

## ‘Humans developed complex belief systems around death’: 78,000-year old gravesite marks oldest human burial in Africa

Archaeologists have identified the oldest known human burial in [Africa](#) during field work that uncovered the remains of a child laid carefully to rest in a grave nearly 80,000 years ago.

The arrangement of the bones shows the three-year-old – named Mtoto after the Swahili word for child – was placed with legs tucked to chest, and perhaps wrapped in a shroud with their head on a pillow, before being gently covered in soil.

Researchers discovered the delicate and degraded bones while excavating the floor beneath a sheltered overhang at the mouth of the Panga ya Saidi cave in the tropical uplands of Kenya’s coastal plain about 10 miles from the shore.

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“Humans, unlike chimps, began to develop complex belief systems around death,” said Prof Nicole Boivin, the principal investigator on the project in Jena.

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“But what seems clear is that there is not just an emotional connection to the dead, but almost certainly also a framework for understanding and navigating death, and for making it meaningful. Unlike other species, we have cosmological belief systems that give meaning to experience and to events like the death of a loved one.”

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