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### **Martian 'Bacteria' Matched To Earth**

From: Stig Agermose <[stig.agermose@get2net.dk](mailto:stig.agermose@get2net.dk)>  
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Stig

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BBC News Online: Sci/Tech

Thursday, February 11, 1999 Published at 15:26 GMT

Martian 'bacteria' matched to Earth

By BBC News Online Science Editor Dr David Whitehouse

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Unusual features found on a Martian meteorite may be those of fossilised alien bacteria after all, research suggests.

When Nasa researchers first made their claims about Martian microfossils in 1996 they were greeted with scepticism by those who believed the shapes were too small to have come from any bacteria-like organisms.

But in a new study, scientists have shown that the tiny fossilised structures can be produced after microbes have died. The experiments have shown that certain parts of Earth bacteria can also leave similar remains when they are fossilised.

"We believe we have clearly shown that features similar in size and shape to those in the Martian meteorite do exist within the biological record on Earth," said Kathie Thomas-Keprta of Lockheed Martin Space Mission Systems and Services in Houston, Texas.

But she warned that this does not prove definitively that the meteorite features are fossilised organisms.

Fossilised filaments

The Earth bacteria, taken from rocks in Washington state, were bred in conditions that simulated the environment deep beneath the Earth's surface. When they died, they became fossilised in only eight weeks.

Scientists saw that about 30% of the microbes grown in the laboratory had filaments attached.

Crucially, filaments that were not attached to the organisms also became fossilised. Researchers say it is the first time such tiny parts of bacteria have been shown to become mineralised in the same way as whole microbe.

It suggests the structures on the Martian rock may also be the fossilised remains of filaments.

#### Original findings

The longest shapes identified on the meteorite are approximately 1/25 the diameter of a human hair. Dr Everett Gibson, a Nasa planetary scientist who worked on the meteorite, says the new study supports the original findings.

ALH84001, the potato-sized Martian meteorite is about 4.5 billion years, the period when Mars formed. It is believed to have originated beneath the Martian surface.

It is believed that billions of years ago Mars was warmer and wetter. The water is believed to have penetrated fractures in the surface rock, forming an underground water system. This system may have been the best location for life during much of Mars's history.

The Earth bacteria used in this new experiment came from the Columbia River basalt of Washington State. They are an example of life thriving at depth in fractured rock where it is isolated from light and protected from any harsh environment at the surface.

So it may be a good example of what life was like on Mars.

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