

Preface

Hardly a week goes by in the media without reports about new, sensational insights into the history of human development. Due to the rarity of new human fossil finds, these are usually reassessments of known finds as a result of new dating methods or molecular genetic analyses. Most of these reports relate to human biology and evolutionary lineage. The findings of prehistoric archeology, the sources of which are much more numerous than fossil human finds, and which also represent direct evidence of the culture of the oldest representatives of humankind, are rarely reported. However, early human history cannot be written solely on the basis of DNA or physical characteristics of the genus *Homo*. Because, from the beginning, it is also the story of our empowered mind and the culture we created in the all-encompassing sense, including social behavior, technologies, way of life, and nutrition, as well as aesthetic forms of expression. Thanks to geology, paleontology, paleoanthropology, and archeology, we now know that life existed on Earth for many hundreds of millions of years before our species developed in Africa. But what was the beginning of human culture, what provided the first impetus to this development in the course of which humans left behind their biological origins, left their original habitat, settled the entire world, and finally, in 1969, set foot on the moon? It is impressive to observe the constant acceleration of development, characterized by the ever-increasing human intervention into their environment and its transformation in so far as that we have now coined the term Anthropocene to distinguish a new geological era.

After Liane Giemsch, curator for prehistoric archeology, successfully organized the special exhibition “Gold and Wine. Georgia’s Oldest Treasures” in 2018/19, I suggested that as a next project she should tackle a topic from her personal area of research, the older Paleolithic, to highlight and bring together her professional specialization, which is rare in Germany, and her rousing enthusiasm for the archeology of the oldest cultures in Africa, where she has carried out research in the past, in an exhibition. To my great delight, she suggested the earliest beginnings of our culture as a topic and immediately set up a student workgroup at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main for the project. Together with Miriam Noël Haidle, coordinator of the long-term project “The Role of Culture in Early Expansion of Humans” at the Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural History Museum in Frankfurt, and in cooperation with other well-known scientists, Liane Giemsch compiled the contents of the special exhibition and this companion volume. In the future, the topics highlighted here will be

part of the new conception of the permanent exhibition at the Archaeological Museum in Frankfurt and its expansion into the digital space, to create a public forum at the interface between science and society about what it means to be human and the origins of human culture. Few fields of research are as dynamic as this one, as groundbreaking archeological discoveries continue to be made.

It began with the research of Jacques Boucher de Perthes (1788–1868), who in 1828 discovered handaxes, which he recognized as stone tools made by “antediluvian humans”, together with the bones of extinct animals in the gravels of the Somme near Abbeville in the Picardy. The skeletal remains discovered in 1856 in the Neander Valley near Düsseldorf are thousands of years younger and, after a lengthy research dispute, were recognized as the remains of prehistoric humans. The skull of a pre-human of the species *Australopithecus africanus*, known as the “Taung child”, was first discovered in South Africa in 1924. In 1931, Mary and Louis Leakey discovered the first evidence of a simple stone tool industry that is up to 2.6 million years old in the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. Just 30 years ago, in 1991, researchers discovered the 1.8 million-year-old fossils of *Homo erectus* and associated stone tools in Dmanisi, Georgia, which represented the oldest evidence of the genus *Homo* outside of Africa up until the more recent discovery of the 2.1 million-year-old stone tools at Shangchen in central China in 2018. And it was only in 2011, in Kenya at the Lomekwi site, that the worldwide oldest known stone artifacts, with an age of 3.3 million years, were found. These are significantly older than the oldest evidence of the genus *Homo* from around 2.8 million years ago.

In the first act of the influential science fiction film “2001: A Space Odyssey” by Stanley Kubrick (1928–99), entitled “The Dawn of Man”, which was released in movie theaters in 1968, a few months before the first orbit of the moon by the Apollo 8 astronauts, a group of pre-humans in the African savanna came across a 4-million-year-old square-shaped black monolith that led to a decisive shift in their leader’s consciousness. The exhibition “Being Human—The Beginnings of Our Culture” is on display in a former monastery from the late Middle Ages. This is a reminder that the questions raised in this exhibition are also aimed at philosophy and theology.

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