

Book Review
Contested Bones

Rupe, Christopher and Dr. Sanford, John. *Contested Bones*. FMS Publications, 2017.

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HO Advanced Seminar in Human Origins (Spring 2022 - Biola)
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1. Author Information

John Sanford holds a BSc in horticulture from University of Minnesota. From the University of Minnesota he received a MSc and PhD in plant breeding/plant genetics. Dr. Sanford has published over 100 scientific publications.¹ Christopher Rupe holds a degree in biology from Geneseo University. He is the founder of the ministry Back2Genesis and has been speaking on the topic of creation/evolution in various settings including local radio and TV stations, colleges, universities, apologetics conferences, and church venues. Since 2011, Rupe has been a research associate at FMS Foundation in collaboration with Dr. Sanford.²

2. Summary

The general goal of the book is as the author summarize “to simply make more people aware that the actual fossil evidence is fragmentary and it is typically self-contradicting. Contrary to what is widely believed, the fossil evidence is weak and does not provide compelling evidence for human evolution.”³ After a prologue and an introduction, the book continues with “Contested Bones”, this Part is divided into three Sections. The first section deals with bones of the human type which includes the fossil finds of *Homo neanderthalensis*, the fossil finds for *Homo erectus* and of the enigmatic *Homo floresiensis*.⁴ The author argue that all these species should be limped under the label human. They contend that for all these species there is evidence of sophisticated behaviour usually attributed to *Homo sapiens*. Moreover, they argue that the morphological differences either fall within the range of modern-day humans or can in case of *Homo floresiensis* be explained by island dwarfism,

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_C._Sanford

² <https://www.logosresearchassociates.org/christopher-rupe>

³ Christopher Rupe and Dr. John Sanford, *Contested Bones*. (FMS Publications: 2017), 10.

⁴ Ibid., 29-94.

interbreeding and reductive selection.⁵ The authors explain that also *Homo erectus* shows evidence for genetic degradation.

Section II – Bones of the Ape Type – focuses on two important fossil finds – *Ardipithecus ramidus* (Ardi) and *Australopithecus afarensis*.⁶ The authors contend in the introduction of the section that all ape-like hominin bones should be placed in one genus, which has morphological variation and should not split into various species. The discoverers of Ardi claimed that this species walked upright like humans. However, the authors of this book argue that there is actually no evidence to substantiate that claim. Regarding *Australopithecus afarensis* there is an ongoing debate if it was more human like or more ape like. The authors contend that the *Australopithecus afarensis* bones are a commixture of ape and human bones, which is consistent with the original assessments of the primary discoverers.⁷

Section III deals with *Homo habilis*, *Australopithecus sediba* and *Homo naledi* which are brought forward as potential missing links to the genus Homo.⁸ They argue that the *Homo habilis* finds and *Australopithecus sediba* finds were both jumbles of Homo and *Australopithecus* bones and that *Homo naledi* was fully human. Then the book turns to other contested issues⁹, like the coexistence of *Australopithecus* and Man, dating methods and genetic evidence. Next, the authors offer their alternative model to account for the existing data¹⁰ and conclude the book with their personal perspective.¹¹

3. Evaluation

3.1. Strengths

The authors general goal to show that the actual fossil evidence is fragmentary, often self-contradicting and that the fossil evidence does not provide compelling evidence for human evolution

⁵ Ibid., 92.

⁶ Ibid., 95-156.

⁷ Ibid., 156.

⁸ Ibid. 157-199.

⁹ Ibid., 200-328.

¹⁰ Ibid., 329-350.

¹¹ Ibid. 351-353.

has been achieved. It is astonishing what firm conclusions palaeontologists draw from fragmentary finds! The whole drama on the *Australopithecus afarensis* and the fights around it is a very good example! Personal goals and ambitions and long held paradigms seemed to trump in the case of the researchers who came up with this new species, while previously holding to a very different view on the same finds. Even if some of the arguments and conclusions in the book turn out to be wrong it would still be the case that the fossil record gives not a clear picture of human evolution and that a single find can change long held views dramatically. For example, the authors of the book argue that Ardi was not bipedal. However, even if Ardi was fully bipedal this would mean that bipedalism emerged in a forest, not an open savanna as the evolutionary paradigm has traditionally maintained. Second, the discovery of the Ardi specimen does more than challenge the traditional evolutionary model for the origin of bipedalism: it challenges long-held notions about the identity of the common ancestor shared by humans and chimpanzees.¹² Therefore the discoverers of Ardi argue that the last common ancestor was not an apelike, knuckle-walking primate. Instead, they contend that chimpanzee anatomy and behavior might be evolutionarily derived states, not ancestral ones.¹³ And this chaos was created just by one fossil!

The chapter on genetic evidence provides a convincing refutation that human evolution is supported by the genetic data and a very helpful summary of the big obstacles evolution based on just natural mechanism faces. Combined with the previous critique on the interpretation of the fossil record by paleoanthropologists the book provides a strong case against human evolution as envisaged by mainstream science. A further strength of the book is that, while the authors are young Earth creationists (YECs), they make their arguments mostly based on the dates accepted by mainstream science. This makes it impossible for critics to dismiss their arguments just for their young Earth view. Moreover, the book not only critiques the standard evolutionary approach to human origins but also provides an alternative model to account for the available data.

¹² Fazale Rana and Hugh Ross, *Who Was Adam?: A Creation Model Approach to the Origin of Humanity*. (RTB Press:2015),277.

¹³ Ibid.

3.2. Weaknesses/Critique

The alternative model proposed by the authors entails that not only *Homo sapiens* but also Neanderthals, *Homo Erectus*, *Homo naledi*, *Homo floresis* are all fully human. According to the model differences between the later and *Homo sapiens* (at least partially) arose from degrading of the genome or as a kind devolution. But that is not convincing. For example, why are there no fossil finds of *Homo sapiens* – the “healthy” version of humans – dated to the same age as the first *Homo erectus*. The “healthy” should come before the degenerated. YECs dispute all the dating result but they must believe that proper dating (if possible) should show that some *Homo sapiens* finds should predate Neanderthal finds and even *Homo erectus* finds.

The evidence brought forth to include Neanderthals and *Homo erectus* into our species includes archaeological finds which purportedly show that those species also had a very sophisticated behaviour comparable to modern humans and even prove symbolism. What the authors fail to mention is that these kinds of findings are heavily debated. Thus, while they provide references to original research to bolster their claims they fail to substantially interact with critique of this evidence. Moreover, the book fails to interact with evidence like findings which indicate that *Homo erectus* developed more like an Ape¹⁴ and evidence which suggests that there are differences in genes of Neanderthals and modern humans which are involved in cognitive development.¹⁵

While this does not affect the main arguments of the book, another weakness is the chapter on dating methods. There are circumstances where those dating methods fail. However, arguments like the ones brought forth against K-Ar Dating¹⁶ misinterpret the data or handle the data very selectively as has been pointed out by critics of YEC.¹⁷

¹⁴ Fazale Rana, “Lecture 23 - Who Were the Erectines?,” HO Advanced Seminar in Human Origins (Spring 2022 - Biola), 2017, vimeo video, 40:38, https://vimeo.com/189847468?embedded=true&source=video_title&owner=3355087

¹⁵ Rana, *Who Was Adam?* 296.

¹⁶ Ibid. 276.

¹⁷ <https://www.oldearth.org/blind.htm>

4. Recommendation

This book is an excellent treatment of the fossil record from a YEC perspective. However, most of the arguments also apply for old Earth creationism (OEC), because they are developed based on timescales assumed by mainstream science and the issue of dating itself is only addressed at the end of the book. Therefore, I recommend this book to any person (Christian, non-Christian, YEC, OEC, theistic evolutionist, atheist etc.) who is interested in the topic of human origins and the related fossil record. The book is very accessible for the lay reader, but the arguments are bolstered by references to original research, for those who want to dive deeper into that topic.