Best of Last Week—early cities were violent, using AI to advance science, common herbicide harms adolescent brain

October 16 2023, by Bob Yirka

A cranial trauma bears witness of a violent death. Credit: Joachim Wahl/University of Tübingen

It was an interesting week for human behavior studies, as a team of economists from several institutions in the U.S. found that for most
people, hunting for the cheapest price for a plane ticket is a waste of time, mostly because of the unorthodox way that airlines set their prices. Also, a trio of researchers from Germany, Spain and Poland reported that the earliest cities, in places like the Middle East and Mesopotamia, were violent, as evidenced by the large number of skulls found with cranial traumas. And a large team of researchers affiliated with multiple institutions across Europe found that flipped coin tossing is not as fair as thought—coins tend to land the same side up as when flipped, almost 1% more often than the other way around.

In technology news, an international team of scientists began building an AI system for scientific discovery using the technology behind ChatGPT. Called Polymathic AI, the idea behind the initiative is to use the power of AI to advance scientific research efforts. And a team at MIT developed a new, human-inspired robotic hand based on a modular structure as a way to reduce development time and costs associated with designing new robots. A team with members from institutions across China developed a new reconfigurable field-effect transistor and memory device based on a 2D heterostructure. And a European consortium conducted the world's first successful test of a 100% hydrogen-powered gas turbine, showing that hydrogen is a flexible way of storing electricity, potentially allowing the decarbonization of conventional energy-intensive industrial sites.

In other news, a team of psychologists at Monash University, working with colleagues from the U.K. and the U.S., conducted what they describe as the largest study of light exposure and its impact on mental health. They found evidence that increased light exposure at night can increase a person's risk of developing psychiatric disorders. Also, via a long-term lizard study, a small team of biologists in the U.S. found evidence that challenges some of the rules of evolutionary biology. And finally, a team of biologists at the University of California, working with colleagues from Ecuador, found evidence that a commonly used
herbicide is harmful to adolescent brain function.

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