Laetoli Footprints:

- In 1976, a team led by Mary Leakey was on an excavation in Laetoli, Africa.
- Paleoanthropologist Andrew Hill and a colleague were tossing elephant dung at each other in Laetoli, a hominin archeological site in Tanzania. As Hill dove out of the way, he stumbled on what turned out to be one of the wonders of prehistoric finds: a trail of hominid footprints about 3.6 million years old.
- The majority of the Laetoli footprint site was excavated in 1978.
• This trail is ~ 80 feet long and preserved in cement-like volcanic ash, made by some of the earliest upright-walking hominins.

Proposed events:

– Initially, a nearby volcano called Sadiman erupted a cloud of fine ash, like beach sand, that left a layer on the landscape.
– A light rain fell onto the ash creating something like wet cement -- an ideal material for trapping footprints.
– Birds and mammals left a great number of prints, but, spectacularly, so did a pair of hominids, one large and one small, trekking across the ash.
  • (Some analysts conclude that it is possible to detect the trail of a third, smaller individual whose tracks overlap the footprints left by one of the others.)
– A subsequent eruption from Sadiman dropped more ash, sealing the footprints.
– Finally, erosion over millions of years unveiled the prints for Hill and other researchers in Mary Leakey's group to discover.
The prints, say experts on hominid body structure, are strikingly different from those of a chimpanzee, and in fact are hardly distinguishable from those of modern humans.

The only known hominid fossils of that age in that location are those of Lucy and her kind, the small-brained but upright-walking hominins classified as *Australopithecus afarensis*.

Some analysts have noted that the smaller of the two clearest trails bears telltale signs that suggest whoever left the prints was burdened on one side -- perhaps a female carrying an infant on her hip. While the detailed interpretation of the prints remains a matter of debate, they remain an extraordinary and fascinating fossil find, preserving a moment in prehistoric time.