

# French co-discoverer of 'Lucy' dies at 87

June 22 2022

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Coppens called himself one of Lucy's 'daddies'

French paleontologist Yves Coppens, credited with the co-discovery of the famous fossil find known as "Lucy", died on Wednesday aged 87 after a long illness, his publisher said.

"France has lost one of its great men," publisher Odile Jacob tweeted,

adding that beyond his science skills, Coppens had also been "a talented writer, storyteller and non-fiction author".

He was, with Maurice Taieb and Donald Johanson, part of the team that found the most complete remnants of an *Australopithecus afarensis* ever discovered, in 1974 in Hadar, Ethiopia.

The team nicknamed the 3.2- million-year-old female hominid "Lucy" after the Beatles song "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" which they listened to while labeling the fossils.

Based on the large part of Lucy they found, 40 percent of her skeleton, the scientists were able to determine her height (one meter, 3.5 feet) and show that she was muscular and able to climb trees as well as walk upright.

Coppens, who was born in Brittany and was the son of a nuclear physicist father, co-signed six hominid discoveries over his career.

"At six or seven years old I already wanted to become an archaeologist," Coppens told AFP in 2016. "All my holiday time was spent at digs," he added.

Coppens was admitted to France's prestigious CNRS scientific center in 1956 when he was still only 22.

He began traveling to Africa from the 1960s, starting with Algeria and Chad.

His first major discovery came in 1967, a 2.6-million-year-old fossil in the Omo valley in Ethiopia.

Then in 1974 came the international expedition in Ethiopia's Afar

triangle that was to make Coppens, his friend and fellow Frenchman Taieb and Donald Johanson, an American, world famous for the discovery of Lucy.

Coppens often referred to himself as one of Lucy's "daddies" ("papas" in French).

For a long time after the find, which comprised 52 [bone fragments](#), scientists believed that she was a direct ancestor of humanity.

But this claim is no longer widely believed, and Coppens as well as other paleontologists came instead to view Lucy as a distant cousin of mankind.

Later Coppens ran digs in Mauritania, the Philippines, Indonesia, Siberia, China and Mongolia.

Back home, he became director of the Musee de l'Homme (Museum of Mankind) in Paris, was given the paleontology chair in the prestigious College de France, and joined France's Academy of Science.

He also won several prizes, served as an advisor on environmental questions to the French government, and wrote several books and more than a million [scientific articles](#).

Besides the discovery of Lucy, Coppens once told AFP, he was particularly proud to have "made an irrefutable link between the emergence of man and [climate change](#)".

As forests gave place to savannas, man stopped climbing trees, began to walk upright and needed to develop brain power to keep carnivores at bay, he said.

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Citation: French co-discoverer of 'Lucy' dies at 87 (2022, June 22) retrieved 15 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-06-french-co-discoverer-lucy-dies.html>

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