

BOX 7.1 FIRE!

The ability to control fire is undoubtedly one of the most significant achievements of humans. There remains uncertainty, however, about the antiquity of controlling fire and the reasons why people initially began to control fire.

Estimates of the antiquity of human-controlled fires range from about 2 million years ago at one extreme to about 30,000 years at the other. Most archaeologists are likely comfortable in placing the origins of human-controlled fires in the range of a few hundred thousand to several hundred thousand years ago. Reasons for debate regarding how long people have been controlling fire include the difficulty of determining whether evidence of fire associated with other human remains

was natural or cultural. This is particularly difficult in open-air sites, where natural fires are not uncommon. Even in enclosed sites, such as within caves, the presence of burned organic remains is not enough to rule out burning by natural fires. Burned organic remains could have been blown into caves, or brought into the caves via animals (including, but not restricted to, humans) that frequent caves. Distinct fire hearths where human control of fire is clear only become evident within the last 30,000 years. Most of the evidence prior to this depends on the presence of burned materials such as wood, bone, and stone, but not within a clear and distinct human-controlled fire. The evidence remains circumstantial.