cnrs international magazine

n° 19
Quarterly
October 2010

Revisiting Ancient Gaul

George Smoot
The 2006 Nobel Laureate's New French headquarters

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advancing the frontiers

Paleontology From on-site excavations to the dissemination of knowledge, the Human Paleontology Institute is dedicated to studying the history of early humans.

In the Footsteps of **Mankind**

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01 Painting by Louis Mayer, illustrating the decision by prince Albert I of Monaco to open the Institute of Human Paleontology. 02 Jawbone fragment of *Australopithecus anamensis*, a 4-million-year-old bipedal hominid, born in Ethiopia.

BY PATRICIA CHAIROPOULOS

In the imposing Parisian building that has housed its offices ever since its creation, the Human Paleontology Institute (IPH)[1] celebrated its centennial this year. The festivities included a series of lectures aimed at the general public, a travelling exhibition, the launch of a Franco-Monacan commemorative stamp, and an international conference (June 2-6) that brought together 78 researchers from various fields (geology, paleontology, paleobotany, etc.) and from 24 countries to discuss the lives and lifestyles of our remote ancestors.

The IPH is entirely dedicated to shedding light on the very first humans. Who were they? How did they live from day to day? What were the consequences of major technological breakthroughs such as the development of stone tools or the domestication of fire? These are some of the mysteries that the members of the IPH have been striving to solve since its creation in 1910.

The institute's founder was none other than Prince Albert I of Monaco. "A learned, erudite man, he was keenly interested in the origins of man—both from a scientific and a philosophical point of view," explains Henry de Lumley, IPH director since 1981. "After seeing the Paleolithic cave paintings at Cantabrie (Spain) in July 1909, and upon the advice of the Abbot Henri Breuil and of Marcellin Boule, a professor of paleontology at the Museum of Natural History, the prince decided to finance the institute, which he conceived as an independent entity with no ties to any other institution.

At its recently-renovated 1200 m² headquarters, the IPH houses an extensive collection of tens of thousands of prehistoric objects and bones that are available to researchers from around the world. It also incorporates a research structure associated with CNRS, as well as a constantly-evolving technological platform that applies medical scans and 3D imaging to paleontology. This extends to the recently-launched "scannothèque"—an image bank that already boasts the medical scans of some 15 fossil specimens from Europe and Asia.

In its quest to find the earliest traces left by our forebears, the IPH plays an active role in the field, coordinating and funding leading-edge research projects. Prehistoric sites in France (the Tautavel and Le Lazaret caves), Africa (Ethiopia and Mauritania), and Asia (India, China, South Korea) are analyzed using an array of methods including magnetostratigraphy, geochronology, or even palynology (the study of pollens and spores). "In every project, the primary goal is to improve our understanding of early humans and their daily life on different continents," de Lumley explains. The results are often remarkable. For example, explorations in the Fejej region of southern Ethiopia in 2002 led to the discovery of remains of ancient hominids of the *Australopithecus anamensis* type. "Based on the associated fauna, these human remains are probably between 4.2 and 5 million years old," says de Lumley. "These were the very first humans, who probably subsisted as scavengers."

01. Institut de Paléontologie Humaine (CNRS / MNHN). www.fondationiph.org

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