

Australopithecus is the term used to designate a genus of pre-humans -- hominid ancestors or close relatives of humans which appear in the fossil record several million years ago. The term *Australopithecus* is often abbreviated by the letter A and presently includes three species, *A. africanus*, *A. robustus*, and *A. afarensis*.

It should be noted that the suffix *pithecus* means "ape." Yet because it is a hominid, an *Australopithecus* is not an ape; it is classified as a member of the human family. But it is not a human being in the modern sense either. In effect the term *Australopithecus* is used to describe a "man-like ape" or "near-man" -- the transitional form -- the missing link between apes and humans.

Australopithecus africanus. Following the demise of the Piltdown Man in 1953, scientists recognized that the *Australopithecus africanus* might represent the transition from ape to human. *Australo* means "southern," *pithecus* means "ape" and *africanus* refers to the continent of Africa where it was discovered by Raymond Dart in 1924. In lay terms, *Australopithecus africanus* thus means "Southern Ape from Africa."

The most numerous and best fossils of *A. africanus* come from scattered locations in the rift valleys of East Africa, the most famous being the Leakeys' renowned site at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. The skeleton of *A. africanus* is about the size of a modern chimpanzee, and the brain cavity size is also the same (440 cubic centimeters).⁶

From comparative analysis of hip and limb bones and the opening in which the spine enters the skull, scientists have concluded that the posture of *A. africanus* was upright. For this reason *A. africanus* qualifies as a *hominid*, an upright walker. It is not a true ape, but not a human either -- a sort of near-man. This composite of hominid and ape-like characteristics suggests that *A. africanus* is the closest fossil available to a missing link.

Australopithecus robustus. A larger and more robust type of *australopithecine* was later discovered in East Africa. It was not only larger (almost as big as a small gorilla), but it appeared to have large molars for grinding coarse vegetation. It has been given the name *Australopithecus robustus*. The majority opinion holds that *A. robustus* evolved out of *A. africanus* and came to an evolutionary dead end. However, the line of *Australopithecus africanus* was thought to have continued on another branch of the tree to give rise to man.

In 1972, Time-Life Books published *The Emergence of Man*. The missing link lineup appeared to be fairly complete in their simulated reproductions. The *australopithecine* figures in the illustrations look



FIGURE 10.6.

A reconstruction drawing of the head of a young *A. africanus*, top, based on the Taungs skull discovered in Bechaunaland. Skull of *Pithecanthropus robustus*, below, as restored by Dr. Franz Weidenreich. (Courtesy American Museum of Natural History.)