



Press Release

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€1.5m ERC Starting Grant for Claudio Tennie

Tübingen behavioral researcher investigates early stone tools – are they more like the work of humans or apes?

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Claudio Tennie. Foto: Friedhelm Albrecht

Dr. Claudio Tennie of University of Tübingen's Institute of Prehistory, Early History and Medieval Archaeology is to receive a European Research Council Starting Grant from April 1. The grants aim to help promising junior researchers to establish their own research groups. Tennie, a behavioral scientist who came to Tübingen from the University of Birmingham, will get

1.5 million euros over the next five years for his STONECULT project. The aim is to determine if the cognitive abilities of apes are sufficient for the manufacture and use of early stone tools – or whether human-like skills are required.

In the past, Tennie investigated the theory that it was cultural and not genetic adaptation which made it possible for humans to spread around the globe. According to the theory, humans did not only learn as individuals to adapt to differing environmental conditions – they were also able to integrate the knowledge of other individuals into their own skill sets, and to pass them on. This “cumulative learning,” the theory goes, is what made it possible for more complex and interdependent knowledge structures to arise – possibly making humans a uniquely cultural species. Other animals, particularly non-human great apes – our closest relatives – can learn, and be influenced by others; but their knowledge is based on their own individual experience and cannot be expanded beyond a certain “horizon.”

Tennie's project, STONECULT – “Do early stone tools indicate a hominin ability to accumulate”, seeks to discover when human cultural forms first arose. Early stone tools are a promising starting point. Recent research suggests that the making of such tools could have been primarily the

result of individual learning – i.e., by mechanisms other species, such as apes, can use. Tennie hypothesizes that the shapes of early tools are too uniform as to be explained by cultural forms resembling modern human culture; he says these would have produced more variance than we actually find. In the STONECULT project, Tennie therefore aims to determine whether early stone tools are closer to technologies used by humans or apes. Depending on the outcome of the project, what we know about the timeline for the development of human cultural forms may be confirmed – or radically shifted.

Claudio Tennie (born in Bad Pyrmont, Germany) studied Biology at the universities of Marburg, Edinburgh, and Bielefeld. He completed his doctorate in 2009 at the Max Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, followed by two years of postdoctoral work. From 2012 to 2016 he worked at the University of Birmingham before coming to Tübingen as a research group leader.

The ERC Starting Grant supports junior researchers in building a research team and establishing an independent career. The aim is to support creative, promising researchers and to promote new ideas across all fields of research. Each successful project is granted up to 1.5 million euros over a maximum of five years.

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