

Preface

Laetoli in northern Tanzania is one of the most important paleontological and paleoanthropological sites in Africa. It is renowned for the recovery of early hominin fossils belonging to *A. afarensis* and for the discovery of remarkably well-preserved trails of footprints of hominins. Given the significance of Laetoli for understanding and interpreting the evolutionary history of early hominins the author initiated long-term geological and paleontological investigations at Laetoli and at other fossil localities on the Eyasi Plateau. The overall objectives of the project were to recover additional fossil hominin specimens and to obtain more detailed contextual information on the paleontology, geology, dating, and paleoecology.

The field campaigns (1998–2005) have produced important original data on the fossil hominins, their associated fauna, and the paleoecological and paleoenvironmental context. The work presented here is the culmination of that research. It represents the combined effort of a dedicated and experienced field crew who were responsible for collecting the fossils and samples described and analyzed here, and subsequent research by a multidisciplinary team of international specialists.

The present volume focuses on the morphology, systematics and paleobiology of the fossil hominins and the associated invertebrate and vertebrate fauna. The companion volume provides an interdisciplinary perspective on the geology, geochronology, paleoecology, taphonomy, paleobotany, and modern-day Serengeti ecosystem. Together, these two volumes present a comprehensive account of the geology, paleontology and paleoecology of Laetoli. It is hoped that the research presented here will provide an important building block in a broader understanding of early hominin evolution, faunal diversity and ecological change in East Africa during the Pliocene, and provide the basis for analyzing early hominin adaptation within the context of broader macroevolutionary models of speciation, diversification and extinction.

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