

Strange cave-fellows? Unexpected discovery suggests 3 early human species lived together in South Africa

Two million years ago, three different early humans—Australopithecus, Paranthropus, and the earliest-known Homo erectus—appear to have lived at the same time in the same place, near the Drimolen Paleocave System. How much these different species interacted remains unknown. But their contemporaneous existence suggests our [ancient relations](#) were quite diverse during a key transitional period of African prehistory that saw the last days of Australopithecus and the dawn of H. erectus's nearly two-million-year run.

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If [paleoanthropologist Andy] Herries and colleagues are correct that they have found Homo erectus, the early dates of the find pose an intriguing question: How did the species arrive in South Africa?

One possibility is that H. erectus originated here and later spread to [East Africa](#) and then out of the continent. However, Herries says that the discovery of the oldest-known bones doesn't necessarily mean H. erectus started in this locale. Perhaps they migrated to the area.

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"We talk a lot about [diverse species coexisting] with Neanderthals, modern humans, and Denisovans, and we can see that with DNA, but we don't have that ability with this earlier stuff," adds Herries. "I'm sure it happened and this may be one of the first instances where we can really see it."

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