

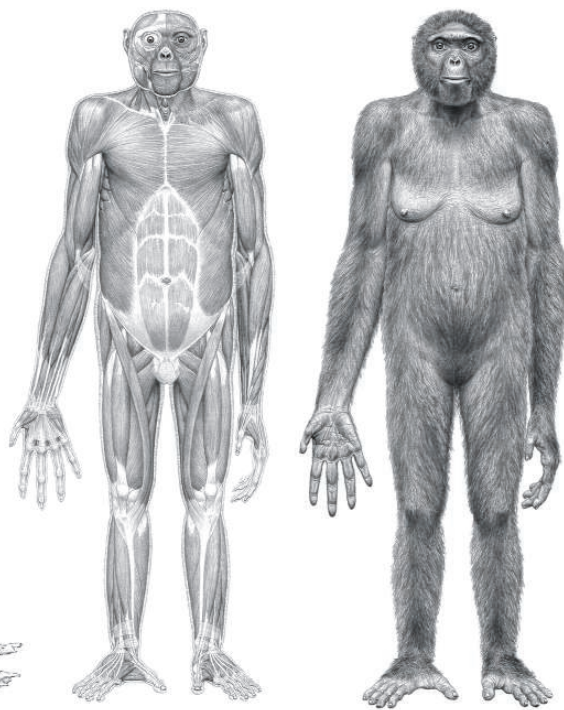
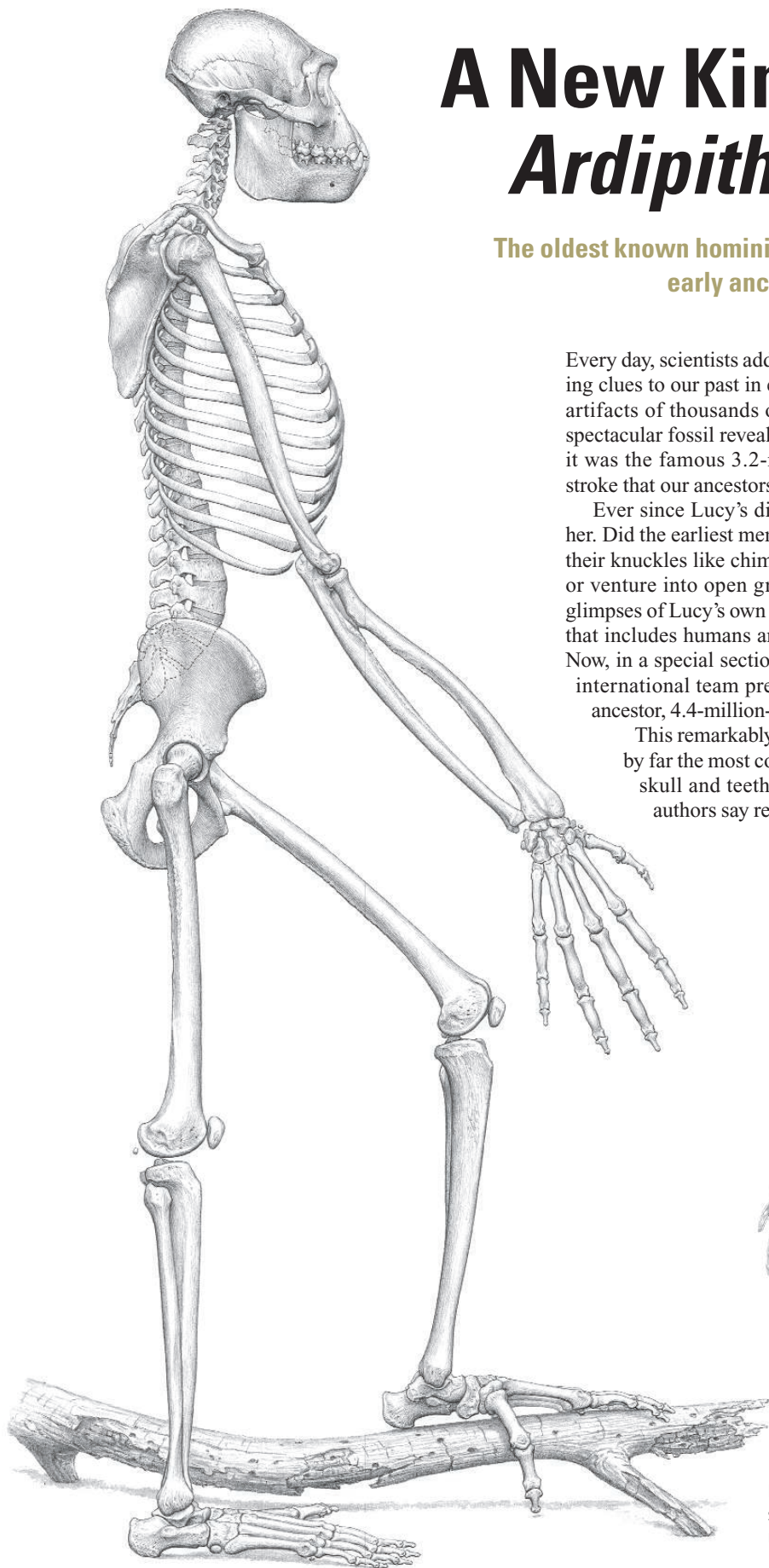
A New Kind of Ancestor: *Ardipithecus* Unveiled

The oldest known hominin skeleton reveals the body plan of our very early ancestors and the upright origins of humankind

Every day, scientists add new pages to the story of human evolution by deciphering clues to our past in everything from the DNA in our genes to the bones and artifacts of thousands of our ancestors. But perhaps once each generation, a spectacular fossil reveals a whole chapter of our prehistory all at once. In 1974, it was the famous 3.2-million-year-old skeleton “Lucy,” who proved in one stroke that our ancestors walked upright before they evolved big brains.

Ever since Lucy’s discovery, researchers have wondered what came before her. Did the earliest members of the human family walk upright like Lucy or on their knuckles like chimpanzees and gorillas? Did they swing through the trees or venture into open grasslands? Researchers have had only partial, fleeting glimpses of Lucy’s own ancestors—the earliest hominins, members of the group that includes humans and our ancestors (and are sometimes called hominids). Now, in a special section beginning on page 60 and online, a multidisciplinary international team presents the oldest known skeleton of a potential human ancestor, 4.4-million-year-old *Ardipithecus ramidus* from Aramis, Ethiopia.

This remarkably rare skeleton is not the oldest putative hominin, but it is by far the most complete of the earliest specimens. It includes most of the skull and teeth, as well as the pelvis, hands, and feet—parts that the authors say reveal an “intermediate” form of upright walking, consid-



From the inside out. Artist’s reconstructions show how Ardi’s skeleton, muscles, and body looked and how she would have moved on top of branches.

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