Discovering Alesi: A Timeline

ISAIAH NENGO, LEAKEY FOUNDATION GRANTEE, TURKANA BASIN INSTITUTE, STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY

Once, now-extinct relatives of hippos, rhinos, elephants, carnivores belonging to the bear-dog family, distant relatives of antelopes, and ancient apes roamed under a thick forest canopy. 13 million years ago, a massive volcano erupts, spewing lava. The forest is buried in a rain of volcanic ash, a blanket tens of meters thick. Tree trunks, roots buried and deprived of oxygen, snap or keel over. Buried along with all the other different kinds of mammals is the tiny, fragile body of an infant ape. Flesh on the bodies of the buried animals disintegrates. Rain dissolves minerals in the ash, the solution permeating bones of animals and buried tree trunks, turning all of it into fossils. Millions of years later, a savannah teeming with more modern African animals and early hominids sits on top of the buried forest. Savannah turns into semi-desert. Today, in an area about the size of Manhattan, a hard-scrabble and desolate environment is sparsely inhabited by the semi-nomadic Turkana people.

For almost five decades, Koobi Fora Research Project (KFRP) teams organized by Richard, Meave, and Louise Leakey criss-crossed the vast Turkana Basin landscape in search of fossils. Their remarkable discoveries in this basin are from the Plio-Pleistocene era, from approximately five million to 11,000 years ago. In the same place, elusive deposits from earlier times can be found. The Napudet foothill deposits are from the Mid-Miocene (between 23 Ma to 5 Ma is considered the Miocene period). In 1990, a team led by legendary fossil hunter Kamoya Kimeu stumbled upon volcanic ash deposits preserving the forest and found the lower canine of an ape. In 2013, I went back to Napudet with a team and successfully relocated the site. In the summer 2014, with a grant from Leakey Foundation trustee Gordon Getty, I put together a small team of six African fossil hunters for a three-week mission through volcanic rock and grit to find more ape fossils. On September 4, 2014, at about 5:30 PM, after a solid day of screening for fossils and finding absolutely nothing, John Ekusi discovered Alesi, the most complete ape skull ever known.

Improbable is how I would describe my career path preceding and leading to the discovery of Alesi. I was introduced to paleontology as a 17-year-old student on a school trip to the National Museums of Kenya to hear Richard Leakey give a talk. Six years later, still mesmerized by his stories of long gone, fantastic creatures, I wrote a letter to Alesi after attached sandstone rock was partially removed at the Turkana Basin Institute, near Lodwar, Kenya. © Isaiah Nengo, Photo by Christopher Kiarie.

[continued on page <7>]
We live in a new media age. I think of it as a Gutenberg moment. Before the invention of moveable type, books had to be hand-written by monks in monasteries. The general public did not have access to learning and few were literate. When printing became widespread, people could learn to read and interpret information themselves; they could become educated. Libraries were established to store information and make it available to the public, but people were limited to visiting the library and looking up the information.

Now that knowledge is created, stored, and disseminated digitally, we have much wider access to information. Most of us carry powerful computers called “smart phones” with us. When we don’t know the answer to questions, we can look them up on the internet immediately.

Take the subject of paleoanthropology, for example. If one goes to leakeyfoundation.org on the internet, he or she learns what scientist is lecturing in a nearby venue. If people cannot make it to the event, they can listen and watch the video of the event on the Leakey Foundation website shortly after. One can watch Robert Sapolsky talking about stress, Tania Lombrozo explaining storytelling, or David Puts speaking of altruism. They can subscribe to these free podcasts or listen on the website. If they would rather read, they can download the transcripts of these same podcasts.

If a person has always wanted to go on a research expedition, he or she can read the blogs of scientists working in the field and in the laboratory. We have 26 pages of them so far with more being added all the time.

Paleoanthropology is a new cutting-edge science that is just being documented. Therefore, The Leakey Foundation’s history is important—just click on the word ‘History’ in the website menu, and you can read about the Leakey family and their early finds being made when the Foundation was just beginning.

Now everyone can learn about human origins discoveries. Our new tools foster more widespread knowledge.

Visit leakeyfoundation.org today!

Camilla Smith
President, The Leakey Foundation

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See page 11 or visit leakeyfoundation.org/donate
persuade him to hire me. When they wouldn't hire me, I volunteered. Two months later, Meave and Richard did hire me, a freshly minted graduate of the University of Nairobi. In two months, I found myself in the back of a truck for five days of traveling rough roads with a team looking for fossils in the Turkana Basin. A year later, with the Leakeys' support I was at Harvard University in Cambridge pursuing a PhD in biological anthropology. In summer seasons, I led my own Leakey Foundation funded expeditions to Miocene sites in Western Kenya. With a PhD in 1994, I taught at UC Berkeley then colleges in California and Ohio while continuing to do fieldwork in Western Kenya with grant support from The Leakey Foundation. Changing course, I made the decision, almost fatal to my career as a paleontologist, to head back to California to teach 10th grade biology at an inner-city high school in East Oakland. Two years later, I began a 15 year stint preaching the value and significance of the fossil record while teaching anthropology at De Anza Community College in Cupertino.

Louise Leakey, visiting De Anza on a public lecture circuit in 2010, urged me to go back to doing field research in Kenya. I received a Fulbright to teach at Nairobi University and study fossils I had collected from Western Kenya, and I was on the mission to relocate the Napudet site.

The excavation took all of four hours under a small shade we constructed in the blazing Turkana sun. The cleaning, which took about three months, revealed just how spectacularly well-preserved Alesi is. From the open sutures, we could tell that we had a fossil baby. All the cranial elements are there except for the erupted baby teeth that had broken and were lost. A medical CT scan revealed the presence of unerupted teeth inside the skull. I traveled to Grenoble, France, at the end of the field season in 2015 to have Alesi scanned for ten days, using the some of the brightest x-ray light available in the world. The scans show the internal morphology in stunning detail. Two years later, we (myself and 12 collaborators) introduced Alesi to the world in an article published in *Nature*. I am heading back in January to Napudet to lead an excavation in search of more of a partial ape skeleton we discovered in 2015. In March of 2018, a team of 16 specialists on various aspects of the skull will meet to plan a 2nd tier analysis. Alesi (the name is a Latinized version of the word for ancestor, “ales” in the Turkana language) is an extraordinary find and a reason for all of us, and future generations to come, to appreciate our place in nature and our common ancestry and to wonder at our survival and our very long evolution on a fragile planet.
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Behavioral

Laura Abondano, University of Texas at Austin
Mating strategies of female lowland woolly monkeys in Amazonian Ecuador

Iulia Badescu, Yale University
Infant feeding and nutritional development correlates of fitness components in wild chimpanzees

Joel Bray, ASU Foundation for A New American University
Social relationships in male chimpanzees: Form, function, and development

Stefano Carlo Lucchesi, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology
Role of ecology in intercommunity relations in bonobos, Kokolopori, DRC

Carrie Miller, University of Minnesota
Does paternity certainty elicit protection and support of offspring by male gelada monkeys?

Sam Patterson, Arizona State University
Maternal predictors of infant developmental trajectories in olive baboons

Megan Petersdorf, New York University
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David Samson, Duke University
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Elaine Gomez Guevara, Yale University
Epigenetics of primate longevity

Sean Lee, The George Washington University
The ontogeny of social behavior and facial form in Pan

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Irisa Arney, University of Michigan:
East African Miocene evolutionary ecology

Amy Bauernfeind, Washington University
Comparative gene expression of primate cerebellum

Aly Baumgartner, Baylor University
Paleoclimate reconstruction of the Miocene on Rusinga Island, Kenya

Marianne Brasil, University of California, Berkeley
Skeletal morphology of early Homo sapiens from Middle Awash, Ethiopia

Lucia Carbone, Oregon Health & Science University
Investigating how the LAVA retroelement shaped the gibbon transcriptome

Marco Cherin, University of Perugia
Exploring Site S: New bipedal footprints at Laetoli (Tanzania)

Susanne Cote, University of Calgary
Excavation of an exceptionally preserved Miocene catarrhine at Moruorot, Kenya

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Tamar Dogandzic, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology
Late Middle and Early Upper Paleolithic in the Balkans

Emma Finestone, Graduate Center, City University of New York
Examining the Oldowan through time on the Homa Peninsula

Mae Goder-Goldberger, University of Ben Gurion in the Negev
The site of Far’ah II, western Negev, and the MP-UP transition

Andres Gomez, J. Craig Venter Institute
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Jason Kamilar, University of Massachusetts Amherst
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Elaine Kozma, Graduate Center, City University of New York
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Shannon McFarlin, The George Washington University
Skeletal recovery and research of Bwindi mountain gorillas, Uganda

Enquye Negash, The George Washington University
Modelling vegetation structure in modern ecosystems; Implications for hominin ecospace

Thomas Plummer, Queens College, City University of New York
Excavation of ca. 2.6 Ma Oldowan sites at Nyayanga, Kenya

Christian Tryon, Harvard University
Archaeology and modern human origins: Investigations of the Late Pleistocene Nyanza Rift, Kenya

Deming Yang, Stony Brook University
Isotopic variability among Plio-Pleistocene Turkana suids: Paleoenvironments and hominin evolution

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Frank Brown passed away on Saturday, September 30, 2017. He was 74 years old.

Frank Brown joined The Leakey Foundation Scientific Executive Committee in 1993 and became the Co-Chair in 1997. During his tenure, Frank provided over 800 internal application reviews and helped the Foundation award 1,270 research grants.

Frank was a fierce advocate for African scholars, and during his 24 years on the SEC he advised the Foundation on funding 145 Baldwin Fellows. Frank deeply understood the impact the Baldwin Fellowships have on the trajectory of a scientist's career. He knew many of these young scholars personally. Some worked alongside him in Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, and China, and others lived with him in Utah as they pursued their education or conducted their own research at the University of Utah.

Many of Frank's students became scientific leaders in their home countries. He was a guiding presence in the life of Dr. Fredrick Kyalo Manthi, and today Fredrick is head of Palaeontology at the National Museums of Kenya. Dr. Bereket Haileab, now chair of Geology at Carleton College in Minnesota, completed his M.S. and doctoral degrees in Utah under Frank Brown's tutelage. Among many others, Frank provided mentorship to Robert Kamau, Fulbert Namwamba, and Patrick Gathogo who completed his B.S., M.S. and doctorate degrees at Utah.

Frank began his career at the University of Utah as an Assistant Professor in 1971. He was promoted to Associate Professor in 1976 and to Professor in 1980. He became chair of his department in 1988 and Dean of the College of Mines and Earth Sciences in 1991, where he secured funding for several endowed funds and for the construction of the Frederick Albert Sutton Building, the home of the Department of Geology & Geophysics.

Frank's professional accolades were numerous, including the Rosenblatt Prize from the University of Utah in 2001, its highest honor. He received the Outstanding Teaching Award in the Department of Geology and Geophysics in 1981, 1984, 1986 and 1999. They also honored him with an Award for Outstanding Research in 1999. Frank was awarded the Rip Rapp Archaeological Geology Award in 1983 for outstanding contributions to the interdisciplinary field of archaeological geology.

Frank worked with many of the great minds of modern geology and paleoanthropology including Louis, Mary, Richard, Maeve, and Louise Leakey. Garniss Curtis and Dick Hay were mentors and later, collaborators. He collected paleomagnetic samples from Olorgesailie and Kariandusi in Kenya and from Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. He worked with Desmond Clark conducting stratigraphic work at Nihewan Basin in China. In the 1980's, he began work at Koobi Fora with Thure Cerling, Naomi Levin, and Tesfaye Kidane. Since 1982, Frank partnered with Ian McDougall on the stratigraphy and geochronology of Miocene rocks in Canberra, Australia. He also worked closer to home on the diatomite quarries of Hazen, Nevada.

Frank was a ten-time Leakey Foundation grantee, receiving his first grant in 1972 to purchase two outboard motors to, as stated in his grant application abstract, "navigate the crocodile-infested Omo River." Frank's name wasn't always at the top of a grant application, but it is fair to say he provided his geological dating expertise on so many research projects that they are too numerous to count.

His impact on the science of human
origins is immeasurable. Former Leakey Foundation SEC Emeritus Member Dr. Desmond Clark once said, “Frank’s contribution to paleoanthropology and Paleolithic archaeology in Africa is immense...some of the best in the 20th century.” Frank’s work made it possible for the Leakey family and others to assign dates to fossils of early human ancestors. Richard Leakey said in 1999, “Without Frank, we would have fossils but wouldn’t know anything about their ages. He is incredibly important to our work.” Richard Klein, who served with Frank as co-chair of The Leakey Foundation’s SEC said, “Frank Brown devoted his career to developing the necessary framework for placing fossils and artifacts in geochronologic order, and it is no exaggeration to say that the hard-won result underlies much of what we now know about early human evolution.”

Over the past year, Frank focused much of his Leakey Foundation efforts on establishing a fund to help young Kenyan and Ethiopian scholars pursue projects in the earth sciences and botany that have importance to the study of human origins. Frank personally contributed and raised over $200,000 to start this program. We will work diligently to honor his intention to grow the Francis H. Brown African Scholarship Fund to $1 million.

It is difficult for words to capture our feelings of grief, as Frank was more than a scientist to us. He was a mentor, nurturing the careers of so many people in Africa and around the world. He was a teacher, always sharing his knowledge with a patient voice that encouraged us to learn more. He was a friend, learning something personal about us and then surprising us months later with a special anecdote or gift. His kindness knew no boundaries and his sense of humor provided levity in a field of science often plagued by infighting. Frank remained above the fray, level headed with a clear focus on the work.

We will remember Frank as kind, funny, dedicated, and generous beyond measure. We already miss him greatly.

To make a donation to the Francis H. Brown African Scholarship Fund please visit: leakeyfoundation.org/frankbrown
Q&A With: John Ekusi

John Ekusi Lochibal is a research assistant with the Turkana Basin Institute (TBI). He lives and works in Kenya. In 2014, Ekusi discovered the fossil nicknamed Alesi. The 13 million-year-old fossil is the skull of an infant, and it is the most complete extinct ape skull known in the fossil record.

Q: How did you first become interested in fossils?
A: I first got interested to fossils when I was in high school. I also come from the place where “Turkana Boy” or “Nariokotome Boy” was discovered, which is Nariokotome in Turkana, north along Lake Turkana. I used to go visit the place when I was a kid. In high school I built interest in evolution and fossils.

Q: Do you remember the first fossil you found?
A: The first fossil I found when I joined TBI was a molar. I was proud of it, and it gave me courage to prospect for more fossils. I have found lots of fossils since then.

Q: What is a typical day of fossil hunting like for you?
A: My typical day of fossil hunting begins at 6:00 am. I wake up and make sure that I have spread my bedroll well and my tent is zipped up to reduce the dust filling the tent during windy days. I make sure that I have everything that is needed with me in the field in my field bag. That's water, GPS, camera, ziploc bags for bagging fossils, toilet paper for wrapping fossils, scale, a pick for excavating buried fossils, brushes, notebook, a pen, betacryl solution for hardening very fragile bones, glue for joining broken fossils, and flags for marking locations. Then we have breakfast. By 7:00 am we are heading to the field. In the field there's a lot of walking. You have to scour every inch of the ground because fossils on the ground look almost identical to the rocks or sediments. You need to have very good eye site. For every good fossil found, data is recorded, and the fossil is collected. We break at either 12:30 pm or 1:00 pm for lunch. We resume prospecting at 2:00 pm and work until 5:00 pm. Then we go back to camp.

Q: What did it feel like for you to find Alesi?
A: The discovery of Alesi made me proud. I didn't sleep that night. Every fossil hunter together with Dr. Nengo was in a frenzy. Everyone was jumping high. My heart was leaping up and racing. Congratulatory remarks were showered on me. I remember the night we found Alesi, going to TBI to show the pictures to Dr. Richard Leakey, and he told me, “Well, you are now great!” I was damn proud!

Q: What do you want people to know about the work you do?
A: What people should know is that fossil hunting is very tedious work, and you don't often discover fossils as special as this one. It is a very proud day when you find something as important as Alesi. I am glad to help scientists search for these important fossils. I love this work, and I respect and cherish it.
The Leakey Foundation archive holds a rich record of our organization’s history and the history of science. In this installment of “From the Archive” Jo Rodgers explores the history of the Foundation’s public programs.

Jo Rodgers is a Leakey Foundation Fellow who joined the Leakey Foundation as a student member in 1971 while studying anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley.

Rodgers is now an anthropology professor and a Leakey Foundation Fellow. She has been volunteering with the Foundation to help prepare our extensive archive for digitization. One of the collections she has found most fascinating is the archive of materials about the lectures and symposia produced by the Foundation over our nearly 50 year history.

As a student in the 70’s, she attended every Leakey Foundation lecture and symposia she could. She said the speakers were “the who’s who of human evolution and primate research. There would be one speaker after another, and you would sit in the auditorium and just be amazed.” Rodgers said, “The Leakey Foundation was the organization that brought this science to the people, and at the time, it was the only way for people to get these big picture ideas directly from the researchers.”

She recalled hearing Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey share stories and photos, and explain what was happening in their field sites “right then.” She said, “Anyone could come and listen to this exciting science, and there was nothing else like it.”

Rodgers said the “In Search of Man” symposium, held by The Leakey Foundation at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco in 1973, was the best program she’s ever attended. She said, “I still tell my students about the time I was in the same room as Raymond Dart.” The presenters at the symposium were truly some of the giants in the field of human origins research. The two-day event had talks by Bernard Campbell, Desmond Clark, Raymond Dart, Dian Fossey, Jane Goodall, David Hamburg, Richard Hay, Clark Howell, Glynn Isaac, and Mary Leakey.

Rodgers recalled that this symposium was one of the first times Dart, who described the famous Taung Child in the journal Nature in 1925, had received recognition at a public event, and the experience of being present the first time his work received accolades from a general audience “was just wonderful.”

The Leakey Foundation’s public programming over the years reflects the ways the field has evolved. The titles and topics of the lectures show what was relevant and exciting to the public at the time as well as the questions that researchers were interested in answering. Rodgers says it’s been fascinating to read these documents and consider how the questions have changed over time. “The ebb and flow of the questions show how our understanding of human origins has changed as more research and more data has filled in the gaps, and it’s very exciting!”

Jo Rodgers and her fellow volunteer Carol Broderick are still working to prepare our archive for digitization. If you would like to help, please contact us by email at info@leakeyfoundation.org.

Thank you to Jim Carty and Pat Randall, and Sally Carty and Barry Schaitkin for their support of our archive digitization project.

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