

Tales of Ancient Worlds

The First Humans



By Stefan Milosavljevich

The oldest adventures in archaeology are very old indeed. We're not talking about thousands of years, but millions! Let's begin by exploring the earliest chapter in human history – the Stone Age.

We'll start over three million years ago with a bunch of hairy upright-walking apes. Then we'll meet modern globe-trotting humans, before ending up around 6000 years ago with the first farmers and their majestic monuments, including the gobsmacking Gobekli Tepe and the stunning Stonehenge.



Your Ancient Family Tree

60

00

It's only right to start this series with the most ancient tale of all, the story of humanity! You may look very similar to your mum and dad, but not exactly the same.

Over time small differences like this add up, and animals very slowly change into something entirely new.

This is called evolution. Over the last 7 million years we evolved from apes in Africa; kike chimpanzees, into modern humans.



Sahelanthropus

6.0

0

These apes lived around 7 million years ago and may be one of our first ancestors to start walking on two legs – at least some of the time.

We can tell this because of how their necks connected to their heads. Walking on two legs is one of the defining features of humans, and a good sign an animal is our ancestor. All other apes mostly walk on all fours.



00

Australopithecus

6,0

Evolving around 3.5 million years ago, Australopithecus lived all across East Africa. They walked on two legs, but their brains were only slightly bigger than a chimpanzee's. despite this, Australopithecus was probably the first of our ancestors to use stone tools!



00

Paranthropus Boisei

٥)

Paranthropus evolved 2.6 million years ago. They aren't our direct ancestor, more like a cousin. They walked on two legs but ate a diet that consisted mostly of leaves and grasses. Almost like human cows. They had big teeth – a result of all that chewing!

Homo Erectus

00

Our ancestors really started to look like us 1.9 million years ago. Homo erectus had hairless bodies and could run on two feet, making them good hunters. They had brains almost as big as ours and were able to leave Africa and spread across Asia.



C

No. A

Neanderthal

00

Neanderthals were very similar to us, just shorter and stockier. This was because they evolved in Europe around 400,000 years ago; where the climate was much colder than Africa (where modern humans evolved.) Their bulky bodies helped them conserve heat.



Homo Sapiens

Q Q

0

Our species, Homo sapiens, evolved in Africa around 300,00 years ago. We owe so much to our ancient ancestors, but we have bigger brains – we're the nerds of our family tree! Our big brans allowed us to be creative, adapt to anything and produce incredible tools and art.

The Story of a Girl Called Lucy

1/1

Ma

Donald Johanson and Tom Gray had been working in the hot sun all morning, surveying the land around Hadar, in the East African country of Ethiopia.

It was 1974 and they were searching for tiny clues at our earliest ancestors – relatives of ours that lived millions of years ago. They weren't having much joy so decided to head back to their car and try a different route. As they were walking back, they noticed a bone sticking out of the ground.

They excitedly began clearing away dirt – revealing part of a skull after two weeks of work they had stumbled upon one of the most incredible discoveries in the history of science, an almost complete Australopithecus, which they decided to name Lucy (after a song by the Beatles)

S AV

Australopithecus was one of our earliest relatives. In many ways it was more similar to a chimpanzee than to a modern human. It was small, and probably spent some of the time living in trees. If you were alive 3 million years ago, you'd be short and hairy too. Lucy had big teeth. She didn't know how to make a fire, so everything she ate was raw. Naturally when your diet is made up of tough bits of food you need big gnashers to chew through it all. How do we know this pile of bones was your great-greatgreat-great (x 100.000) grandma? It's all down to the legs and hips. Different animals walk in different ways; your legs are not the same as a cat's legs, and a cat's legs aren't the same as a mouse's. Lucy was definitely designed to walk upright on two legs, and her feet were shaped like ours. She didn't walk or run as well as you though, but had a funny waddle. The fact that she couldn't run very fast probably means she wasn't a great hunter. If Lucy ate any (raw) meat, it was likely because she had found an old dead animal. Tasty!

The Family of Shanidar Cave

-

Incredible discoveries about human evolution are not just made in Africa.

0

In 1957, American archaeologist, Ralph Soleck, and his tram were exploring the mountains of northern Iraq. As they climbed higher and higher, they came across the enormous Shanidar Cave, a perfect home for prehistoric people. They entered the cool dark cave and began to dig into the earth. Tucked away in these mountains they made a fantastic discovery – beans and stone tools left behind by a group of Neanderthals 50,000 years ago! The Neanderthals were out closest cousins. In many ways they looked and acted like us. They lived in caves, hunted wild animals, buried their dead and even made small pieces of artwork. They had slightly different skulls from us and they were a little shorter and wider. Imagine a family of professional wrestlers and you're along the right lines. As skeleton after skeletons was recovered from Shanidar Cave more evidence emerged of how similar Neanderthals were to

us. The best example came from the skull of a male Neanderthal called Shanidar 1. When Shanidar 1 was young he was hit on the head really badly. Not a little bump, but a lifethreatening injury that caused terrible damage.

Shanidar 1 was probably blind and deaf on the injured side of his head. The wound also caused his arm and leg to not grow properly. For someone who had to hunt for a living, you would think that should spell disaster, but it wasn't the case. As it turned out, Shanidar 1 lived until he was about 45 years old. Not too bad for a caveman! This meant that Shanidar 1 was probably helped by other Neanderthals, most likely his family and must have had a respected role in their group. This was a really important discovery. Previously it was thought that Neanderthals led a hard, uncaring life. Now we know they loved and cared for their family, just like us.

9

The Baby That Loved to Climb

In 2000, Zeresenay Alemseged and his team were excavating in the Dikika region of Ethiopia, part of an area called the Great Rift Valley. The region is hot and dry, but it's a great place to study ancient humans. As the team sifted through the dust, bucket after bucket, searching for any clue, they uncovered a small, cute and incredibly important fossil: the 3.3-million-year-old remains of a 3-year-old Australopithecus (try saying that quickly).

Zeresenay knew this was a special discovery. It's incredibly rare to find bones that are over 3 million years old, but it's even harder to find the remains of children because their bones are fragile and less likely to fossilize. Zeresenay called the child "Lucy's baby" in honour of the other famous Australopith discovery. Scientists got to work studying the remains. Even though the child was very young it was clear that it was able to walk upright, just like us. Lucy's baby held its mother's hand as they wandered across the hot savannah. The finger and toe bones were curved, similar to modern chimpanzees and gorillas. Modern apes have these features to help them climb trees. This suggests that Lucy's baby was doing the same thing. Why would an animal that walked on two legs also need to be good at climbing? We don't know for sure, but we can make some educated guesses. Life in the African savannah can be very dangerous.

The area is full of lions, hyenas and cheetahs, animals that would absolutely love to eat you for breakfast. Australopiths like Lucy's baby might have climbed into trees at night to keep them safe from predators. You don't want to wake up in the morning and discover a hyena licking your feet! Lucy's baby is a great example of how slowly humans adapted, or evolved, over millions of years. Even though they walked on two legs like modern humans, Australopiths still had many similarities to other apes. Even to this day, we still find it fun to climb – maybe that's the ape inside of you!

