



Where I work Israel Hershkovitz

Photographed for *Nature* by
Corinna Kern.

I interview people who lived in the past. I'm an anthropologist at Tel Aviv University in Israel, but I call myself a biohistorian. I'm trying to understand human history, not from human artefacts, temples or big walls surrounding old cities, but from bones. They record every important aspect of your life: what you eat, your ailments, your broken hand at age five.

My main interest is the origin of our own species, *Homo sapiens*: how we evolved, and how we interacted with other *Homo* groups, such as *Homo neanderthalensis*. In this photograph, taken in the preservation laboratory where we first clean our finds, I'm using a pneumatic drill to slowly expose the bones of a human who lived between 100,000 and 120,000 years ago. I and a colleague discovered them in a small cave called Tinsihmet, located near the city of Shoham in central Israel. It is also known as Mugharet Al Watwat in Arabic, meaning 'cave of the bat'. The block, which my team removed from the cave, is a half-tonne piece of breccia, an accumulation of sedimentary fragments of rock or mineral debris.

This is probably one of the most important human fossils ever found – the earliest intentional burial that we know of. The skeleton is fully articulated and lies on its side in the fetal position, which suggests that the burial was organized. We don't know yet if it's a modern human, an archaic *Homo* or a Neanderthal, because it will take at least 18 months to expose the bones.

Right now my lab is closed; nevertheless, I continue to work from home at full speed. Anthropology requires the collaboration of scientists from different disciplines, and we do Zoom meetings almost every day.

In this work, your fossil becomes your best friend. You want to know them, to get excited about every discovery and new morphological trait. It's very relaxing to work slowly in a quiet environment, not disturbed by people or external noise. This is what I love the most.

Israel Hershkovitz is director of the Dan David Center for Human Evolution and Biohistory Research at Tel Aviv University.

Interview by Josie Glausiusz.