

Learning Unit 2: From the Archaean to the Stone Age

4000-2500
million (4-2.5
billion) years
BCE

South Africa has long been regarded as a promising location for the Earth's oldest fossils because it includes some of the most ancient well-preserved sedimentary rocks, many of which contain carbonaceous matter. Carbon is a prerequisite for carbon based life forms.

The discovery of numerous filaments in the 3500-million-year-old Swaziland Supergroup lying within The Barberton Greenstone Belt, provides convincing evidence for the existence of bacteria-like or cyanobacteria-like organisms on the Earth during the early Archaean Aeon.

The significance of this is enormous, as the Archaean Aeon constitutes the middle part of the Precambrian (the time in which it is theorised that there was no life on earth), and precedes the Proterozoic Aeon.

4-1.5 million
years BCE

Australopithecines (proto-human hominids) walked upright in the African savannah.

Fossil evidence has been found to support this at various locations, and most convincingly at the Sterkfontein Caves in South Africa (Cradle of Humankind).

2.2-1.8 million
years BCE

Homo habilis, the first member of the genus Homo that made stone tools was believed to have walked in Eastern Africa. The findings include those at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania.

Other discoveries have been made throughout Southern Africa, and in fact one finds Early Stone Age hand axes along the banks of rivers in Swaziland and South Africa similar to those found in Eastern Africa.

We however find no fossil evidence to back this up in most cases, as the calcareous and limestone rocks necessary for the preservation of bone are not present in these areas.

1.8 million –
500 000 years
BCE

Homo ergaster (Homo erectus) spreads through Africa and beyond.

500-100
thousand
years BCE

Archaic Homo sapiens evolves with a similar brain capacity to that of modern humans, but not of the same intracranial cavity shape, indicating that thought processes were most probably not handled in the same manner as ours.