Piltdown Hoax Encyclopedia Article

Piltdown Hoax

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Piltdown Hoax

On December 18, 1912, Charles Dawson (1865-1916) announced to the Geological Society in London that he had discovered skull fragments and a partial jaw in a gravel formation in Piltdown Common, Fletching, near Lewes, Sussex, England. The skull fragments were accompanied by bones of relatively recent hippopotamus, deer, beaver, and horse, as well as ancient bones of extinct mastodon and rhinoceros. Collected over a period of years, the skull fragments had an unusually thick brain case but were otherwise considered to be human. The jaw remnant was clearly primitive. This spectacular announcement was considered evidence, found in Britain, that supported the Darwinian evolutionary theory and provided a true representational link to modern man. Named in honor of its discoverer, Dawn man (*Eoanthropus dawsoni*), would eventually be known as Piltdown man, the most deceptive scientific hoax of the twentieth century that would take 40 years to disprove.

Initially, there was skepticism and scientists proposed that the jaw and cranium fragments were from two creatures, rather than one. However, in 1915, a second Piltdown man was discovered two miles from the original site. The second set of fossil remains seemed to indicate that the possibility of a human cranium and an ape jaw coming together purely by chance was unlikely. Clearly, both jaw and cranium fragments were from one type of human ancestor that provided evidence of an intermediary stage between ape and human, however when compared to other authentic prehuman fossils, it was unclear where piltdown man fit in the evolutionary development of man.

Even with the lack of continuity between Piltdown man and other prehuman fossil remains, the authenticity of Piltdown man was not disproved until 1953, when dating techniques unequivocally proved it a fraud. Piltdown man was merely a hoax made up of an ancient human skull and a contemporary orangutan jaw. The dark color of the fragments that was representative of fossil find in the area wasartificial. The teeth in the orangutan jaw had been mechanically ground down to resemble humanlike wear, rather than that of apes. In 1912, accurate dating techniques were unavailable and the fervor to provide evidence to support the cherished belief that humans had first developed a big brain, and then later developed other human characteristics was great.