

THE EMERGENCE OF HUMANS

Prolegomenon There might very well be nothing; nor anyone. No one to notice that there is nothing, and to consider that natural. But that there is something, and, whatever it may be, the strange thing! I shall never cease being amazed at this. —André Gide, *Journal*, 1947.²

b36 Hominin classification < not knuckle walking >

I hate babies. They're so human – they remind one of monkeys. —Saki, *The Watched Pot*, 1924.³

Historically human beings have demonstrably belonged to one species. Of our species, there are many clines (**Figure b36.1**); but culture can blind. “The sad litany of a hundred wars and skirmishes,” writes Richard Fortey, “attests to the grim underbelly of diversity: intolerance.”⁴

In the classification of life, we primates (**Table b36.1**) are genetically close to great apes: bonobos (*Pan paniscus*), chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) and gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla*) of African, and orangutans (*Pongo pygmaeus*) of Borneo and Sumatra, and lesser apes: greater gibbons (siamangs) and lesser gibbons (*Hoolock*, *Hylobates* and *Nomascus*) of southeastern Asia. Of living hominids, genetic studies (see Topic f25) have indicated that humans, bonobos, chimpanzees and gorillas are great apes more closely related than they are to lesser apes (orangutans, siamangs and gibbons). The family Hominidae (hominids) includes humans and other great apes.

Questions that naturally arise are: Have humans evolved? Were prehistoric humans always distinct from other apes? In 1967, zoologist Desmond Morris broke rank from the lingering need to draw comfortable distinctions between man and beast by declaring us “naked apes” with thoughts and genetically constrained behaviors understandably similar (but nonhuman apes are short in erudition).

Today, among apes, humans are “self aware” at a level that allows for reasoned choices such as, when prompted by hunger: continuing to read to improve oneself, rather than immediately seeking for food. Were prehistoric humans always one species? Working back in time we find that prehistoric humans do not converge on other apes as these are today (the surprise would be if they did!) but to a common ancestor to all. Prehistoric (archaic) hominids that were tool makers did have heads like nonhuman apes but, otherwise, their bodies were like those of existing humans. To accommodate for this observation, habitually bipedal hominids are placed in subfamily Homininae (hominins) (**Figure b36.2**). This allows for prehistoric extinct humans who may, or may not, have been of the same species as historical humans, to be grouped as the same clade of habitually erect-walking humankind,

Table b36.1 A nested classification of the Order Primates




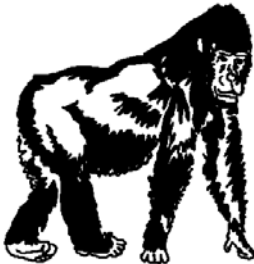


| | <i>Subdivisions of the Order Primates</i> | | | | <i>Include</i> |
|------------------------------------|---|--|---------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Order Primates LINNAEUS 1758 | Suborder Anthropoidea MIVART 1864 | Superfamily Hominoidea GRAY 1825 | Family Hominidae | Subfamily Homininae | Human |
| | | | | | Chimpanzee Gorilla Orangutan |
| | | | | Gibbon | |
| | | | | Old World Monkey New World Monkey | |
| | | | | Tarsier Lemur Loris | |

which does not include knuckle-walking apes.⁵ Of this *clade* that includes the genera *Homo* and *Australopithicene*, we are the species *Homo sapiens*. Historical (modern) humans, to keep everyone happy, are referred to as *Homo sapiens sapiens* although such a racial distinction from prehistoric humans cannot be proven.

Clearly prehistoric humans lived. They have left evidence of their existence, not in script, but in paintings, carvings, utensils, hearths, middens, stone tools (**Footnote b36.1**) and their bones. □

Figure b36.2 Classification of the apes

As a measure of their facility for culturalization, of all the apes, only humans make (beginning 28,000 years ago) and give (trade) shoes (Middle Paleolithic modern humans and Neanderthals, and all before, went unshod).⁶ Socially learned patterned behaviors that last from one generation to the next do not appear to this level among other apes. For example, chimpanzees in four wildlife areas (Bossou, Gombe, Mahale, and Tai) have independently invented “ant dipping” (using a stick to gather ants from a mound) variations. However, Christophe Boesch and Michael Tomasello, who have noted this, doubt that the chimpanzees ever understand the intended results of another’s behavior.⁷

| Lesser apes | Great apes | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Hominids | | |
| | SE Asian | African | Hominins |
|  <p data-bbox="251 1165 406 1207"><i>Hylobates</i></p>  <p data-bbox="227 1438 462 1480"><i>Symphalangus</i></p> |  <p data-bbox="568 1270 665 1312"><i>Pongo</i></p> |  <p data-bbox="876 1144 982 1186"><i>Gorilla</i></p>  <p data-bbox="876 1459 933 1491"><i>Pan</i></p> |  <p data-bbox="1120 1438 1209 1470"><i>Homo</i></p> |

Before European tenderfoot fashions intruded, Amerindians had invented sandals, slip-ons, sling-back heels, and round-cupped heels. From a dig in a dry cave near the Missouri river, Michael O’Brien has found many sandals woven from the fibers of a yucca plant called *rattlesnake master*. The production technology had changed little throughout the millennia. One sandal 8,300 years old is the oldest shoe east of the Rockies. Some from Utah date a bit older.⁸ The common level of mental ability of living humans becomes more understandable when one learns of our generational closeness through Richard Dawkins statement that “more people are *alive* today than have died since the dawn of *Homo sapiens*.”⁹ However, that is a little hyperbolic in view of J. R. McNeill’s estimate in 2000 of 80 billion people born since the beginning of the species.¹⁰

Footnote b36.1 May 1859, a flint tool *uncontroversially* in situ on the authority of Joseph Prestwich and John Evans in “Drift” gravels, in a worked pit (earlier reported on by Boucher de Perthes) near Amiens, northern France, along with the bones of extinct animals as mammoth and woolly rhinoceros, made history.¹¹