

Obituary of Richard Leakey (1944–2022)

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OBITUARY



Richard Leakey at Turkana Basin Institute, Turkwel, 2009 (photograph: Ottmar Kullmer).

Richard Erskine Frere Leakey, who died in Nairobi on 2 January 2022, left many legacies in diverse fields and from a broad range of activities—fossil collector, pilot, safari organizer, museum director, research group leader, conservationist, environmental activist, politician, anti-corruption fighter, and winemaker, to name only a few. He was a well-known public figure in Kenya, who took on the Kenyan citizenship with the independence of Kenya in 1963. He was appointed director of the Kenya National Museum, Nairobi, in 1968 at the age of 25, became a Member of Parliament in 1998, and was the head of the Kenya Civil Service between 1999 and 2001. In the general public worldwide, however, Richard was best known for his numerous contributions to paleoanthropology, including hominin discoveries, interdisciplinary research, building up magnificent collections, and popularizing science.

As the grandson of English missionaries to the Kikuyu

tribe, and son of archaeologists Mary and Louis Leakey, Richard grew up in a family of successful fossil hunters, yet it took years until he became one as well. He regarded himself as a naturalist in the broadest sense and loved Africa. Of course, he could not completely avoid discovering—and cataloguing—fossils as a child, when he spent holidays in Olduvai Gorge (Tanzania) with his parents. Yet, despite this early hands-on training in paleobiology and related fields, after leaving school at 16-years-old, Richard was less interested in further formal education than in practical experiences in wildlife adventures and flying.

Flying his Cessna resulted in major turning points in his life, both good and bad. It was how, in 1963, that he spotted promising outcrops in the western shores of Lake Natron. This observation resulted in an expedition to the area the following year with his long-time field collector Kamoya Kimeu, and in the discovery of a *Paranthropus* jaw

bone near Peninj. In 1967 he participated in field work in the Omo area, Southern Ethiopia, where two crania were discovered in the Kibish Formation—which still constitute some of the oldest evidence for the evolution of anatomically modern humans. On his flight there, distinct erosion patterns east of Lake Turkana sparked his interest and fueled his wish of discovering fossil sites in his home country of Kenya. The first expedition to the area followed in 1968. Since then, Koobi Fora developed into one of the most prominent fossil localities in Africa.

Being able to fly to Koobi Fora was definitely an advantage for a busy Museum director, who he was at the time, the alternative being a four-day road trip to the eastern side of Lake Turkana. Whereas the discovery of Koobi Fora was a highlight in his pilot career, the low point came during his flight there in 1993 due to the failure of his aircraft's engine. Losing both legs when crashing into trees added to other life-threatening events during his career, such as a fractured skull, a liver and kidney transplant, and skin cancer. At the time of the plane accident, Richard was Director of the newly founded Kenya Wildlife Service and surely had many enemies. He started his job with burning 12 tons of confiscated ivory in Nairobi National Park, a spectacular and effective exercise, repeated in 2016, which nowadays is followed by wildlife authorities all over Africa. Following his accident, Richard resigned in 1994 from Kenya Wildlife Service and formed his own political party in 1995, getting elected to Parliament in 1998.

At Koobi Fora, Richard and his “Hominid Gang,” led by Kamoya Kimeu, brought to light more and better-preserved fossils than his parents or most other teams would ever discover. He engaged a large team of specialists to work in an interdisciplinary fashion and recognized the great potential of Koobi Fora as a reference site for dating other African localities and as the place for understanding the origin of our own genus *Homo*. Although one of the rather controversial finds, cranium KNM ER 1470, turned out to be geologically younger than originally proposed, Richard's claim for an age of around 3 to 2.5 Ma for the origin of our genus was later confirmed by evidence from other African sites, such as Uraha, Malawi, where my own team has worked for several decades, and elsewhere. Connected with the origin of *Homo*, he advocated a change in food resources to include more meat in the diet through scavenging and the earliest hunting, an idea that persists today. One of his team's most spectacular fossil find was a 1.6 Ma old nearly complete *Homo erectus* (*ergaster*) skeleton from Nariokotome in 1984, who became world famous as “Turkana Boy.”

Richard rightly regarded the discovery of new fossil material as a scientific achievement in its own right. Over time, the magnificent fossil record from Koobi Fora resulted in innovative concepts of sympatry and parallel evolution of different early hominin species. Clearly this was a break with older approaches of just finding missing links and the ‘single species hypothesis’ for human evolution, and foreshadowed modern views of evolutionary diversity in the hominin lineages.

In addition to fieldwork, Richard was acutely aware of the role of research collections in science, and the significance of where these collections were curated. He argued that Kenyan fossils need to be accessible in Kenya, and he understood—and actively promoted—the growing importance of hominin remains as national symbols of identification. He was instrumental in introducing modern antiquities laws protecting Kenya's national heritage. In two decades under his stewardship as Director General, the Kenya National Museum, Nairobi, experienced an unprecedented increase in numbers of, and space for, its collections, including new buildings, for which he organized funding. In this way, he helped develop the Kenya National Museum into the world class research museum that it is today. He was also instrumental in developing regional museums, sites, and monuments promoting natural and cultural heritage all over Kenya.

Richard was convinced that human evolution in the context of changing environments should stimulate public discourse. Long before funding organizations worldwide started to demand and support activities by scientists on public understanding of science, he did exactly that: As author of and contributor to popular science articles, books, and films, he advanced public knowledge that decisively changed the image of paleoanthropology and related fields in the eyes of the public.

He envisaged that African museums should provide spaces for negotiating culture and I enjoyed vivid discussions with Richard on the new role of museums in Africa in the 21st century. He wholeheartedly supported our own activities in Malawi of establishing the Cultural & Museum Centre in Karonga, and he also developed plans for a museum at Koobi Fora. He did not see his dream of a place for disseminating knowledge close to the fossil sites come true during his lifetime. But I have no doubt that it will happen and will advance our knowledge of human heritage on the continent which he loved, and which he regarded to represent not only the past but also the future of Humanity: Africa.