

**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/whats-missing-in-studies-of-a-missing-link-in-human-ancestry-1446738210>

LIFE | IDEAS | MIND & MATTER

# What's Missing in Studies of a 'Missing Link' in Human Ancestry

Homo Naledi discovery raises plenty of new questions



Professor Lee Berger holds a replica of the skull of a newly discovered ancient species, named 'Homo naledi,' during its unveiling outside Johannesburg in September. *PHOTO: SIPHIWE SIBEKO/REUTERS*

By **MELVIN KONNER**

Nov. 5, 2015 10:43 a.m. ET

In September, the paleoanthropologist Lee Berger of Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand and colleagues announced one of the most important finds ever made in the search for human fossil remains: some 1,500 bones from a South African cave complex called Rising Star. The cache was so large that it allowed them to reconstruct one whole composite skeleton and 15 partial ones.

As the research team reported in the online journal *eLife* (and also in *National Geographic*), the creatures they discovered had many humanlike traits—the lower body, the feet and aspects of the hands, head and teeth—but also brains the size of oranges. With an upright 5-foot frame, they had smaller brains than chimpanzees. Could this dim protohuman really be on our own evolutionary branch, the first *Homo*, on the way to becoming the brainiest ape of all?

---

MORE FROM MELVIN KONNER Dr.

- 
- Matriarchy on the March (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/book-review-women-after-all-by-melvin-konner-1427483355>) (3/27/15)
  - A Better World, Run by Women (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/a-better-world-run-by-women-1425657910>) (3/6/15)

Berger and his colleagues named the creature *Homo naledi*, combining the Latin word for our own genus and an African word for star (to note the Rising Star cave). But the truly stellar brilliance of the find brought a shroud of mysteries with it, too.

First, there was no way to date the bones. They seemed to have been dumped where they were, not embedded between layers of volcanic ash or other datable substances. So did they die three million years ago? One million? No way to tell.

And how in Darwin's name did the bodies get there? Saber-toothed something-or-others didn't drag them, because they would have left bite marks all over the yummy bones. The now-narrow cave might have had a different configuration back when, so the creatures could have walked in, but why would so many have died right there?

There was no evidence of a rock slide killing them all at once or of a stream washing the bones into the cave. Other kinds of catastrophic death traps, such as deadly gases, can't be ruled out, but they would have to have happened without a struggle.

By elimination (nobody's favorite scientific method) Prof. Berger concluded that these creatures' fellows must have dumped them there after death—an act of impressive thoughtfulness for an unimpressive brain. Could there have been a simple mortuary ritual so much earlier in our evolutionary history than we had thought? Skeptics are saying no, but the theory may not be so far-fetched.

We humans don't have a monopoly on fascination with the boundary between life and death. Many animals show signs of grief. Ape mothers cradle unresponsive infants for days after death. Elephants are compassionate toward the dying and drawn to the dead; they have been seen lingering over bleached bones. Peter Fashing and Nga Nguyen have argued, in the *International Journal of Paleopathology*, that nonhuman interest in dying and dead companions can help us understand fossils.

So if *Homo naledi* did slip its dead into a deep cave, why? A crude wish to get the bodies off and away? A more generous desire to protect them from being eaten by lions or desecrated by enemies? A sense that we belong to the earth when the breath of life leaves us? Your guess is as good as mine.

Ongoing research may yet give us a more definite time frame for our newly discovered cousins and thus fill in some details of their story. Certainly, we'll be learning much

more about what kind of protohuman our new relative was. As with previous finds about our prehistoric origins, these bones have the curious capacity to work like mirrors.

*—Melvin Konner is the author of “The Tangled Wing” and “Women After All.” He is a professor of anthropology, neuroscience and behavioral biology at Emory University*

Copyright 2014 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).