



Laetoli Footprints



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.