ASSIGNMENT

Discuss the view that the findings in the Olduvai Gorge by the Leakeys marks the beginning of man in Africa.

Lecturer: Dr. Frimpong Manso
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INTRODUCTION

The origin of man has been very controversial in the 17th and 18th centuries. Religious groups have made their positions, philosophers and some archaeologists have tried to prove and state where man originated from. It was initially believed that the first man evolved from East Asia. Christians, Muslims and other religious bodies hold the view that the first man to exist was Adam in the Garden of Eden. Contrary to these views are the findings of Louis Seymour Bazett Leakey and his family that man came to being long before the time of Adam.

In 1931 Louis Leakey found Olduvai fossils in Berlin and thought Olduvai Gorge would have more information about the beginning of man so set out to prove Darwin’s theory the Africa was humankind’s homeland. Louis together with his wife Mary Leakey was the archaeologists responsible for most of the excavations and discoveries of the hominid fossils in Olduvai Gorge.

BRIEF HISTORY OF OLDUVAI GORGE

Olduvai Gorge is a steep – sided ravine in the Great Rift Valley that stretches through eastern Africa. It can be located in northern Tanzania. The name Olduvai Gorge is a misspelling of Oldupai Gorge, which was adopted as the official name in 2005. Oldupai is the Maasai word for the wild plant Sansevieria Ehrenbergii which grows in the Gorge.

Olduvai is one of the most significant paleoanthropological sites in the world and has been instrumental in furthering the understanding of early human evolution. Researchers dated Olduvai Gorge using radiometric dating of the embedded artifacts, mostly through potassium-argon dating and argon – argon dating.

German neurologist Wilhelm Kattwinkel discovered Olduvai Gorge in 1911, where he noticed many fossil bones of an extinct three-toed horse. Kattwinkel’s discovery inspired Professor Hans Reck to lead a team to Olduvai Gorge in 1913. There, he found a hominid skeleton, but unfortunately, the start of World War I halted his research. Louis S. B. Leakey and Mary Leakey decided to research this site because they had
strong conviction that the site contained facts about the origin of man. (en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/olduvai_gorge)

**FINDINGS**

In the book “Man: His First Two Million Years”, Montagu (1969) notes that the most primitive, though by no means the oldest known form of man is a member of the subfamily Australopithecinae. This is Zinjanthropus boisei discovered in July 1959 by Dr. L. S. B. Leakey and his wife in Olduvai Gorge, Tanganyika territory, East Africa. “Zinj” is the classical Arabic name for East Africa and “anthropus” of course means man. Zinjanthropus boisei or Oldoway man is represented by an almost complete skull and part of a shinbone. The skull is that of a youth between sixteen and eighteen years of age, with a cranial capacity of 530 cc. The face is long and wide, there is a sagittal crest, almost no brow, large premolars, but small canines and incisors. The skull was found on a living floor associated with stone tools of an early type known as Oldowan.

In the 1930’s a Mary and Louis searched for earliest stone tools in east Africa, many people were skeptical that Africa was the place where humans evolved. Yet, when the Leakeys found tools in Olduvai Gorge, evidence turned in their favour. These tools according to Montagu (1969) made of quartzite and lava are characterized by having only a few flakes removed in either one or two directions on both faces to make a simple chopping implement with a sharp but irregular cutting edge on either side of the stone. Found in association with these skeletal remains were a large number of typical Oldowan artifacts. These included a most interestingly shaped bone tool, which Leakey interprets a some sort of “lissoir”, that is, a tool used for working and polishing the skins of animals into usable leather. If the interpretation of the significance of this bone tool is correct, then, as Leakey remarks, “It postulates a more evolved way of life for the makers of Oldowan culture that most of us would have expected”.

Great quantities of the remains of tortoises, catfish, and relatively easily caught aquatic birds were found at this level, suggesting that at this stage these early men had not yet progressed to the gathering and killing of the juveniles of larger animals.
Zinjanthropus, according to potassium–argon dating (carbon–14 technique) arrived at by Drs. G. H. Curtis and J. Evernden of the University of California, dates back to 1.75 million years. This corrected the Leakeys’ view that it was 600,000 years old. Most authorities have now agreed that Zinjanthropus is an australopithecine of the same type as paranthropis from two sites in South Africa, Kromdraai and Swartkrans and from another as far away as Java (Meganthropus). Montagu (1969)

In 1978, Mary Leakey found a trail of clear ancient hominid foot prints of two adults and a child – some 3.5 million years old – impressed and preserved in volcanic ash from a site in Tanzania called Laetoli. They belonged to a new hominid species best represented by the 3.2 million year old Lucy skeleton, which was found at Hadar, Ethiopia, by Donald Johanson. “It is tempting to see them as a man, a woman and a child”, Mary Leakey later wrote. From 1961 – 1964 the Leakeys and their son Jonathan unearthed fossils of Homo Habilis, “handy man”, the oldest known primate with human characteristics and discovered in 1967 Kenyapithecus Africanus. The Leakeys claimed that Homo habilis had walked upright and viewed it as a direct ancestor of modern human. It had a brain almost 50 percent larger than that of the Australopithecines. “Until then, the idea that two hominids could occupy the same area at the same time had been unacceptable to most scientists”. Mary Leakey wrote in Discovering the Past (1984)

CONCLUSION

The assertion that man originated from Africa specifically East Africa is justified by the discussion above based on the findings of the Leakeys. The excavations at the Olduvai Gorge was therefore important because they established the African origin of humankind and brought empirical evidence to solve the controversy about the origin of man or the ancestry of man.

Moreover, the Leakeys discoveries formed the basis for the most important subsequent research into the earliest origins of human life.
REFERENCE

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