

## Book Reviews

### Human Evolution: A Very Short Introduction

By Bernard Wood (2005). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 131 pp., \$9.95/£6.99 (paperback), ISBN 0-19-280360-3.

Bernard Wood's *Human Evolution: A Very Short Introduction* is a recent addition to OUP's series of texts which for the past decade have provided expert summaries of a variety of specialist topics ranging from Gandhi to particle physics. Reviewing for *The Times* (London), Lisa Jardine describes the series as "snappy, small-format...stylish design...perfect to pop into your pocket for spare moments"; an accurate description. One wonders how, in the space of only 131 half-size pages, palaeoanthropology can be given adequate treatment without reverting to conventional modes of explanation often employed when catering to a lay audience. Fortunately, this short volume avoids tired aphorisms while it tackles the discipline with readability and, at times, humour, e.g. "*Burkerking ipodensis* would not be an acceptable binomial for a new hominin species" (p. 38).

From the outset, palaeoanthropology is contextualised within the deep time framework of the Tree of Life, following the evolution of vertebrates, mammals, primates and finally humans. Subsequent sections continue to hearken back to this concept rather than leaving it to languish as an abstract metaphor. The second chapter provides a concise but broad history of modern thought on humanity's place in the natural world from early Greek philosophy, the emergence of inductive thought during the Renaissance and the inception of familiar disciplines such as geology and palaeontology. Wood quickly moves into an explanation of how modern subjects such as biochemistry and immunology have contributed to palaeoanthropology and how these affect our interpretation of fossil evidence.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide a more scientific context for the study of human evolution. Geological and fossilisation processes are described along with dating techniques, and the differences in types of fossil sites are explored. Later, procedures of taxonomy are discussed, with particular emphasis on variation and sexual dimorphism. Wood thoughtfully explains how these factors may confound the assignment of specimens to taxa, how relationships between fossil species are determined, and how behaviour is reconstructed. The sections on speciation and taphonomy, while thoroughly summarised, are later in the text than I expected, and as a result some of the book's flow is disrupted.

The second half of the book engages the reader with the recent history of major finds and events. It gives clear reviews of the morphology of the fossil species and their reconstructed diets, locomotor repertoires, lifeways and environmental contexts. Of particular note, Chapter 5 creates a picture of

what one might expect the "first hominin" to look like based on human and chimp models and reviews the potential candidates. Each chapter concludes with a "points to watch" section that outlines missing evidence which might help us address unanswered questions, and these also inform the reader about directions in which the discipline is moving.

Subsequent chapters are similarly objective and thorough, with a focus on the morphological variation observed in the fossil record and how this impacts our understanding of the trajectories of hominin lineages. Differences between the East versus South African and the African versus Asian material are explored and Wood adds a brief insight into well known controversies regarding the distinction between *Homo habilis* and *H. rudolfensis*, and between *H. erectus* and *H. ergaster*. The final chapter describes the emergence of anatomically modern humans and details the multiregional and Out of Africa hypotheses and the variety of evidence used to reconstruct later stages of evolution and migration. While the final timeline and further reading sections are useful, the book does, however, lack a solid conclusion. The omission is unusual considering Wood's efforts to contextualise and outline the discipline's history in other sections.

While the book is impressively concise, some chapters suffer from awkward inclusions, such as the sections on "Teamwork" and "Fossils Rediscovered" in Chapter 3. Another relatively minor flaw is that later chapters tend to slide into a descriptive style dotted with terms that are not defined as consistently as in earlier chapters. Finally, while experts will find little fault with the content of figures and tables, they are not always linked properly to the text and they lack descriptive captions. In some cases, they provide information that has not yet been addressed in the text, for instance the map in Chapter 5 labels 23 early hominin sites, but the majority of these relate to species that are described later in the book; Wood never refers back to this map.

It is difficult to do justice to the entirety of human evolution in limited space, but this volume accomplishes a great deal. It would be highly recommended as a background text for introductory university level courses or students preparing to study for anthropology degrees, and also to a curious layperson with some degree of scientific background.

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Bernard Wood. Abstract. Human Evolution: A Very Short Introduction traces the history of paleoanthropology from its beginnings in the eighteenth century to the latest fossil finds.Â Bernard Wood, author Henry R. Luce Professor of Human Origins at George Washington University and the Smithsonian Institution in 1997 Author Webpage. Read More. Highlight search term.Â Access to the complete content on Very Short Introductions online requires a subscription or purchase. Public users are able to search the site and view the abstracts and keywords for each book and chapter without a subscription. Please subscribe or login to access full text content.