Louis Leakey: man and myth

Julie Lawrence



Louis Leakey in the early 1950s. Photograph courtesy of Meave Leakey.

Louis Leakey's pioneering life is wrapped in folklore. His astonishing success in finding major fossils demonstrating human evolution was attributed to 'Leakey's Luck'. His wife, Mary Leakey, is often regarded as the talented excavator of the partnership, a view mentioned in many of my interviews with archaeologists. However, attributing Louis's achievements to good fortune and implying that Mary was the only talented excavator undermines the true intelligence and real determination that drove Louis Leakey's own career. Unpublished field reports, personal correspondence and official records held at St John's College Archives and at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge tell us that, as a young man, Leakey was greatly valued for his hard-won, pragmatic, field expertise and skill. The fact that, in his later collaborative work with Mary, he took the role of fund-raiser and public figure has overshadowed his own earlier proven ability as an archaeologist.

As an undergraduate, in 1924, Louis Leakey took a year away from his studies for health reasons. Because of his intimate knowledge of the environment, people and language of East Africa, he was chosen to participate in an expedition with the British Museum of Natural History. Reports by Jack Driberg and Wynfrid Duckworth, held at St John's College, acknowledge the advantages that Leakey's previous knowledge and childhood association with East Africa gave to his anthropological work. The leader of the expedition, William Cutler, left the responsibility of practical arrangements, such as securing the water supply and camp equipment, to Leakey. Cutler noted in his diary:

> 'Leakey very low with malaria, temperature 104; Leakey still has malarial symptoms . . . but he superintended ditches 4, 5 and 6 all day'(Cutler as quoted in Morell 1995: 31)

While Leakey benefited from the experience of running an expedition, Cutler was fortunate to have his practical awareness of the provisions needed in Africa as well as Leakey's ability to endure arduous conditions while working productively.

In 1926, at the age of 22, Leakey embarked as leader of his own East African Archaeological Expedition. Field reports and correspondence sent to the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology reveal that Leakey was a capable excavator, field worker, organiser and fund-raiser. This was in part due to the initiative he took to teach himself, acting upon his interests and investigating allied subjects such as geology. From the very beginning, he also demonstrated an impressive knowledge of lithic typology and technology. For example, in his November 1928 field report, Leakey analysed the assemblages from six different sites to address the then

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topical idea of migration of races and their associated industries. And, in three months of 1929 alone, he sent a total of 148 cases of specimens home to England.

In the St John's College Referees' report on Leakey's Fellowship dissertation in 1928, Haddon wrote a glowing report describing Leakey as *'an efficient field geologist, a well-trained archaeologist, well able to tackle a problem in technology, and, unexpectedly, he has shown that he is a competent craniologist'*. On the basis of his first two East African Archaeological Expeditions, Leakey was one of the first in Britain to be awarded the newly instituted PhD degree. Before 1935, he successfully led another two expeditions.

On the fourth expedition, Leakey invited the established geologist Percy Boswell to inspect sites at Kanam and Kanjera where he had found fossils that were exciting scientific interest in Europe. Unfortunately, due to circumstances that were largely out of Leakey's control, Boswell returned with a negative report. He published a damning article in *Nature* regarding the accuracy of Leakey's archaeological methods (Boswell 1935). Boswell's influence tainted Leakey's reputation as an archaeologist for years afterwards. This may be the origin of the myth that Leakey was a careless excavator. However, Boswell did not work in the vast, uncharted landscape of East Africa where it was extremely difficult to distinguish and to mark securely a specific spot. Further consideration of the conditions surrounding this incident suggest that Leakey may have been judged unfairly.

It would seem that previous biographical work and commonly-held views do not reflect the complexity and quality of Leakey's character and abilities. Leakey's skill as a young archaeologist has not been fully recognised. The usual perception of a man who was not patient or meticulous enough to be a dedicated, detailed excavator is undeserved. Leakey took on immense research projects early in his career and saw them to fruition. The folklore surrounding Leakey's life fails to portray the more enlightening reality.

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