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## Ramidus vs. Orrorin

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### INVESTIGATING GENESIS

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#### “Ramidus vs. Orrorin”

Ever since the dethronement of Lucy as the “missing link,” several contenders have surfaced. One is *Ardipithecus ramidus*, discovered in 1994 in Ethiopia by Tim D. White and dated to 4.4 million years ago. This age would bestow on *A. ramidus* the honor of being the “oldest human ancestor” (Begley 2001: 52). However, a rival team has discovered what it claims is an older species in the direct line to modern humanity. The July 23, 2001 issue of *Newsweek* reported:

In the other corner glares the scrappy challenger, *Orrorin tugenensis*, excavated [in 2000] from ancient strata in Kenya. His French discoverers say the 6-million-year old guy deserves the ‘oldest ancestor’ crown, but Orrorin’s pedigree is controversial and he has been snubbed by many anthropologists like an arriviste at a Social Register tea (p. 52).

*Orrorin*’s discoverers, Martin Pickford of the College de France and Brigitte Senut of the National Museum of Natural History in Paris, claim that the creature was bipedal and thus the oldest human ancestor (hence its scientific name, which means “original man”). To claim that *Orrorin* was a hominid, protested Bernard Wood of George Washington University, you “have to rewrite human evolutionary history” (p. 52).

Responding to the *Orrorin* challenge, the *ramidus* team began a vigorous search for stronger evidence that their creature was truly the oldest human ancestor. In 2001, one of White’s graduate students, Yohannes Haile-Selassie, discovered 11 fossil bones that appeared to represent a *ramidus* specimen dating from 5.2 to 5.8 million years ago,

leading Haile-Selassie to declare his find “the earliest definitive evidence of the hominid” family yet discovered (Begley 2001: 52). However, as *Newsweek* pointed out,

His appearance remains a mystery: with neither a skull nor intact limb bones to guide them (only a toothy jawbone, hand and foot bones, fragmentary arm bones and collar bone), all scientists can tell is that he was the size of today’s chimps... (Ibid.).

If this new version of *ramidus* is the oldest human ancestor, then current theories will be upset, because it would mean that the “first humans” inhabited lush forest-land. *Newsweek* reported that

paleo-dogma says that the savanna, not the forest, was the birthplace of humanity, as climate change turned forests to grasslands and evolutionary pressure split the ape lineage into the hairy ones who stayed in the forest and the naked ones who roamed the savannah. With [*ramidus*], says Haile-Selassie, that theory is ‘down the drain’ (Ibid.).

The magazine further pointed out the serious flaws in trying to claim that one ape-like creature or another was **unquestionably** our evolutionary ancestor:

Apes who lived 5 or 6 million years ago so resembled each other that we may never know which begat chimp and which begat man. Complicating things even more, the human family tree is so bushy ‘there is not a single line from ape to angel,’ says anthropologist Donald Johanson, director of the Institute of Human Origins (Ibid.).

So fierce is the controversy over the identity of the oldest human evolutionary ancestor that Pickford sued famed paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey for false arrest when he was jailed in Kenya for supposedly collecting fossils without a permit. He even subtitled a book about Leakey “Master of Deceit” (Begley 2001: 52). The mess surrounding *Orrorin* and *A. ramidus* shatters the myth that the theory of human evolution is one of sober, objective science. It is actually a chaotic swirl of backbiting, contradiction, and failed “missing links” that receive much ballyhoo before eventually being shelved as evolutionary dead ends.

#### Reference:

Begley, S. 2001. “Bickering over Old Bones.” *Newsweek* [international edition], 23 July.

*Stephen Caesar holds his master’s degree in anthropology/archaeology from Harvard. He is a staff member at Associates for Biblical Research and the author of the e-book The Bible Encounters Modern Science, available at [www.1stbooks.com](http://www.1stbooks.com).*