

Looking for new pieces of the Cradle of Humankind in Southern Africa

Laurent Bruxelles

TRACES, UMR 5608 of the CNRS, Toulouse, France; Inrap and School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Dominic Stratford

School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Amélie Beaudet

School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg and Department of Anatomy, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 0001, South Africa

Grégory Dandurand

Inrap, Poitiers, France and TRACES, UMR 5608 of the CNRS, Toulouse, France

Francis Duranthon

Toulouse Museum and AMIS, UMR 5288 du CNRS, Toulouse, France

Jean-Baptiste Fourvel

LAMPEA, UMR 7269 of the CNRS, Aix-en-Provence, France

Clément Zanolli

PACEA, UMR 5199 of the CNRS, Bordeaux, France

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Abstract

For several decades, the great East African rift is considered as the cradle of Humankind. Indeed, it has delivered numerous fossils of ancient hominins, covering the emergence of *Homo* genus, and in particular the oldest *Australopithecus* specimens. But another area, located in South Africa, can also claim to be the cradle of Humankind. Here, a large number of fossils of *Australopithecus*, *Paranthropus* and *Homo* have been found in palaeokarsts, 35 km Northwest of Johannesburg. However, recurring dating problems have suggested that these fossils were too young compared to East Africa, excluding the possibility that South Africa could also yielded old fossils.

Very recently, the dating of the almost complete *Australopithecus* specimen nicknamed “Little Foot” gave an age of 3.67 Ma. This dating, consolidated by other works in progress, demonstrate that South Africa contains fossils almost as old as East Africa and that it is another candidate region to look for the origins of the genus *Homo*. But, if we consider that in both cases, the fossils are preserved in geological traps (i.e. the rift valley and the caves), what about the rest of Africa? Shouldn't we consider the whole Africa as the cradle of Humanity, with only a few pieces of this cradle still preserved until today, according to specific geological traps?

On this basis, an interdisciplinary team built the Human Origin in Namibia mission to look for potentially fossiliferous palaeokarsts. The first results, very encouraging, suggest the existence of such traps in several places in Namibia. Similarly, we have just initiated another research project called Human Origin in Mozambique and Malawi Environments to search for fossil sites in the karsts that surround the southern end of the Great East African Rift. This promising region is a true link between the sites of East Africa and those of South Africa, just at the outlet of the Great East African Rift. If only one evidence of any remnant of an old hominin is found in another area than East or South Africa, it will validate our hypothesis and will open huge research perspectives for interdisciplinary and international teams.