



# **The Official Field Guide to the Cradle of Humankind: Sterkfontein, Swartkrans, Kromdraai and Environs World Heritage Site**

*Lee R. Berger*

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Who were the original people that occupied South Africa, and how far back do we go to find out? Beneath the dolomitic outcrops and the grasslands of an area in the north east of South Africa known as the "cradle of humankind", lies an extensive series of underground caverns that have preserved clues of our most ancient past. Declared a World Heritage Site in 1999 by UNESCO, the area embraces Sterkfontein, Swartkrans, Kromdraai and environs. Research in the area has shaped much of our thinking about the development of Homo sapiens, and fossil finds have proved beyond doubt that humanity originated in Africa - and even suggest that the emergence of our own species may well have happened in South Africa. This work describes the recent historical forces that have played themselves out in the area, and dissects the extraordinary geological framework of the landscape to explain how the "cradle of humankind" can be read like a prehistory textbook. It chronicles the search for human origins at Sterkfontein and the surrounding sites, providing the reader with a context in which to understand the animal and hominin species that existed long ago in this part of the world. With the help of colourful photographs, sketches, diagrams and maps, the authors try to evoke a world in which our earliest ancestors might have lived; provide a guide to all the hominin species that are known to have existed; trace the broad climatic changes that have swept across the region over the aeons; discuss hominin evolution; and describe the plants and animals of the region, both past and present.

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