

Ancient skeleton's DNA window into earliest modern human group

The skeleton of a man who lived more than 2300 years ago and foraged food from the ocean off southern Africa belonged to an ancient group of modern humans now presumed extinct, an Australian-led study has found.

When archaeologists discovered the complete skeleton in St Helena Bay in 2010, they feared the region's acidic soils would have destroyed its DNA.

But an international team led by Sydney geneticist Vanessa Hayes was able to generate a complete mitochondrial genome of the man, using material extracted from a tooth and a rib.

Mitochondrial DNA contains information passed from mother to child, and from this the team learned that the man was a member of the earliest ethnic group of humans to diverge from the maternal common ancestor all humans share.

Professor Hayes, an expert in African genomes, said everyone living on Earth today shared a common maternal ancestor, an ancestral "Mitochondrial Eve", who lived in Africa about 200,000 years ago.

"From Eve, this [individual] comes from the earliest branch, which diverged around 150,000 to 170,000 years ago," said Professor Hayes, the head of the Laboratory for Human Comparative and Prostate Cancer Genomics at the Garvan Institute of Medical Research.

The discovery will likely reignite debate about the region in Africa where the first modern humans arose.

Read full original story: [Skeleton of man from ancient group of humans found in South Africa](#)