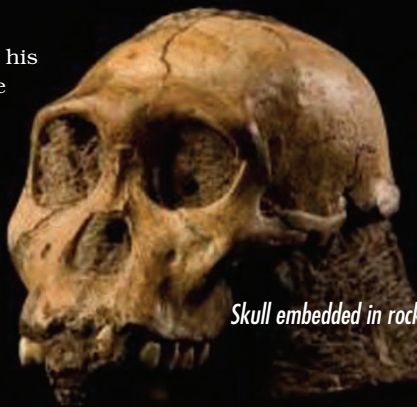


Australopithecus sediba: Serendipitously Ours

Death came for this young male much before his time. He was aged somewhere between nine to thirteen years...too young to die. No one knows if anyone saw him die or even how he died. No eyewitnesses have survived. No records exist of his final resting place. History appeared to have passed him by... until 15 August 2008, when his bones were liberated from the confines of the soil by Mathew Berger, another nine year old. The place was the Cradle of Humankind, a UNESCO World Heritage site near Johannesburg.



Skull embedded in rock



Mathew Berger (and Tau, his dog) were dashing around excitedly when he tripped over a log and got up waving a clavicle or collar bone. *"Dad, I found a fossil!"* Matthew shouted out to his father, Lee R. Berger, a paleoanthropologist with the Institute for Human Evolution at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. Dad was searching for fossils nearby and he ran towards his son. When within viewing distance, Dr. Berger was stunned by the fact that the 'bone' his son was waving around was a *"...clavicle with the unmistakable shape of a hominid."*

The story did not end there. In March 2009, Dr Berger found a remarkably intact cranium to go with the clavicle. A second partial skeleton of an adult female was also found close to where Mathew found the first bones. Scientists speculate it might have been a mother and son team out on a hunting trip. It took a team of more than 60 scientists and a large contingent of students more than a year-and-a-half to extract the bones from the rock. Dating techniques placed the age of the rocks encasing the bones to between 1.95 and 1.78 million years.

The fossils are, *"...a surprising and distinctive mixture of primitive and advanced anatomy and thus qualified as a new species of hominid, the ancestors and other close relatives of humans."* The new species was named *Australopithecus sediba*. The species name "*sediba*" means natural spring, fountain or wellspring in Sotho language. It also ties in with the fact that these were discovered in an eroded cave believed to have been an underground lake. The fossilized animal bones that were recovered alongside included those from a sabre-toothed cat, antelope, mice and rabbits. None of the animals appear to have been eaten by scavengers. This indicates that all died suddenly and were swiftly entombed.

"We think that there must have been some sort of calamity taking place at the time that caused all of these fossils to come down together into the cave where they got trapped and ultimately buried," says Professor Paul Dirks from James

Cook University in Queensland, Australia. All the bones were preserved in the hard calcified sediment that formed at the bottom of a pool of water.

Today, the boy *Australopithecus sediba* is better known as Karabo. In the Setswana language the word Karabo means "answer". It was one of the more than 15000 submissions in a naming competition sponsored by Standard Bank and Palaeontological Scientific (PAST) in association with Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg and the Department of Science and Technology.

The name was proposed by 17-year-old Omphemetse Keepile, a student of St. Mary's, Johannesburg. Omphemetse says that she chose the name Karabo because *"...it suggests that answers are present [and] that more answers will follow."* She explained that the fossil represents a "*solution*" to understanding the origins of humankind.

Karabo walked upright on long legs, had a prominent nose, and human-like hips and pelvis. However, he could climb trees using his ape-like arms. He had small teeth and yet his face resembled that of *Homo*, the genus that includes us modern humans. He had relatively primitive feet and the "*tiny brain*" that is common to *Australopithecus*. Dr. Berger's team said that the new species probably descended from *Australopithecus africanus*. Dr. Berger described the species as, *"... a possible ancestor of Homo erectus, an immediate predecessor to Homo sapiens, or a close 'side branch' that did not lead to modern humans."*

Since the find is such a recent one, studies are still on. The precise placement of *A. sediba* in the human family tree is becoming a little controversial; some opine that it may well be a *Homo*. *"They are a fascinating mosaic of features,"* says Rick Potts, director of the Human Origins Program at the Smithsonian Institute. *"It reminds us of the combining and recombining of characteristics, the tinkering and experimentation, that go on in evolution."*

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