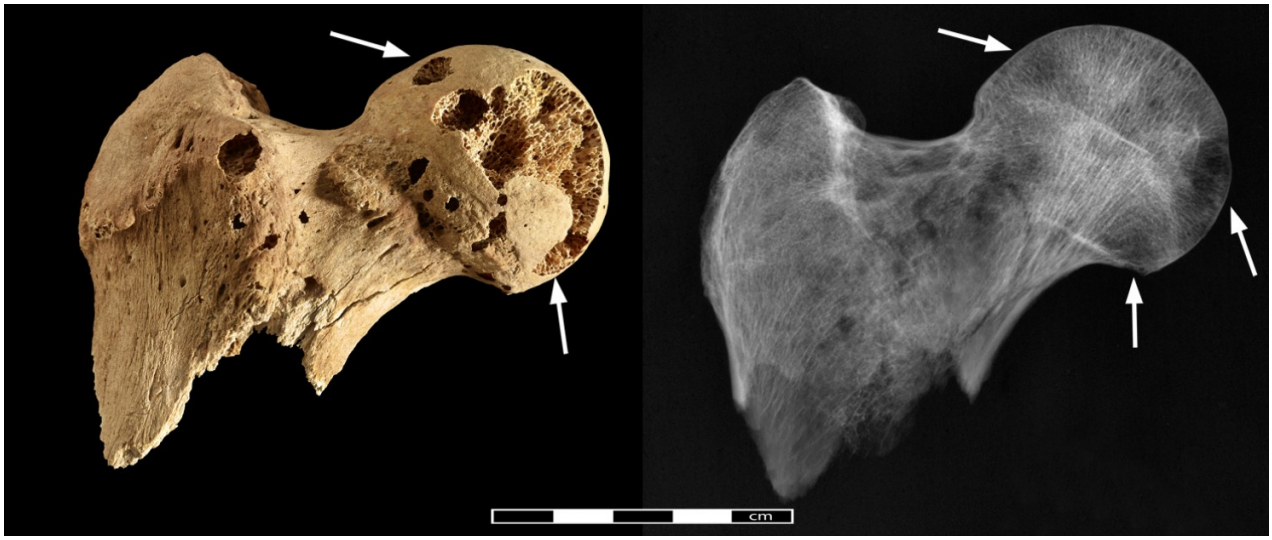
"The study of her remains shows the typical destructive damage provoked by the extension of a breast cancer as

a metastasis," Egyptian Antiquities Minister Mamdouh el-Damaty said in a statement on Tuesday, Reuters reported. He added that the woman's bones showed "an extraordinary deterioration."

[*DNA evidence proves that King Richard III's remains really did end up in a parking lot*]

More such discoveries are possible in the future. The Durham University researchers called the lack of cancer in the archaeological record a possible "illusion" and noted that archaeologists during the 20th century uncovered other ancient remains that may have contained traces of metastatic cancer. But only the skulls were kept, so a full analysis using more modern technology couldn't be completed on them.

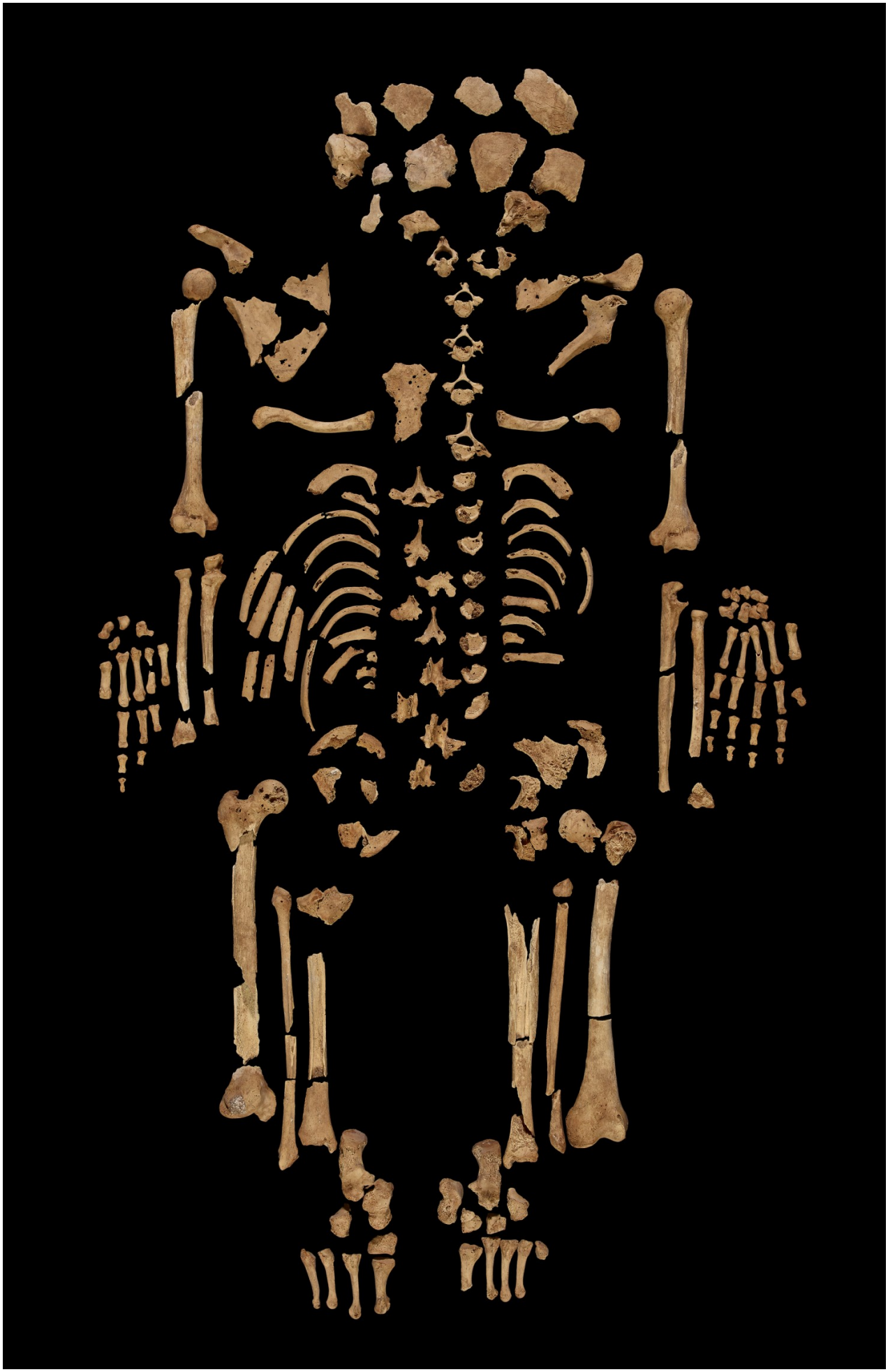
The Durham University researchers scanned the skeleton they found in a tomb and detected traces of lesions on bones, including cancer metastases on the man's collar bones, shoulder blades, upper arms and ribs.



Durham University researchers examined these bones for signs of cancer in 2014. Photo- and radiograph of lytic lesions in the right femoral head. Arrows indicate areas of pathological lesions. (Durham University/British Museum)

Cancer currently kills millions of people. It's not known how common the disease was during ancient times, but medical records from past civilizations hint at conditions that could have been cancer.

"Very little is known about the antiquity, epidemiology and evolution of cancer in past human populations," the Durham University researchers wrote. "Nevertheless, ancient medical documents indicate pathological conditions, tentatively identified as cancer, were known both to the Ancient Egyptians and Greeks."



Durham University researchers examined these bones for signs of cancer in 2014. (Durham University/British

Museum)

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