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978-1-107-01995-9 - African Genesis: Perspectives on Hominin Evolution

Edited by Sally C. Reynolds and Andrew Gallagher

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Cambridge Studies in Biological and Evolutionary Anthropology 62

African Genesis: Perspectives on Hominin Evolution

The announcement of the first African hominin species, *Australopithecus africanus*, from Taung, South Africa in 1924, launched the study of fossil man in Africa. New discoveries continue to confirm the importance of this region to our understanding of human evolution.

Outlining major developments since Raymond Dart's description of the Taung skull, and, in particular, the impact of the pioneering work of Phillip V. Tobias, this book is a valuable companion for students and researchers of human origins. It presents a summary of the current state of palaeoanthropology, reviewing the ideas that are central to the field, and provides a perspective on how future developments will shape our knowledge about hominin emergence in Africa. A wide range of key themes are covered, from the earliest fossils from Chad and Kenya, to the origins of bipedalism and the debate about how and where modern humans evolved and dispersed across Africa and beyond.

SALLY C. REYNOLDS is an honorary research staff member of the Institute for Human Evolution, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa and Liverpool John Moores University, UK. She conducts research on the world-famous Sterkfontein Cave fossils and is interested in the relationships between geomorphology, mosaic habitats and extinction in hominins and other mammals.

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Foreword

As the Honorary President of the African Genesis symposium committee, it was a great pleasure to welcome delegates from many countries to a meeting that served two purposes: to celebrate the discovery of the Taung child, the type specimen of *Australopithecus africanus* and, secondly, to honour Professor Phillip Tobias, the doyen of palaeoanthropology in Africa, the continent from which humanity evolved.

It was awesome to hear presentations by Michel Brunet, Brigitte Senut and Martin Pickford, regarding the type specimens of *Sahelanthropus* and *Orrorin*, from Chad and Kenya respectively, dated between 6 and 7 million years before the present. To place things in perspective there was a lecture by David Begun on African hominin origins, with reference to Miocene primates. This was followed by colloquia on the origin, adaptations and radiations of australopithecines; on hominid evolutionary ecology in the Plio-Pleistocene; on origins and diversity of *Homo* in the early Pleistocene; and on the origins, evolution and behaviour of *Homo sapiens* in the Late Pleistocene.

Speaker after speaker paid tribute to Professor Tobias whose enthusiasm has evidently encouraged many palaeoanthropologists who have worked on hominid fossils curated by the School of Anatomical Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand. The collections at Wits have grown substantially since the description of the Taung child by Professor Raymond Dart in 1925.

The description of 'Little Foot', an extraordinary australopithecine discovered at Sterkfontein by Ron Clarke, Nkwane Molefe and Stephen Motsumi, was dramatic. Here was a palaeoanthropologist's dream. If *Sahelanthropus* and *Orrorin* were breathtaking, this new discovery in the Cradle of Humankind was even more so. A virtually complete skeleton, initially dated at 3.3 million years on the basis of fauna and palaeomagnetism, has been found *in situ* in the Silberberg Grotto and awaits formal description. Ron Clarke's presentation made South Africans proud of their heritage, and proud of the work that is being done in this part of the African continent.

In addition to formal lectures by invited speakers, there were many excellent posters presented by students who represent a new generation of palaeoanthropologists.

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I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the organising committee of the African Genesis symposium for their dedicated efforts that made the event the stunning success that it was. Thanks are also extended to the many sponsors, especially to De Beers, the Department of Science and Technology, the Anglo-American Chairman's Fund, the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the National Research Foundation, the Palaeontology Scientific Trust (PAST), First National Bank, the French Embassy in South Africa, the Canadian Embassy and the School of Anatomical Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand. Special thanks are extended to Sally Reynolds for her sterling efforts with regard to the publication of this compilation of papers, and to Cambridge University Press for accepting the proceedings of the African Genesis symposium as part of their Cambridge Studies in Biological and Evolutionary Anthropology series.

Francis Thackeray

Honorary President

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We would like to extend our thanks to the University of the Witwatersrand Medical School for hosting the conference and to all the participants who joined us for this marvellous event. Francis Thackeray, in his role as President of the Symposium, was a kind and genial host. We would like to acknowledge the hospitality of the Mayor of the City of Johannesburg, Amos Masondo and the staff of the Cradle Restaurant (Cradle of Humankind) for our delegates. We are grateful to Professor Laurence Chait for the bust of Phillip Tobias that has been installed at Sterkfontein.

Our generous sponsors made this symposium unforgettable; specifically we acknowledge De Beers, the Department of Science and Technology (DST), the Anglo-American Chairman's Fund, the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the National Research Foundation (NRF), the Palaeontology Scientific Trust (PAST), First National Bank, the French Embassy in South Africa, the Canadian Embassy and Rick Menell. The fossil exhibit was a highlight of the conference and Stephanie Potze and the staff of the Ditsong National Museum of Natural History (formerly the Transvaal Museum, Pretoria) are thanked for granting permission to display the original fossils of Sterkfontein's 'Mrs. Ples' and Raymond Dart's 'Taung child' together for the first time.

To all our colleagues and friends at Wits Medical School, including Colin Menter, Muhammad 'Spoc' Spocter, Meredith Robinson, Jason Hemingway, Manoj Chiba, Kavita Chibba, Ishana Ryan, Candice Hutchinson, Adhil 'Bugs' Bhagwandin and the late Heather White: thank you for your camaraderie, patience and loyal support.

Our thanks are due to Martin Griffiths and Lynette Talbot at Cambridge University Press for their invaluable help in the production of this volume. We also owe a special mention to Bernard Wood for his support of this project.

Finally, Sally would like to extend her gratitude to her parents, Chris and Jenni Reynolds for all their support of this volume. In particular, she would like to acknowledge the patience, encouragement and editorial support of her mother, Jenni.

Sally C. Reynolds
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