



Britannica reports the latest on primates and human evolution

New research sheds light on our ancestors, ourselves

CHICAGO, January 26, 2010—We humans and our primate cousins parted ways along the evolutionary road millions of years ago, but despite our divergent paths we still have a few things in common.

That's part of the news from two special reports on recent scientific findings just published by Encyclopaedia Britannica.

In an article now available on the company's Web sites, Professor Stephen L. Zegura of the University of Arizona reports on [Ardipithecus](#), the 4.4-million-year-old hominin species discovered in the early 1990s that scientists say constitutes a distinct and structurally more primitive genus from the more famous early human ancestor [Australopithecus](#), which has been known to anthropologists for many years. Evidence suggests that Ardipithecus was only about four feet tall, walked upright when on the ground but still swung from trees. Males of the species were similar in size to females, were invested in child rearing and showed less aggression toward their fellow males than their evolutionary ancestors.

Summarizing recent research, much of it reported last fall in the journal *Science*, Zegura says that Ardipithecus, fossils of which were unearthed at the Aramis excavation site in Ethiopia, extends our knowledge of human origins back further in time and gets us closer to "the approximately seven-million-year-old hypothetical common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees."

Seven million years is a long time, but the origins of laughter in humans harkens back even further: 10-16 million years, in fact, according to research described in another Britannica article by Lisa Newbern of the Yerkes National Primate Research Center at Emory University. In "[Primate Research: A Key to Understanding What It Means to Be Human](#)," Newbern reviews

recent scientific work from England, Germany, Sweden, the United States and elsewhere that sheds new light on similarities and differences between people and non-human primates. Scientists have found, among other things, that orangutans, gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos respond to tickling with laughter. To varying degrees primates also floss their teeth, distinguish right from wrong and appreciate good music. And in a discovery sure to resonate with parents of young children, one study found that infant rhesus macaques manipulate their parents by throwing temper tantrums.

Large differences between us and our nearest non-human relatives do remain, of course, and you can [read the article](#) for more about that.

These and other special reports, which are available online now, will be published next month in the 2010 Britannica Book of the Year.

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