

CHAPTER 3: THE IRISH OR SIMPLE-SYSTEM FLUTE AND THE MODERN FLUTE

The *Irish flute*, despite the implication of this commonly used name, is not an instrument indigenous to Ireland. Other names heard in Irish circles are the *concert flute*, the *timber flute*, and the *fheadóg mhór* or “big whistle.” These terms refer to the type of transverse flute favored by the vast majority of traditional Irish flute players, past and present: the classical wooden flute of the 19th century and modern instruments closely based upon it. The development of this instrument represented the last major stage in a long, continuous evolution which included the baroque, renaissance, and earlier flutes. The modern flute, based on Theobald Boehm’s new-system flute of 1832, represents a radical break from that evolution.

THE OLDEST INSTRUMENT?

It appears that the flute is very ancient indeed. With the 1996 discovery of a Neanderthal bone flute segment estimated to be between 43,000 and 82,000 years old, the flute is considered to be, as of this writing, the oldest known musical instrument. Measurements of the tone holes on this bone flute segment show that it had a diatonic scale, the same basic scale as the Irish flute and tin whistle.

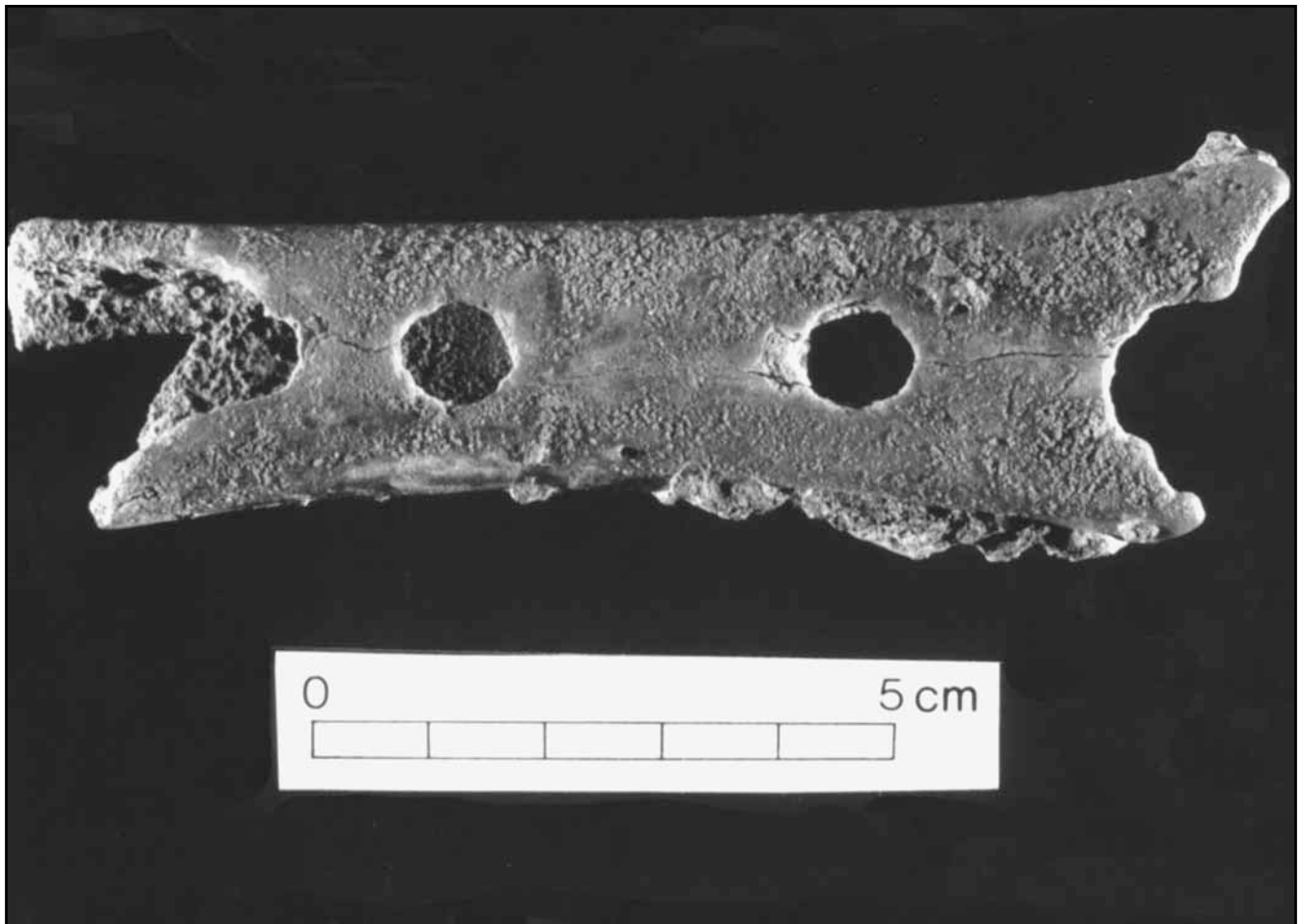


Figure 3-1. A segment of a Neanderthal flute, made from the femur of a cave bear, found in 1996 in Slovenia. Note the two intact tone holes and the two broken ones at the ends of the fragment.