

Feature Study

In the Field...

The Stones and Bones of Mary Leakey

By the time of her death in 1996, at age 83, Mary Douglas Nicol Leakey had received numerous awards and honours, and was world renowned as an archaeologist, paleoanthropologist, author and artist. Others in her field said that she set the standard for the excavation and documentation of Paleolithic finds. Mary's meticulous records and her tireless unearthing of stones and bones inspired many others to start thinking about who the early humans were, not just where they were. Her son, Richard Leakey, a paleontologist himself, said that for much of her early career she laboured in the shadows while her husband, Louis, got most of the publicity. According to Richard, Mary was at the centre of the research. He would know, since he, his two brothers, their nannies and several Dalmatians usually accompanied Mary to her work.

Mary did not have a formal education, but she did have drive and curiosity to spare. She also had a family background that had exposed her to archaeology at an early age and predisposed her to thoughtful examination of her surroundings. Both Mary's parents were artists. Wherever the family lived, Mary's father pursued his avid, amateur interest in archaeology. One of his best friends was Howard Carter, the man who discovered Tutankhamun's tomb.

Mary's father died when she was 13 and her mother's attempts to settle her down in school were not successful. When she was 17, Mary wrote to a number of archaeologists offering to help at digs. An archaeologist named Dorothy Liddell, took her up on her offer and Mary dug and provided sketches for publication. Mary soon met a well-known archaeologist named Louis Leakey; the two were married in 1936 and made their home and workplace in Africa.

Until 1959, Mary and Louis worked at a variety of sites in Kenya and Tanzania. Louis was often distracted by other pursuits, but Mary persevered with a commitment to detail that resulted in several important finds. She also changed the scientific community's mind about human evolution. Before Mary Leakey documented her work, it was assumed that Asia would be found to be the site of human evolution. The Leakey discoveries made Africa our cradle.

What did Mary find? In 1948 she located the first fossil ape ever found. Dated between 16 and 20 million years old, people hoped that this would prove to be some sort of missing link between humans and apes. It wasn't, but it was thought to be an ancestor of both humans and apes. Only three others have been found since.

- #1. Who is Mary Leakey?
- #2. Why is she important?

In 1959, after years of excavating in Olduvai Gorge, Mary discovered the skull of a 1.75 million-year-old hominid. At the time it was both the first of its species and the oldest hominid ever found.

These discoveries brought the Leakeys honours, financial support, the support of scientists, and a lot of attention. Mary shied away from the limelight and let Louis be the star. After Louis died in 1972, Mary continued to work, and established a site at Laetoli, just south of Olduvai. Then in 1978, Mary made an extremely exciting find: hominid foot prints that had

been hardened in volcanic ash about 3.6-million-years ago! The absence of tools at the site led Mary to postulate that bipedalism (two-footedness) preceded the use of tools – the opposite of what had previously been thought.

Formidable to the end, Mary believed that archaeologists should spend more time looking for concrete evidence and less time making hypotheses.

Activities

1. Look up archaeologist, paleoanthropologist, and paleontologist in a dictionary. In your own words, write a definition for each. Which of these career options attracts you the most? Explain.
2. Defend or reject the last sentence of this feature. What are the roadblocks to uncovering the real story of human evolution?



Mary Leakey's most important discoveries were made here, in the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, Africa "the cradle of man."