

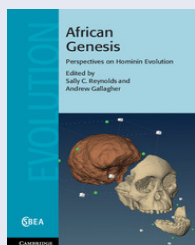


# 80 Years after Taung: A review of *African Genesis*

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80 Years after Taung: A review of *African Genesis*

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The sad news of the death of Phillip Tobias in July 2012 reached me as I was reading chapters from this wonderful academic volume, which was the outcome of a conference held in 2006 to celebrate Professor Tobias' 80th birthday. The conference in January of that year not only celebrated the 80th annum of Tobias, but also the 80th anniversary of the publication of the Taung skull. This was not the first of these great commemorative conferences. I was part of two previous conferences hosted by Tobias himself – in Johannesburg and Mmabatho in January 1985 and in Johannesburg and Sun City in April 1998. Both were gatherings of the 'who's who' of palaeoanthropology and both resulted in similar books of conference proceedings.<sup>1,2</sup>

The African Genesis symposium of January 2006 was intended to honour the long career of Phillip Tobias, but it also had a pair of very specific scientific objectives. The conference intended to review the major developments since the publication of the description of the Taung skull in 1925, and to gauge the consensus between the various disciplines that have contributed to the research on the origins of humans in Africa since that time.

The editors have divided the published conference papers into four broad clusters. Part 1 deals with new discoveries and new interpretations of the fossil evidence for the origin of the human family in Africa. This part takes us back to our distant hominoid roots in the Miocene and ends with the australopithecine fossils from Sterkfontein. Part 2 deals with the anatomy – focusing on brains, bodies and teeth of mostly the fossil remains of the australopithecines. Part 3 broadens out to look at the rise of the genus *Homo* and the special place that Africa holds in the origin of the genus. The last part casts a wider net, venturing into the realm of environment and behaviour rather than just fossilised human bones and their anatomy. Human ancestors are seen in their ecological context, and the remnants of human activity are discussed in the context of archaeological evidence for specific behaviours linked to activities and communication. The last paper in this series discusses the earliest evidence for intentional burial and speculates about the signs of humanity that burials evoke.

The papers are of a uniformly high academic standard, but this comes as no surprise, as the gathering in Johannesburg drew in a wide range of South African and international leaders in their fields. This was an impressive assembly of scientists and the academic output in the form of the papers included in this volume reflects that expertise and experience.

The book has taken a long time to come out, but as all of the authors were given an opportunity to update their conference presentations, the volume does not simply reflect the state of palaeoanthropological science as it was in 2006. Sally Reynolds emphasises this fact in the first paper of the series when she reviews the output of the conference. She notes a long list of new developments since 2006 that have added to, or sometimes even altered, the knowledge base as it was at the time of the conference – developments that are considered in the post-conference revision of many of the papers.

*African Genesis* is about the evidence for human evolution in Africa. It is scholarly and thorough and not intended to be an introduction to the topic. It reflects the detail of palaeoanthropological science as presented by experts in the field and the papers examine our state of knowledge on the subject. It is a fitting tribute to the late Phillip Tobias.

## References

1. Tobias PV. Hominid evolution: Past, present and future: Proceedings of Taung Diamond Jubilee International Symposium. New York: A.R. Liss; 1985.
2. Tobias PV, Raath MA, Moggi-Cecchi J, Doyle GA. Humanity from African naissance to coming millenia. Firenze: Firenze University Press; 2001.