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GEOLOGY

Cuban dig may hold key to meteor mystery

By William J. Broad
NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

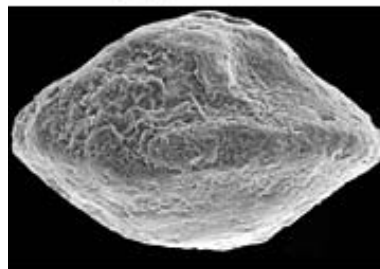
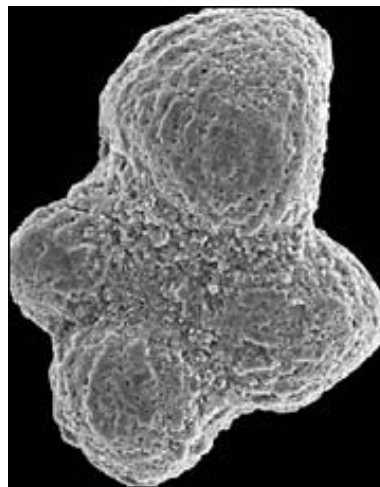
September 28, 2005

No guns materialized. Even so, the scientists kept a low profile while digging, eager to avoid security forces from the nearby air base – an important military site that helped provoke the Cuban missile crisis. The diggers had no permit and no interest in being asked to explain their presence.

In the end, they found rare fossils that are shedding new light on what wiped out the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous Period 65 million years ago.

For more than a decade, the standard view has envisioned a speeding object from space that crashed into the Earth and kicked up enough dust and rock around the globe to blot out the sun. The smoking gun seemed to be the discovery beneath the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico of a 110-mile-wide crater called Chicxulub, after a nearby town.

But lately, doubters have argued that Chicxulub formed 300,000 years before the mass extinction – too early to have played a role in the demise of the dinosaurs and hundreds of other plant and animal species that vanished at the end of the Cretaceous.



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The team of scientists zeroed in on Cuba as an ideal place to seek clues, having heard from Cuban colleagues of a possible trove of fossils of the right age. The Cuban zone was 600 miles from the Mexican crater.



New York Times
Foraminifera, tiny fossil creatures, have helped scientists date a Cuban deposit to the end of the Cretaceous 65 million years ago.

Now, in the September issue of *Geology*, the scientists, from Spain, Cuba and Mexico, report that they have discovered a highly disturbed bed of fossils that bears numerous signatures of Chicxulub's mayhem. The date of the disturbance, 65 million years ago, is exactly at the end of the Cretaceous.

"It's basic" to resolving the debate, Laia Alegret, a team geologist at the University of Zaragoza in Spain, said in an interview. "But it was difficult. The site is located opposite a military base. So it's almost impossible to get a work permit."

Age confirmed

The discovery was outside Santa Clara, a city in central Cuba whose nearby air base drew scrutiny in 1962 when American spy planes spotted Soviet jets and anti-aircraft missiles. It turned out that the base held Soviet bombers and a half-dozen atom bombs.

"It was definitely a hot spot," said Timothy Naftali, a Cold War historian at the University of Virginia.

Starting around 2000, Alegret and her European colleagues repeatedly sought work permits for a nearby hill but always met with stultifying delays, if not outright rejections. Finally, they slipped into the site with their Cuban colleagues, going in late 2000, 2002 and 2003. At other times, the Cubans went in alone.

A rocky outcrop on the hill showed an exposed bed of sedimentary rock

made up of broken bits of minerals and fossils. It was more than 30 feet thick. The team took 66 samples. Examination with microscopes showed numerous signs of cosmic violence, including quartz deformed by high temperatures and pressures, as well as tiny spheres of glass, both clearly debris from a spectacular fireball.

Microscopic study also revealed the presence of thousands of tiny fossil creatures, most especially foraminifera. These one-celled animals have a bewildering array of minuscule shells. Forams, as they are known, evolve so fast that geologists, paleontologists and oil companies use their

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shifting appearance as reliable guides to geologic dating.

"They told the age of the sediments," Alegret said. "So we've definitely confirmed the age of these deposits."

At the end of the Cretaceous, the rocky bed now in Cuba formed on the ocean bottom at a depth of perhaps 3,300 feet, over a few days or weeks as tons of debris rained down from the sky and huge waves generated by the Chicxulub event washed land out to sea.

"It was geologically instantaneous," Alegret said of the deposit's formation.

Earth movements over the ages turned that part of the seabed into land.

Alegret said that because of the site's importance, her Cuban colleagues were talking with the government to have it protected from rain and erosion. The aim is to save the outcrop for scientific study.

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