

Earliest evidence of flip flops in the Middle Stone Age

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In a twist in the ancient human story, emerging evidence suggests that we may have worn shoes as early as the Middle Stone Age (75,000—150,000 years ago). This could mean that our species had

complex cognitive and practical abilities much earlier than was previously thought.

Europe's oldest known shoes are 6,000 years old. In South Africa, it was believed that before 2,000 years ago, people weren't wearing shoes. But trace fossils from three paleosurfaces (surfaces of considerable antiquity) found on South Africa's Cape Coast change that narrative. According to one of the researchers, Dr. Bernhard Zipfel, of Wits' Evolutionary Studies Institute, the new evidence reveals that humans of the time wore some form of [footwear](#) to walk across the beach.

"We all assumed that people were habitually barefoot. However, the Southern Cape Coast had very sharp rocks at the time. It makes sense that people would use footwear to protect themselves. One hundred thousand years ago, an injury to the foot could have been fatal," said Zipfel.

Ichnology—the study of fossil tracks and traces—answers unresolved questions

There is no hard evidence of what shoes ancient hominins wore. Leather and plant materials would have been biodegraded. Zipfel and his fellow researchers thus considered "shod" tracks. The global record of sites attributed to shod trackmakers is sparse, however. Only four sites older than 30,000 years have been postulated, all from Western Europe. This included a Neanderthal site. Therefore, ichnology research can unlock new insights into the history of civilization.

Ichnology helps search for evidence of footprints made by people wearing some foot covering. By analyzing these footprints, ichnologists can learn more about ancient human populations' behavior, movement, and interactions.

Zipfel, who is also a podiatrist, believes that the type of shoes worn were plakkies, or what we know as flip flops. This is backed up by recent archaeological evidence of sandals worn by San people. "It was important for these shoes to withstand environmental concerns," he explains.

The researchers cobbled together primitive footwear. Wearing these, they walked up and down the very same beaches these hominins trod. They walked in various conditions and could study their shod tracks in both wet and dry sand. The team could compare the actual tracksites (between 70,000 and 150,000 years in age) to their work through computerized images. "There were amazing correlations," said Zipfel.

Their theory reveals at least three tracksites on the Cape South Coast that shod humans may have made.

"While our evidence is inconclusive, we are pleased with our discoveries nonetheless. We also contribute to the research about when humans wore shoes. This research has been few and far between. It is worth noting that the research findings strongly suggest that the region of southern Africa has been a hub for developing cognitive and practical abilities for an extended period," said Zipfel.

Provided by Wits University

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