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Dispute over 'oldest tooth'

From Charles Bremmer in Paris

Humanity's oldest ancestors probably had little time to worry about their dental work. Seven million years later, however, one of their wisdom teeth has set off a feud among scientists, with charges of deception, bungling and glory stealing.

At the centre of the row is Toumai, a fossilised skull and jawbone whose discovery by a French team in the Chad desert set the scientific world alight in 2002. Backed by eminent palaeontologists, Professor Michel Brunet claimed to have identified the earliest hominid twice as old as the "common ancestor" known as Lucy and a million years older than Orrorin, found in Kenya in 2000.

But rival camps disputed whether Toumai was an early biped hominid or merely a female gorilla. Arguments focused on the shape of the skull and its teeth. The plot thickened when Alain Beauvilain, leader of the Toumai expedition, claimed Professor Brunet had secretly glued a wisdom tooth onto the jawbone.

The professor hit back this month, with the signatures of 28 leading palaeontologists to vouch for Toumai's third molar. He acknowledged, however, that the tooth had been found in the sand a few inches from the jaw. "After recovery, we established it belonged to the mandible, on the right side", he wrote in the *South African Journal of Science*. The relative lack of wear on the tooth had no significance and the team stood by its conviction that Toumai was a humanid", said Professor Brunet.

M Beauvilain, a geography lecturer and 14-year veteran of Chad expeditions, stuck to his guns. Yesterday, he accused Professor Brunet of incompetence and dishonesty with *Sahelanthropus tchadensis*, as Toumai is classified.

"It is a serious transgression to stick bits on fossils without reporting that you have done that", he said. The tooth was obviously from the left jaw and all the photographs had been reversed, he added. "It's blindingly obvious". M Beauvilain acknowledged that he had a longstanding quarrel with Professor Brunet over the discovery of Toumai.

"Brunet wanted to make me disappear completely from the picture. He was on holiday in France when we found it, but he went (later) into the desert and had himself photographed discovering the fossil", M Beauvilain said