Travels of a Darwin Groupie: Cradle of Humankind

Timeline

1731-Johann Jakob Scheuchzer publishes *Sacred Physics*, a pictorial account of Earth’s history based on the Old Testament. Included is a description of what he believes is a fossilized victim of the biblical flood.

1735-Linnaeus publishes his system of binomial nomenclature.

1799-Charles White publishes *An Account of the Regular Gradation in Man, and in Different Animals and Vegetables*, showing people of color at the bottom of the human chain of being.

1811-Georges Cuvier identifies Scheuchzer’s biblical flood victim as a giant salamander.

1823-William Buckland finds the Red Lady of Paviland (probably male).

1856-The first recognized fossil human, a Neanderthal, is discovered near Düsseldorf.

1863-T.H. Huxley publishes *Man’s Place in Nature*.

1871-Charles Darwin publishes *The Descent of Man*.

1894-Eugène Dubois publishes his monograph of *Pithecanthropus erectus* (Java Man).


1912-Arthur Smith Woodward announces the find of Piltdown Man.

1925-Raymond Dart publishes a description of the Taung Child (*Australopithecus africanus*).

1925-Tennessee prosecutes schoolteacher John Thomas Scopes for teaching evolution.

1953-Piltdown Man is finally debunked.


1974-Donald Johanson and his team discover Lucy (*Australopithecus afarensis*).

1974-Kamoya Kimeu discovers a 1.7-million-year-old *Homo erectus* female skeleton with advanced Vitamin A poisoning, who was likely protected by someone else.

1978-Mary Leakey announces the discovery of fossil footprints at Laetoli.

1987-Allan Wilson and Rebecca Cann announce that all humans share a common ancestor who lived in Africa as recently as 150,000 years ago.

2001-Chris Henshilwood and collaborators discover and describe 77,000-year-old artwork: stones carved with lines and triangles, found in Blombos Cave.

2002-David Lordkipanidze and collaborators excavate a 1.77-million-year-old *Homo erectus* skull of a “toothless old man” at Dmanisi.

2004-Peter Brown, Mike Morwood and collaborators announce the find *Homo floresiensis*.

A Selection of Discarded Hominin Names

Left: Salamander identified as *Homo diluvii testis*

Right: Holotype specimen for *Plesianthropus transvaalensis*

*Pithecanthropus erectus, Sinanthropus pekinensis, Pithecanthropus alalus* (Ernst Haeckel’s Ape Man without Speech), *Homo stupidus*


Taung Child

Mrs. Ples

Vegetation at Sterkfontein

Robust australopithecine teeth

A Sterkfontein Cave tour guide discussing Robert Bloom
Ernst Haeckel on Race

Unlike Charles Darwin, Ernst Haeckel was an enthusiastic Social Darwinist. Haeckel was probably no more racist than most of his contemporaries, but his fondness for publishing ensured that his views would be preserved for future generations.

In *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte*, Haeckel ranked different types of humans, which he regarded as separate species. The darker the skin, the lower the rank. At the turn of the 19th century, the pinnacle of humanity was Greek. By the end of the 19th century, thanks largely to Haeckel’s imagery, the pinnacle had changed nationality. Humanity’s best and brightest was now Nordic and bearded. Haeckel was Nordic and bearded, too.

Piltdown Hoax

**Date announced:** December 18th, 1912

**Possible perpetrators:** Charles Dawson, amateur archaeologist; Sir Arthur Keith, anatomist; Martin Hinton, British Museum employee; Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author; Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Jesuit priest

**Early skeptics:** David Waterston, King’s College anatomist; Gerrit Smith Miller, Smithsonian mammal curator; Marcellin Boule, paleontologist; Franz Weidenreich, anthropologist

**Final debunkers:** Sir Wilfrid Le Gros Clark, Kenneth Oakley, Joseph Weiner

**Year debunked:** 1953

On Neanderthals

In the history of paleoanthropology, Neanderthals are central... And yet in an evolutionary standpoint, Neanderthals probably aren’t as important as the attention we give them. If we think about the evolutionary reality of humans for the last million and half years, as they’ve occupied large stretches of Africa, the Middle East, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe was probably always fairly marginal, on the peripheries of that environment... Neanderthals were probably always a fairly small population, probably only a tenth the size of the population in Africa, maybe even less... But they’re important in the history our discipline because they’ve been the center of discussion for so long.

— Adam Van Arsdale

The World According to Robert Broom

One World, One People, from the Origins Centre, Wits University

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