Current issues in human origins research in South Africa

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ANY OF THE ARTICLES IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES WERE ORIGINALLY PRESENTED AT THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS ANNUAL MEETING IN APRIL OF 2002, IN BUFFALO, NEW YORK, AS PART OF A SYMPOSIUM ENTITLED 'AUSTRALOPITHECINES TO AMHS: CURRENT PALEOANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN SOUTH AFRICA'. THE GOAL OF THIS SYMPOSIUM WAS TO EXPLORE THE BREADTH OF RESEARCH CURRENTLY BEING UNDERTAKEN IN THIS COUNTRY. ALTHOUGH THERE HAVE BEEN SOME NEW ADDITIONS TO THIS BODY OF MATERIAL (AND A FEW DELETIONS), THE GOAL REMAINS UNCHANGED FOR THIS PUBLICATION.

These papers represent current paleoanthropological research in South Africa broadly construed — investigations into hominid taxonomy and morphology, ancient diets and environments, early culture, site formation and excavation are all included. South Africa has a unique fossil record that reflects important events, both ancient and recent, and therefore the temporal range of the papers is also broad — from the Pliocene to the late Pleistocene. This remarkable time depth contributes towards a better understanding of ancestors living three million years ago (Myr), somewhat later than previously thought.

The hard work of locating and excavating hominid fossil sites also plays a crucial part in all paleoanthropological studies, and articles by Berger, de Ruiter, Steininger and Hancox (276), Berger and Lacruz (279), and Reynolds, Vogel, Clarke and Kuman (283) describe important contributions to this endeavour. Lacruz, Ungar, Brink and Berger (286) also show how GIS analysis can offer important insight into palaeoanthropological field research.

South African researchers pioneered methods for reconstructing past diets and environments through stable light isotope analysis, and these methods are being used to understand the ancient environments of early hominids. Sponheimer and Lee-Thorp (273) use bovid data to show that, three million years ago, fossil hominids from Makapansgat in the Limpopo Province were probably living in a relatively wooded environment. In a companion paper, Luyt and Lee-Thorp (271) use data from Sterkfontein bovids to show that the major shift to open environments in this region occurred around 1.7 million years ago (Myr), somewhat later than previously thought.

Human ancestors started using stone tools around 2.5 million years ago, and the record of material culture in South Africa picks up soon thereafter, and continues in abundance to the present. Backwell and d’Errico (259) report on new bone tools from Swartkrans, c. 1.8–1 Myr, and suggest that robust australopithecines were the hominids using them. Kuman (251) discusses how the formation of sites can influence the preservation of Stone Age artifacts. Parkington (243) and Wadley (247) tackle the other end of the human lineage, addressing the difficult issue of recognizing the archaeological evidence for the emergence of modernity.

Also included in this special suite are articles which address important current issues in paleoanthropological research. The distinctive and distinguished South African tradition in paleoanthropology has spanned most of a century, and continues to be both vibrant and valued, while also facing significant challenges. Brain (235) reports on the expanded role of an important funding agency for South African paleoanthropologists. Sealy (238) offers a thoughtful perspective on managing museum collections of human remains. The museum’s role in promoting heritage awareness by means of materials for teaching and research is described on page 240. Van der Merwe (237) discusses how legislative issues surrounding research permits are negatively affecting the practice of archaeologists and palaeontologists.

I wish to thank all of those who participated in the original symposium in Buffalo, as well as those who have graciously added their contributions to this special issue. The topics covered here are by no means exhaustive — plenty of excellent, well-established research programmes as well as emerging research areas are not represented — but are indicative of the scope of research being pursued in South Africa. To the Reader: I hope you will enjoy this glimpse into South Africa’s remarkable ancient heritage, and will pass it on to others — especially young people. There is so much more to be done.

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