

Homo gautengensis— new species of alleged apeman is just another australopith

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The unveiling of the alleged new hominid species *Homo gautengensis* occurred with surprisingly little fanfare. Darren Curnoe discovered the new species by sorting through the ‘garbage bag’ of fossil items dumped by others into the taxon *Homo habilis*, in particular cranial, mandibular and dental elements of southern African specimens.¹

Overall, the specimens making up *Homo habilis* (*sensu lato*²) are generally considered too heterogeneous³ to all belong to the one species. Some consider *Homo habilis* an invalid taxon, and there is debate among evolutionists whether the majority of fossils assigned to this category should be reassigned to *Australopithecus* or some other genus instead.^{4,5} Also, some evolutionists have argued that a few of the *Homo habilis* specimens might represent *Homo erectus* instead,⁶ although the list of such specimens appears to be diminishing—at least in this author’s opinion. Recognizing that a particular sample of southern African *Homo habilis* fossils were “morphologically too distinct” to be accommodated within *Homo habilis*, Curnoe decided to assign them to the novel species *Homo gautengensis* instead.¹

From a creationist point of view species such as *Homo gautengensis* (real or imagined) are unlikely to correlate with the biblical *kind*,⁷ the latter generally being a broader taxon than the species. For example, all members of the genus *Australopithecus* may well be traced back to just one or two different biblical *kinds*. Whether a fossil specimen or fossil species belongs in the genus *Homo* or not depends on

what is meant by the genus *Homo*. If the genus *Homo* is a compilation of fossil specimens that were fully human, that is, descendants of Adam and Eve, then obviously extinct apes⁸ such as the australopiths⁹ are omitted. In that case members of the genus *Homo* are all part of the same human *kind*, regardless of whether the fossils are designated as belonging to *Homo sapiens*, *Homo neanderthalensis*, *Homo heidelbergensis*, or *Homo erectus*. Also, all species in the genus *Homo* would need to be reclassified as *Homo sapiens* if *Homo sapiens* is equated with the human *kind* (since all descendants of Adam can intermarry, they are obviously the same species). However, for ease of discussion, since the anthropology literature is saturated with the terms, it is often convenient to use the above names for the different human fossil ‘species’ when referring to them. Of course, evolutionists do not look at it this way, and would define the makeup of the genus *Homo* differently, but it is a useful classification scheme from a creation point of view.

Similarities with *Australopithecus africanus*

The question of interest here then is whether *Homo gautengensis* should really be categorized as *Australopithecus gautengensis* instead, if indeed it is a species. That is, does it represent humans or extinct australopith apes? Although the type specimen (holotype) for *Homo gautengensis* is the partial Sterkfontein cranium Stw 53, the list of other representatives used to describe the species (paratypes) is quite long.¹⁰ Stw 53 is a heavily reconstructed cranium, discovered in 1976, that has previously been (or still is) assigned to or associated with *Australopithecus africanus*, a robust australopithecine, or *Homo habilis*.¹¹ Kuman and Clarke list several major morphological traits of Stw 53 that they believe warrant its inclusion in the genus *Australopithecus*, including an estimated cranial capacity in the *Australopithecus* range, teeth that are very large (typical of *Australopithecus*), a nasal skeleton “flattened as in the

apes and in *Australopithecus*”, and a braincase that “is frontally narrow and restricted” (typical of *Australopithecus africanus*, for example, specimen Sts 5—nicknamed ‘Mrs Ples’).¹² No stone tools were associated with the Stw 53 fossil cranium.¹³ As noted by Cartmill and Smith, paleoanthropologist Milford Wolpoff “asserts that Stw 53 most closely resembles *A. africanus* specimens from Sterkfontein Member 4 in such features as its shallow mandibular fossa, the form of its mastoid region, its vault shape as seen from rear, and the presence of anterior pillars in its face.”¹⁴ From a creation perspective it would seem that Stw 53 is an australopith, and so does not belong in the genus *Homo*.

Another specimen included in *Homo gautengensis* is the Swartkrans partial cranium SK 847 (as a paratype). Apart from Stw 53, the most significant other fossil specimen designated by Curnoe to the species *Homo gautengensis* appears to be SK 847, and a significant part of the paper is taken up with comparing the above two crania.¹⁵ Curnoe and Tobias earlier compared Stw 53 and SK 847 and came to the conclusion that they were both of the same species, and “that both can be accommodated within the hypodigm of *H. habilis*.”¹⁶ The SK 847 cranium has also been associated with *Homo erectus*, but the incompleteness of the cranium has made any definite diagnosis difficult.¹⁷ If the conclusion of the Curnoe and Tobias comparison is correct, and Stw 53 and SK 847 belonged to the same species,¹⁸ then they would both belong to the same species of australopith, but not the genus *Homo*. The only other cranial paratype included by Curnoe in the new species *Homo gautengensis* appears to be the highly compressed (superior-inferior) juvenile cranium SK27, but its inclusion seems to be more for what its dental remains indicate, rather than its cranium.¹⁹

No postcranial material was included in the description of the species “because there are no clear associations between the craniodental remains used to diagnose the new taxon and any postcranial fossils.”²⁰



Figure 1. The above heavily reconstructed Stw 53 cranium represents the type specimen of the newly described species *Homo gautengensis*.

The age span of the species is stated as being from ~2.0 to 0.82 million years BP, and is said to make *Homo gautengensis* “probably the earliest recognized species in the human genus”, with its longevity “apparently well in excess of *H. Habilis*.”²⁰

Humanlike characteristics

Interestingly, in a *National Geographic* article by James Owen about the study, Curnoe is noted as believing that *Homo gautengensis* appeared “too late in the evolutionary time line to be our direct ancestor”, but that “the potential new species had humanlike characteristics”.²¹ This leads to an important point. The view that if the australopiths were only apes then they would show no humanlike traits is a false hypothesis, used by some evolutionists to set up a straw man of the creationist position that they can then easily falsify (that is, any humanlike characteristics are used as evidence that australopiths were intermediates between apes and humans),²² but which in reality does not represent the creationist position. Nor is it even logical, since modern apes clearly demonstrate many characters in common with humans. Also, australopiths such as the famous

partial Lucy skeleton (representing *Australopithecus afarensis*) “bears characteristics that are not present in apes or in humans.”²³

Back to the same old *Homo habilis* problem

The article by Owen states that “Compared with modern humans, the new species had proportionally long arms, a projecting face somewhat like a chimp’s, larger teeth, and a smaller brain—though not too small for verbal communication.”²¹ How it can be known that “the new species had proportionally long arms” is unclear, given that no postcranial material was associated with the species. However, computed tomography (CT) scans of the bony labyrinth of the inner ear have shown that the semicircular canal dimensions in the crania of Stw 53 indicated that it “relied less on bipedal behaviour than the australopithecines”.²⁴ The above study by Spoor *et al* also referred to the “modern-human-like labyrinth of SK 847”, which was said to be “consistent with its attribution to *H. erectus*, and the extreme differences in labyrinthine morphology between SK 847 and Stw 53 make attribution of both specimens to the same species, on this evidence alone, highly unlikely.”²⁴ Hence, there is a real possibility that *Homo gautengensis* is based on a mixture of fossil fragments derived from both australopith and *Homo erectus*, which would be unsurprising given the state of incompleteness of the partial SK 847 cranium. Hence, we are back to the original problem of *Homo habilis* (where the fossil specimens SK 847 and Stw 53 were earlier placed)—that it is most likely a compilation of fossil specimens from different species, most of them belonging to the australopiths, but perhaps also a few fragments from *Homo erectus*.

Homo gautengensis vs *Australopithecus sediba*

The study by Curnoe is said to cast doubt on the new ‘missing link’ *Australopithecus sediba* being

“the ‘key transitional species’ between the apelike australopithecines and the first human species.”²⁴ After a discussion with Curnoe, Owen states:

“The newfound *Australopithecus*—with its tiny brain and long, apelike arms and wrists adapted to life in trees—‘is much more primitive than *Homo gautengensis*’ yet they both ‘lived at the same time and in the same place,’ he said.”

“Assuming *A. sediba* co-existed with the new early human species, then *A. sediba* is ‘less likely to be the ancestor of humans’ than its proponents say it is—it’s simply too late in the fossil record, Curnoe argued.”²⁴

Paleontologist Fred Spoor is stated as noting that “the *A. sediba* team had argued that Stw 53 is a more primitive skull than that of *A. sediba*. In other words, *H. gautengensis* may not be human at all but an apelike australopithecine.”²⁴ Hence, it seems that more controversy lies ahead with respect to *Homo gautengensis* and *Australopithecus sediba*, which is par for the course in paleoanthropology.

References

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2. In this context *sensu lato* refers to *Homo habilis* defined in a wide or broad sense. For example, it would encompass specimens assigned to *Homo rudolfensis*.
3. Means having widely dissimilar elements or constituents.
4. Wood, B. and Collard, M., The changing face of genus *Homo*, *Evolutionary Anthropology* **8**:204, 1999.
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6. Line, P., Fossil evidence for alleged apemen—Part 1: the genus *Homo*, *Journal of Creation (formerly TJ)* **19**(1):22–24, 2005.
7. Lubenow, M.L., *Bones of Contention: A Creationist Assessment of Human Fossils*, Revised and Updated, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 187, 2004.

8. I use the term ‘apes’ here in a broad ‘lay’ sense to mean apelike non-human primates. This is not intended to suggest that australopiths, for example, are merely minor variants of extant apes, nor to contradict assessments by evolutionists such as Oxnard that their anatomy was uniquely different in many respects from both extant apes and humans. But if they were alive today, they would probably be regarded as ‘apes’.
9. Collectively all alleged hominids outside the genus *Homo* are sometimes informally referred to as ‘australopiths’ by evolutionists, but when talking more specifically the genus and/or species name is used. The term ‘australopithecine’ refers specifically to members of the genus *Australopithecus*.
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17. Line, ref. 6, p. 23.
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20. Curnoe, ref. 1, p. 151.
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Further expansion of evolutionary fossil time ranges

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We are commonly challenged to explain the fossil order worked out by evolutionary scientists. Fossils are, of course, crucial to the evolutionary story; their sequences and placement in the evolutionary time scale are fundamental to the evolutionists’ grand scheme. However, outcrops with fossils are usually widely scattered and further fossil collecting commonly brings surprises, such as the expansion of the ranges of fossils either up or down within the geological column.^{1–3} Since I last reported on fossil range expansions in 2009, many new reports have been published.

Supposed fish-amphibian transition pushed back 18 Ma

One of the most sensational expansions is that of the supposed origin of tetrapods from fish by about 18 Ma earlier in the evolutionary timescale.^{4,5} This change is even more damaging to evolutionists since a few years before this research was published there was a big splash about a new missing link between fish and amphibians.⁶ This supposed transition

occurred after the new biozone base derived from the unique fossil *Tiktaalik* found in northeast Canada. But the new discovery of tetrapod tracks (figure 1), which should push the supposed origin of tetrapods even further back than 18 Ma, has caused consternation over the range changes.^{7,8} (On a personal note, in an exchange of letters to the editor in the local newspaper between a certain evolutionists and myself, *Tiktaalik* was commonly brought up as a fulfilled prediction of evolutionary theory, until in my last letter I pointed out the new tetrapod track discovery.)

Colonial eukaryotes are 200 Ma older

Another major shift in evolutionary time was caused by the discovery of macroscopic, and probably multicellular, fossils in strata dated at 2.1 billion years old in the evolutionary timescale.^{9,10} This pushes back the origin of such fossils 200 million years. After eliminating the possibility of them being inorganic structures, scientists now believe that the fossils are colonial eukaryote organisms. However, that date corresponds to a time in evolutionary history of insufficient oxygen level in the atmosphere combined with a toxic mix of greenhouse gases. The discovery raises more questions for the evolutionary scenario than it answers.

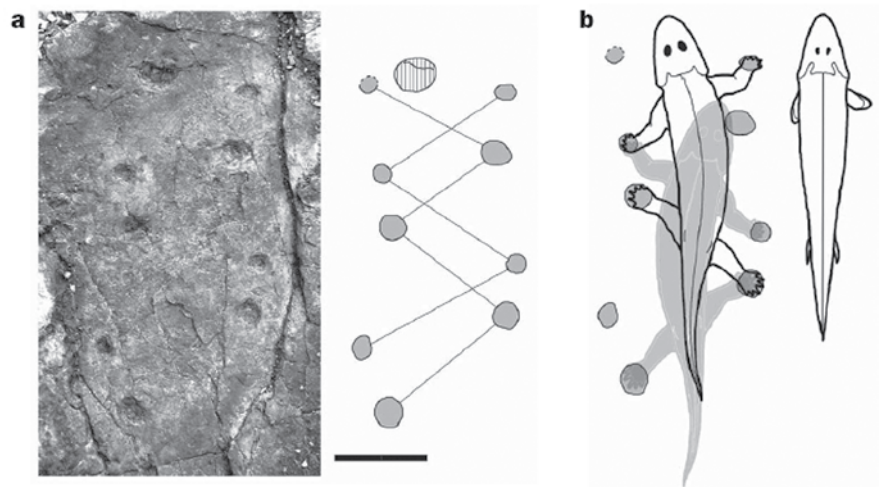


Figure 1. Tracks discovered in a quarry have been dated 18 Ma earlier than the supposed transition from fish to tetrapod (from Niedzwiedzki, ref. 11).