

Modern humans co-existed with at least seven now extinct hominid ancestors, and in many cases integrated their DNA

Ancient DNA technology has revolutionized the way we study human history and has quickly taken off, with a constant stream of studies exploring the genes of long-ago people.

Along with more fossils and artifacts, the DNA findings are pointing us to a challenging idea: We're not so special.

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Scientists now know that after *H. sapiens* first showed up in Africa around 300,000 years ago, they overlapped with a whole cast of other hominins, explained Rick Potts, director of the Smithsonian's Human Origins Program.

Neanderthals were hanging out in Europe. [Homo heidelbergensis](#) and [Homo naledi](#) were living in Africa. The short-statured [Homo floresiensis](#), sometimes known as the "Hobbit," was living in Indonesia, while the long-legged [Homo erectus](#) was loping around Asia.

Scientists started to realize all these hominins weren't our direct ancestors. Instead, they were more like our cousins: lineages that split off from a common source and headed in different directions.

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"They didn't have a map, they didn't know where they were going," the Smithsonian's [Rick] Potts said. "But looking over the next hillside into the next valley, (they) ran into populations of people that looked a bit different from themselves, but mated, exchanged genes."

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