Preserved human brains: 4,400 date back nearly 12,000 years

Historically, human brains were considered to decay swiftly after death, making their preservation a rarity. However, [Oxford University forensic anthropologist Alexandra] Morton-Hayward’s research just published by The Royal Society tells a different story. Her team has uncovered an extensive archive of over 4,400 human brains dating back nearly 12,000 years. These brains, found across diverse environments—from the icy terrains of the North Pole to the dry deserts of Ancient Egypt—challenge the notion that brains are among the first organs to decompose.

The preserved brains showcased a wide array of conditions, with textures varying from brittle and dry to soft and spongy. Interestingly, a significant portion of these brains were discovered in bodies where no other soft tissues survived, presenting a unique phenomenon in the realm of archaeological discoveries.

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The diversity and age of the preserved brains offer an unparalleled resource for studying ancient diseases, cognition, and behavior. As Morton-Hayward notes, “Ancient brains may provide new and unique paleobiological insights.” This research could revolutionize our understanding of neurological development and disorders, offering a window into the health and lifestyle of our ancestors.

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