The fossils of *Ramapithecus* indicate that it lived during the period between 14 and 9 million years ago. This creature is known only from a few fragments of jaws and teeth. From these remains it is not possible to know whether it walked erect. Nor do we know whether it became extinct, evolved into apes or into man. There simply are no fossils of apes or *hominids* (upright walkers) from 8 million to 4 million years ago. This period is termed the great black hole of human paleontology. To quote one of the world's leading paleoanthropologists, Donald Johanson, "There are no in-between types known. There are, in fact, *no ape fossils from anywhere* after about eight million (years ago)."^2 (italics Johanson's) He also comments, " …science has not known, and does not know today, just how or when the all-important transition from ape to hominid took place."^3.

Nevertheless, until mid-1982 when David Pilbeam discovered unknown parts of its facial skeleton, *Ramapithecus* was considered by some paleoanthropologists to be the first critical link in the chain leading from a common ancestor of ape and man to man. There is no other likely fossil candidate for this position. To quote Elwyn Simons, who leads the Duke University Center for the Study of Primate Biology and History, "*Ramapithecus* is ideally structured to be an ancestor of *hominids*. If he isn't, we don't have anything else that is."^4

FIGURE 10.5.

Richard Leakey examines a skull of Australopithecus on the spot of its discovery near Lake Rudolf, Kenya. (Courtesy Meave Epps Leakey, © National Geographic Society.)

HOMINIDS

A *hominid* is defined by anthropologists as a member of the family of humans. The major characteristic of the family (*Hominidae*) is upright walking -- walking on two feet only (bipedal locomotion). Hominids are further characterized by erect posture. Apes are not hominids (they do not walk upright as their primary means of locomotion, and they do not stand completely erect). The only presently living hominids are humans, but there are hominids in the fossil record that are thought to be human ancestors or at least very closely related. According to anthropology textbook author, William Haviland, "*Ramapithecus* is believed by some scientists definitely to be a hominid."^5 This assertion is based solely on the analysis of jaw fragments and a few teeth. The connection between dentition that indicates seed-eating and being "definitely hominid" has not been accepted by all scientists. Most paleoanthropologists have simply believed *Ramapithecus* may have been ancestral to the hominid they call *Australopithecus*.