

Paper Number: 652

Searching for our ancestors: a time ripe for forgeries

Aguirre-Urreta, B.¹

¹ Instituto de Estudios Andinos Don Pablo Groeber, Universidad de Buenos Aires & CONICET, Argentina.
aguirre@gl.fcen.uba.ar

The discovery of the Java Man (*Pithecanthropus erectus*) by Eugène Dubois in the late nineteenth century accelerated a worldwide interest in discovering fossils that could illuminate the origins of modern man. Soon afterwards, Charles Dawson, a lawyer and amateur geologist found the remains of a skull and a jaw in Piltdown, England. These remains were associated with various animal teeth and stone tools. He showed them to Professor Arthur Smith Woodward, then the most famous palaeontologist at the British Museum, who in 1912 informed the Geological Society of London on the discovery of a new human ancestor, *Eoanthropus dawsoni*, who would have lived between 1 and 4 million years ago. He was the expected "missing link", a mixture of human and ape and he was British, at a time when every country in the world wanted to be the cradle of mankind. For over 40 years, the Piltdown man was accepted as a genuine discovery and incorporated into the evolutionary tree of man. But since 1930, the discovery of *Australopithecus*, and further examples of the Neanderthal man, left Piltdown man completely isolated in the evolutionary sequence. It was not until 1953 that careful studies of the two pieces showed that the skull belonged to a relatively modern human (no more than 50,000 years old) and that the jaw, deliberately treated to give the appearance of a fossil, belonged to a great ape.

Also in 1912 human fossil remains were found near Miramar, in the coastal area of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The discoverer was a Genoese immigrant, Lorenzo Parodi, who had been hired by the Natural History National Museum to restart exploration work on the Atlantic coast. These earlier explorations had already yielded human bones in Tertiary strata associated with lithic artifacts, scoriae and "tierras cocidas" (baked earth) and were made by Florentino Ameghino, the most famous Argentine palaeontologist at that time, who had died in 1911. In 1915 Carlos Ameghino (younger brother of Florentino) reported the discovery of a *Toxodon* femur with an incrustated broken quartzite arrow head. The controversy reached then American and European scientific circles and even the British Museum asked for a cast of the fossil.

Several commissions of important local and foreign scientists went to the area in order to prove that the bones and artifacts were *in situ* in the supposedly, at that time, Tertiary strata.

In 1923 Parodi was transferred to Buenos Aires, where he continued as an employee of the Museum until his death. No more important findings were reported from Miramar and the evidence we have now shows that the findings of Miramar were another case of scientific fraud.



Figure 1: Lorenzo Parodi, sitting in the center, with a committee of leading experts convened to verify his findings in the coastal area of Miramar. Next to him to the left is Carlos Ameghino, also in the photograph are Hermann von Ihering, first to his right and Estanislao Zeballos third to his right.

