

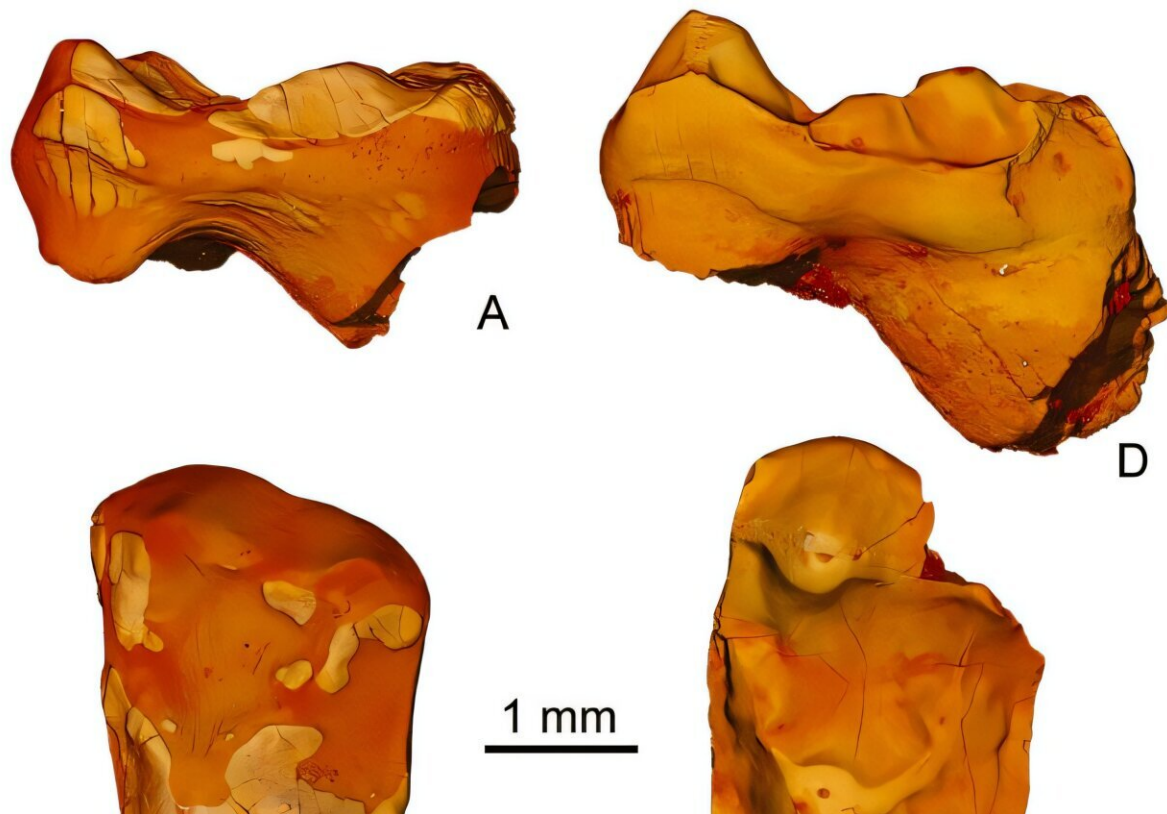
Hidden beneath the scorched expanse of the central Libyan Sahara lies a prehistoric graveyard that was once a lush, green gateway to a continent. For decades, the origin of Africa's higher primates has been one of evolution's most enduring mysteries, centered on a single, pivotal question: How did the ancestors of monkeys and apes first cross ancient oceans to reach their new home? Now, a handful of microscopic fossils recovered from these silent sands is threatening to overturn the traditional timeline of that epic journey.

Writing in the [Journal of Human Evolution](#), an international team of researchers has unveiled a new species of early anthropoid from the 39-million-year-old Dur At-Talah escarpment. Named *Saharopithecus salemi*, this diminutive primate possesses a bizarre combination of dental traits that doesn't fit the standard evolutionary mold. The discovery provides a rare, high-resolution look at a world in transition, suggesting that the colonization of Africa wasn't a single, isolated event but a complex series of biological invasions arriving in multiple waves from across the sea.

A window into a 39-million-year-old Sahara

Dur At-Talah in central Libya preserves late-middle Eocene sediments (around 39–38 Ma). Back then, the Sahara was a much greener landscape. Paleontologists had already found three other diminutive anthropoids here: *Biretia piveteaui*, *Talahpithecus parvus* and *Afrotarsius libycus*.

Each was only a few hundred grams, and each had differently shaped molars. For comparison, Egypt's famous Fayum quarry (horizon L-41) is younger—about 37 million years old. That makes Dur At-Talah one of the oldest known diverse primate sites in Africa.



Saharopithecus salemi gen. et sp. nov., an anthropoid from Dur At-Talah, Libya, rendered from a 3D virtual model generated using μ CT scans. DT4-1, left M2 : mesial (A), occlusal (B), and distal (C) views; DT2-25, left M2 (holotype): mesial (D), occlusal (E), and distal (F) views. Credit: *Journal of Human Evolution* (2026). DOI: 10.1016/j.jhevol.2026.103843

Unearthing an unusual anthropoid

The new species is named *Saharopithecus salemi*. It's known from just two tiny upper molars recovered at Dur At-Talah. Using micro-CT scans, the team built 3D models of these teeth for detailed study. The molars are bunodont (with rounded cusps) and unusually rectangular in outline. Each tooth has a large protocone and a distinct hypocone, and

even an extra cusp (a pericone), plus tiny side cusps (conules) and a thin ridge (prehypocrista). This unique combination of features—partly primitive, partly advanced—sets *Saharopithecus* apart from other Eocene primates.

Teeth tell a tangled tale

Where does this primate sit on the family tree? A large cladistic analysis of tooth characters offers an answer. *Saharopithecus* emerges on a very early branch of anthropoids, close to the Egyptian late Eocene fossil *Proteopithecus sylviae* but outside the crown group that led to modern monkeys and apes.

In other words, it appears to be a stem anthropoid. Its teeth are neither exactly like later Old World monkeys nor like older African forms—they have a mix of traits from different lineages.

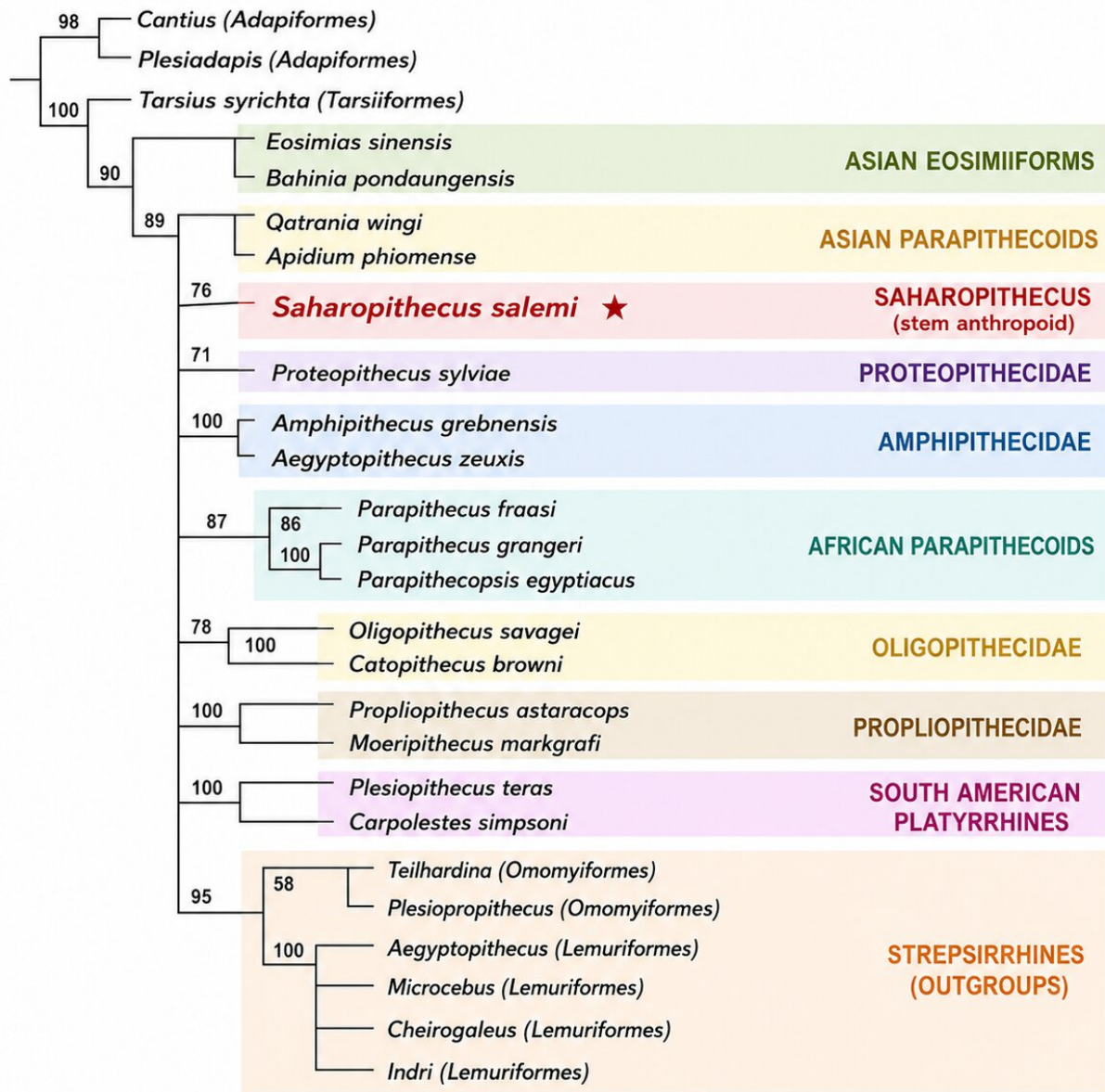


Figure 4. Tentative phylogenetic position of *Saharopithecus salemi* gen. et sp. nov. among anthropoid primates, based on a cladistic assessment of the dental evidence. Strict consensus tree of two equally most-parsimonious trees (1570.08 steps each, Consistency index = 0.42; Retention index = 0.55).

Tentative phylogenetic position of *Saharopithecus salemi* gen. et sp. nov. among anthropoid primates, based on a cladistic assessment of the dental evidence. Strict consensus tree of two equally most-parsimonious trees (1570.08 steps each, Consistency index = 0.42; Retention index = 0.55). Credit: Image generated by the author using the picture in the original paper as a reference.

Many roads into Africa?

Why is that intriguing? The authors emphasize that *Saharopithecus* shows "a mosaic of primitive and derived dental characters," a pattern they say supports the idea that "multiple Asian anthropoid lineages independently colonized Afro-Arabia by the late middle Eocene." The Dur At-Talah fossils suggest several waves of monkeys and apes may have reached Africa from Asia. For example, Asian fossils like *Afrasia* share close dental similarities with African forms, implying at least two separate Eocene crossings.

[Earlier paleontological work](#) had even argued for a single African homeland for higher primates. *Saharopithecus* complicates that picture. Its mixed traits hint that Africa's primate story was more tangled, with Asian primates arriving at different times.

Limits of the clues

The finding is exciting but comes with caveats. *Saharopithecus* is known only from two teeth, and similar diets can produce similar tooth shapes in unrelated species. The exact age of the Dur At-Talah deposits is also debated (though ~39 Ma is widely cited). Even so, this Sahara site is extraordinary: it now has at least four confirmed anthropoid species, making it the richest known middle Eocene primate community in Africa.

The authors note, "Dur At-Talah currently represents the oldest known anthropoid community in Afro-Arabia...." That tiny primate community's diversity hints at a surprisingly complex early history for Africa's monkeys and apes.

Next digs and big questions

Future fossils will put these ideas to the test. If more *Saharopithecus* remains are found—for example, lower jaws or additional teeth—its place in the primate family tree can be nailed down. More excavations in Libya and surrounding regions could turn up other Asian-derived primates of this era. Each new tooth has the potential to rewrite the timeline of monkey and ape evolution.

For now, the image of small simians rafting or island-hopping into an ancient Sahara adds a vivid chapter to our evolutionary tale. The Sahara's silent sands, long thought empty of primates, are full of surprises.

More information: Jean-Jacques Jaeger et al, New late middle Eocene anthropoids from Dur At-Talah, Libya: Implications for early primate dispersal into Afro-Arabia, *Journal of Human Evolution* (2026). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jhevol.2026.103843](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhevol.2026.103843)

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