

# The Malapa Fossils

photographs & text by  
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Professor Lee Berger, the man behind the discovery, believes Malapa may hold the key to one of the most significant and least understood chapters in human evolution: the origin of the first species enough like us to be called the first human – the first member of the genus called Homo.

The Malapa site lies outside of Johannesburg, South Africa in the famous “Cradle of Humankind.” Over the last 3 years it has offered up more unique fossil finds than any other site in the world. Careful excavation by Professor Lee Berger’s Wits University team is leading to ongoing discoveries more regularly than any site in history. Many of these finds are more significant and complete than any other thus far in this field.

There is now scientifically verifiable evidence of six individual skeletons on this site alone, unprecedented in the field of Paleo-Anthropology.



The skull of juvenile male MH1 Australopithecus sediba photographed at the Malapa site in the Malapa Nature Reserve on November 1, 2010 in the Cradle of Humankind, South Africa.



The "elephant chamber" inside Sterkfontein Caves on October 11, 2010 in Gauteng, South Africa.

The use of technology has also proven revolutionary, with incredibly detailed micro scans from French Synchrotron machines, CT scans and 3D imaging producing images that were never possible before. There is even a possibility of seeing skin and hair on the skull of Sediba, a 1.95 million year old youth with the most intact skull ever found.

This discovery opens up fundamental questions about human origin. It takes what has come before and throws into dispute many theories on evolution. There are currently more than 80 scientists working in harmony on this project, something rarely seen in such a competitive field. Wits University Paleo Sciences department has a large team of excavators and artists, delicately carving out fossil

pieces from Malapa's ancient rock, duplicating them in resin and sending these discoveries out to the worldwide team to reinforce their research.

One of the chief questions remains: what exactly has been discovered? Are these fossils late *Australopithecus Africanus* or an early *Homo Erectus*? If so, where does this link fit in our chain of evolution? Whatever it turns out to be, these fossils offer more evidence about early hominids than any other single discovery in the world. There seems to be no end to the fossils coming out the ground at Malapa and no limit to what they may tell us about the true origins of humanity.



Views of the Malapa range on the Malapa Nature Reserve in the Cradle of Humankind in Johannesburg, South Africa.



The entrance of Sterkfontein Caves which features a natural "Death Trap" opening into which animals and early humans would have fallen and become preserved as fossils within the Sterkfontein Cave system, October 8, 2010 in Gauteng.

Professor Lee Berger of Wits University Paleontology Department sits with his son Matthew at the Malapa Fossil site on the Malapa Nature Reserve in the Cradle of Humankind on October 25, 2010 in Johannesburg, South Africa. Australopithecus Sediba was found at the Malapa site 18 months ago and has gone on to become perhaps the most important early hominid find in history. Matthew Berger is credited with finding the first Hominid fossil at the site, a find which led to a major new Hominid genus being discovered. A juvenile male is emerging largely intact as well as an adult female and it appears there are at least 4 other skeletons at the site. This is the largest find of its kind in history and may rewrite the books on how we view early relations to humankind.





FAR LEFT: Professor Lee Berger of Wits University Paleontology Department works with his excavations staff at the Malapa Fossil site on the Malapa Nature Reserve in the Cradle of Humankind on October 25, 2010 in Johannesburg, South Africa. Australopithecus Sediba was found at the Malapa site 18 months ago and has gone one to become perhaps the most important early hominid find in history. A juvenile male is emerging largely intact as well as an adult female and it appears there are at least 4 other skeletons at the site. This is the largest find of its kind in history and may rewrite the books on how we view early relations to humankind.



The excavations staff at the Malapa Fossil site on the Malapa Nature Reserve in the Cradle of Humankind on October 25, 2010 in Johannesburg, South Africa. Australopithecus Sediba was found at the Malapa site 18 months ago and has gone on to become perhaps the most important early hominid find in history. A juvenile male is emerging largely intact as well as an adult female and it appears there are at least 4 other skeletons at the site. This is the largest find of its kind in history and may rewrite the books on how we view early relations to humankind.





**FAR LEFT:** The mandible of MH2, the adult female hominid find from Malapa, inside the De Beers Tomography facility on November 2, 2010 in Johannesburg, South Africa. This Micro-Tomography facility conducts hyper hi-res scans of the fossils and is capable of magnifying them 100 times more than a standard medical CT scan. These fossil scans are used to determine many things about the hominids, from diet, cause of death, bi-pedalism and many more previously unknown facts.



**TOP:** Excavators from the Malapa hominid project at Wits University go through rock matrix extracted from the Malapa fossil site looking for evidence of hominid fossil remains on October 17, 2010 in Johannesburg, South Africa. The Sediba fossil find from Malapa may represent a new Hominid genus, something never seen before. The find at Malapa in the Cradle of Humankind area of South Africa are unprecedented in their scale. There are so far an adult female and juvenile male who are almost intact as well as evidence of at least 4 other skeletons. There has never been a find of similar scale in the hominid section of the Paleontological world. Over 76 scientists around the world are currently working together on this project.

**BOTTOM:** Casting Lab Technicians at Wits University Paleo Sciences department work on the Sediba hominid project making precise resin copies of fossil finds on October 5, 2010 in Johannesburg, South Africa. These copies are then utilised across the world by scientists working on the project as well as educators across the paleolithic spectrum.



School children from the Marapo A-Thutlwa Primary school visit Maropeng visitor's center at the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site on October 8, 2010 in Gauteng, South Africa. Maropeng means "returning to the place of origin" in Setswana, the main indigenous language in this area of South Africa. This is a center devoted to human origins and the children undertake a journey into the origins of man as they tour the facility. The recent Sediba discovery has re-energised the Paleolithic world in the minds of people in South Africa and there is more interest in early man and the fossil rich Cradle of Humankind than ever before.



Professor Lee Berger teaches an early man fossil class to students inside the fossil vault at the Wits University Medical department on October 12, 2010 in Johannesburg, South Africa. Professor Berger has been responsible for a number of important Hominid fossil discoveries, the most recent of which is the Sediba fossil, this find represents a new Hominid genus, something not seen before in the evolution of early man. These fossil finds at Malapa in the Cradle of Humankind area of South Africa are unprecedented in their completeness and sheer number. There are so far an adult female and juvenile male who are almost intact as well as evidence of at least 4 other skeletons. There has never been a find of similar scale in the hominid section of the Paleontological world. Over 76 scientists around the world are currently working together on this project.

Artists Mabote Boy Louw, 22, and Given Fortune Bongani Nkosi, 22, work on a mural of the evolution of man at a school in Mamelodi township on October 16, 2010 in Pretoria, South Africa. Nkosi and Louw spend their working week creating casts of the Malapa fossils at Wits Paleo Center, working with others to create accurate replicas of the Hominid fossils for distribution to the scientists working on this project around the world. Nkosi and Louw were selected for this job after they won a competition for artists run by the American Embassy in Johannesburg. Both men are interested in spreading knowledge of the Paleo history of South Africa amongst the townships of the country and are trying to initiate a mural project based on images of early man.





**FAR LEFT:** The skeleton of adult female Mh2 Australopithecus sediba from the Malapa Hominid find(left) and The skeleton of juvenile male MH1 Australopithecus sediba from the Malapa Hominid find (right) as seen at Wits University Paleo Sciences department on October 26, 2010 in Johannesburg, South Africa. These finds are precisely copied in resin and the copies are then utilised across the world by scientists working on the project as well as educators across the paleolithic spectrum. The Sediba fossil find represents a new Hominid genus, something not seen before. The find at Malapa in the Cradle of Humankind area of South Africa are unprecedented in their scale. There are so far an adult female, MH2 and a juvenile male, MH1, who are almost intact as well as evidence of at least 4 other skeletons.

**LEFT:** The scapula, arm and hand of adult female Mh2 Australopithecus sediba from the Malapa Hominid find lying next to the scapula, arm and hand of a Bonobo Chimpanzee, as seen at Wits University Paleo Sciences department on November 5, 2010 in Johannesburg, South Africa. This is the most complete Hominid skeleton ever found. These finds are precisely copied in resin and the copies are then utilised across the world by scientists working on the project as well as educators across the paleolithic spectrum. The Sediba fossil find represents a new Hominid genus, something not seen before. The find at Malapa in the Cradle of Humankind area of South Africa are unprecedented in their scale.



The skull of Turkana Boy, a 1.5 million year old Hominid, photographed at the National Museum of Kenya on October 21, 2010 in Nairobi, Kenya (left); the skull of Mrs Ples, as curated by the Ditsong National Museum of Natural History, October 13, 2010 in Pretoria, South Africa (center); the skull of Australopithecus sediba, a juvenile male hominid dating back approximately 1.95 million years, October 17, 2010 in Johannesburg, South Africa. Turkana Boy, also known as Nariokotome Boy, the common name of fossil KNM-WT 15000, a nearly complete skeleton of a hominid who died in the early Pleistocene in the Turkana region of Kenya. This specimen is the most complete early human skeleton ever found. It is 1.5 million years old. Turkana Boy is classified as either Homo erectus or Homo ergaster. His age has been estimated from as old as 15 years to as young as 7 years six months. The most recent scientific review suggests 8 years of age. It was initially suggested that he would have grown into 1.85 m tall adult but the most recent analysis argues for the much shorter stature of 1.63 m. The reason for this shift has been research showing that his growth maturation differed from that of modern humans in that he would have had a shorter and smaller adolescent growth spurt. The skeleton was discovered in 1984 by Kamoya Kimeu, a member of a team led by Richard Leakey, at Nariokotome near Lake Turkana in Kenya. Mrs Ples is a famous example of Australopithecus africanus and is estimated at 2.5 to 2.1 million years old. She was discovered by Robert Broom in 1947 and has been instrumental in comparative analysis on the new Sediba find, thought to be younger than Mrs Ples. The Sediba skull has subsequently become a largely complete skeleton and was found with a largely complete adult female. There are fossil parts for an estimated 4 other skeletons making this one of the largest finds of its kind in history. 76 scientists from a myriad of disciplines are involved in the project thus far.

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