

From “Footprints in the Ashes of Time”

Mary Leakey

The closeness of the two sets of prints indicates that their owners were not walking abreast. Other clues suggest that the hominids may have passed at different times. For example, the imprints of the smaller individual stand out clearly. The crispness of definition and sharp outlines convince me that they were left on a damp surface that retained the form of the foot.

On the other hand, the prints of the larger are blurred, as if he had shuffled or dragged his feet. In fact, I think that the surface when he passed was loose and dusty, hence the collapsed appearance of his prints. Nonetheless, luck favored us again; the bigger hominid left one absolutely clear print, probably on a patch of once damp ash.

What do these footprints tell us? First, they demonstrate once and for all that at least 3,600,000 years ago, in Pliocene times, what I believe to be man’s direct ancestor walked fully upright with a bipedal, free-striding gait. Second, that the form of his foot was exactly the same as ours.

One cannot overemphasize the role of bipedalism in hominid development. It stands as perhaps the salient point that differentiated the forebears of man from other primates. This unique ability freed the hands for myriad possibilities—carrying, tool-making, intricate manipulation. From this single development, in fact, stems all modern technology....

But what of those two hominids who crossed the Laetolil Beds so long ago? We have measured their footprints and the length of their stride. Was the larger one a male, the smaller a female? Or was one mature, the other young? It is unlikely that we will ever know with certainty. For convenience, let us postulate a case of sexual dimorphism and consider the smaller one a female.

Incidentally, following her path produces, at least for me, a kind of poignant time wrench. At one point, and you need not be an expert tracker to discern this, she stops, pauses, turns to the left to glance at some possible threat or irregularity, and then continues to the north. This motion, so intensely human, transcends time. Three million six hundred thousand years ago, a remote ancestor—just as you or I—experienced a moment of doubt.¹

¹ Mary Leakey, “Footprints in the Ashes of Time,” *National Geographic*, April 1979, 446–57.