

Louis leakey



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

By: sean smith

E-mail: emailprotected

Louis Leakey Discovering the Secrets of Humankind's Past Louis Leakey was born to be an archaeologist, for his childhood in Africa truly prepared him for the field life he would later lead. The son of missionaries Harry and Mary Leakey, Louis grew up in Kenya near Nairobi, among the Kikuyu African tribe who the elder Leakeys were trying to convert. Despite intervening periods in which the Leakeys moved back to England, Louis grew up practically as a Kikuyu tribe member, and at the age of eleven he not only built his own traditional hut in which to live but was also initiated as a member of the Kikuyu tribe. It was within this hut that the beginnings of Leakey's archaeological aspirations took place. In one section he started a personal museum, collected all things naturalistic, from bird eggs to animal skulls. It was in 1916, at the age of fourteen, when Leakey first truly realized that he was meant for archaeology; after reading the account of stone-age men entitled " Days Before History" he was hooked. After reading about the arrowheads and axeheads created by these people, Louis began collecting and classifying as many pieces of obsidian flakes and tools as he could find. After confirmation by a prehistory expert that these were truly stone tools of ancient Africans, truly links to the past, Leakey knew that the rest of his life would be devoted towards discovering the secrets of the prehistoric ancestors of humankind. Despite not being accustomed to the school structure back in England and the accompanying problems he had in public school, Leakey was accepted into Cambridge in 1922. However, blows to the head sustained during rugby games resulted in epilepsy and headaches for Leakey, and he had to leave school in 1923. This, however, was a blessing in <https://assignbuster.com/louis-leakey/>

disguise, for Leakey landed a job as an African expert on an archaeological mission to Tendaguru in what is now Tanzania. He was to accompany the archaeologist and dinosaur bone expert William E. Cutler. With his fluency in Swahili, Leakey soon organized an entire safari to the site. Working with and observing Cutler, Leakey learned "more about the technical side of the search for and preservation of fossil bones than he could have gleaned from a far longer period of theoretical study". Many dinosaur bones were dug up although a complete skeleton was never found. After several months Leakey was forced to leave, leaving Cutler to continue. Back in England, Leakey wrote many articles and letters about the dig. Cutler, however, died in Africa a few months later, a victim of Blackwater fever. Leakey returned to Cambridge and studied anthropology. From these studies and independent ones, Leakey developed the view that early man had originated in Africa, not in Asia as most scholars believed at the time. He became fascinated with the Olduvai Gorge site and the Homo sapiens skeleton discovered by German paleontologist Hans Reck. Great controversy surrounded Reck's find because the age of the skeleton could not be proven. Further, Reck could not return to the site because, as he was German and Britain had won that region of Africa in World War I, he was not able to go there. Leakey was fascinated with the site and told Reck that they would one day go back. For the time being, this had to be put on hold. Finishing finals, Leakey graduated with excellent marks and received many grants for research in Africa. He was twenty-three, and he was about to lead his own expeditions. Over the next few years Leakey dug at many sites, finding many stone tools, animal bones, and other artifacts. His search, however, was for proof of the use of a specific Chellean hand-axe style found in other parts of the world. This he found in

<https://assignbuster.com/louis-leakey/>

1929, and its discovery pushed back the age of the Great Rift Valley in Africa a great deal. Further, it provided critical evidence for a level of sophistication in East Africa equal to that of European cultures at the time. By this time Leakey's work had caught the attention of the archaeological community and he began to receive much acclaim. In November 1929 he returned to England with a two-year fellowship at St. John's College, and a wife, Frida, as well, whom he had married in 1928. However, excavating the site at Olduvai Gorge was on his mind, and he made plans to return to Africa. With the publication of his first book, *The Stone Age Cultures of Kenya Colony*, his extensive fieldwork, and his position at St. John's College, Leakey obtained a grant to go to the Olduvai Gorge site in 1931. Along with Reck at the site, Leakey excavated five different beds, finding an amazing number of hand tools. In addition, Leakey analyzed the site of the original skeleton and concluded it was the oldest *Homo sapiens* in Africa and probably anywhere else. On returning from the excavation, Leakey received much acclaim for his discovery. But this was not to last, for rumblings of doubt began to be heard as to the true age of the skeleton. Various tests contradicted Leakey's claims, and he decided to return to the site to find more skeletons to prove his theory. Leakey first went to explore fossil beds at Kanjera near Lake Victoria, and it is here where he made a startling discovery of more *Homo Sapiens* skulls. Further, one of the skulls found at the nearby Kanam site was found in situ, providing proof of its age. He had thus found contemporaries of the Olduvai man at Kanjera. However, on his return to England he found his academic reputation greatly hurt. The original Olduvai man was generally accepted to not be of such a great age, and he was seen as "pigheaded" for maintaining his belief on the subject. He finally withdrew his support for the

<https://assignbuster.com/louis-leakey/>

Olduvai mans great age in 1933. He still held that the fossils from Kanam and Kanjera were of great age, but he recieved little support due to his hurt reputation. However, he soon restored his reputation by proving to the scientific community the great age of these fossils at a conference in Cambridge, when he showed his evidence to twenty-six leading scientists. They agreed with his interpretation, and his career began to soar. In 1934 Leakey returned to the Kanam and Kanjera sites to further substantiate his claims. In addition, the eminent professor P. G. H. Boswell was to visit the site, as he was one of the few scientists to still have misgivings about the age of the skulls. On Leakeys return, however, he found the iron markers he used to mark the spots where the skulls were found to be stolen, with only a photograph to show the area of the site. When Boswell arrived, Leakey still had not found the exact spot where the skulls were found. In addition to this, Boswell found Leakeys erratic methods and absentmindedness to be very unsettling. Disgusted with Leakeys " losing" of the exact site, Boswell returned to England, writing scathing papers about Leakeys techniques and casting great doubt on the true age of those skulls. This, along with Louis separation from wife Frida and his living with girlfriend Mary (which was not tolerated in the 1930s) led to the ruining of Leakeys reputation once again. Although Louis and Mary worked on the Olduvai site for the next year, making excellent discoveries, when Leakey returned to England in late 1935 he had no job or prospects. He was given small grants to finish books or lecture occasionally, but could receive no university position. Due to serious lack of money he was forced to publish an autobiography in 1936, White African. With no prospect of grants to lead an expedition, Leakey finally had to accept a grant to write an anthropological study of the Kikuyu tribe that

<https://assignbuster.com/louis-leakey/>

he grew up with. Leakey returned to Africa with new wife Mary, who engaged in archaeological digs of her own while Louis undertook the Kikuyu study. After the works were published, though, Leakey was still unable to find a position he desired. At one point he even had to sell beads and beeswax to support his family. Ostracized by the scientific community, he became a civilian intelligence officer for the Kenyan government in 1939, and by the end of the year was drafted into the African Intelligence Department when Britain declared war on Germany, and was running guns to Ethiopia. During the remainder of World War II, Leakey became somewhat of a spy, collecting information for the government. However, in his free time he, along with his wife Mary, kept themselves busy archaeologically with many sites, including the Olduvai site. They made their most amazing wartime finds, though, at Olorgesailie, forty miles south of Nairobi, where they found an incredible array of handaxes and hammerstones spread out in the open, untouched. They made this an open-air museum in 1947. Further, on Rusinga Island in Lake Victoria Leakey found a proconsul jaw as well as a jaw of *Xenopithecus*. The proconsul jaw was the most complete Miocene jaw ever discovered, and helped show that Proconsul was near the common ape-man stem in the evolutionary chain. Over the years since the Boswell incident, Leakey had made some fantastic discoveries, and the credit he was due was about to come in 1947 when Louis' vision of a Pan-African Congress on Prehistory became reality. Sixty scientists representing twenty-six countries came to spend a week giving papers and holding discussions. The event was such a huge success that the members voted to hold one every four years. Not only did the scientists visit Leakey's nearby sites (praising both Louis' and Mary's expertise), but Louis was seen as less of a maverick and more of

<https://assignbuster.com/louis-leakey/>

a dedicated scientist. The scientists also noticed that he had almost single-handedly traced East Africa's prehistory from the Miocene to the Early Stone Age. Further, Louis made important connections, such as his friendship with the eminent anatomist Wilfrid Le Gros Clark, which would help him in the future. After this congress, another event helped spur Leakey's success. The brash American Wendell Phillips was about to begin a massive expedition to Leakey's Kenyan Miocene sites and had a great deal of American money behind him. Phillips was clearly trying to hone in on Leakey's discovery. The idea that the American would steal this British source of pride was such that it spurred British donors to support Leakey's excavation to get there first. While Phillips' expedition grew and grew and the trip got more and more delayed, Leakey got his together and began excavation in June of 1947. Leakey made some important finds in his trip to Rusinga Island but the crowning jewel came when in 1949 he and Mary discovered the first Proconsul skull complete with a face. The finding of the Proconsul Africanus skull created a huge stir across Britain and indeed the world, although it was soon announced not to be the "missing link" but rather a link between monkey and ape. The discovery, however, along with its accompanying media frenzy led to an increase in research funds. Rusinga Island was worked on more, and many important fossils were found including more Proconsul remains. Louis and Mary renewed their explorations of the Olduvai site in 1951, and for several years searched for the man that created the handaxes and tools, the "Chellean" man. In 1959, they began to find indications of what they were looking for until finally they discovered an exciting new skeleton. Louis did not just give it a new species name, but a new genus as well: *Zinjanthropus boisei*. Although eventually it was shown to

<https://assignbuster.com/louis-leakey/>

be a member of the Australopithecus genus (*Australopithecus boisei*) and also not the "Chellean" man, for many years Leakey argued that it was different. However, the find was still spectacular, and when Leakey announced and displayed the find at the fourth Pan-African Congress of Prehistorians, it caused a frenzy. "Zinj", as he called it, was the earliest known hominid at the time. Worldwide fame and fortune resulted, as well as a great deal of grant money. The Leakey's would never have to work on a shoestring budget again. With the new money, a full-scale excavation of Olduvai Gorge was commenced. Mary took over the dig while Louis was curator at the Coryndon Museum, but Louis was at the site a great deal. They searched in the area of Zinj's discovery for its living floor. But as they dug deeper and deeper smaller bones, originally attributed to a female Zinj, were increasingly found. In an area nearby that Jonathan, their son, discovered, more hominid bones were found and there they began to dig. At "Jonny's Site" several hominid foot bones resembling those of *Homo sapiens* were found, and then many other parts of the skeleton were found as well. Once the parietal skull bones of *Telanthropus* were found, however, they knew that they had evidence that two different types of hominids lived together at the same time. Further, Louis found the skull of his "Chellean Man" nearby, later to be grouped under the name *Homo erectus*. Meanwhile, Louis was trying to prove that the smaller bones found in the Zinj site were from a member of the *Homo* genus. He tried to enlist others to back him, but they were only swayed when Louis found the skulls and skeletons of several more of the new *Homo* in 1962 - *Homo Habilis*, the earliest human and the maker of all the oldest stone tools. Almost as startling as the find of the oldest human was the fact that *Homo Habilis* (who originally had the "

Telanthropus" characteristics and Zinj, an Australopithecus, both lived side by side at the same point in time. In 1961 Leakey also found a new jaw from the genus and species he named Kenyapithecus wickeri. By 1967 he had found more evidence of this and of Kenyapithecus africanus, an older one. By doing so, and claiming these as the oldest human skeletons, he extended humankind back to twenty million years ago. Although Louis Leakey's enthusiasm and recklessness led to his ostracism early in his career it resulted in his great dedication to all he worked on. With his "Leakey's Luck" his and Mary's finds revolutionized the way we think of the descent of mankind. He ended up showing the world that humankind did evolve from and begin in Africa. By the 1960s Leakey had established himself at the top of his field and with all of his finds he certainly became one of the greatest archaeologists ever. And although Louis died in 1972, his son Richard Leakey has carried on his father and mother's work.

Word Count: 2455