Is “Ida” a Missing Link?

On Tuesday, May 19, 2009, the very complete fossil of a small lemur-like animal, nicknamed Ida, was unveiled at the New York’s American Museum of Natural History. The unveiling was accompanied by press releases touting a special to air on the History Channel on May 25th. Newspaper reports included headlines like, “Is 47 million year old fossil a missing link?” The History channel went even further in its hype:

> ***Scientists have discovered the oldest and most complete fossil of a human ancestor.***
>
> *An incredible 95 percent complete fossil of a 47-million-year-old human ancestor has been discovered and, after two years of secret study, an international team of scientists has revealed it to the world. The fossil’s remarkable state of preservation allows an unprecedented glimpse into early human evolution. Discovered in Messel Pit, Germany, it represents the moment before anthropoid primates—the group that would later evolve into humans, apes and monkeys—began to split from lemurs and other prosimian primates. This groundbreaking discovery fills in a critical gap in human and primate evolution.{1}*

However, as is often the case, the facts behind the headlines and the advertising do not support all of the hyperbole. As reported in an AP story,

> *Experts not connected with the discovery said the finding was remarkably complete because of features like stomach contents. But they questioned the conclusions of Hurum (Jorn Hurum, of the University of Oslo Natural History Museum) and his colleagues about how closely it is related to ancestors of monkeys and humans.*
>
> *“I actually don’t think it’s terribly close to the common*

> *ancestral line of monkeys, apes and people," said K. Christopher Beard of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh.{2}*

So let's review the facts behind the hype based on the journal article written by the scientists who studied the fossil.{3}

In the late 1970's and early 1980's an area of Messel, Germany was being mined for oil shale. In the process of mining, workers uncovered fossils that were relatively well-preserved within this sediment. In 1983, a private group uncovered the lemur-like fossil that has now been classified as *Darwinius masillae*. *Darwinius massillae*, or Ida, was split into two plates, one of which ended up in Wyoming and another was purchased by Hurum at the Oslo Natural History Museum in 2007. With access to both plates, a group of paleontologists used advanced techniques to analyze this specimen. The results showed very detailed features including food in her stomach and an outline of her soft-body form, including her fur.

This is truly a remarkable find because so much of the fossil is intact and many details are preserved. Furthermore, this provides an opportunity to study a fossil that paleontologists date at 47 million years old. The final conclusion of the journal article is, "*Darwinius masillae* is important in being exceptionally well preserved and providing a much more complete understanding of the paleobiology of an Eocene primate than was available in the past." They also indicate that she is important for classification purposes because there are so few fossils from this particular era and location. They hope that she will allow other paleontologists to have specific features to aid in classifying other fossils.

This is the extent to which the journal article discusses the significance of Ida. However, the authors and the media are painting a far different picture. The claims that Ida is the "missing link" in human evolution, or a "Rosetta stone" for

understanding early branches in the human evolutionary tree, or the "eighth wonder of the world," are not reported in the peer-reviewed scientific journal. However, the authors of this journal are now marketing their find as such. In addition to The History Channel documentary, they have a book that will be coming out soon.

Whether it is "the bones of Jesus," global warming, or the latest "missing link" fossil fad, we recommend much discernment and discretion when reading about something that makes such grandiose claims as changing the world or solving some ancient mystery. This is plain old sensationalism and marketing to get famous and make money. This is an excellent fossil find that any paleontologist would love to study, but this is not "proof" of evolution. Evolutionists have been engaging in a marketing blitz this year honoring Darwin's 200th birthday and the 150th anniversary of the publication of *Origin of Species*. This fossil has been studied for two years. Just looking at the documentary, the book schedule, and the name, it is no coincidence that it came out this year at this time. The authors of the paper seem to be banking off of the Darwin hype.{4}

For a great article on why Ida is not the missing link, go to Access Research Network's article "Ida: The Holy Grail of Missing Links?".

Another interesting article with excellent points by Jonathan Wells can be found at *World Net Daily*'s article "Media Blitz; 'We found missing link'".

Slate has an article that discusses the media's overuse of the term "missing link": "How Many Times Will Paleontologists Find the 'Missing Link'?".

For a broader discussion of the relationship between fossils and the debate between Darwinian and creation-based models for the origins of life check out our section on "Origins" under

the “Faith and Science” section of our website at www.probe.org .

Notes

1. www.history.com/content/the-link/about-the-link/the-link
2. Malcolm Ritter, The Associated Press, May 20, 2009.
3. For the entire journal article: www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0005723
4. online.wsj.com/article/SB124235632936122739.html; www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/05/090519104643.htm; www.guardian.co.uk/science/2009/may/19/ida-fossil-missing-link/print

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