

Exploring the “Cradle of Humankind”

Caves of the Ape-Men: South Africa's Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site,
by Ronald J. Clarke and Timothy Partridge, with contributions by Kathleen Kuman. S.E.
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Ian Tattersall

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A sense of place is as important in the understanding of human evolution as it is in any other area of human experience. Possibly more so than in most, indeed, for it is your reviewer's conviction that there is little in life more satisfying and revelatory than being introduced to an important fossil or archeological site by an articulate colleague who is intimate with its structure and history. Quite simply, there is no other way in which the past, and the evidence for it, can be brought to life with the same immediacy; and, as the products of a long evolutionary journey, human beings find it hard not to respond in a visceral way to those very special places at which their common origins are documented.

Perhaps that penetrating sense of in some way *belonging* to a strange place, of being away from home but still somewhere that is truly significant in one's own background, is nowhere more powerful than when one visits the classic hominid sites of the South African High Veld. In this now dry and largely treeless landscape, erosion and dynamite have exposed ancient cave localities from which a torrent of ancient human fossils has been recovered, beginning in the middle 1920s. This is truly the heartland of the “australopiths,” archaic hominid relatives dating (in this region) to between about three million and one-and-a-half million years ago. The australopiths were the human precursors who made the first foray into becoming beings that were somehow truly *different* from other primates. They were creatures retaining ape-sized brains, large faces, big chewing teeth and short stature; but they already shared with us the bipedal locomotion which makes us so physically distinctive in the

modern world. Ultimately, they even began to make stone tools. Plainly, these ancient relatives had already embarked on the Great Human Adventure; and this is why their remains, and the places at which those remains were found, speak so eloquently to us over that vast reach of time.

Dubbed “The Cradle of Humankind” since its recent designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Sterkfontein Valley to the northwest of Johannesburg is the core of this unique landscape; and it is home to perhaps the richest concentration of fossil hominid sites to be found anywhere in the world. Each of several legendary localities has its own complex story to tell, and each of them exerts its own mysterious pull on the visitor. One of the Cradle of Humankind sites, the Sterkfontein cave, is now partially open to the public; and the complex as a whole boasts a recently opened visitors' center at Maropeng, an hour's drive from downtown Johannesburg. Still, most aficionados of human evolution are unlikely ever to make that drive in person; and the next best thing is to do it in imagination, something that has now been made possible by the publication of *Caves of the Ape-Men*, by Ron Clarke and Tim Partridge. Clarke is the current excavator of Sterkfontein, and the initial discoverer of the “Little Foot” skeleton that has garnered so much publicity as he has patiently extricated it from its unforgiving rocky matrix over the past decade or so; and Partridge was a leading geologist of the caves until his tragic early death as the book went to press. It is hard to imagine a more authoritative team to expound the history and significance of these historic sites and their denizens.

The book is large in format and lavishly illustrated in high-quality color with maps, diagrams, views of the sites, photographs of important hominid and other mammal fossils, artifacts, and reconstructions of the caves' denizens as they appeared in life. The fairly brief text is accessibly written for a general audience and situates the australopiths

I. Tattersall (✉)
Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History,
New York, NY 1002, USA
e-mail: iant@amnh.org

in the history of the study of human evolution as well as covering their biological significance as it is understood today. Topics also covered include the formation of the caves themselves, and the environments that surrounded them at the time they were filled with the rubble in which the hominid and other fossils were enclosed; the physical characteristics and relationships of the hominid genera *Australopithecus* and *Paranthropus* to which the hominids are assigned; the beginnings of stone tool making in the region and the possible early use of fire; and the early development of hominid culture. Throughout, text and illustrations are integrated for the maximum complementarity and readability.

Once the sites themselves have been evoked and explained, the book continues with some salutary if rather unsettling reflections on past environmental changes and the substantial risks posed to the future South African environment by current human activities. However, it finishes more cheerfully with some very useful practical suggestions on how to organize a visit to the Cradle of Mankind sites. If you care about human evolution and you are not in a position to capitalize upon this excellent final advice, then find a copy of this book. As a “virtual tour” of this magical landscape, and of its unique history, it’s as close as you’re likely to get to the real thing.