

Rock the Cradle of Mankind

Forget your Cro-Magnons and Neanderthals. It's that dynamic duo of hominid evolution, *Homo habilis* and the slightly more upright, axe-wielding *Homo erectus*, that have paleoanthropologists up in arms these days.

Until now, evolutionary biologists thought that *Homo erectus* evolved from *Homo habilis*. However, fossils recently unearthed in Kenya have thrown a prehistoric wrench into the most widely accepted theory of mankind's origin. It seems a mistake has been made somewhere along the evolutionary line—one of Darwinian proportions.

In 2000, out in the volcanic deserts of Northern Kenya on the shores of Lake Turkana, mother-and-daughter Meave and Louise Leakey (following in the footsteps of their paleontologist namesakes) finally made their contribution to the renowned Leakey name: the discovery of a skull from the hominid *Homo erectus*.

Seven years later the University of Utah was finally able to pronounce the age of the specimen using volcanic ash deposits.

According to this process the *Homo erectus* skull is about 1.55 million years old.

Here's the hitch. The skull was found within walking distance of a 1.44-million-year-old upper jaw of a *Homo habilis*. The ages of the fossils indicate that the two hominid species coexisted in eastern Africa for about half a million years, instead of one evolving from the other.

"It is the equivalent of finding that your grandmother and great-grandmother were sisters rather than mother-daughter," comments Fred Spoor, professor of evolutionary anatomy at University College in London and co-author of a study on the apparent evolutionary aberration.

But don't muster your search party for Adam and Eve's bones just yet. While the fossils certainly complicate man's development from the ape, they hardly disprove the theory of evolution. So while these evolutionary biologists may be getting a little hot under the collar, Darwin can rest easy. That is, until someone digs him up. JM 