

International team of scientists presents evidence that the oldest pre-humans lived 7.2 Ma ago on the Balkans

On May 22 2017, the well-known scientific journal PLOS ONE published two joined papers, which present a new viewpoint on the time and place of the first steps of humankind.

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An international scientific team from Germany, Bulgaria, Greece, Canada, France and Australia, headed by Professor Madelaine Böhme (The Senckenberg Centre for Human Evolution and Palaeoenvironment at the University of Tübingen) and Professor Nikolai Spassov (National Museum of Natural History at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences), presents evidence that the first hominins (first pre-humans) rose on the Balkans 7.2 Ma ago.

The present-day chimpanzees are humans' nearest living relatives. Where and when the last chimpanzee-human common ancestor lived is a central and highly debated issue in paleoanthropology. Researchers have assumed up to now that the lineages diverged five to eight million years ago and that the first pre-humans developed in Africa.

The recent research published in PLOS ONE presents another scenario about the origin of humankind. The new view point is based on two fossil remains, discovered in Greece at (at Pyrgos Vassilissis near Athens) and in Bulgaria (the area of Azmaka near Chirpan).

In one of the papers the authors demonstrate that both finds refer to the same species, the fossil hominid *Graecopithecus freibergi*. They point out that its features give ground to consider *Graecopithecus* a pre-human (hominin).

The other paper sets the geological age of *Graecopithecus* using biochronological and geophysical methods. The rather dry savannah paleoenvironment of this pre-human is also restored. The determined remains of the mastodont *Anancus* sp., the bovid *Tragoportax macedoniensis* and several other newcomers in the local fossil fauna indicate that the age of the *Graecopithecus* localities is younger than the one of the well-known paleontological locality of Pikermi in Greece. The precise analyses show an age of 7.24 Ma for the find from Azmaka and respectively 7.175 for the one from Pyrgos Vassilissis.

All of this characterizes *Graecopithecus*, nicknamed El Graeco, the oldest potential hominin, whose age exceeds by several hundred thousands of years that of *Sahelanthropus*, found in Chad and considered until now to be the oldest hominin.

Thus, the appearance of pre-humans possibly occurred in the Eastern Mediterranean and not – as customarily assumed – in Africa.

In 1994 the eminent French paleontologist Yves Coppens emphasized the role of droughting of the East African landscapes in the evolution and the straightening of the pre-humans and called it the East Side Story. Today we have more reason to relate this process with a North Side Story.

For contacts:

Prof. Nikolai Spassov

Phone: +359 887317967; e-mail: nspassov@nmnh.com

<http://www.nmnh.com/spassov-nikolai-bg.html>