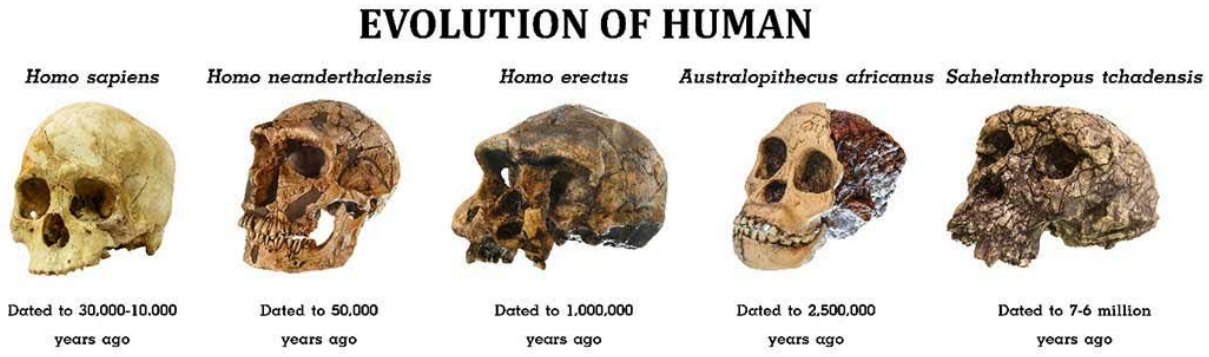
The Origins Of Mankind: Was There An African Eve?

Jim Willis

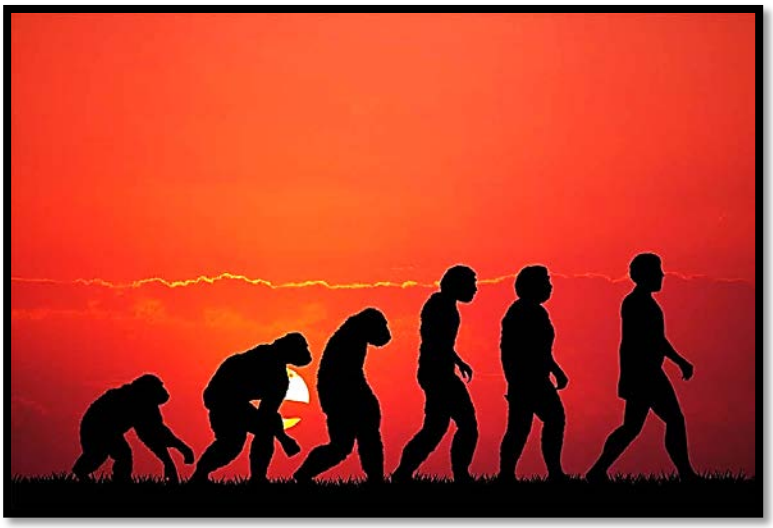
Archaeogenetics is a fascinating science. Accepted current research suggests that every human being on earth is descended in an unbroken line, traced through their mothers in a genetic system called matrilineal descent, from one woman who lived in western Africa some 200,000 years ago. She was given the rather catchy nickname, 'Mitochondrial Eve', after her genetic lineage and biblical counterpart.

Unlike her counterpart, however, no one suggests that she was the only woman who lived at the time.



Evolution of Mankind (stockdevil / Adobe Stock)

The human population numbered in the tens of thousands back then. Other women alive no doubt passed on their lineage to people living today who carry their genes. But at some point, in the long human history since then, each of their lines of descent failed to generate a reproducing female, thus breaking the mitochondrial line. In order for the genes carrying this mitochondrial material to continue into the future, the offspring of these women had to, at some point, mate with the descendants of Mitochondrial Eve, the proposed African matriarch of everyone. Mutations have occurred, obviously. People share different color skin and eyes, for instance. But according to the Out of Africa theory, every person alive on Planet Earth today is, in one sense, African beneath the surface.



When did they start to walk upright? (adrenalinapura / Adobe Stock)

All this biology, however, still does not answer two questions. What makes people human? How did it get that way? Is the answer to these questions going to be found in biology, or in physical actions? In other words, are people human because of what they *are*, or what they *do*? If people became human when they started to walk upright, then it can be said that their evolutionary transition from ape-like hominin to human took place some six million years ago. But if they became human when ancient upright walkers started to have legs mechanically similar to modern man, then, according to Smithsonian studies, that would make mankind some three million years old. If people became human when they tamed and utilized fire, then they are about 350,000 years old.

Was it when they tamed fire? (Gorodenkoff / Adobe Stock)

If people became human when they started to bury their dead with grave implements, signifying religious thought or a belief in an afterlife, then they are a little more than 100,000 years old as a species. If one searches out the very earliest example of symbolic thought, meaning cave paintings and rock art, it was only about 40,000 to perhaps 60,000 years ago that people began to hit their stride, although that number is being pushed back almost daily.

So, the questions remain. What makes people human and how did they get that way? The answer seems to depend entirely on who is asking the questions, but the interesting thing is this: Recent discoveries always seem to push the dates back further in time. Anthropologists today think human species is much older than their counterparts did a 100 years ago, or 50 years ago, or even 20 years ago.

What that implies is that if people were sitting, perhaps even dancing, around a fire in the Middle East at least 350,000 years ago, if they were building boats and making voyages across large expanses of water 130,000 years ago, if they were using tools and depositing them all over the world at least 100,000 years ago, they have had plenty of time to develop cultures that are now lost to history.

Were they using tools 100,000 years ago?
(Gorodenkoff / Adobe Stock)

African Eve: Lucy

But if one wants to begin somewhere specific, most anthropologists these days start with an ancient African woman now named Lucy. In 1974, paleontologist Donald C. Johanson and his team were working in Ethiopia, searching for evidence of early humans. Little did they know they were about to have even their fondest dreams realized. They managed to uncover about 40% of an early female human ancestor who lived about 3.3 million years ago. For a while, later researchers thought they had even found her baby. But after careful analysis, the 'baby' turned out to be about a hundred thousand years older than her 'mother'. In the end, the discovery of both skeletons proved the existence of a human ancestral species now called *Australopithecus Afarensis*. At a party thrown to celebrate the discovery, the young researchers kept playing the Beatles' rendition of *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*. Hence, the old girl was given a new name — Lucy. It stuck. To this day she remains Lucy the *Australopithecus Afarensis*, the 'upright ape".

The skull of Australopithecus africanus from Africa (wlad074 / Adobe Stock)

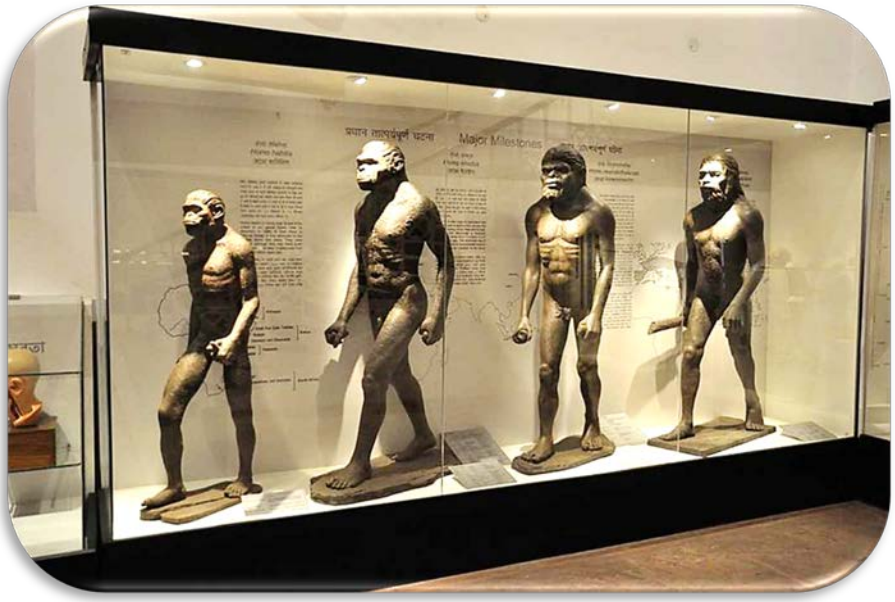
Lucy has a combination of both ape and human features. Her spinal column indicates that she walked upright, but she was only about three and a half feet (107 centimeters) tall. Males were probably a bit larger. She had an ape-like head, with a low, heavy forehead, and a jaw that jutted out. Her wisdom teeth had grown in and her skull had knitted together, so she was probably an adult. Her brain was about the same size as a chimpanzee's. All in all, Lucy is usually cited as the oldest known predecessor. Her offspring, it is thought, probably evolved into modern man's ancestors.

Pliocene Epoch (Morphart/ Adobe Stock)

Predating Lucy

But there are problems associated with this scenario. Although the facts are often suppressed, consider a few anomalies in the anthropological record which indicate real human beings are a lot older than Lucy. Consider this article from *The Geologist*, published back in December of 1862: "*In Macoupin County, Illinois, the bones of a man were recently found on a coal-bed capped with two feet of slate rock, 90 feet below the surface of the earth. The bones, when found, were covered with a crust or coating of hard glossy matter, as black as coal itself, but when scraped away left the bones white and natural".* The coal deposits which had formed over the bones were proved to be at least 286- to 320 million years old. Although any evidence from 150 years ago is rather sketchy, that is, at least, an eye-opener.

In Foxhall, England, in 1855, a human jaw was found in a quarry at a level of 15 feet (4.88 meters) underground. Soil comparisons indicate the jaw was at least 2.5 million years old. American physician Robert H. Collyer described the Foxhall jaw as "*the oldest relic of human existence*." It appeared to be quite modern, displaying none of the ape-like qualities one would expect in such an ancient specimen. Many dissenters simply ignored the evidence because it did not fit accepted chronologies.



Human Evolution Gallery, Indian Museum (Biswarup Ganguly/ CC BY-SA 3.0)

More recently, researchers discovered a fully modern human skull in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It was laying in an Early Pliocene formation, and suggested the presence of modern humans in South America between one and 1.5 million years ago. The modern appearance of the skull did not fit conventional thinking about human origins, so it was simply discounted, even though the skull was found in Pre-Ensenadean strata, which dates back more than a million years. This is called 'dating by morphology', a process that disregards all other data, no matter how credible, simply on the grounds that "*this artifact can't be here because it is not supposed to be here!*"

In 1911, an anatomically modern human skeleton was discovered by J. Reid Moir beneath a layer of glacial boulder clay near the town of Ipswich, in England. It was discovered at a depth of 4.5 feet (1.37 meters) between a layer of clay and glacial sands, dated by the British Geological Survey to 400,000 years ago. The find was rejected by the specialists of that day. In their words: "*Under the presumption that the modern type of man is also modern in origin, a degree of high antiquity is denied to such specimens*."

Today most anthropologists are tempted to disregard evidence such as this because it is thought to be outdated. So, because of such prejudicial suppression, the Out of Africa-evolutionary theory still reigns supreme when it comes to human origins. But gaps are beginning to appear in the theory with increasing frequency. New information, new equipment, new theories, and new dating techniques are now in use that question long-held suppositions.

(Left) Le Moustier Neanderthal skull reconstitution, Neues Museum Berlin (CC0) (Right) Reconstruction of a Neanderthal woman (CC BY-SA 2.5)

Out of Africa?

Even within the Out of Africa camp, however, there are competing theories about how it is to be interpreted. Various 'denominations' have arisen: The *Recent Single-Origin Hypothesis* (RSOH), the *Replacement Hypothesis*, and the *Recent African Origin* model (RAO) are just a few. All have their adherents, but they are still all variations on the same theory, and all virtually eliminate the hypothetical possibility that humans could have evolved in various places at different times. So, the key to understanding these competing theories is not found in human origins, but rather in human migration patterns.

Most anthropologists agree that there were waves of emigration from Africa, possibly beginning as early as 270,000 years ago, and most certainly between 115,000 and 130,000 years ago. The populations who made up these migration waves seem to have died out or otherwise disappeared by 80,000 years ago. Then, some 70,000 years ago, the direct ancestors of everyone alive today, a species called *Homo sapiens*, made the final big push. It is to these ancestors that modern humans owe their current dominance.

The Denisovan genome was sequenced from the distal manual phalanx fragment (replica depicted) found in the Denisova cave (Thilo Parg /CC BY-SA 3.0)

Hybrid Species

In 2010, genetic studies began to produce evidence that later population groups interbred with the earlier species, such as Neanderthals. More recent DNA studies have found evidence of *Homo sapiens* co-mingling with Denisovans as well. And in 2018, in the Denisova Cave in Siberia, the partial skeleton of the hybrid daughter of Denisovan/Neanderthal parents was discovered. Clearly there was a lot of contact between species going on in ancient times, proving that the three species were at least close cousins. They would have had to be, in order to produce viable offspring.

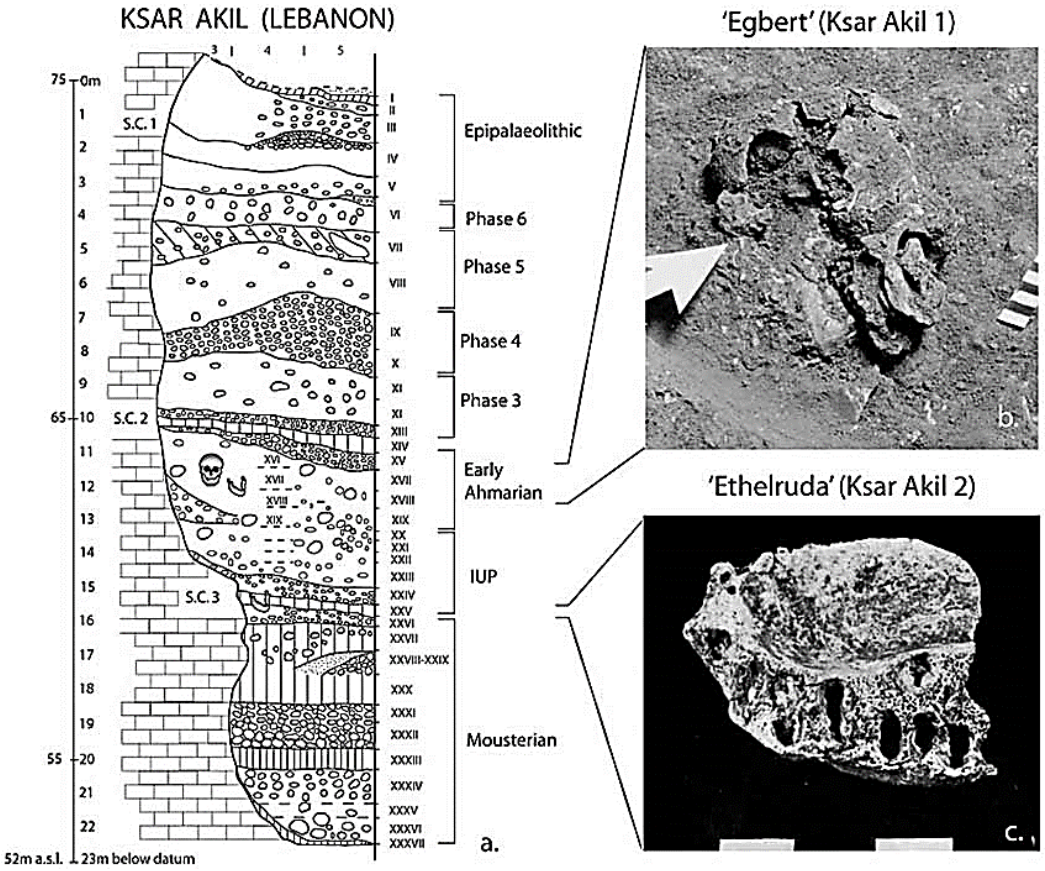
There had, for a number of years, been a general agreement that Neanderthals went extinct, either because they were murdered by other species, or that they were in some ways mentally inferior. With the discovery of Neanderthal DNA in modern humans, however, that theory eventually fell apart. It was seen to be based on pre-conceived prejudice more than scientific fact. In some very significant ways, Neanderthals did not become extinct as much as they became modern. Their image is being seriously upgraded these days.

But there is still much disagreement when it comes to sorting things out, and the recent discovery of new human species, such as *Homo luzonensis* in the Philippines and *Homo floresiensis* in Indonesia, quickly nicknamed 'The Hobbit' because of its small stature, further confuse the issue.

Homo floresiensis woman. National History Museum London. (Emőke Dénes/ CC BY-SA 4.0)

Migration Routes

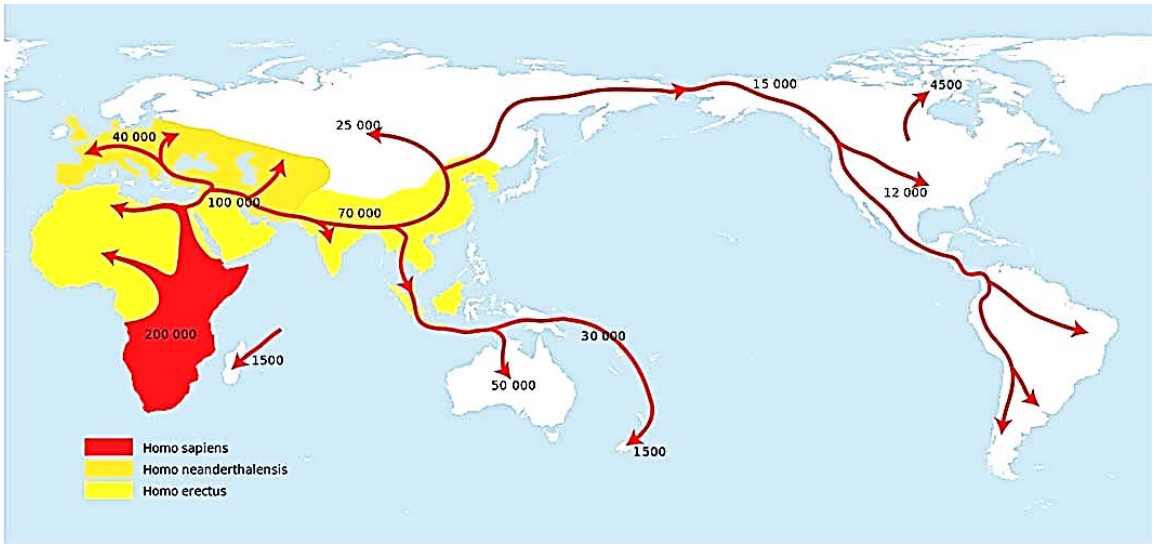
Much of the current argument swirling around the Out of Africa theory, then, settles around the routes followed by those who emigrated. Generally speaking, proponents have settled on two migration routes. The Northern Route Dispersal: Around 135,000 years ago, in tropical Africa, there were a series of droughts. It is assumed that these droughts would have caused people to be on the move, searching for better living conditions. They would probably have migrated along seaside routes, following shorelines where food and water would have been obtainable. It is very easy to picture small family groups walking along the beaches between the African continent and greener pastures in the Middle East.



Layer sequence at Ksar Akil in the Levantine corridor, and discovery of two fossils of Homo sapiens, dated to 40,800 to 39,200 years ago for Egbert, and 42,400–41,700 years ago for Ethelruda (CC BY-SA 4.0)

The modern nation of Israel stands right on this crossroad. When small groups of travelers reached the north-east coast of the Mediterranean, they needed to make a decision. If they turned left, they headed toward Europe. If they turned right, Asia lay before them. According to the Out of Africa theory, these were the routes favored by those who were to eventually become Europeans and Asians.

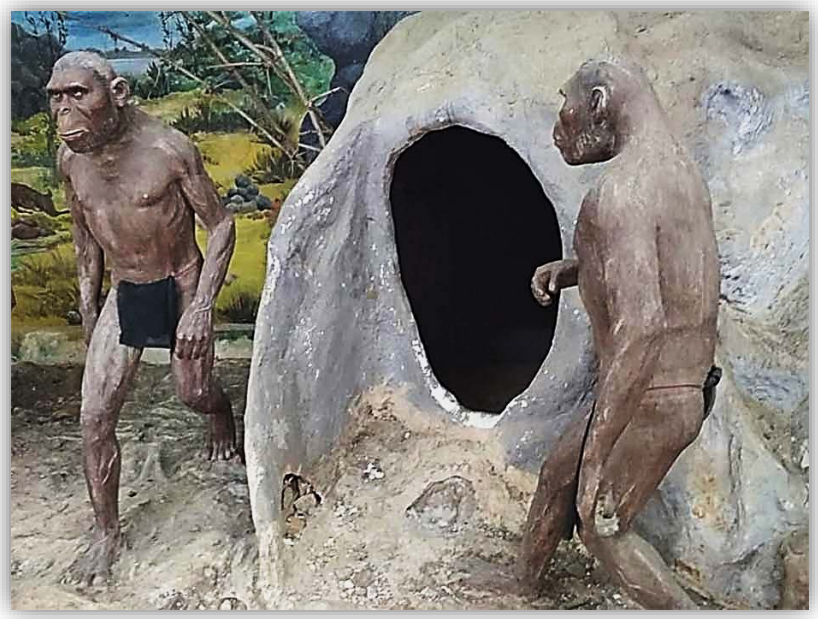
Bones and artifacts of *Homo sapiens* have been found all along this route, dating back as early as 80,000 years. But the thinking goes that these people either become extinct or returned back home to Africa when climate conditions improved. It was the later population groups who eventually came to stay. They mated with both Neanderthals and Denisovans, who had long ago followed these same routes into Europe and Asia. Both these early species had split off from the line of modern humans as much as 200,000 years earlier.



Successive dispersals of Homo erectus greatest extent (yellow), Homo neanderthalensis greatest extent (ochre) and Homo sapiens (red).(Public Domain)

The Southern Route Dispersal: The natural land route to the east and north out of Africa was not the only way out of town. Evidence indicates that some ancestors decided to head east after first crossing the Red Sea. These people then stuck to the coasts and headed through what was to become Arabia and Persia all the way to India and beyond. By at least 50,000 years ago, and probably a whole lot earlier, they made it as far as Australia. The earliest dates for their arrival there, still not universally accepted, are now being pushed back to at least 65,000 years ago.

The specific problem of dating the first Australian arrivals does not revolve around DNA evidence. The problem is that for the first Aussies to migrate to what was became their home continent, they must have had boats. Few traditional archaeologists want to admit that anyone back then had boating technology. So, there is a small but influential minority still holding out against the genetic evidence that indicates a shockingly old ancestral line. The date for the southern route migration is currently up for debate. But genetic information is being analyzed, and more information is sure to be forthcoming. The data is complicated because of the eruption of Mount Toba, which may or may not have had a devastating impact on human populations in India.



Homo sapiens is the only extant human species. The name is Latin for 'wise man' and was introduced in 1758 by Carl Linnaeus. (Pinal0408 /CC BY-SA 4.0)

In short, both migration route theories propose that modern humans, and their early distant cousins, originated in Africa through chance mutation. Early in the game, some of these distant cousins left town and evolved on their own in seclusion. Later, modern types migrated, reunited with their early ancestors, such as Neanderthal and Denisovan, and either killed them or married them. It is a simple story, and easy to follow. But real history is rarely that simple.

History Rewritten

In December 2017, Gemma Tarlach wrote an article headlined: *It's Official: Timeline For Human Migration Gets A Rewrite*. The very first paragraph sums up the essential gist of the story: "*The wealth of new paleo-anthropological, archaeological, and genetic evidence has passed the tipping point: In a review published today in the prestigious journal 'Science', researchers acknowledge that the conventional timeline of human migration out of Africa "can no longer be considered valid*".

The article goes on to say that traditional mainstream thinking is now obsolete. New research indicates that Neanderthals and Denisovans were interbreeding far earlier than was thought, and much farther away from their homeland in Southern Africa. When moderns showed up later, but much sooner than was first believed, the old ones became not so much "distant cousins" but rather "kissing cousins". The evidence points to the fact that almost everyone alive today, unless they have a pure African descent line, carries both Neanderthal and Denisovan ancestry in their genes. Those two ancient species did not die out as much as they merged with modern mankind.

And the surprises kept coming. There are huge gaps in humans' ancestry that need filling. Wherever the early ancestors went, from Asia to China and Siberia, from the Middle East to Europe, and even across the ocean into the Americas, they encountered people who got there before them.

Surprises kept coming. Primitive Hunter Gatherer Uses Smartphone in a Cave at Night. (Gorodenkoff / Adobe Stock)

All this indicates that human history is a lot older than one would like to think it is. Even mankind's birthplace now seems to be up for grabs. Rather than one regional location, the thinking is that the history of human origins is not so much that of a metaphorical genetic river from the past flowing into the present, as much as it seems to be a number of intertwining streams coursing parallel to one another, and sometimes even joining together for a period of time. It might be that there were human species in Africa, Asia, and Europe, existing all at the same time, at least 700,000 years ago. That would throw the whole Out of Africa scenario right out the window. Human beings would be a lot older than a mere 200,000 to 300,000 years. And their presence around the globe would have been evident much earlier than is now believed.

Top Image: Australopithecus Afarensis (procy_ab / Adobe Stock)

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