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Sommario/riassunto

This is an in-depth account of the fossil skull anatomy and evolutionary significance of the 3.6-3.0 million year old early human species Australopithecus afarensis. Knowledge of this species is pivotal to understanding early human evolution, because 1) the sample of fossil remains of A. afarensis is among the most extensive for any early human species, and the majority of remains are of taxonomically informative skulls and teeth; 2) the wealth of material makes A. afarensis an indispensable point of reference for the interpretation of other fossil discoveries; 3) the species occupies a time period that is the focus of current research to determine when, where, and why the human lineage first diversified into separate contemporaneous lines of descent.