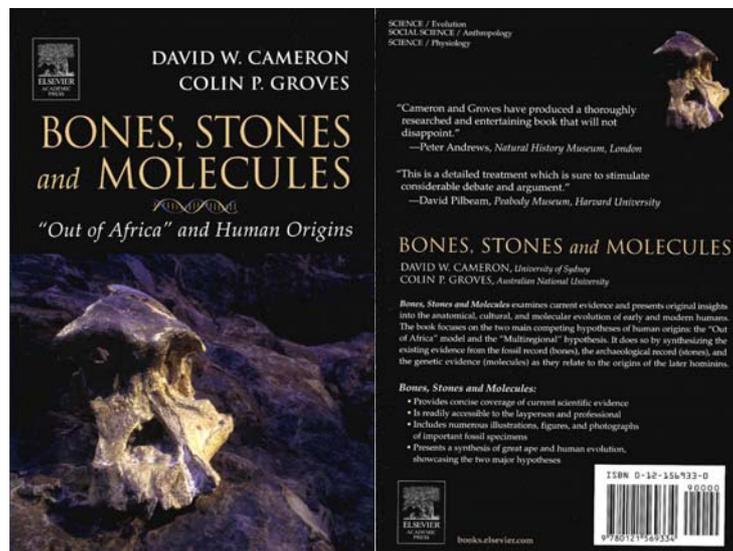


Cameron, D.W. & C.P. Groves. 2004. Bones, stones and molecules. "Out of Africa" and human origins. – Amsterdam, Elsevier Academic Press

Book review by P. Storm



Every general book on human evolution that came out recently but just a little too early has one big frustrating aspect: we miss the ‘Hobbit’ of Flores. October 28, 2004, the news was published in ‘Nature’ that parts of a human skeleton had been found in the cave of Liang Bua, Flores (Indonesia). The skeletal parts indicated that the owner had an adult stature of about 1 m and endocranial volume of 380 cm³, comparable with that of an ape. Moreover, this hominin had lived only 18,000 years ago. This find is no unimportant detail, according to Lahr & Foley (2004) "they are among the most outstanding discoveries in palaeoanthropology for half a century". On the internet I came across the following remark of Chris Stringer: "this finding really does rewrite our knowledge of human evolution". Inevitably, the first thing that crossed my mind was whether this book, missing the outstanding discovery of the ‘Hobbit’ is still worthwhile reading or not?

‘Bones, stones and molecules’ deals in the first place with bones. It is a book in which hominid fossils play the leading part, from Miocene *Proconsul heseloni* (formerly well-known by the name *Proconsul africanus*) to *Homo sapiens*. The book is well and nicely illustrated with black and white drawings and photographs of hominid skulls, but those who are fond of beautiful illustrations do not have to buy the book for this aspect. The second title of the book, "Out of Africa" and modern human origins, reveals that special attention is given to the question of the origin of our species. I enjoyed reading the interludes (there are five of them), like "Creationism and Other Brainstorms" and 'Milford Wolpoff in the Garden of Eden'. The closing sentences of this last mentioned interlude give a clear stand of the book on the issue (p. 278): "There is no continuity. Milford Wolpoff finds himself in the Garden of Eden. But he won't eat no apple."

Last quoted sentences may give the impression that the book speaks with one voice, gives a narrow-minded view, but this is certainly not the case. Beside the fact that this is a very readable and entertaining book, what I especially like is that the authors "agree to disagree" (p. xi), which has been made explicit in the presentation of differing taxonomies of the family Hominidae (pp. 126–127; 280–281). In this way they create an important atmosphere in which it is clear that there is a difference between the hardware, the fossils, and the software, the different ways in which we interpret the fossil evidence. Transparency is also demonstrated by the tables with a lot of characters (descriptions, pp. 129–138; 288–344), something that will be especially appreciated by professionals.

Cameron & Groves have managed to write an enjoyable book for both the layperson and professional, which gives a lot of interesting thoughts, and with a good way in which views are substantiated. Although we miss the ‘Hobbit’ of Flores, this book is still worthwhile reading.

Cameron, D.W. & C.P. Groves. 2004. Bones, stones and molecules. "Out of Africa" and human origins. – Amsterdam, Elsevier Academic Press. 402 pp. ISBN 0–12–156933–0 (paperback).

Cited literature

Lahr, M.M. & R. Foley. 2004. Human evolution writ small. – Nature 431: 1043–1044.

Remark Chris Stringer: <http://www.news-leader.com/today/1028-Dwarfskele-213273.html>