

British

Archaeology

THE VOICE OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN BRITAIN AND BEYOND

Let Lucy sparkle

An icon of world heritage is soon to be publicly displayed: but prominent anthropologists would stop it. Jill Cook is not impressed.

Back in 1974 the discovery of fossilised remains in the Hadar Basin of Ethiopia caused a worldwide sensation. Although other skull and jaw fragments, as well as postcranial bones, were well known, this was the first partial skeleton of a single prehuman ancestor to be found. Named Lucy after a Beatles song, the 3.2 million-year-old individual has had a huge impact on our understanding of the anatomy and capabilities of *Australopithecus*, one of the key genera that preceded the first *Homo* species.

Lucy's bones are normally kept in a vault in the National Museum in Addis Ababa. Now for the first time she is to go on public display, as the highlight of an exhibition of Ethiopian treasures at the Houston Museum of Natural Science, Texas. This has caused a storm among scientists and museums about who should see the real Lucy.

The International Association for the Study of Human Paleontology considers that original hominin fossils are "an irreplaceable component of the world heritage" that should not be transported beyond their country of origin without "compelling scientific reasons". The public should make do with replicas. Passed as a resolution by the council of this UNESCO-affiliated body in 1998, this position is now being waved as an ethical standard by which we should deplore the Houston loan.

Can this be right? Had the discussion taken place in a broader forum including museum professionals, as well as cultural and development agencies, would there have been agreement that only a chosen few might see and utilise the evidence for the beginnings of humanity? We applaud the occasional loan of a rare, fragile masterpiece by Leonardo da Vinci as a great cultural benefit. What makes human fossils so different? Whereas Leonardo's masterpieces are finite, the search for new fossils continues. Relatively complete examples may be rare, but significant new finds are still being discovered. This is the oxygen of our subject, which should be used to stimulate public interest, support and understanding as much as scientific research and debate.

In museums, fragile materials are expertly handled by professional conservators in controlled environments to minimise risk. As may be seen on many human fossils, this is not always the case on the laboratory bench. Some bones are chipped and scratched by metal measuring instruments. Other are damaged by moulding and casting which have variously removed surfaces, altered morphology or left plaster, latex or silicone residues embedded in cracks. Sometimes there are oily stains left from bits of plasticine used to hold fragments together temporarily, or to position bones for photography. Exhibition conditions are benign by comparison. But there are bigger issues than this.

Scientists should not be the sole arbiters of how material so vital to our understanding of humanity and evolution may be used. These fossils are part of our intellectual, spiritual, political and economic world, as much as they are data for an empirical science. As scientists we should also be advocates of the evidence we rely on: striving to find new ways to enthral and intrigue the public who fund our endeavours, at the same time challenging our own interpretations. A survey last year by Opinion panel showed that some 30% of over 1,000 students in UK higher education reject evolution in favour of creationism or intelligent design. Is it any wonder when science excludes them from seeing the evidence?

We must also consider social and diplomatic issues. Visitors do not attend exhibitions to see replicas: they want to experience the real thing. In a socially fragmented and intolerant world, fossils have the extraordinary power to remind us of our common origins as we search for new identities. Human and proto-human fossils from Africa are a particularly potent force.

I am sure that Lucy's visit to Houston will be a great success. As an ambassador, Lucy will give us pause to reflect on Ethiopia as the cradle of humankind, as well as a rich and civilised nation celebrating its millennium. She will earn vital funds for the museum in Addis Ababa while establishing valuable international relationships beyond the reach of everyday science and diplomacy. The exhibition was offered by Ethiopia and will show a positive view of an African nation, its past and its aspirations. In this light, the self-interested resolution of a closed community of scientists has been properly set aside for the greater good.

Lucy's Legacy: The Hidden Treasures of Ethiopia is at the Houston Museum of Natural Science, Aug 31 2007–Apr 20 2008. Jill Cook is deputy keeper of the Department of Prehistory and Europe at the British Museum.