

The "Ancestors" Project: An Expurgated History

Ian Tattersall, John A. Van Couvering, AND Eric Delson

Department of Anthropology (I.T.), Micropaleontology Press (J.A.V.C.), and Department of Vertebrate Paleontology (E.D.), American Museum of Natural History, New York, New York 10024.

One question often asked us is, "How did you think of 'Ancestors'?" In fact, it doesn't take a genius, let alone three geniuses, to conceive of putting the world's most famous human fossils on display, especially if you work at one of the great natural history museums and spend a lot of time thinking and writing about prehistoric primates. What it does take, perhaps, is chutzpah: John's initial memo to Ian, dated April 27, 1979, begins: "Conceivably the most grandiose idea I have ever aspired to entertain." We soon discovered, however, that grandiose as it may have seemed to us, we were by no means the first to have had the idea of staging an international exhibition of original human fossil specimens. But always before, in spite of the great popular and scientific interest such an event would arouse, the notion had been dismissed in the face of apparently insurmountable problems. So the question that people ought perhaps to ask us is, "What made you think 'Ancestors' *could* happen?"

Over the months that followed the initial floating of the idea it may simply have been the benign ambience of the old "Blarney Castle" on 72nd Street, an establishment where excellent ideas draw benefit from collegial encouragement and distance from care, that kept the project alive and gestating. However, even in less euphoric surroundings we soon began to sense that the time was ripe: public as well as scientific interest was at a new high due to a spate of well-publicized discoveries and to the popular books derived from them, as well as because of the escalation of the "creationist" assault on evolutionary biology, a matter of great and growing concern at the Museum. Nevertheless, when we presented the out-

line of the proposed exhibition to Dr. Thomas D. Nicholson, the Museum's Director, we suggested that an advisory committee first be assembled to help us determine if the proposal was even feasible. If they agreed with us that it was, we hoped (rightly) that the members would then become a steering committee that would advise us, from expert knowledge, on the complex and delicate task of getting the specimens needed from their various vaults and locked cases around the world.

Our proposal met with Dr. Nicholson's enthusiastic support, and the committee eventually convened for its first meeting on January 27, 1981, in the Portrait Room at the Museum. Every person we contacted agreed to come. Present in addition to Museum personnel were four eminent paleoanthropologists: David Pilbeam of Harvard, Elwyn Simons of Duke, and Clark Howell and Desmond Clark, both of Berkeley. With them sat the heads of four major private foundations that support the search for fossil man: Lita Osmundsen of the Wenner-Gren Foundation, Mary Pechanec of the L.S.B. Leakey Foundation, Melvin Payne of the National Geographic Society, and David Mash of the Foundation for Research into the Origins of Man. Wenner-Gren and the Leakey Foundation later became involved in the scientific activities that preceded the exhibition, as did the four academic members.

This January 1981 meeting was the first real trial for the "Ancestors" project. We began by outlining our concept of the exhibition, to justify asking the assistance of the committee. Our view was that the primary purpose of the exhibition was not, in any political sense, to make a statement about

human evolution, as if to dignify the challenge of "creation science," but simply to make it possible for the public, lay and professional, to witness at first hand and for the first time a full sample of what had been found in the century or so since the search for prehistoric humans began. The special significance of the specimens as, in a broad sense, the ancestors of each person who came to the exhibition, would be acknowledged by presenting the fossils as objects of beauty and fascination in their own right, separate from the explanatory material needed to place them in the context of current scientific understanding.

The committee was unanimous in applauding the concept of the exhibition, but its members varied in the degree of their optimism that the goal could be achieved. The unmistakable conclusion, however, was that it was worth a try, if the Museum were prepared to invest the resources necessary to ensure the security of the fossils should the exhibition become a reality. For it was overwhelmingly clear that if their guardians could not be assured that every possible precaution was being taken, not a single specimen would come to New York, and rightly so. The committee returned more than once to the subject of physical security during the exhibition, and even showed a rather ghoulish fascination with ever more ingenious ways (which we duly noted) to smash delicate fossils to bits. Of course, we had not yet designed and built the display cases—a project which ultimately involved a lot of the New York experience gained from bank teller cages, armored car windows, and Transit Authority token booths. The Police Department supplied specialists on criminal and lunatic violence, and Chemical Bank offered the expertise of its security chief. As it turned out, of the entire supply of active maniacs in the Tri-State area, not one chose in the event to test the system that resulted, possibly because of the enthusiasm and vigilance of the Museum guards assigned to the exhibit. Also, in view of the fragility of many of the specimens, we proposed that no fossil would be touched, photographed, or viewed in the open except by personal arrangement with the responsible curator, who would retain absolute control of the specimen whenever it was out of the closed, high-security exhibit case.

With the most convincing of reasons and the best in security, could we assemble enough specimens to justify an exhibition? A draft "wish list" had been presented to

the advisory committee, and names were suggested of those curators from around the world whose participation was considered most important to the success of the venture. Over the following several months we made both informal and formal approaches to these colleagues, and were delighted by the generally positive responses we received. We were particularly gratified by the immediate enthusiasm for the project shown by Elisabeth Vrba and Bob Brain of the Transvaal Museum; it may well be that their early commitment to participate with a large number of the important fossils in their care helped to sway the decisions of many other curators. For, frankly, we were surprised by the number of affirmative replies we received over these months, since our requests presented each individual we approached with a difficult curatorial decision. It cannot have been easy for them to justify the risks of transporting such delicate and irreplaceable specimens over vast distances, and of placing them on prolonged exhibit in the homeland of creationism. Some curators or institutional trustees, after longer or shorter periods of indecision, quite understandably declined to take those risks. Nevertheless, most of those approached at this initial stage shared our enthusiasm for this unique project, and agreed on principle to participate in "Ancestors" if adequate security for their specimens could be assured. Accordingly, at a second meeting of the Advisory Committee, held on June 18, 1982, it was formally decided to proceed with "Ancestors," and the date of April, 1984 was set for the opening. At this time the American Museum committed itself to underwriting the unmet costs of the exhibition (which in the end meant almost all of the costs, since the exhibition ultimately proved to be too "controversial" to attract either Federal or private funding (with the exception of a valuable indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities), although small but useful grants were generously made by the New York State Council on the Arts), and to actively seek the participation of additional institutions holding important human fossils. In addition, since every fossil would be personally hand-carried to New York by its curator, it was agreed that the resulting assembly of scientists should be made the occasion of a scientific symposium in advance of the opening of the exhibition.

Following this meeting, we began planning details of the exhibition with Michael Blakeslee of the Museum's Department of

Exhibitions, who had been assigned to "Ancestors" as designer. Scientifically, however, the major turning point of the event occurred in October 1982, when Eric and Ian attended the First International Congress of Human Paleontology, held in Nice. Here, for the first time, it was possible for a substantial number of potential and committed participants to gather in person, and to discuss the concerns of those contributing fossils to the exhibit. Besides permitting a consensus on technical matters such as security and insurance, this meeting was memorable for an impassioned appeal by Phillip Tobias to exploit the scientific potential of "Ancestors" to the utmost. Phillip recalled the excitement of those three days in 1964 when, in Cambridge, he and Ralph von Koenigswald were able to compare the Olduvai *Homo habilis* fossils with Ralph's material from Java. The idea of staging a major scientific comparison session of the fossils assembled in New York struck a chord with all those present, and the idea was enthusiastically endorsed by the meeting. Many, Phillip among them, felt that the addition of this unique scientific aspect to the proceedings would be of great help in persuading their institutions or governments to permit the showing of their fossils in "Ancestors." We were ourselves delighted by this development; for although the exciting possibilities of scientific comparison of the assembled specimens had certainly not failed to occur to us, we had felt somewhat constrained from actually suggesting this because we had from the beginning assured potential participants that their fossils would remain under their personal control at all times, and would not be handled by third persons except with their express permission. Since the suggestion had now come from a curator, however, and had received the collective endorsement of a substantial number of those who had agreed to participate in "Ancestors," the way was now open to making the scientific sessions a reality.

The organization of the scientific sessions received detailed consideration at the final meeting of the Advisory Committee, held on January 14, 1983. It was decided to seek funding for both a scientific comparison session and a symposium, each of several days' duration, in which not only transporting curators, but also invited paleoanthropologists from the U.S.A. and abroad would participate. A subcommittee consisting of Eric, John, Ian, and Lita Osmundsen was delegated to plan these scientific activities in

detail. That the resulting plans were successfully implemented, as the existence of this volume testifies, is due to the generous support of the Wenner-Gren Foundation (which funded the attendance at the symposium of non-curatorial participants and helped to defray the expenses of this volume), and of the National Science Foundation and L.S.B. Leakey Foundation (both of which subsidized the attendance of non-curatorial invited participants at the comparison sessions and paid the expenses of comparison photography), as well as to that of the American Museum of Natural History, which provided facilities and underwrote the expenses of all "Ancestors" curators who attended the scientific sessions.

Arrangements for the comparison sessions posed something of a challenge. Obviously, we could not simply lay all of the available fossils on a table and invite a free-for-all. In the end we decided that a maximum of six scientists at a table making comparisons between a maximum of seven specimens would be as much as would be manageable; with four or five such sessions running concurrently, and ten such periods over the four days of comparison, we concluded that we would be able to offer each of the sixty-plus participating scientists a reasonable choice of comparisons to make, as well as to provide opportunities for other scientists and students who had obtained curatorial permission to examine specimens. Little suspecting what we were getting into, instead of setting up comparison sets and inviting applications for seats, we then circulated a list of included fossils and requested that each curator and invited scientist send us a choice of four comparisons among six fossils, plus a couple of additional choices. Some of the requests we received were idiosyncratic to say the least, multiplying the number of choices vastly beyond what we had expected; but fortunately Philippe Lampietti and Les Marcus came to our aid with a computer program which managed to match scholars and specimens more or less to everyone's satisfaction.

Time-consuming though its organization had been, and nerve-racking though the procedure was itself, with dozens of delicate fossils being repeatedly handled by large numbers of excited scientists, the comparison session turned out to be an extraordinary event that far surpassed even our optimistic expectations. Even those who had begun by believing that casting technology was by now able to provide us with replicas

virtually as good as the originals had by the end to admit that technology still has a long way to go. There is nothing like an original fossil—and for an egotistical species, particularly a hominid fossil—to get the juices flowing; and in this respect two fossils, especially if they normally reside in institutions hundreds or thousands of miles apart, are much more powerful than one. The comparison session also attracted a good deal of attention in the popular media; of the various articles that resulted, the excitement of the event was probably best caught by John Pfeiffer's August contribution in *Smithsonian* magazine (Pfeiffer, 1984). When Paul Beelitz and Gary Sawyer returned the specimens to the Museum's vault at the end of the last day of comparisons we breathed a deep sigh of relief, but could not help noting that the fossils had withstood the proceedings at least as well as the scientists, most of whom were beginning to suffer from sensory overload.

The period between January 1983 and the opening of the exhibition on April 9, 1984 had been a frantic time of writing label copy, finalizing details of design, making transport, insurance, and other logistical arrangements, attempting to recruit additional fossils for display, and attending to a thousand other exhibition-related tasks, as well as of organizing the symposium and comparison sessions. A particular problem lay in the design of the free-standing exhibition cases in which the original fossils would be displayed; for while these had to be as secure and as shock-resistant as possible, they also had to be aesthetically pleasing. Michael Blakeslee's imaginative and highly successful solution consisted of a case within a case, in which the fossils stood on a free-standing internal pedestal; this was surrounded but not contacted by an angular armored structure supporting a subsquare bulletproof laminated Lexan cover with mullioned joints. Fifteen of these cases (see page 228), each containing between one and four specimens, were disposed, following a branching time line, along the central area of the Museum's new Gallery 1; explanatory materials, visuals, and the few casts considered necessary to round out the story were ranged along the walls. In the first place the exhibit was set up using casts; the originals were finally substituted for these during the four days of the symposium, the result of which is this volume.

Virtually up to the last minute, we expected the participation in "Ancestors" of 25

institutions in a dozen different countries. However, only two weeks before opening date the Museum of Victoria was obliged to withdraw the Kow Swamp 1 and Keilor crania because of Aboriginal opposition to their inclusion, while a week later the Dutch government rescinded its permission for the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie to participate with Dubois' Trinil 2 calotte, the Trinil 3 femur, and the Wadjak skull. And finally, on the eve of the arrival of four curators and eight specimens, the Tanzanian government withdrew in the face of pressure exerted at the United Nations by a political group objecting to the inclusion of South African specimens in the exhibition. Nonetheless, on April 13, 1984, following the highly successful scientific program reported in this volume, "Ancestors: Four Million Years of Humanity" opened to the public, and to widespread media acclaim, with 40 of the world's most important human and prehuman fossil specimens on display. Eleventh-hour disappointments notwithstanding, "Ancestors" was the unique and highly gratifying result of an unprecedented act of international paleoanthropological cooperation between 21 institutions in nine countries. By the time the exhibition closed on September 9, 1984, almost half a million people, not only from this country but from all over the world, had had the opportunity to see and to appreciate for themselves a substantial proportion of the original, tangible evidence upon which our present understanding of human evolution is based.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"Ancestors" could only have come to fruition as a result of the wholehearted cooperation both of the institutions listed below and of the individual curators of the specimens, most of whom have contributed to this volume. To all of these individuals and institutions we express our profound gratitude. Within the American Museum itself, the success of the venture was similarly due to the efforts of many people in several different departments. Apart from Dr. Thomas D. Nicholson and the staff of the Director's Office, we particularly wish to thank Michael Blakeslee and his team of preparators from the Department of Exhibitions who worked so willingly under difficult conditions (for example, during the rush at the last minute when we found that our precision specimen mounts, so carefully prepared on the basis of casts supplied in advance, in most cases failed to fit the original specimens—as dra-

matic an illustration as one could wish that casts are no substitute for originals); Charles Miles and Sankar Gokool and all of the Museum attendants who under their supervision maintained a high level of enthusiasm and vigilance for five months to ensure that the public exhibition passed without incident; Paul Beelitz, Gary Sawyer, and Barbara Conklin, who took responsibility for the original specimens during the harrowing days of the comparison sessions, and Chester Tarka who so expertly photographed them; and Priscilla Ward, Pat Bramwell, Clarissa Wilbur, and Barbara Werschek, who helped with the organization. Others outside the Museum also contributed: Joan Fellerman, Rocky Covino, and Roy Johnson made travel and arrival/departure arrangements, and Joe Maisano and his colleagues ensured swift and comfortable ground transportation, while the New York City Police and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey Police most efficiently helped to ensure the safety of the fossils during transit. Officials of both the U.S. Customs Service and the Immigration and Naturalization Service did everything possible to speed the passage through formalities of the fossils and their transporting curators. And once again we would like to record our gratitude to the members of the "Ancestors" Steering Committee who guided the entire process from the beginning, and the foundations already mentioned whose support made the full scientific program possible. Finally, we should note that our families, and especially our wives, Andrea, Enid, and Bobbie, endured almost as much as we did: the 4:00 A.M. telephone calls, the constant string of crises, and of course the griping. Thank you all three.

LIST OF PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS AND SPECIMENS CONTRIBUTED TO "ANCESTORS: FOUR MILLION YEARS OF HUMANITY"

American Museum of Natural History, New York, U.S.A. (Cerro Sota 2)

Geological Museum, Cairo, Egypt (CGM 40237 *Aegyptopithecus* cranium)
 Geological Survey of Pakistan, Quetta (GSP 15000 *Sivapithecus* face)
 Geologisch-Paläontologisches Institut, Universität Heidelberg, Federal Republic of Germany [Mauer 1 mandible]
 Geološko-Paleontološki Muzej, Zagreb, Yugoslavia (Krapina A/1 part calotte, C/3 part skull)
 Institut de Paléontologie Humaine, Paris, France (Arago 2 mandible, 13 mandible, 21 face, 44 part pelvis, 47 parietal)
 Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums, Jerusalem (Amud 1 skull, Zuttiyeh 1 frontal)
 Musée de l'Homme, Laboratoire d'Anthropologie, Paris, France (Cro-Magnon 2 skull, La Ferrassie 1 skull, La Quina H5 skull)
 Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Institut de Paléontologie, Paris, France (Ternifine 3 mandible, 1857-1 *Dryopithecus* mandible)
 National Museum, Bloemfontein, South Africa (Saldanha 1 calotte)
 Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Los Angeles, California, U.S.A. (La Brea 1 skull)
 Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A. (Skhul 5 skull)
 Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn, Federal Republic of Germany (RLB 332 Neanderthal calotte, left femur)
 Senckenberg Museum, Frankfurt am Main, Federal Republic of Germany (Sangiran 2 calotte, 4 palate)
 South African Museum, Cape Town (Saldanha 1 calotte)
 Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde, Stuttgart, Federal Republic of Germany (Steinheim 1 cranium)
 Transvaal Museum, Pretoria, South Africa (Sts 5 cranium, 14 part skeleton, 52a&b maxilla/mandible, 71 cranium; Sk 23 mandible, 48 cranium, 847 part cranium)
 Università di Roma "La Sapienza," Rome, Italy (Saccopastore 1 cranium)
 Université de Bordeaux 1, Talence, France (Biache 1 part cranium, St. Césaire part skull)
 Université de Paris VI, Paris, France (Salé 1 cranium)
 University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa (Taung 1 part skull, Border Cave 1 skull, Stw 53 part cranium)

LITERATURE CITED

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Eric Delson

American Museum of Natural History
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Lehman College, City University of New York
Bronx, New York

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