

Cradle Of Mankind

3,500,000 years ago, our very remote ancient ancestors walked through a landscape very like that which we see today between Ngorongoro and Serengeti. The volcanoes were fewer but more active then, though Ngorongoro had not yet towered high above the others. On one particular day, the volcano Sadiman puffed out a lot of grey ashes, so that the local animals left crisp, clear tracks when they walked. Some of the creatures have changed little; hares were abundant, guinea-fowl scurried about, giraffes strode regally over the plain. Others are no longer with us, such as an elephant with downward-curving tusks in its lower jaw, and Hipparion, a three-toed horse.

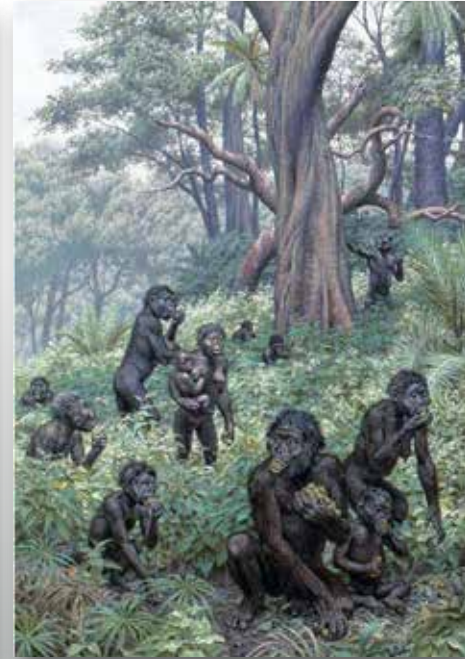
Through this desolate grey landscape that would later be named Laetoli travelled through hominids. Shorter than ourselves (1.2 to 1.4 metres high), they may have looked more than apes than people, but they walked on two legs. A large, a medium-sized and a small individual walked together, the medium-sized one stepping in the tracks of its large companion. A day or two later, a fresh ash-fall buried the tracks, until they were excavated 50 years ago. We know from contemporary fossils that the footprints were made by *Australopithecus afarensis*, an early hominid.





Australopithecus Afarensis

It is tempting to wonder why these ape-like, small brained creatures (450cc; our own brains average 1400cc) walked upright – could they see further afield? Did they use their hands for carrying water, food, or babies? Or did they carry sticks, stones or thorn branches to fight off neighbouring hominids, or predators? If they carried such weapons, did they use them in self-defence or to stela kills from hunters?

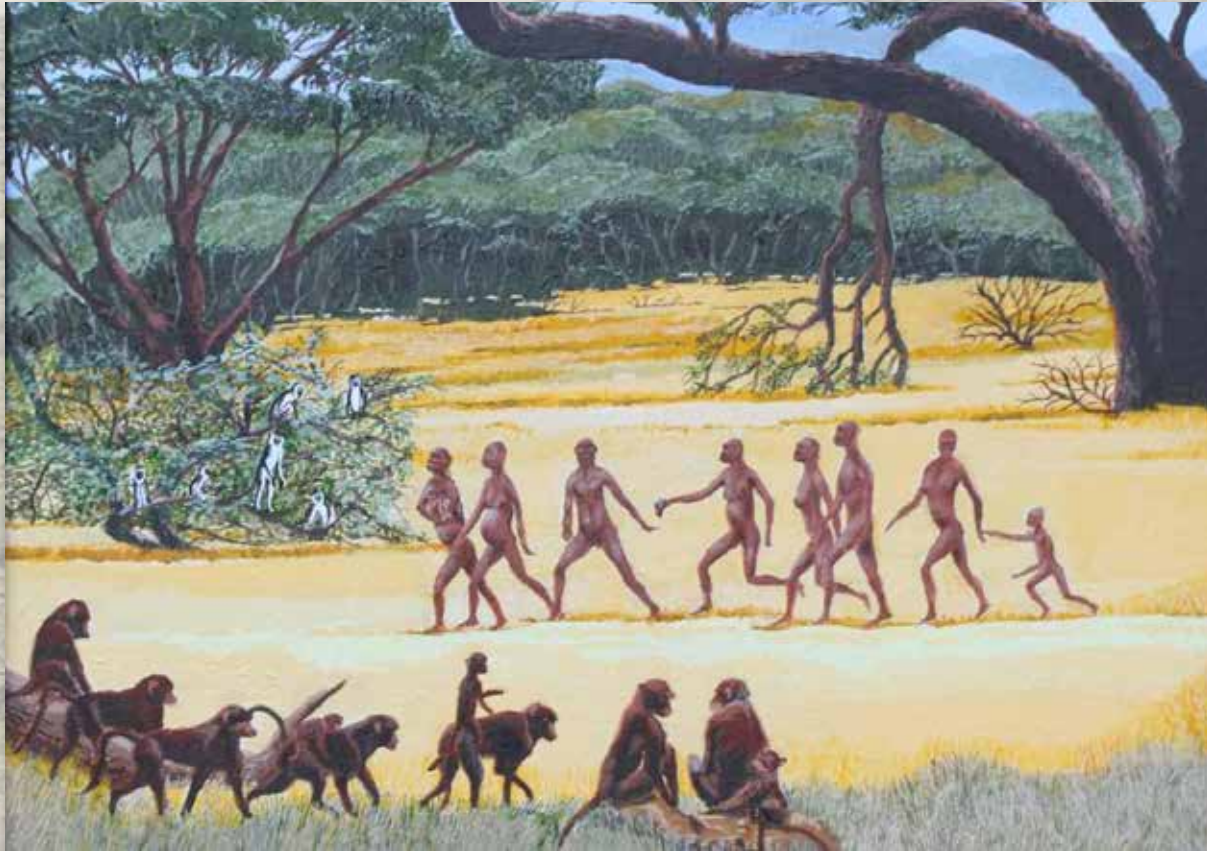


A Homo habilis family group in Pleistocene East Africa:

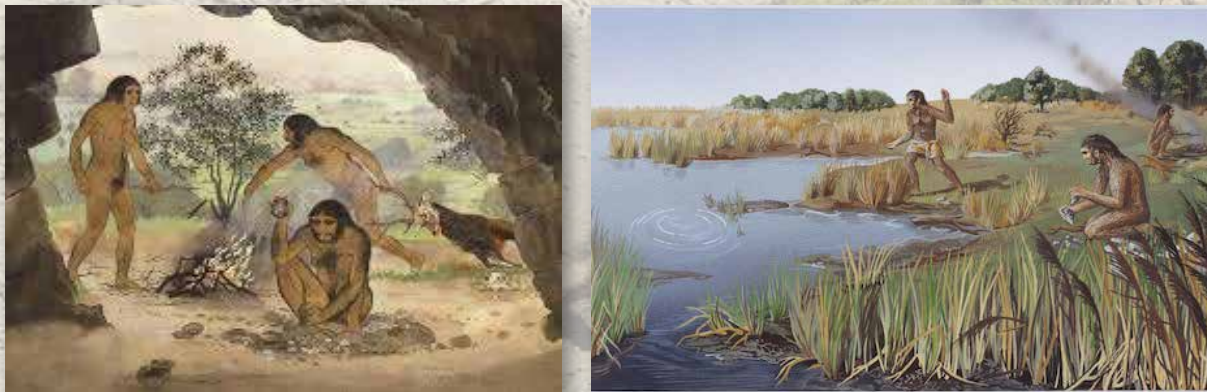
1,890,000 years ago, the volcano Olmoti erupted, and thick lava flows covered the area now occupied by Olduvai Gorge, burying any earlier remains beneath black basalt. A lake soon formed there, and became the focus of activity for a wide variety of animals. Its alkaline waters provided ideal conditions for fossilizing dead animals and plants falling in it.



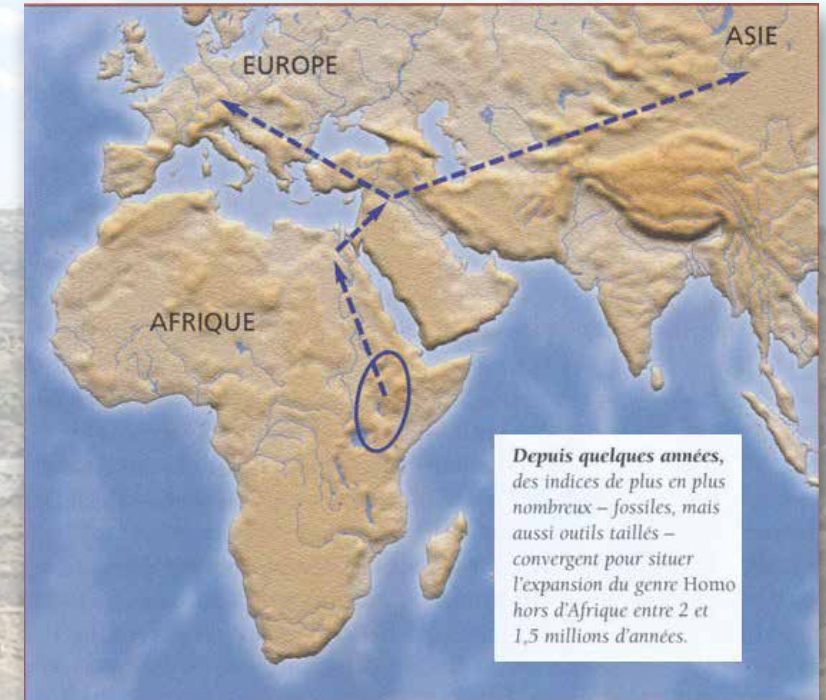
The descendants of Laetoli's upright-walkers were at Olduvai. Two different kinds of hominids left remains in the deepest level of the gorge, *Australopithecus boisei* and *Homo habilis* ("handy man").



Homo habilis family group walk through a clearing in East Africa around 2 million years ago



Early humans were able to speak and crossed sea on boats



1,500,000 years ago, earth movements and faulting caused "Lake Olduvai" to be drained. At this time *Australopithecus afarensis* was still present, while *Homo habilis* had evolved to *Homo erectus* ("upright man"), our direct ancestors. This human had a bigger brain (900cc) and made better stone hand-axes. Only 17,000 years ago *Homo sapiens* lived in the gorge.

