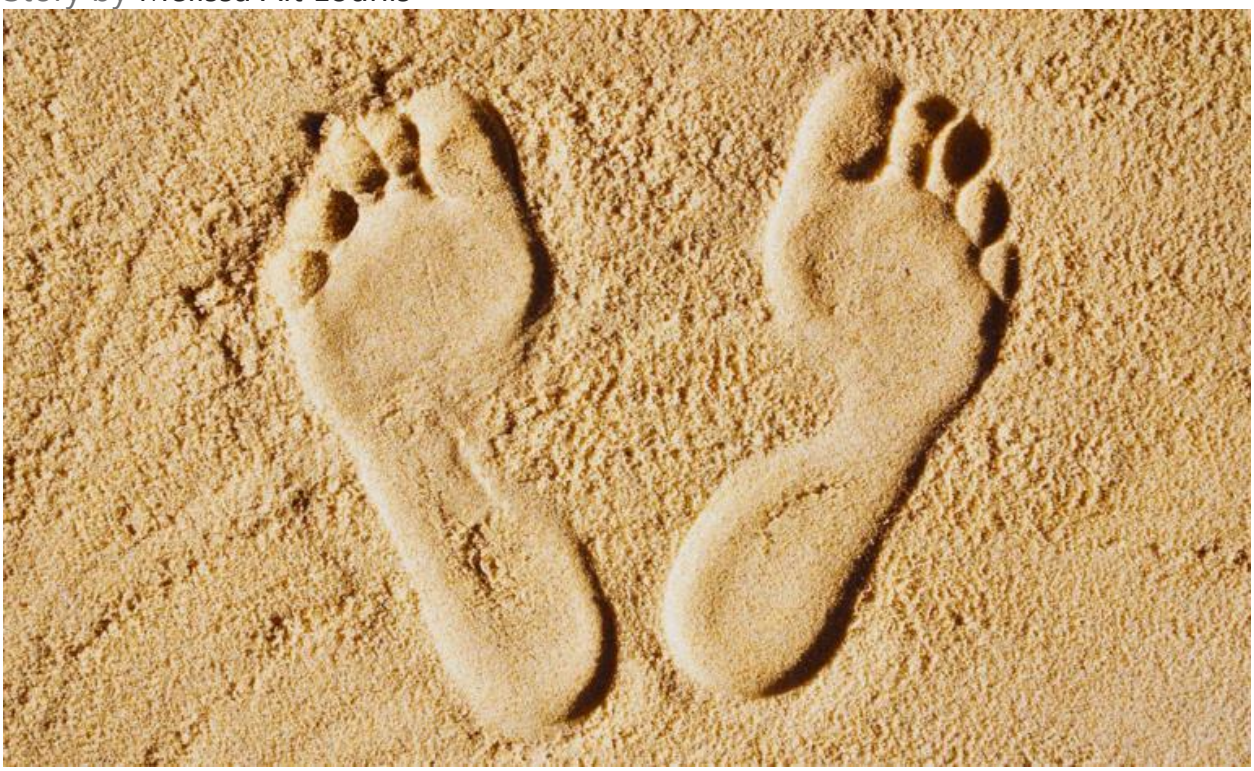
Ancient Footprints Emerge From Sands Where Humans Shouldn’t Have Walked

Story by Melissa Ait Lounis



Credit: Shutterstock | The Daily Galaxy --Great Discoveries Channel

Hidden beneath layers of sediment in a long-dried lakebed, a set of fossilized human footprints—dated to roughly **115,000 years ago**—has emerged as some of the **earliest physical evidence of *Homo sapiens*** in the Arabian Peninsula. Described in detail in a peer-reviewed study published in ***Science Advances***, this discovery sheds new light on the presence of early humans in a region long considered a migratory crossroads.

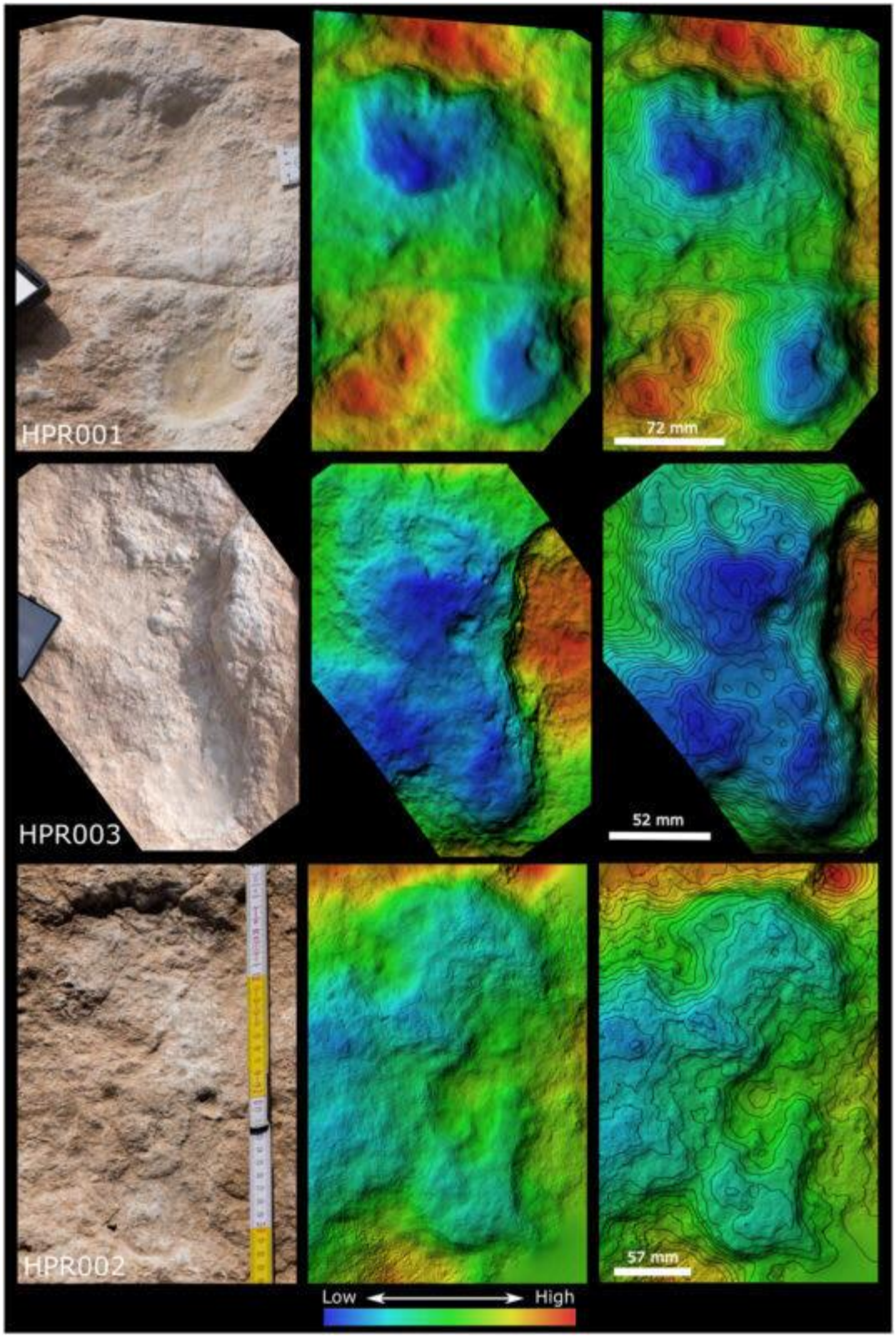
A Temporary Visit On The Edge Of A Vanished Lake

Back in 2017, scientists came across a site now called *Alathar*, Arabic for “the trace.” It sits in the western Nefud Desert, a place that today is nothing but sand

and rock. But **100,000 years ago**, this spot was alive with freshwater lakes and would have drawn in people and animals alike.

There, researchers found**seven human footprints** pressed into ancient mud, sitting side by side with the tracks of elephants, antelopes, camels, and wild horses that no longer roam the region. It looks like this lakebed once acted as a busy stop along a migration route, where different species came together for the same reason: water.

What's striking is how short-lived this moment was. These prints weren't left over years, they were likely made within just days, maybe even hours. Normally, footprints in wet mud **vanish quickly**, f**ading in only two to four days**. The fact that these survived is thanks to a rare set of conditions that froze this fleeting scene in time.



Digital Surface Models Of Three Specific Hominin Footprints© Daily Galaxy US

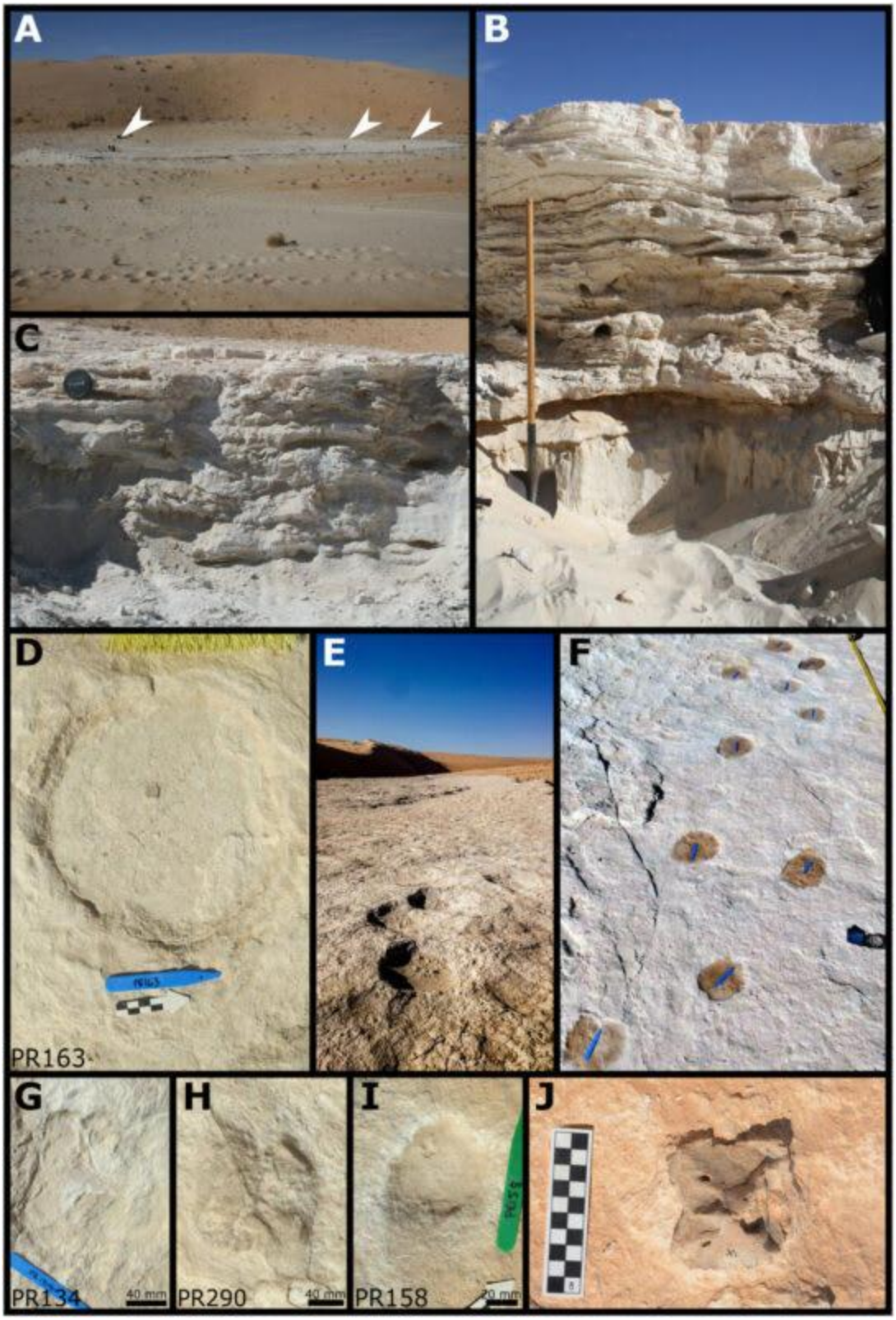
A Snapshot Of Early Human Dispersal

The significance of the Alathar prints goes far beyond their preservation. These impressions support the idea that **early humans dispersed out of Africa much earlier than once believed**, using inland routes that passed through what is now the Arabian Peninsula.

While genetic and fossil evidence has shown that *Homo sapiens* spread through the Levant and into Eurasia, physical traces in Arabia have been limited. The new findings suggest that humans **moved into the region during favorable climate phases**, using the green corridors formed by temporary lakes and grasslands.

The research team noted that the prints are *"contemporaneous with an early H. sapiens out-of-Africa dispersal,"* and likely represent the **earliest known human presence** in Arabia. Based on size and shape, the researchers are confident the tracks were made by *Homo sapiens*, not Neanderthals.

"Given the fossil and archaeological evidence for the spread of *H. sapiens* into the Levant and Arabia during [130,000 to 80,000 years ago] and absence of *Homo neanderthalensis* from the Levant at that time, we argue that *H. sapiens* was responsible for the tracks at Alathar," they explained.



Sediments, Footprints, And Fossils From The Alathar Paleolake

Oldest Human Footprints in Arabia Unearthed

The Alathar footprints aren't just random marks in the sand. They capture a rare when**people** and **big animals** gathered around a shrinking lake in a world that was getting warmer.

Animal tracks found alongside the human prints help fill in the picture. Massive elephants, probably the **now-extinct *Palaeoloxodon***, left deep trails through the mud. Camels, antelopes, and wild horses passed through too, all drawn by the same thing: water

There are no overlapping human tracks, which suggests people didn't come back again and again. The group that left these impressions may have been among the last to pass through, before the lake dried up and the**Ice Age** began to set in.

Retrieved October 5, 2025 from ttps://www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/ancient-footprints-emerge-from-sands-where-humans-shouldn-t-have-walked/ar-AA1NxGcf?ocid=msedgntp&pc=ENTPHB&cvid=68e29a04137441878b7c6be28945802a&ei=17