

In his Beagle field notebook (1.6, EH 8820236) Charles Darwin observed that he 'saw the east and west ranges south of Caledon' travelling along 'the mountains in the curved road'. He mentions as geographic markers the Palmiet River and the Zonderend that, presumably, is today's Riviersonderend.

Darwin did a quick tour of the Cape over four days during June 1836 taking him to Paarl, Franschoek, Houw Hoek and back to Cape Town over what was then called the Sir Lowry Cole's pass. He wanted 'glimpses of African landscape, or rather should I say, African deserts.'

Darwin had written to his sister Catherine in a letter from the 'Cape of Good Hope' dated 3 June 1836 that 'Having seen so much of that sort of country in Patagonia Chile and Peru I feel myself to a certain degree a connoisseur in a desert and am anxious to see these.'

I tell this story because Darwin was close to one of the candidate sites for modern human origins - the Mossel Bay area. It invites goose bumps to know that the first natural scientist to believe that human beings had an African origin was unknowingly close to a candidate site.

In the *Descent of Man* Darwin wrote that 'in each great region of the world the living mammals are closely related to the extinct species of the same region. It is therefore probable that Africa was inhabited by extinct apes closely allied to the gorilla and chimpanzee.' (Penguin, London, 2004, p.182)

Not everyone will be delighted by the news that, as Darwin put it, as 'these two species are now man's nearest allies, it is somewhat more probable that our early progenitors lived on the African continent than elsewhere.' A man for facts, Darwin exclaimed that it was nevertheless 'useless to speculate on this subject.'

The facts collected since the publication of the *Descent of Man* (first published by John Murray in 1879, 129 years ago) confirm Darwin's speculation. Human beings are without a doubt of African origin. It turns out that our present modern variety - you and I - likely originated in the Mossel Bay region.

Two lines of evidence converge on the dramatic conclusion that the region where modern beings evolved their behavioural and cognitive abilities is a mere four-hour drive from Cape Town. Developers who are busy with another gold course there are threatening the site.

Presented at the Nobel conference recently held in the USA state of Minnesota, Dr Curtis Marean appeared to have solved the puzzle of where anatomically modern humanity with our language and planning abilities originated: a site called Pinnacle Point near to Mossel Bay holds the secret.

The critical evidence is almost entirely old fashioned archaeology: scientists look very carefully at the garbage - discarded bones and shells largely - and can reliably date the finds and derive some sense of what they were used for and mean. They date the finds at 165,000 years old.

The date coincides with the findings of the geneticists who look at the age of human DNA. It seems as if the Mossel Bay *strandlopers* survived a major global ice age that spanned the years between 194,000 to 125,000 years ago because they happened to be there, activating a new evolutionary line.

All we need now, to really clinch it, are the human remains. This is a tough one because it is only under most unusual of circumstances where environmental conditions conspire to preserve fossils. It is furthermore likely that the rising ocean levels swallowed most of fossils.

This is the story of stories, our origins. It remains a controversial subject because it challenges deeply held beliefs. It was controversial in Darwin's time, which is why he confined the *Origins of Species* to non-hominid lines and only published the *Descent of Man* twenty years later.

So the circle closes in South Africa: when Darwin disembarked at what was then called Simons' Bay May 31 1836 he stepped on soil from whence his own ancestors and humanity itself came. He suspected this to be so.

Europeans evolved from a sub-population of the Mossel Bay strandlopers who presumably had reached North Africa and breached the continent about 50,000 years ago.

Darwin's people were a sub-population of the North Africans who settled in the Iberia and who colonised the British Isles 15,000 to 7,500 years ago.

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