By Any Other Name: Historical & Contemporary Trends in Fossil Hominin Nicknames

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submitted: 12 July 2024; revised 13 February 2026; accepted: 27 April 2026

Handling Editor in Chief: Karen Rosenberg

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the practice of nicknaming hominin fossils in paleoanthropological research writ large. We highlight historical trends revealed in a compilation of close to 100 fossil nicknames coined since 1823 to address the questions of which fossils get nicknames and why, how these nicknames have evolved over the past two centuries of research, and who gives fossils nicknames and for what purpose. We argue that nicknames provide a way of humanizing evolutionary stories from deep time, which makes fossils and extinct species accessible across formal scientific training and study. Using nicknames to refer to specific fossil individuals also adds an element of epistemic ownership. We note a shift from names emphasizing gender and place in the early years of the discipline to, towards the middle of the 20th Century, invented personas that humanize given fossils. From the 1960s on, especially following the work of the Leakeys at Oldupai, nicknames come to acquire a pop culture dimension, which is supplemented from the 1980s onwards with homages to given individuals involved in their discoveries. The 21st Century sees the rise of fossil nicknames with deep ties to local communities, landscapes, and languages, seeking to eschew the colonial roots of the practice of nicknaming fossils. We conclude by discussing how the narrative power and cultural cachet offered by fossil nicknames can lead to a greater appreciation of fossils as biological and historical objects loaded with referents to a particular moment in that fossil's discovery and social history.

On 21 December 1974, *The Ethiopian Herald* published a frontpage story about a new fossil hominin discovery in the country's northern Afar region. (Per the Ethiopian calendar, the date was Tahsas 12, 1967). The article announced the International Afar Research Expedition's discovery of a partial skeleton from a "three-million-year-old hominid in the Awash Valley" and that the individual was representative of "the most complete early man discovery ever made in Africa."

Found a month earlier, on 24 November, by Donald Johanson and then-student Thomas Gray, the skeleton was "extremely small in size" and the pelvis and sacrum shape suggested that the individual was female. At the end of the lede paragraph, *The Ethiopian Herald* notes that Dr. Johanson "has already christened 'her' Lucy" ("Most Complete Remains of Man Discovered," 1974.) Before the fossil ever left her country of origin, she had been given a name by her discoverers and, with that name, a budding persona for "Lucy" began to grow.

Popular tellings of the fossil's origin story invariably recount to readers that the fossil's nickname came by way of the Beatles. "There was a tape recorder in the camp, and a tape of the Beatles song 'Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds' went belting out into the night sky," Johanson describes in his 1981 bestseller *Lucy: The Beginnings of Humankind*. "At some point during that unforgettable evening…the new fossil picked up the name of Lucy, and has been so known ever since" (Johanson and Edey, 1981: 18).

Incidentally, the scientific name for the discovery—*Australopithecus afarensis*—was published in *Kirtlandia* in 1978, fully four years after the fossil's discovery; but the fossil was Lucy before she was AL 288-1—her catalog number—or *A. afarensis* (Johanson et al. 1978). Between her nickname, catalog number, and taxonomic assignment, "Lucy"—who

is also known as Dinkinesh ("You are marvelous" in Amharic) and Heelomali ("She is special" in Afar)—has had several historical and cultural trajectories that have unfolded concurrently (Johanson and Wong 2010; Pyne 2016). Which of the fossil's names is used, where, and how helps shape the narration and expectations that audiences hold for the fossil within the context that the name is used.

Although, perhaps, the most celebrated and well-known of fossil hominin individuals, Lucy was not the first—and certainly will not be the last—fossil to be bequeathed an informal nickname that falls outside of the strict rules of zoological species nomenclature. In some ways, however, she was also a progenitor: "Lucy" inspired the nickname "Luzia" that was assigned to an 11,500-year-old skeleton from the Greater Belo Horizonte region of Brazil when it was discovered in 1974 (Feathers et al. 2010). And NASA's current "Lucy Mission" was named in honor of the Lucy fossil, seeking out "the fossils" of the solar system (Amos 2021).

This leads to the question of whether there have been other "watershed" moments in the history of nicknaming human ancestors. After all, nicknames of fossil hominins appear in scientific literature from the very early days of paleoanthropology and paleo-archaeology. Some nicknames are simple references to the geography of the fossil's discovery such as "Java Man" or an allusion to classical mythology like "Orpheus" and "Eurydice." In some cases, nicknames have even been bestowed on much, much more recent skeletons (i.e., individuals who are only centuries old) by descendent communities, with "Kaakutja" being a good example (Raath 2001; Shipman 2003; Westaway et al. 2016).

It is possible to view assigning a fossil nickname as a PR stunt or pandering to popular media; historically, however, fossil nicknames do carry a significant appeal both inside and outside of scientific circles. This broad cultural affinity for nicknaming very old things is not specific to paleoanthropology and Pleistocene archaeology—from the early twentieth-century's (fictional) Gertie the Dinosaur to the popular appeal of Dippy the *Diplodocus* casts in a plethora of natural history museums around the world, it is easy to see how a "paleo-object" (like a fossil) can take on a life of its own and that its moniker plays a not insignificant role in that paleo-object's afterlife (Mitchell 1998; Nieuwland 2019).

Broadly, nicknames imply a familiarity and friendship that cuts across formal scientific training and study; giving and using nicknames adds an element of epistemic ownership (Paddon 2011). For fossil hominins (and to a different extent, Late Pleistocene individuals associated with contemporary Indigenous communities), we argue that nicknames provide a way of humanizing evolutionary stories from deep time—making fossils and extinct species accessible—and have done so for over a century.

This project examines approximately 130 years of fossil hominin nicknames to assess trends, styles, and practices in assigning nicknames to fossils (Supplementary Information Table 1). Who is doing the naming? Where are the names published? Are there fossils that act as catalysts for other fossil nicknames? How do informal, familiar names shape storytelling around the fossil? Can fossil nicknames help us understand deep time, cultural patrimony, and colonial legacy in ways that taxonomic nomenclature does not?

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It is easy to assume that the practice of assigning nicknames to scientific discoveries is an antiquated practice at best and a practice of colonial legacy at worst. Historically, biological objects—things like taxidermied remains of animals, skeletal elements, biological specimens, and the like—are ways for audiences to trace the shifting scientific, cultural, and emotional meanings associated with single animals and their remains (Alberti 2011).

Indeed, there are a plethora of examples in the history of science where iconic animals and sets of animal remains have been given a name and a persona has been crafted around the individual, making the organism a biological object that exists outside of its biological life and death. Examples of such nonhuman mascots, personas, or nicknamed characters include Chi-Chi the giant panda from the London Zoo in the 1960s; Alfred the gorilla at the Bristol Zoo in the 1930s–40s; Balto the Siberian husky made famous for his journey to deliver diphtheria medications to a remote community in Nome, Alaska, in the winter of 1925; or even Sue the T-rex, arguably one of the most famous and recognizable nonhuman fossils, thanks in large part to their active online Twitter (now X) character (Fiffer 2000; Nicholls 2011; Paddon 2011; Poliquin 2011).

The critical evaluation of the process of narrative-building around a name and a persona can and ought to be extended to the practices that surround fossil hominin nicknames. This is especially true because they contribute to making these fragmented assemblages of bones recognizable ancestors to which the public can more easily identify. Some fossils, like Miguelón (aka Skull 5 from Sima de los Huesos, Spain), "interact" with the public—or, perhaps more accurately, the public can interact with them—over social media. For example, in 2021, @MiguelonMEH had ~17.4k followers on Twitter (hilariously dwarfing the social media following of the authors' combined Twitter presence at the time) and tweeted about Pleistocene lifeways and paleoenvironments, promoted relevant talks and seminars, as well as highlighted exhibits at the Museo de la Evolución Humana in Burgos, Spain, where the actual Miguelón fossil is housed.

Assigning fossil hominin nicknames is not a historical relict of paleoanthropology's early days. In 2021 alone, for example, fully seven new fossils and their nicknames entered scientific and popular literatures. The first, "Linya" (a 14,000-year-old *Homo sapiens* woman) is from Cova Gran de Santa Linya in Spain (*Upper Paleolithic Human Remains Are Found at the Cova Gran de Santa Linya Site* | CENIEH 2021). The second, "Dragon Man" (a male member of a new species, *Homo longi*, from 146,000 years ago, now argued to be that of the Denisovans—Feng et al. 2025)) was found in Harbin, China, along the Songhua River; the confusing his-

torical circumstances of the Dragon Man discovery makes pinpointing a specific geographic location impossible (Gibbons 2021). The third, "Mtoto," a roughly three-year-old *Homo sapiens* child from 78,000-years-ago, was found in a cave burial in Panga ya Saidi, Kenya (Martinón-Torres et al. 2021). The fourth, Bessé (7,200-year-old *Homo sapiens* woman) is from the Indonesian island of Sulawesi (Carlhoff et al. 2021). The fifth, Leti (a roughly 240,000-year-old *Homo naledi* child), was recovered from the Rising Star Cave System in South Africa (Brophy et al. 2021; Elliott et al. 2021; Pappas 2021). The sixth, Neve, was a female *Homo sapiens* newborn buried 10,000 years ago at Arma Veirana in the Italian region of Liguria (Hodgkins 2021; Hodgkins et al. 2021). Finally, the seventh, Issa, was a female *Australopithecus sediba* from the Malapa locality in South Africa (Brits 2021; Williams et al. 2021).

These seven contemporary nicknames vary in their temporal range, geography, taxonomy, and nicknaming; taken together, however, they are emblematic of various historical trends in how and why nicknames are assigned to fossils. As each of the discoveries were announced in 2021, the nickname invariably accompanied how the audiences—scientific and non-expert audiences alike—were introduced to the fossil. Together, these seven individuals also show that the practice of nicknaming fossils is alive and well today. This point is hammered home by two nicknamed fossils published since. The first is "Thorin," a ca. 50,000-year-old partial Neanderthal mandible from Grotte Mandrin, France (Slimak 2023; Slimak et al. 2024), named after one of the last dwarf kings in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. The second, "Pink," is the partial midface of a 1.4 myo individual from Sima del Elefante, in Spain. The name is a reference to its nature (a hidden face), the "Dark Side of the Moon" album by Pink Floyd, and to Rosa, the first name of the lead author of the study that reported the find in *Nature* (Huguet et al. 2025; Martinón-Torres 2025). These observations, in turn, prompt the questions of how the practice of nicknaming fossils has established itself and evolved over time.

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To assess how fossil hominin nicknames have been assigned and used in the last 130 years, we have compiled a database of 75 nicknamed fossil hominin individuals that, between them, have 95 nicknames, since many individuals have more than one nickname that has accrued over time. These nicknames were collected from published peer-reviewed literature, popular accounts of fossils, and press releases. Due to the changing nature of publishing fossils over the last century, we used published sources that put a fossil's nickname in print (either digital or physical print), thus making the nicknamed fossil accessible as such to others. The literatures searched were predominantly in English, which aligns with trends of publishing fossils in scientific literatures throughout the late-nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

We also established a Twitter account for the project (@FossilNicknames) to introduce nicknamed fossil hominins to interested followers and to invite people to add nicknames to our database of individuals. This resulted in four new-to-us fossil nickname submissions from the online community. Note that we refer to Twitter, as this work was conducted in 2021 before its recent rebranding, when its reach as a tool in science communication was arguably the strongest (see, e.g., Côté and Darling 2018); it remains an open question how much of that reach effectively remains after November 2022, especially for smaller scientific communication accounts (Insall 2023; Valero 2023). Indeed, emerging research on the topic strongly suggests that Twitter/X has since lost much of its relevance and appeal, with alternative microblogging sites like Bluesky overtaking it in terms of its utility in scientific communication, which indicates the continued perceived benefit for researchers to be active on social media (Arroya-Machado et al. 2025; Shiffman and Wester 2025).

We examined fossil nicknames according to temporal and geographic distributions to assess frequency of use as well as to understand what, if any, research sites acted as epicenters in generating clusters of fossil nicknames. Moreover, we scrutinized the "type" of nickname assigned to different fossils and if/how the "type" of nickname varies over time. That is, does a nickname reference a particular geographic locale or discovery point, like "Java Man" (Trinil-1 and Trinil-2) or "Peking Woman" (from the Zhoukoudian assemblage)? Is it an allusion to classical or biblical mythology like "Abel" (Gibraltar 2)? Is it meant as a bit of fun affection like "Dear Boy" (OH 5)? A reference to then-contemporary popular culture like "Lucy" (AL 288-1) or "Twiggy" (OH 24)? A reference to a colleague or site collaborator (KT12/H1 or DNH 134)? Or an attempt to fold in—invest—other communities and community members in the stories and legacies of the fossils by participating in bestowing a non-taxonomic name to the fossil, like "Karabo" (MH 1) or "Ötzi"?

Our categories to assess all of these nickname trends are, of course, qualitative. Due to the nature of our questions and the availability of data, we have used raw counts (n) to assess what, if any, changes we see in fossil hominin nicknames over time.

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The earliest instance of a skeleton being bequeathed a familiar moniker was the Red Lady of Paviland when geologist William Buckland discovered the burial in southern Wales's Paviland Cave in 1823. The nickname came from Buckland's misidentification of the skeleton's sex—the individual is a male, not female—and the bones' notable staining with red ochre. (Two hundred years later, the age of the "Red Lady" is resolved to be ~26,000 B.P., making the burial Britain's only ceremonial Early Upper Paleolithic burial (Aldhouse-Green and Pettitt 1998). Buckland's interpretation of the skeleton drew heavily from his work with historical geology—he declared the remains to be Post-Diluvian—and his second interpretation of the burial cast the individual as a female fortune-teller in Roman Britain.

As historian of science Marianne Sommer (2008) ar-

gues, the "Red Lady" has been a character—a historical object, even—that is told and retold within different historical contexts. (And shared a nickname with the Red Lady of El Mirón fossil hominin from Spain, discovered in 2010, also stained with ochre [Weiss 2015]). But it is the name—specifically the nickname the Red Lady of Paviland—that set the skeleton on this historical path. We argue that it also set a precedent for future discoveries.

Although the number of fossil hominin discoveries in the nineteenth-century are few—given the nascent fields of paleoanthropology and Paleolithic archaeology—the names of fossils that do appear in scientific and popular literature follow the naming pattern established with the Red Lady of Paviland; that is, the name contains the geography of discovery and a gender. These nicknamed fossil discoveries included, for example, Cheddar Man (Britain 1877), L'Homme de Menton (Italy, 1872—renamed "La Dame du Cavillon" in the early twenty-first century), and Java Man (Indonesia, 1891–1892) (De Lumley 2016; Seligman and Parsons 1914; Shipman 2003). At the turn of the twentieth century, as scientific circles emphasized new fossil discoveries' taxonomic designations and phylogenetic relationships, this nicknaming pattern expanded to include discoveries like the Old Man of La Chapelle (La Chapelle-aux-Saints 1, a *Homo neanderthalensis* individual discovered in France in 1908), the Taung Child (Taung 1, sometimes "Taungs Baby" from South Africa, an *Australopithecus africanus* discovered in 1924), the Devil's Tower Child (Gibraltar 2, from Gibraltar, a Neanderthal discovered in 1926, also nicknamed "Abel" by Dorothy Garrod when she discovered it); as such, the names were quick references to the geography of the fossils' discovery.

The mid-twentieth century saw nickname types diversify with clusters of nicknames from sites in Europe (e.g., "Il principe" or 'The Prince' aka Arene Candide 1 from Italy, discovered in 1942) and Egbert (Ksar Akil 1 from Lebanon), Africa, and Asia—all places where paleoanthropologists and Paleolithic archaeologists had active sites and published discoveries. Nicknames of fossils rarely appeared in scientific literature and were more likely to be found in newspapers, museum literatures, and popular sources that did not depend on scientific expertise. Clusters of nicknames begin to appear after World War II, during the mid-twentieth century, when larger-scale, long-term research schools were established.

For example, and in particular, between 1959–1968, six fossil discoveries from Oldupai [then known as Olduvai) Gorge in Tanzania were published, each with its own nickname (e.g., Nutcracker Man aka *Zinj* aka Dear Boy; Johnny's Child; Chellean Man; Pinhead; Cinderella aka Cindy; and, George aka Oldupai George). These Olduvai Gorge nicknames read as a bit of whimsy and fun generally without specific allusions to their geographic locale. Incidentally, as taxonomic designations of fossils were debated in scientific circles (e.g., *Zinjanthropus* versus *Paranthropus* versus *Australopithecus*), the individual's nickname (e.g. "*Zinj*" or "Nutcracker Man") remained constant and a fossil's most consistent identification. This "nickname first, taxonomy later" is consistent with the naming of many fossil hominins, from this point onward, as was discussed in the case of Lucy, for instance. Historically, we see that once a fossil individual has a nickname, it will continue to do so, even if the nickname morphs in later decades. For example, the Barma del Caviglione 1 Pleistocene individual from Italy was originally nicknamed "L'Homme de Menton;" it was subsequently renamed "La Dame du Cavillon" (later translated in Italian as "la donna del Caviglione"). More recently, "Kennewick Man" has been renamed "Ancient One."

Indeed, it seems as if the whimsical public personae created for "their" fossils by the Leakeys over the course of that decade—including specific references to popular culture, as with "Twiggy"—set the template used by Johanson and his team for Lucy. "Mary [Leakey]…was delighted by her discovery, and she and Louis [Leakey] began to refer affectionately to the massive skull as 'Dear Boy,'" Virginia Morell's (1995: 183) popular account of the Leakeys' work in Tanzania explains. It is worth noting that the fossil was referred to as "Dear Boy" while it was being pieced together, well before it was published in scientific literature; "*Zinj*" caught on as a nickname being a shortened version of "*Zinjanthropus*," the fossil's original genus designation. As a nickname, "*Zinj*" was often written as *Zinj*, thus cueing the reader that it was a shortened "scientific" name (Morell 1995).

Consequently, the tradition of nicknaming fossil discoveries—whether it is a practice that is seen as formal or informal—is arguably a part of a much larger practice in the sociology of paleoanthropology and Plio-Pleistocene archaeology. Further, the basic parameters of this practice seem to have become codified, moving away from the "[wo]man of [place]" labels that characterized the first nicknamed fossils.

In the one hundred-fifty years between the Red Lady of Paviland and Lucy's discovery, we count 33 nicknamed fossils, or about 0.23/year (Figure 1). In the 52 years since Lucy's discovery, more than that number, 56 nicknamed fossils appear in the literature, a rate of about 1.08/year, that is almost five time the "pre-Lucy" rate. However, this gulf is even deeper if we consider "*Zinj*" (aka "Dear Boy" aka "Nutcracker Man" aka OH 5) as a starting point in 1959. Starting with "*Zinj*," shifts to 0.13 nickname per year and 1.16 nickname per year, respectively, showing that the putative "post-Lucy" rate is actually lower than the "post-*Zinj*" reality. Although the increase of nicknames could and does track with an increase of overall fossil discoveries and with the public profile of paleoanthropology in popular science, these numbers indicate that fossils with nicknames garner scientific and popular press—the more known they are, the more known they become (Pyne 2016). As such, we see *Zinj* as a catalyst for creating fossil nicknames, a legitimizing presence for the practice, and an expectation—certainly within the public and even within scientific circles—that a discovery—or at least *some* discoveries—"ought" to have a nickname. However, as we will see below, Lucy proved to be a catalyst for specific elements of how we think about

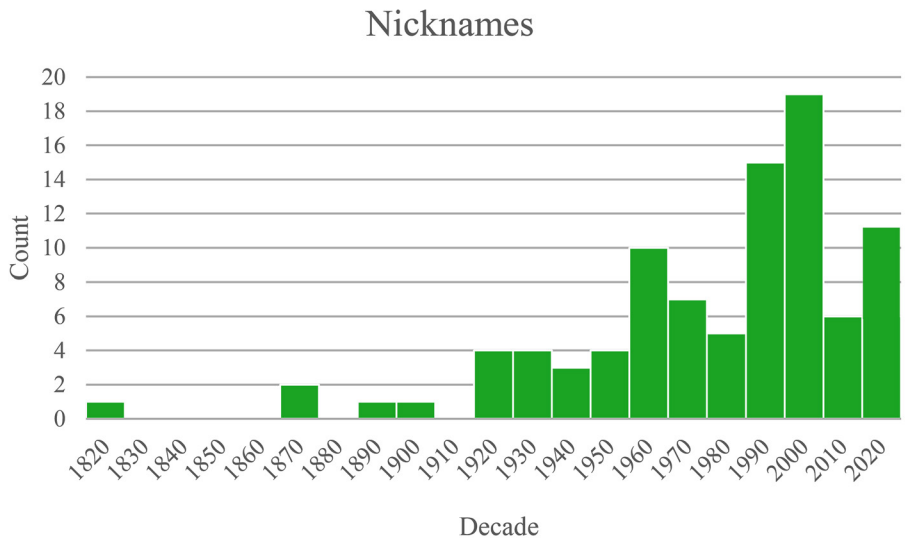


Figure 1. Number of new fossil nicknames coined, per decade.

fossil nicknames and their impact in the popular *and scientific* imaginations.

There are clusters of 1980s nicknames from sites in Kenya, specifically near Lake Turkana; for example, KNM-WT-15000 aka Nariokotome Boy aka Turkana Boy, a *Homo erectus* individual and KNM-WT-17000 aka The Black Skull, the only fossil currently assigned to *Paranthropus aethiopicus*. Incidentally, when we posted a Twitter thread about The Black Skull, we were a bit astonished when so many online followers took the opportunity to share how much they loved that particular fossil; we did not see the same level of outpouring of enthusiasm for other featured nicknamed fossils (Fossil Nicknames 2021). These surprising insights into the popularity of specific nicknamed fossils was at the time an unanticipated secondary benefit of using Twitter (or microblogging platforms more broadly) as an interface to solicit information about them, in that beyond revealing some new nicknames, it also gave us a sense of how some of them lived in the popular imagination about human origins.

After the relative lull in the 1980s, fossil nicknames proliferate through the 1990s and early 2000s at sites around the globe (see Figure 1). The 1990s–2000s-era nicknames from Sima de los Huesos show a diversity in nicknames—some are a bit of jocular levity, others alluding to classical mythology (e.g., Agamemnon, Benjamina, Rui, El Jefe, Vicente del Bosque, and La Chica), all coined as part of a what has been argued to be a concerted effort to popularize Spanish paleoanthropology (Hochadel 2013a,b, 2016). In Italy, Argil aka Ceprano Man (Ceprano 1) was discovered and named in 1993; "Roger" (Boxgrove 1, a *Homo heidelbergensis* individual) was discovered in 1993; Ötzi (aka the Ice Man, a late Neolithic individual) was discovered in 1991 in Italy. We note in passing that Ötzi, perhaps specifically by virtue of being a non-paleo specimen, has been the only nicknamed fossil whose persona has been explicitly subjected to an in-depth analysis (Robb 2009). That approach, while secondary to the goal of this paper, offers some really promising insights on how to analyze paleo fossil individuals in a similarly thorough way in the future (cf. Pyne 2016).

Back in Ethiopia, Lucy's Baby (DIK-1/1 aka Dikika Child aka Dikika Baby aka Dikika Infant) was discovered in 2000 at the Dikika locality in the country's Afar region. The fossil is also named "Selam" in Afar, translating as "peace." Although "Selam" is 120,000 years older than Lucy, the idea of a fossil being "Lucy's baby" offers a familiar cultural touchstone and immediately conveys that there is place for Selam in paleoanthropology's vast popular appeal ("This is attached to Lucy, I know Lucy, therefore I could know this fossil," so goes such narrative-building). We would also suggest that the closer in proximity via nickname, geography, or allusion to "Lucy" as an iconic fossil, the more cachet the next-to-Lucy fossil will be able to accrue. For example, the Brazilian "Luzia" individual represents yet another "second-order Lucy," as does the group of *A. afarensis* fossils from Hadar known as the "First Family" (AL-333), discovered in 1975. Indeed, the various different nicknames for Lucy's Baby / Dikika Child / Selam or Big Man / Kadanuumuu (also "Lucy's Big Brother" in some popular accounts) appear fairly equally in a plethora of various literatures and popular science writing (Frayer 2017; Gibbons 2010; Owen 2006, 2012; Pyne 2016; Suto 2013).

The mid-2000s also saw the discovery of *Homo floresiensis*, a small hominin found on the island of Flores in Indonesia. With the publication of the LB1 skeleton in 2004—the publication happened in global throes of enthusiasm for Peter Jackson's movie adaptation of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy—it seemed almost inevitable that the small Flores hominin would be nicknamed "Hobbit;" the idea was to avoid calling it "The Hobbit" to skirt any issues of copyright with J.R.R. Tolkien's estate. LB1 has also been called

Flo and The Little Lady of Flores, though these names have had less of an impact in the popular press (Callaway 2014; Dalton 2004; Falk et al. 2009).

It is telling, however, that in the case of "Hobbit," the enthusiasm for a nickname was not universal for the original research team. To commemorate the ten-year anniversary of the fossil's publication *Nature* journalist Ewan Calloway coordinated a series of interviews and an oral history "roundtable" for members of the team to talk about the discovery and how the fossil got its name. Paleoanthropologist Peter Brown said, "Mike [Morwood] and I didn't agree about nicknames because I thought it trivialized it, and I thought it would result in every loon on the planet telephoning me as soon as it was published. And that was true — endless bizarre telephone calls from people who had seen some small hairy person in their backyard." Geochronologist Richard Roberts recalled, "We knew we had to come up with a name for publicity purposes. We couldn't call it *Homo floresiensis*, so Mike [Morwood] said, 'I like hobbit.'…Mike referred to LB1 as hobbit, not 'the' hobbit, as if its name was Mary. For a while, Mike was trying to persuade Peter Brown to call it *Homo hobbitus*. I think he just thought Mike was a complete charlatan for even suggesting it" (Callaway 2014).

The "Hobbit" interviews highlight a fascinating tension that underscores the question "What happens when fossils are given a name?" Does it trivialize the fossil? Diminish its significance? Is it a way of cutting through scientific jargon and making the individual "real" and accessible to audiences tens of thousands (even millions) of years after its death? The differences of this opinion could offer reasons why many fossil hominins do not have nicknames and popular personas to go with them. And yet, they also go a long way to showing that discussions about nicknames often come up almost at the moment of discovery, especially when these fossils appear to be particularly important, for instance, when they also happen to be the holotype of or a particularly well-preserved example of a new species. Thus, it is perhaps no coincidence that LB-1 is known as the 'hobbit', the first Denisovan is known as 'X-woman,' the first mostly complete *H. naledi* is known as 'Neo,' and the first *A. sediba* is known as 'Karabo.'

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Who confers a nickname to a fossil? The majority of the fossil hominins with nicknames were given to them by their respective research teams (e.g., Lucy, Selam, Dear Boy), often with specific ties to their respective discoverers. An exception to this is Qafzeh 9—a Pleistocene *Homo sapiens* individual approximately 100,000 years old, discovered in Israel in 1933. For decades, the fossil has been known by its catalog number and it is only in two recent papers that the some authors have begun to refer to Qafzeh 9 as "Eve" (Coutinho-Nogueira et al. 2021; Waddel 2015).

Here, it is perhaps worth returning to Karabo (MH1—the type specimen for *Australopithecus sediba*, discovered in at the Malapa site in northern South Africa in 2008), who represents a notable exception to this naming practice. The first description of the MH1 partial skeleton appeared in *Science* 9 April 2010 and was assigned to the then-new hominin species *Au. sediba*; unlike Lucy and most other fossil nicknames, "Karabo" came after the fossil's publication in *Science* (Berger et al. 2010). "Karabo" was selected as the fossil's name via a competition sponsored by Standard Bank and the Palaeontological Scientific Trust in association will the University of Witwatersrand and the Department of Science and Technology. It is therefore clear that, in this case, the decision to nickname the fossil was very much a conscious effort.

More than 15,000 schoolchildren suggested names for the fossil and "Karabo" was the suggestion of then-17-year-old Johannesburg resident Omphemetse Keepile. Karabo translates as "answer" in the Setswana language. "It has helped researchers to seek much deeper into the information that they have and the information that they will acquire through this discovery. It has enabled them to broaden their former understanding of the concept of humankind," Keepile was quoted in an interview with the South African Government News Agency published 1 June 2010 (*Ancient Skeleton Named*, 2010). In the same news article, paleoanthropologist Lee Berger attributed a genuineness and authenticity to the name "Karabo." "The name is a real African name, chosen by the children of Africa and it is an exciting moment in history when the children of Africa have picked a name for an ancient child of Africa, who himself was found by a child," Berger was quoted as saying, referring the fossil's discovery by his own child. Taken a step further, we propose that examples like this—deliberate and public decisions to name fossil individuals—could be ways for "disappeared" individuals (e.g., fossil individuals) to be "recovered" in popular and scientific literatures. Such an association allows the fossil to be linked to their "discoverers" too, that is individuals in the team, even though they might not be linked with naming in scientific publications.

Here in the twenty-first century, fossil nicknames can also be a form of attribution or tribute, as is the case with "Simon" from the Drimolen site in South Africa. Discovered in 2015 and published in 2020, the remarkably well-preserved (and at 2.05 mya, also the oldest-known) *Homo erectus* individual (DNH 134) was specifically christened as "Simon" in the team's 2020 publication (Herries et al. 2020). "We say a special thanks to our co-author Simon Mokobane for his many years of work at the site. Simon recently passed away from cancer and he will be remembered fondly by many generations of people who have worked at Drimolen," the team's acknowledgements read. "In recognition of this, we have named the DNH 134 cranium after him (Simon). This work would not have been possible without him."

And while the 11 nicknames of fossil hominins coined in the 2020s fit into historically conventional naming patterns, it is worth noting that the cultural allusions for some nicknames we found to be unexpected and curious. For example, "Fidel" aka Obi-Rakhmat 1 (*Homo neanderthalensis* from Uzbekistan found in 2003) was named in honor of Fidel Castro whose birthday is the same as the day the fossil was discovered (Viola, personal communication). This pa-

per's authors thought that "Shanidar Z" alluded to 2013's *World War Z* zombie horror movie; the name is, however, a "placeholder" name using "z" like a mathematical variable as researchers work to link this specimen with the numbered Neanderthal individuals recovered in the 1950s and 1960s, the first one of which (Shanidar 1), happens to have been nicknamed Nandy (Bonner 2020; Pomeroy et al. 2020; Pomeroy, personal communication). In an interesting bit of narrative twist, this last individual, who happened to have lived with severe injuries and an atrophied arm in his latter life, would also become the model for the character Creb in Jean Auel's novel *Clan of the Cave Bear.* Whatever the name, it is clear that the nickname that is given to a fossil has the potential to shape how people internalize, remember, and tell "the story" of that individual.

This also has implications for other ways that audiences encounter fossil hominins outside of scientific publications or popular media; namely, in hominin reconstructions and museum exhibits. A current example of this is the two relatively new Neanderthal reconstructions currently on display in the Gibraltar Museum. These two reconstructions were created by paleoartists Adrie and Alfons Kennis and based on the fossils Gibraltar 1 (a fossil without a nickname) and Gibraltar 2 (nicknamed Abel aka Devil's Tower Child.)

"When the sculptures were close to completion, we had several brainstorming session to come up with names for Gibraltar 1 and 2. The name for the boy (Gibraltar 2) was easy enough. We decided to call him Flint," archaeologist Clive Finlayson describes. "Flint is one type of rock that Neanderthals used to make tools but it was also the surname of the military officer who discovered the Gibraltar 1 skull in 1848." Although Gibraltar 1 and Gibraltar 2 were not contemporaries of each other, the reconstructions of the two Gibraltar hominins are displayed together to tell a story. "It was a way of telling a story. We decided that the Gibraltar 1 female would be Flint's grandmother, so she became Nana. And so Nana and Flint were born" (Finlayson 2019: 4–5). These nicknamed reconstructions offer another set of stories that build up around a fossil like Gibraltar 1 and especially Gibraltar 2. Matryoshka-like, nicknames of reconstructions of already-nicknamed hominins are a physical manifestation of how narratives accrue around particular fossils. It would stand to reason that future hominin reconstructions could pursue their own names and nicknames, independent of a fossil's commonly held nickname.

For this project, we have opted to focus on paleoanthropological fossils that do not have affiliations with modern or affiliate communities or are the subject of discussions about repatriation; as such, we have not included Late Pleistocene individuals from North America. Although there are named-nicknamed Late Pleistocene individuals from North America, it is worth noting that which names of these individuals are used and how, they have powerful, epistemic implications for laying claim to the individual and their story, and that most of these nicknames were coined with no input from descendent or affiliated communities.

Indeed, the controversy that has surrounded the Ancient One/Kennewick Man individual is one such example. Cree-Métis archaeologist Paulette Steeves (2021: 39) highlights the difference in narrative trajectory each name lends itself to as "Kennewick Man speaks volumes about ongoing racism in American anthropology. The Ancient One carries a strong message that racism is active in academic circles, is still being taught and passed on, and is still negatively impacting Indigenous peoples". This should also make it clear that while the practice of nicknaming individuals is a current practice in paleoanthropology—and indeed an evolving one that increasingly incorporates/pays tribute to local considerations—it is borne of a colonial practice (cf. the Leakeys) and thus has the potential to be very problematic if undertaken uncritically today.

In short, the clusters of nicknames track with where research is being done, where discoveries are made, and projects that publish their findings. While there are, certainly, examples of fossil hominins that are not assigned nicknames, such un-named fossils do not enjoy the same levels of popular recognition and "re-telling" that named fossils do.

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In summary, nicknaming fossil discoveries has been part of the history of paleoanthropology and Paleolithic archaeology from the early days of the disciplines. (Interestingly, there are not very many examples of nicknamed artifacts; three exceptions are the infamous Piltdown "cricket bat;" Excalibur, a colorful quartzite handaxe that happens to be the only stone tool recovered with the Sima de los Huesos individuals; and Durandal, a massive handaxe recovered from Caune de l'Arago, France, where "l'homme de Tautavel" was discovered, a reference to the sword of the titular character in *The Song of Roland*). Nicknaming fossils appears to help humanize hominin discoveries and make them and their stories more accessible. The need to create "human" or "human-adjacent" characters would not be necessary with artifacts. What does this mean for nicknames and narrative-building going forward?

We argue that the act of nicknaming can be a way—actively or passively—of taking narrative and epistemic ownership of a fossil discovery and its story. This ownership can come in the way that allusions to a literature or mythos builds on a shared cultural familiarity. It can come as a way of "reclaiming" participation in the study of human origins, a field that has historically privileged a particular way of doing science, often at the expense of indigenous participants. Creating a name that lives outside of and beyond a specimen number and a taxon can be about exercising power—without careful consideration, creating a nickname can simply recreate uncomfortable and unfair power dynamics by those who claim power to name and those who are not ceded that authority.

We also argue that nicknames are a way to be able to discuss an individual fossil when its taxonomy is under discussion. For example, Denny clearly places the individual with the Denisovan group that only recently came to have a formal potential taxonomic designation (i.e., *Homo longi*). To reiterate a point, Lucy was Lucy before she was an *Australopithecus afarensis*.

Although there is a plethora of types of names and of motivations behind the choice of a fossil's nickname, as the case of Karabo shows, the idea that some discoveries "ought" to have a nickname appears to be gaining traction. But archaeological and paleoanthropological "discovery" is that of a finite resource, much of which may already be "depleted" (Surovell et al. 2017). "Consider that there has not been a major find of a well-preserved Neandertal in nearly 20 years," Surovell and colleagues argued in 2017, "despite 50 having been found before that date." There are only so many discoveries to be made, so many nicknames to be assigned, so many "types" of human narratives of human evolution that the names can tap into (Landau, 1993). We think that this situation makes it that, going forward, any discovered paleoanthropological or Paleolithic individual will be more likely to be given a nickname, as they are likely to become rarer and rarer. This certainly seems to be borne out by the eleven nicknamed individuals published from 2020 to 2026, and the fact that a single Neanderthal tooth published in 2019 was nicknamed "Vera."

Nicknames for fossil hominins are an integral part of a fossil's cultural history and historical identity. Like common names for plants and animals, nicknames can offer a way to parley between scientific and non-scientific circles; they also offer a way for audiences to be emotionally and narratively invested in a fossil and its story. For example, it is not uncommon for a newly discovered/newly published hominin to reference "Lucy" in its press release or media coverage. "This fossil is older than Lucy"; "This hominin had a different diet than Lucy"; basically, a way for audiences to have a familiar touchstone as a reference point. Although it is certainly the case that famous fossils are more likely to have nicknames, it is not necessarily a predictor in a fossil's celebrity.

Every nickname tells a story—that of an encounter with a fossil hominin at a particular moment in that fossil's life history. Understanding the narrative power and cultural cachet that these fossil nicknames offer can deepen the appreciation of fossils as biological and historical objects.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For suggestions, nicknames, clarifications and discussions, we would like to thank (in alphabetical order): Jess Beck, Isabelle Coupal, Michelle Drapeau, Gerrit Dusseldorp, Luke Fleming, Emma Pomeroy, Matt Pope, Chris Stringer, Bence Viola, and Becky Wragg Sykes. We are also grateful to Claudelle Morneau and Andy Lythe for help with the compilation of the first version of the database and data processing. We appreciate the comments and feedback from two anonymous reviewers. JRS would like to say "thanks, I guess" to COVID-19, which was responsible for the feverish state which inspired this project. LP would like to acknowledge the Interlibrary Loan librarians at University of Texas at Austin for their assistance in tracking down microfilm copies of the *Ethiopian Herald*. This project was supported by funding from Université de Montréal.



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Supplement 1 to By Any Other Name: Historical & Contemporary Trends in Fossil Hominin Nicknames

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SUPPLEMENT 1
This supplement contains: Supplementary Information Table 1.

PaleoAnthropology **2027:1** **supplement to Riel-Salvatori and Pyne 2027:1** **ISSN 1545-0031**
Paleoanthropology Society & European Society for the study of Human Evolution
OPEN ACCESS
Early View available online 26 October 2026

Supplementary Information Table 1. Fossil nickname database.

Nickname	Specimen #	Species	Country	Date coined	Site
Red Lady of Paviland	None	*Homo sapiens*	UK	1823	Paviland Cave
Cheddar Man	None	*Homo sapiens*	UK	1877	Gough's Cave
L'Homme de Menton	Barma del Caviglione 1	*Homo sapiens*	Italy	1878	Barma del Caviglione
Java Man	Trinil-1 & Trinil-2	*Homo erectus*	Indonesia	1892	Trinil
Old Man	La Chapelle-aux-Saints 1	*Homo neanderthalensis*	France	1908	La Chapelle-aux-Saints
Mal'ta Boy	MA-1	*Homo sapiens*	Russia	1920	Mal'ta
Taung Child	Taung 1	*Australopithecus africanus*	South Africa	1924	Buxton Limeworks
Devil's Tower Child	Gibraltar 2	*Homo neanderthalensis*	Gibraltar	1926	Devil's Tower
Abel	Gibraltar 2	*Homo neanderthalensis*	Gibraltar	1926	Devil's Tower
Peking Lady	None	*Homo erectus pekinensis*	China	1937	Zhoukoudian
Nelly	None	*Homo erectus pekinensis*	China	1937	Zhoukoudian
Peking Man	None	*Homo erectus pekinensis*	China	1937	Zhoukoudian
Egbert	Ksar Akil 1	*Homo sapiens* (AMH)	Lebanon	1938	Ksar Akil
Il principe (the prince)	Arene Candide 1	*Homo sapiens*	Italy	1942	Arene Candide
Mrs. Ples	STS-5	*Australopithecus africanus*	South Africa	1947	Sterkfontein Caves
Ethelruda	Ksar Akil 2	*Homo sapiens* (AMH)	Lebanon	1948	Ksar Akil
Nandy	Shanidar 1	*Homo neanderthalensis*	Iraq	1957	Shanidar Cave
Nutcracker Man	OH 5	*Paranthropus boisei*	Tanzania	1959	Olduvai Gorge: Bed 1
Zinj	OH 5	*Paranthropus boisei*	Tanzania	1959	Olduvai Gorge: Bed 1
Dear Boy	OH 5	*Paranthropus boisei*	Tanzania	1959	Olduvai Gorge: Bed 1
Johnny's Child	OH 7	*Homo habilis*	Tanzania	1960	Olduvai Gorge
Chellean Man	OH 9	*Homo erectus*	Tanzania	1960	Olduvai Gorge
Pinhead	OH 12	*Homo erectus*	Tanzania	1962	Olduvai Gorge
Cindy	OH 13	*Homo habilis*	Tanzania	1963	Olduvai Gorge: MNK Skull Site

Cinderella	OH 13	*Homo habilis*	Tanzania	1963	Olduvai Gorge: MNK Skull Site
Olduvai George	OH 16	*Homo habilis*	Tanzania	1963	Olduvai Gorge
George	OH 16	*Homo habilis*	Tanzania	1963	Olduvai Gorge
Sámuel	VSZ II	*Homo heidelbergensis*	Hungary	1965	Vértesszőlős
Samu	VSZ II	*Homo heidelbergensis*	Hungary	1965	Vértesszőlős
Twiggy	OH 24	*Homo habilis*	Tanzania	1968	Olduvai Gorge
L'Homme de Tautavel	Arago 21/47	*Homo heidelbergensis*	France	1971	Caune de l'Arago
Mystery Skull	KNM-ER 1805	*Homo habilis*	Kenya	1973	Koobi Fora
Lucy	AL-288-1	*Australopithecus afarensis*	Ethiopia	1974	Hadar Formation
Dinkinesh	AL-288-1	*Australopithecus afarensis*	Ethiopia	1974	Hadar Formation
Heelomali	AL-288-1	*Australopithecus afarensis*	Ethiopia	1974	Hadar Formation
Luzia	Lapa Vermelha IV Hominid 1	*Homo sapiens*	Brazil	1974	Lapa Vermelha
Pierrette	Saint-Césaire 1	*H. neanderthalensis*	France	1978	Saint-Césaire / La Roche à Pierrot
Moshe	KMH2	*Homo neanderthalensis*	Israel	1982	Kebara Cave: Kebara 2
Nariokotome boy	KNM-WT-15000	*Homo erectus*	Kenya	1984	Nariokotome
Turkana boy	KNM-WT-15000	*Homo erectus*	Kenya	1984	Nariokotome
The Black Skull	KNM-WT-17000	*Paranthropus aethiopicus*	Kenya	1985	West Turkana
Dik-dik hominid	OH 62	*Homo habilis*	Tanzania	1986	Olduvai Gorge
Ice Man	None	*Homo sapiens*	Italy	1991	Ötzaler Alps
Ötzi	None	*Homo sapiens*	Italy	1991	Ötzaler Alps
Miguelón	Skull 5	*Homo heidelbergensis*	Spain	1992	Sima de los Huesos, Atapuerca
Agamemnon	Skull 4	*Homo heidelbergensis*	Spain	1992	Sima de los Huesos, Atapuerca
Rui	Skull 6	*Homo heidelbergensis*	Spain	1992	Sima de los Huesos, Atapuerca
Argil	Ceprano 1	*Homo heidelbergensis*	Spain	1993	Ceprano
Ceprano Man	Ceprano 1	*Homo heidelbergensis*	Spain	1993	Ceprano
Roger	Boxgrove 1	*Homo heidelbergensis*	Spain	1993	Boxgrove
Little Foot	StW 573	*Australopithecus*	South Africa	1994	Sterkfontein Caves: Member 2

Elvis	Pelvis 1	*Homo heidelbergensis*	Spain	1994	Sima de los Huesos, Atapuerca
Eurydice	DNH-7	*Paranthropus robustus*	South Africa	1994	Drimolen Main Quarry (DMQ)
Orpheus	DNH-8	*Paranthropus robustus*	South Africa	1994	Drimolen Main Quarry (DMQ)
Abel	KT12/H1	*Australopithecus bahrelghazali*	Chad	1995	Koro Toro (KT 12 locality)
Vicente del Bosque		*Homo heidelbergensis*	Spain	1995	Sima de los Huesos, Atapuerca
Lucy's Baby	DIK-1/1	*Australopithecus afarensis*	Ethiopia	2000	Dikika: Locality DIK-1
Dikika Child	DIK-1/1	*Australopithecus afarensis*	Ethiopia	2000	Dikika: Locality DIK-1
Dikika Baby	DIK-1/1	*Australopithecus afarensis*	Ethiopia	2000	Dikika: Locality DIK-1
Dikika infant	DIK-1/1	*Australopithecus afarensis*	Ethiopia	2000	Dikika: Locality DIK-1
Selam	DIK-1/1	*Australopithecus afarensis*	Ethiopia	2000	Dikika: Locality DIK-1
Millennium Man	BAR 1002'00	*Ororrin tugenensis*	Kenya	2000	Tugen Hills
Zveva	D2280	*Homo georgicus / erectus*	Georgia	2000	Dmanisi
Mzia	D2282	*Homo georgicus / erectus*	Georgia	2000	Dmanisi
Benjamina	Skull 14	*Homo heidelbergensis*	Spain	2001	Sima de los Huesos, Atapuerca
Toumaï	TM 266-01-060-1	*Sahelanthropus tchadensis*	Chad	2002	Toros-Menalla (TM 266 locality)
The Hobbit	LB1	*Homo floresiensis*	Indonesia	2003	Liang Bua
Little Lady of Flores	LB1	*Homo floresiensis*	Indonesia	2003	Liang Bua
Flo	LB1	*Homo floresiensis*	Indonesia	2003	Liang Bua
Fidel	Obi-Rakhmat 1	*Homo neanderthalensis*	Uzbekistan	2003	Obi-Rakhmat
Pàus	St.n.166623	*Homo neanderthalensis*	Italy	2004	Spinadesco, CR
Kadanuumuu	KSD-VP-1/1	*Australopithecus afarensis*	Ethiopia	2005	Afar Region
Big Man	KSD-VP-1/1	*Australopithecus afarensis*	Ethiopia	2005	Afar Region
Lucy's big brother	KSD-VP-1/1	*Australopithecus afarensis*	Ethiopia	2005	
El Jefe		*Homo heidelbergensis*	Spain	2007	Sima de los Huesos, Atapuerca
Karabo	MH1	*Australopithecus sediba*	South Africa	2008	Malapa Cave, COHWHS
La Chica		*Homo heidelbergensis*	Spain	2008	Sima de los Huesos, Atapuerca
Ardi	ARA-VP-6/500	*Ardipithicus ramidus*	Ethiopia	2009	Middle Awash study area: ARA-VP-6 locality

Krijn	Zeeland Ridges specimen	*Homo neanderthalensis*	Netherlands	2009	Zeeland Ridges
X-woman	Denisova 3	Denisovan	Russia	2010	Denisova Cave
Eve	Qafzeh 9	*Homo sapiens*	Israel	2015	Qafzeh Cave
La Dame du Cavillon	Barma del Caviglione 1	*Homo sapiens*	Italy	2016	Barma del Caviglione
The Red Lady of El Miron	El Miron xxx	*Homo sapiens*	Spain	2016	El Miron Cave
Neo	LES1	*Homo naledi*	South Africa	2017	Lesedi Chamber, Rising Star cave system
Denny	Denisova 11: DC1227	Neanderthal/Denisovan hybrid	Russia	2018	Denisova Cave
Vera	Prado Vargas 1360	*Homo neanderthalensis*	Spain	2019	Prado Vargas
Simon	DNH 134	*Homo erectus*	South Africa	2020	Drimolen Fossil Hominin Site, COHWHS
Shanidar Z		*Homo neanderthalensis*	Iraq	2020	Shanidar Cave
Linya		*Homo sapiens*	Spain	2021	Cova Gran de Santa Linya
Mtoto	PYS individual	*Homo sapiens*	Kenya	2021	Panga ya Saidi
Dragon Man	HBSM2018-000018(A)	*Homo longi*	China	2021	Harbin
Bessé		*Homo sapiens*	Indonesia	2021	Leang Pallange
Leti	U.W. 110	*Homo naledi*	S. Africa	2021	Rising Star Cave
Issa	MH2	*Australopithecus sediba*	S. Africa	2021	Malapa Cave, COHWHS
Neve	AVH-1	*Homo sapiens*	Italy	2021	Arma Veirana
Thorin		*Homo neanderthalensis*	France	2023	Grotte Mandrin
Pink	ATE7-1	*Homo* aff. *erectus*	Spain	2025	Sima del Elefante, TE-7, Atapuerca