

Lee Berger

Researcher, palaeontologist and professor

Professor Lee Berger may hail from Georgia in the United States, but it is in the caves of Gauteng’s Cradle of Humankind, that he has made his mark as a world-renowned palaeoanthropologist.

Berger moved to South Africa in 1989 to study under Professor Phillip Tobias who, over half a century, led archaeological digs at Sterkfontein and pioneered advances in the study of our pre-human ancestors.

Like his mentor, Berger is fascinated by the origin of our species. He has been particularly keen to prove that the transition from ape to human occurred in South Africa and put forward the theory that he was on the hunt for fossil bones.

Two amateur cavers, Steven Tucker and Rick Hunter, provided Berger with the fossil evidence he needed in 2013, when they stumbled upon a treasure trove of fossil bones after navigating through a narrow chute in the Dinaledi (Rising Star) cave in the Sterkfontein complex.

Berger commissioned six very petite women scientists whom he dubbed “underground astronauts” to haul out over 1 500 fossil bones belonging to 15 children and adults from Rising Star cave. After two years’ solid work studying the fossils with a team of more than 50 scientists, Berger announced the discovery of a new link in our human chain which he called *Homo naledi*.

The discovery of Naledi also saw Berger using cutting-edge 3D-printing technology, a technique that enables scientists around the world to print the bones and contribute to their research by being able to physically analyse them.

The research on *Homo naledi* catapulted Berger into *Time* magazine's 2016 list of the 100 most influential people in the world – but it also courted controversy.

For Berger the most interesting part about the Naledi fossil find was that the bodies were carried or thrown into the cave which led him to deduce that this pre-human species may have buried their dead, an activity only observed in humans.

This claim, and the fact that Berger had not determined the age of the fossils, has caused great scepticism in global palaeontological circles, but all agree that the find will nevertheless provide a significant contribution to the study of our evolution as humans.

Prior to the discovery of *Homo naledi*, Berger's most significant find was that of another ape-like human ancestor, *Australopithecus sediba*, after the fossil hunter's nine-year-old son, Matthew discovered a clavicle bone during a walk in the Malapa Nature Reserve in 2008. Dated to about two-million years ago, Sediba was the first major find from South Africa published in decades.

Berger was born in Kansas in 1965 and raised in Georgia. He graduated from Georgia Southern University (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgia_Southern_University) in 1989 with a degree in anthropology (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropology>)/archaeology (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archaeology>) and a minor in geology (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geology>).

Berger is presently the research professor in Human Evolution and the Public Understanding of Science at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa and an explorer-in-residence at the National Geographic Society. He holds a PhD in palaeoanthropology and a Doctor of Science degree in the same field. Berger resides in Johannesburg and is married to Dr Jacqueline Scott Berger. He has two children, Megan and Matthew.



