

The Gona Paleoanthropology Research Project (GPRP) has been operating since 1999 under the direction of Dr. Sileshi Semaw of the CRAFT Institute at Indiana University. Although research in the area is relatively new, researchers from Gona have already recovered the remains of multiple hominid species and an array of stone tool industries from deposits spanning over four million years. The GPRP paleontologist, Dr. Scott Simpson, of Case School of Medicine, was first an employer and subsequently a research advisor to me during my undergraduate education at Case. During the summer of 2005, I took my first trip to Ethiopia with Dr. Simpson to begin learning faunal identification and techniques for fossil curation and preparation. That trip was funded in full by the Eva L. Pancoast fellowship of the Case College of Arts and Sciences. Although I am currently attending graduate school at another institution, Dr. Simpson invited me to be involved in the 2006 GPRP field season as the paleontology field assistant. The following are a few excerpts from a travel log of my experiences there.

January 22

Dr. Simpson and I arrive in Addis Ababa after 20 hours of travel. Before we even leave the airport, we have already seen friends and familiar faces. The air here is filled with the smells of roasting coffee and incense. It is night—8 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time—and the streets are alive with the bustle of people and animals. The taxi passes by street vendors, shops, and bars (decorated year-round with multi-colored Christmas lights) as I have a strained English/Amharic conversation with the driver. Arriving at the hotel is like coming home to family—Dr. Simpson has been staying at the same hotel for about twelve years and we know the hotel staff by name. This country exudes hospitality with the utmost sincerity.

January 29

Currently, Gona's faunal collections are at the Addis National Museum, in an aluminum shack with a less-than-reliable electricity supply. However, there is major construction going on at the museum and sparkling new facilities are on the way. I am just about finished doing an inventory of the 4.3-5.6 million-year-old fossil collections. The GPRP scientists will arrive in a few short days. Mike Rogers, an archaeologist from



Dr. Sileshi Semaw stands in front of our 6-vehicle caravan as we stop at the last gas station before turning off into the field.

Southern Connecticut State University will be working to identify new sites with Dr. Semaw in late Pliocene and Pleistocene deposits. The senior geologist, Jay Quade, from the University of Arizona, specializes in geochemistry. He and his former graduate student, Naomi Levin (University of Utah) are responsible for the basic mapping, structural geology, and isotopic geochemistry at Gona. This year, we will be joined by three geochronologists, Bill McIntosh and Nelia Dunbar from New Mexico Tech, and Tsefaye Kidane from Addis Ababa

University, who will be working at establishing dates for a number of Gona sites. Dr. Simpson and I will be concentrating on the excavation of an Early Pliocene hominid site.

February 12

We are now in the full swing of fieldwork. The excavation has started at the Early Pliocene hominid site. We began by spending two days crawling up various drainages to ensure we did not miss any surface collectables that may have eroded from the excavation site. We pick up every fossil fragment while the desert sun beats down on our backs and sweat drips off of our faces. The Afar guys, the local people who are hired as guides and workers, laugh and chatter throughout the day, which eases my foreigner-in-the-desert crankiness. Some of these men have been working annually with Gona since 1999 and are skilled fossil finders. When the excavation begins, we carry buckets, picks, tarps, screens, poles and other gear out to the site everyday. The labor force is divided up—one person excavating, a couple carrying buckets, a couple screening and a couple picking through the concentrate created by the screeners. Everybody on our crew takes turns doing each of the jobs.



The excavation setup: picking to the left, screening in the middle and excavation/buckets to the right

February 16

After a particularly unrewarding day at the excavation we are sitting at the table eating popcorn. We were the first car back today, but shortly after we sit down we hear the geology and archaeology cars in the distance. Then we hear the cheering and clapping. Everybody gets out of the cars, crowding around the table as Jay brings the bags over to Scott. The fossils are wrapped in tissue paper for protection, but even so it is easy to guess what is in the bag...the object is round and the smile on Jay's face is huge.

This is ironic because late in the afternoon, when it became apparent that the excavation team wasn't going to be finding anything, Dr. Simpson said, "I bet the geologists are going to bring back a hominid today...and we are going to have pizza for dinner." We did not eat pizza for dinner, but the rest of the prediction was dead on.

The Gawis cranium was found by the Afar man guiding the geologists, Asahamad (pictured to the right with his find). He stayed at the back of the crowd while the cranium was unwrapped then disappeared into his tent without a word until dinner.



February 26

Field time is beginning to run short. We finish the excavation for this year and secure the site to ensure that eroding fossils are not washed away when the rains come. We have been spending more time surveying in the last few days. During survey my job is recording the positional information for all the fossils we collect...and carrying them

Yesterday we re-visited sites that were particularly productive in previous years in order to do "site upkeep". This involved picking up any freshly eroded collectibles and making general observations regarding the fossil refresh rate at different sites.



Drs. Scott Simpson (right) and Steve Frost (left) inspecting fossils from a newly discovered site.

March 19

We are leaving to go back to the U.S. in a few short days. The curatorial aspect of the lab work took up most of our post-field time at the museum. Even though fossil collection was not a goal this year, we brought back over 600 specimens. Luckily, I have had a chance to collect some data for a possible future project. The amount of time and effort that goes into amassing a faunal assemblage is almost unbelievable when just looking at the row of dusty drawers in the tin shack.