First Human Fossil Found at Olorgesailie (Kenya) Field Site; Smithsonian Scientist Makes Dramatic Discovery

Working at the Olorgesailie (Kenya) field site during the summer of 2003, Rick Potts, director of the Smithsonian's Human Origins Program at the Museum of Natural History, discovered a partial cranium of the first well-dated fossil that stands in a 400,000-year gap in the human fossil record of East Africa. The gap is between 1 million and 600,000 years old, an important time period prior to the origin of our species, Homo sapiens (in Africa around 200,000 years ago). The age of the fossil is about 900,000 years old (technically between 970,000 and 900,000 years old) and represents the first human fossil ever found at the Olorgesailie site.

The fossil is directly associated with the rich handaxe sites at Olorgesailie and establishes a fossil human along side the Acheulean technology of East Africa (one of the longest stone technologies in human prehistory). The paper on the discovery, co-authored with Anna K. Behrensmeyer, Smithsonian Institution; Alan Deino, Berkeley Geochronology Center; Peter Ditchfield, University of Oxford; and Jennifer Clark, Smithsonian Institution, will be published in the July 2 issue of Science.

“The discovery of a human fossil at Olorgesailie helps to unlock the mystery of an important period in human development,” said Potts.

Olorgesailie is famed for its concentrations of Acheulean handaxes. The discovery of the first human fossils at Olorgesailie comes after 62 years of survey and excavation at this site, dating to the first exploration and digging by Louis and Mary Leakey in 1942. Since 1985, the Smithsonian’s Human Origins Program has directed excavations at the site, in collaboration with the National Museums of Kenya. Their research has focused on how early humans used the ancient landscape. Over the years they have found stone tools and animal butchery sites and investigated how humans adapted to an extensive degree of environmental change over time.

Dr. Potts and his team returned to Olorgesailie in June 2004 and will conduct further excavation at the site throughout the summer. Their work can be followed weekly, beginning July 1, on the Human Origins Program website: www.nmh.si.edu/anthro/humanorigins (see Dispatches from the Field 2004).