Fossils Suggest Hominids May Have Lived Alongside Modern Humans

MAROPENG, South Africa: Pristine hominin fossils may have lived in Africa at the same time as humans, researchers said yesterday in new findings that could change the understanding of human evolution.

A team of 20 scientists from laboratories and institutions around the world, including in South Africa and Australia, established that the hominids, called Homo naledi, may have lived alongside Homo sapiens. The team estimates that they are between 236,000 and 335,000-years-old, the beginning of the modern human era, said Berger.

Everyone who has examined the anatomy of the fossils using six independent methods, the team said, has agreed it was Homo naledi. “This was the most exciting day of our lives,” said Hawks, who also published Tuesday in three papers in the journal eLife.

The focus of the team’s research has been South Africa’s barely accessible Rising Star Cave system, part of the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site, about 50 kilometers northwest of Johannesburg. The area has been an incredibly rich source of artifacts for paleontologists since it was first discovered. “There has been a lot of excitement on how old Homo naledi was,” said Hawks.

Noted Darwinian evolutionist Richard Dawkins is among the many people who have supported the team’s findings suggesting the hominids called Homo naledi, may have lived alongside Homo sapiens. “We have two species living here at the same time,” said Hawks, an academic at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The new dating of the fossils opens up all sorts of possibilities for an interchange of behaviors between Homo naledi and Homo sapiens. “It is a critical missing piece of what happened in human evolution,” said Hawks.

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