



From Lagoa Santa to Zarqa

Brazilians search for ancient hominids in Jordan

Fieldwork in the Zarqa River Valley: migration route for hominids leaving Africa

From October through November 2014, archeologist and anthropologist Walter Neves, coordinator of the Human Sciences Laboratory of the Biosciences Institute at the University of São Paulo (IB-USP), focused his fieldwork on a new project: working alongside Brazilian, Italian and Middle Eastern colleagues to conduct excavations in the valley area of the Zarqa River, a tributary of the famous Jordan River that crosses the central hill country of Jordan. Home to nearly 50 prehistoric caves, some bearing evidence of very ancient human lithic industry, the area was inhabited by the first hominids that migrated from Africa to Asia and possibly Europe nearly 1.8 million years ago. “Conducting research in the Middle East has always been my dream,” Neves says.

Never known as anything but bold, through two decades of studies carried out at Lagoa Santa on the outskirts of Belo Horizonte, the USP researcher pro-

posed a new theory about the colonization process in the Americas. Based on an analysis of the anatomical features of more than 80 human skeletons found in this region of Minas, rich in archeological sites, particularly studies on the skull of Luzia (11,000 years old), Neves supports the belief that South America was colonized by two different groups of *Homo sapiens* who came from Asia.

The first migratory wave would have occurred approximately 14,000 years ago and included individuals resembling Luzia, with non-mongoloid features similar to modern-day Africans and Australian Aborigines. That group is believed not to have left descendants. The second wave would have made its way to the continent approximately 12,000 years ago, and its members would have had the physical traits typical of Asians, of whom the descendants are present-day Amerindians. The theory was and continues to be con-

troversial, but now nearly all international research findings that focus on the process by which the Americas were populated must at least mention it, if for no other reason than to refute Neves’ ideas.

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Besides the controversy surrounding the descendants of Luzia, the USP archeologist has made other significant contributions to this field of study. Research groups from the Museum of Archeology and Ethnology (MAE) and the team led by Sabine Eggers, of the IB-USP, have conducted research along the Brazilian coast on a type of archeological site known as *sambaquis*, a term that refers to the mounds of shells that served as prehistoric burial sites. One of the most interesting discoveries was Luzio, the name given to the 10,000 year-old skeleton discovered in 2000 in a river shell mound of the Ribeira Valley in the state of São Paulo. ■