

Paleoanthropology, the Short Version

Bernard Wood, Human Evolution: A Very Short Introduction,
Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 2005, 131 pp., \$9.95
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The Very Short Introduction series is just that, a series of pocket-sized (4.5 × 7”) books about a wide variety of topics. It seems similar to the now-defunct French series “Que sais-je” (“what do I know,” or better “what should I know”). In this volume, Bernard Wood, a leading scholar of human evolution, presents the main theoretical background, fossil data, and interpretations of biological paleoanthropology; he specifically bypasses archaeology, which is set to appear in another “VSI” on *Prehistory*, but that loses one of the main integrative benefits of modern paleoanthropology.

As part of the introductory/historical section, Wood presents two alternative classifications of higher primates, which will interest readers of *Journal of Mammalian Evolution*. In the traditional version, there are two families other than Hylobatidae (all apes in Pongidae; a subfamily Australopithecinae for all genera other than *Homo* within Hominidae), while there is just one in the version that includes genetic evidence; here, however, Wood is hoisted by his own petard, recognizing Ponginae, Gorillinae, and Homininae (with Panini and Hominini). The reason for recognizing an Italian sandwich as a tribe for chimps is obviously to keep our own minor clade at the currently-desired tribal level, but this leads to imbalance at the subfamily level. There is no simple answer—either humans must devolve to subtribe Hominina (homininans) or we can cheat as I have done and place *Pan* as Homininae indet., recognizing Gorillini and Hominini (or, of course, abandon Linnaean nomenclature altogether).

About halfway through the book (chapter 5, p. 58), Wood begins to consider the human fossil record, with successive chapters on: the predecessors to *Australopithecus*; *Australopithecus*, *Paranthropus*, and the earliest species of *Homo* (which Wood here returns to that genus, despite previous ejection in Wood and Collard, 1999a,b); later species of *Homo*; and modern humans, including our origins and global dispersal. Each of these chapters has a “points to watch” box of current questions and controversies, as well as a site map and a typical Wood phylogram of taxon ranges without clear indications of phylogeny. Unfortunately, the size restrictions prevent the inclusion of photographs or even drawings of the fossils themselves, and morphology in general

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is summary at best. The book finishes with a timeline from Greek philosophers of the 6th century BCE through the finding of *Homo floresiensis* and fossil chimps in 2005; a short bibliography of mainly text and trade references; and a good index. In summary, the book is suggested for the uninitiated (its target audience), but it is not particularly useful for those already aware of the field, even as an update.

Literature cited

Wood B, Collard M (1999a) The human genus. *Science* 284:65–71

Wood B, Collard M (1999b) The changing face of *Homo*. *Evol Anthropol* 8:195–207