

Book Review

African Genesis. Perspectives on Hominin Evolution.

Edited by Sally C. Reynolds and Andrew Gallagher.
xvi + 582 pp. New York: Cambridge University
Press. 2012. \$135.00 (cloth), \$108.00 (ebook).

The late Phillip Tobias wrote “My conception must have been just about on the day that the Taung skull was announced to the world by Dart, on February 3, 1925” (Tobias et al., 2008). Eighty years later, some of the finest minds in paleoanthropology met in Johannesburg to celebrate both Taung and the extraordinary work of Professor Tobias. *African Genesis. Perspectives on Hominin Evolution* is a 27-chapter edited volume written by the participants of that meeting, and skillfully edited by Sally C. Reynolds and Andrew Gallagher, both of the University of Witwatersrand.

African Genesis is divided into four parts, arranged roughly chronologically. Part I deals with the earliest hominins. Part II consists of nine chapters devoted to the functional anatomy of hominins, from their brains (Falk and Holloway in Chapters 8 and 9, respectively) to their legs (Richmond and Jungers in Chapter 13), arms, and hands (Drapeau in Chapter 14). Part II also presents advances in methodology: digital reconstructions (Weber et al. in Chapter 16) and histological sectioning (Dean in Chapter 14). Part III deals with modern human origins with chapters on body size (Churchill et al., Chapter 17), and evidence for a fascinatingly complex origin of our species based on both fossil and genetic data (Wolpoff and Lee, Smith et al., Chapters 18 and 19, respectively). Part IV examines the environment of early hominins (De Ruiter et al., Chapter 22), and reviews the behavior of late Pleistocene hominins from the archaeological record (Chapter 26 by Wadley).

African Genesis is a good contribution to the paleoanthropological literature and it will undoubtedly find its way into many university libraries. However, the volume has shortcomings, and this is best illustrated by a closer look at Part I. Michel Brunet’s announcement of *Sahelanthropus* is one of the first things that got me interested in a career in paleoanthropology, making it both surprising and disappointing that there is nothing new to report a decade later. Perhaps more disappointing was the realization that this Chapter (4) is lifted almost verbatim from a previously published paper (Brunet, 2010). I was looking forward to reading whether Martin Pickford’s interpretation of the taxonomic position of *Orrorin* (Chapter 6) was at all modified by the detailed study of the *Orrorin* femur by Richmond and Jungers (2008; and expanded on nicely in Chapter 13 of this volume), only to find that this important paper, published in *Science* four years ago, was not even cited in Pickford’s chapter. But there are also some gems in Part I. Groves presents in Chapter 3 a fascinating examination of the fossil record in the context of how new species evolve. Clarke in Chapter 7 provides important historical background to the excavations at Sterkfontein in an optimistic tone, noting that future excavations at Sterkfontein are “full of promise.”

Ultimately, the problem with *African Genesis* is that I still do not know what this book is. Is it a *festschrift* in honor of Phillip Tobias? Of course, there already is a volume in honor of Tobias (Sperber, 1990) but if anyone

deserves two, it is Professor Tobias. If *African Genesis* is a *festschrift*, why not mention his name in the title? And where is the chapter on Olduvai, *Homo habilis*, or *Zinjanthropus*? Why is there no chapter on race or many of the other paleoanthropological topics to which Tobias contributed? And it would be an odd *festschrift* since only 2 of the 45 PhD students and post-docs Tobias mentored contribute to this volume. Where is the chapter by Moggi-Cecchi, Menter, Curnoe, or Grine? Even the contributors appear confused, since some explicitly frame their chapters around Tobias and his work, while seven chapters do not even mention his name anywhere in the text, references, or even the acknowledgements. So, if *African Genesis* is not a *festschrift*, what is it? The book jacket describes *African Genesis* as a “summary of the current state of paleoanthropology.” The title implies that the 27 chapters will sweep broadly across the entirety of the African continent. But there are so few contributions from anyone working north of Nairobi (i.e., Alemseged, Haile-Selassie, Kimbel, Leakey, Semaw, Simpson, Spoor, Suwa, Ward, White), one would have thought that Ethiopia did not yield hominin fossils until the Late Middle Pleistocene finds from Omo and Herto (Drapeau’s Chapter 14 the exception). The focus of *African Genesis* is clearly South Africa, which is appropriate given that this book was inspired by a meeting to celebrate two South African icons: Taung and Tobias. But there are several chapters that have little or even nothing to do with South Africa. This book therefore reads as a theme-less collection of disjointed chapters—some very good and some not.

This too would be acceptable if the goal of reporting the current state of the field was achieved. But it is unfortunately not. The gathering of minds that inspired *African Genesis* took place in 2006. Not surprisingly, then, the contributed papers vary widely in how they incorporate the discoveries of the last 6 years: *Ar. ramidus*, *Au. sediba*, the Woronso-Mille fossils; new discoveries at Koobi Fora and Ileret; new work on early hominin diet; the Neanderthal genome; Denisova; Flores. Some do a fine job of incorporating new finds and capture the current state of the field to the extent that a paper in an edited volume can. Others look as though they were written in 2006 and barely dusted off in the years that followed. This is not the fault of the editors, but is a general criticism of edited volumes—they are simply out of touch with the pace of discovery and are not the best vehicle for disseminating up-to-date information to our students and fellow researchers. These edited volumes are wonderful as *festschriften*, and can be excellent reviews around focused topics [e.g., Hartwig’s *Primate Fossil Record* or Begun and Ward’s *Function, Phylogeny, and Fossils* are examples on my shelf (Begun et al., 1997; Hartwig, 2002)], but *African Genesis* is neither a *festschrift* nor focused. A collection of the most current papers written by the same 45 authors who contributed to this volume could be quickly compiled into a course-pack for students and would not only be more up-to-date and perhaps more insightful than *African Genesis*, but would cost considerably less than \$135.

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