

HUMAN ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

Summary

Fossil and genetic evidence show that the history of bipedal primates (hominids) began approximately six million years ago. At that time in Africa lived a common ancestor, from which two evolutionary lineages arose and then diverged – one of these lineages led to us – *Homo sapiens*, and the other – to our most recent living relative – the chimpanzee. In this paper a review of the hominid fossils is presented – paleontological proofs of evolution, which were lacking then to Darwin. Beginning with the earliest known hominids (including the Plio-Pleistocene australopithecines and *Ardipithecus*), I discuss the fossil record of the early representatives of the genus *Homo*, through archaic forms of humans (and their most recent representatives – the Neandertals), up to early anatomically modern *Homo sapiens*.

Paleoanthropologists differ in their perception and interpretation of hominid history – the phylogenetic tree, and the number of hominid species that should be included there. Some scholars distinguish as many as 23 hominid taxa; others only 10. Although anthropologists generally agree that in the Pliocene and early Pleistocene many species of early hominids can be distinguished, the nomenclature for the genus *Homo* has been a matter of considerable controversy. This paper favours the view that beginning with the origin of *Homo erectus*, human evolution proceeded along a single lineage, and that *Homo sapiens* appeared not as a result of speciation (cladogenesis), but as a continuation of *H. erectus* populations.