

**Obituary: Phillip Vallentine Tobias
(October 14, 1925 Durban – June 7, 2012 Johannesburg)**

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In the passing of Phillip Tobias last summer, the discipline of paleoanthropology has lost a giant and South Africa one of its most respected and revered scholars and human rights advocates (Fig. 1).

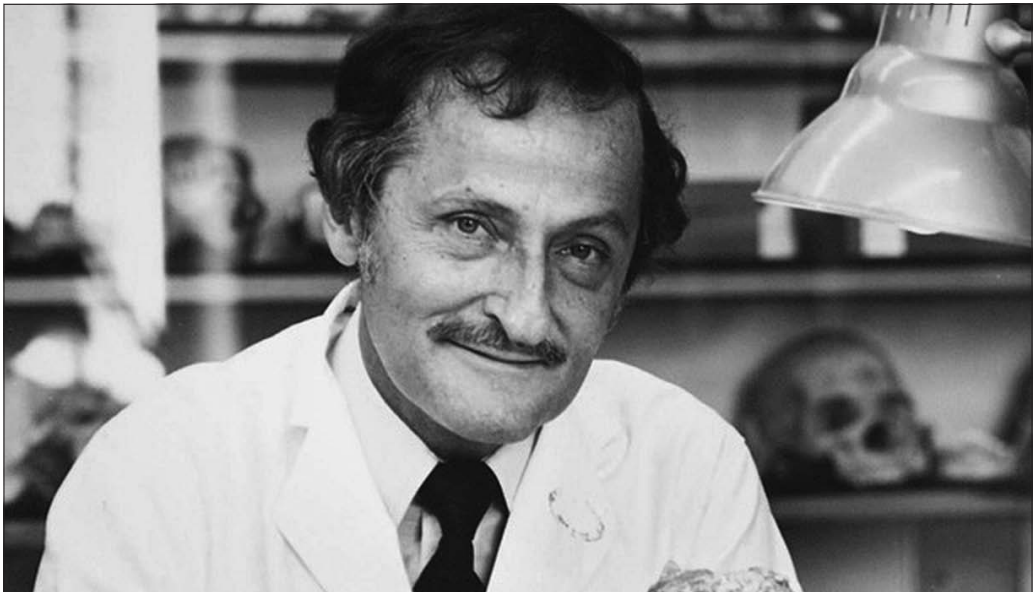


Fig. 1: Phillip Vallentine Tobias (1925 – 2012).

Tobias started his academic career as a medical student at the University of the Witwatersrand. Although fascinated by human evolution and by Raymond Dart, then Professor of Anatomy, Tobias conducted his Ph.D. in genetics. In 1950, while still pursuing his doctoral degree, he was invited by Raymond Dart to join the Department of Anatomy as a junior lecturer. Throughout his career and despite several brief forays to institutions abroad – including stays at Cambridge, University of Michigan and University of Chicago – he remained at the University of the Witwatersrand.

He received his Ph.D. in 1953 and soon embarked on research on human biology, variation and growth, focusing on the San of the Kalahari Desert, who he always regarded as a culturally highly specialized and advanced group of *Homo sapiens*.

His research interest took a new turn in 1959, when he was invited by Louis and Mary Leakey to study the newly discovered OH5 cranium, and later also all other Leakey fossil discoveries from Olduvai Gorge. This event marks the beginning of a lifetime of contributions to paleoanthropology. The same year, 1959, also marks the retirement of Raymond Dart and the appointment of Tobias as Professor and Head of the Department of Anatomy at the University of the Witwatersrand, a position he held until 1990.

His paleoanthropological work includes the influential first description and naming of *Homo habilis* (Leakey et al. 1964), which appeared in the journal *Nature* in 1964; his descriptions of OH5 (Tobias 1967a) and *Homo habilis* from Olduvai (Tobias 1991), as well as the description of specimens from 'Ubeidiya (Israel; Tobias 1966), Chemeron (Kenya; Tobias 1967b), Haua Fteah (Libya; Tobias 1967c), and Cave of Hearths at Makapansgat (South Africa). Tobias headed the excavation of the Sterkfontein site for many years, which was initiated in 1966 under the auspices of the University of the Witwatersrand, and published extensively on the hominin remains from that site (Fig. 2). He was instrumental in the recognition of the fossil cave sites Sterkfontein, Swartkrans, Kromdraai and their surrounding region as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1999, known as the 'Cradle of Humankind'. Among his many students are several well-known paleoanthropologists, including Ron Clarke, Fred Grine, Lee Berger, Charles Lockwood, as well as one of us, Friedemann Schrenk. Altogether he published more than 1100 articles in professional journals and is the author of 40 books, in diverse fields such as Physical Anthropology, Human Biology, Palaeoanthropology, Palaeodemography, Palaeoneurology, Human Genetics, and Biomedicine.

During the 1980ies, when southern and eastern Africa were the centers of African paleoanthropology, Phillip Tobias contributed a new pan-African perspective to Human Evolution: „It is not the South African fossils alone, nor yet the East African fossils alone, that may be expected to lay bare the secrets of human evolution. None would doubt, however, that the distributions of the early hominids embraced the intervening region. The vicinity of Lake Malawi about half-way between the northern Tanzanian sites and those of the Transvaal have not yet yielded early hominids. It is, however, most likely that they are there and will still be discovered” (Tobias 1980, 15). As his prophecy came true some years later (Schrenk et al. 1993), he was the first colleague to see the remnants of the earliest member of the genus *Homo* from Malawi in his office at Witwatersrand University in August 1991.

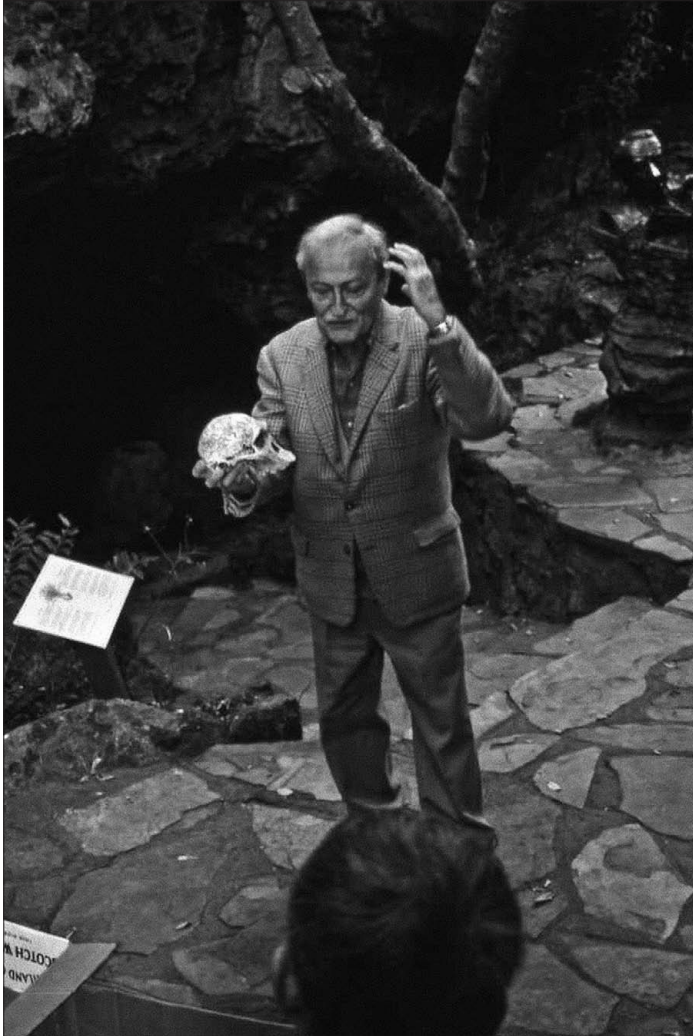


Fig. 2: Phillip Tobias at the site of Sterkfontein (South Africa), holding a cast of the famous fossil 'Mrs. Ples' (*Australopithecus africanus*), August 12, 1999. In the background a bronze-bust of Robert Broom. Photo: M. Bolus.

Beyond his contributions to science Tobias was a prominent activist against the apartheid regime and against the restriction of academic freedom at universities in South Africa during this time. Already in 1949 he initiated the first anti-apartheid movement in South African universities. He fought fervently against this regime through many of his activities, lectures and publications over 40 years. He also devoted great effort to repatriating the remains of Saartjie Baartman, a San woman, from France to South Africa. She was exhibited in a cage in Paris and London at the beginning of the 19th century and her skeleton and body cast was on display in France until 1981. Finally in 2002, her remains returned to South Africa, where her grave is a national monument today.

Phillip Tobias received 17 honorary doctorates from around the world and was a fellow of 28 Scientific Societies. He was nominated three times for the Nobel Prize. Among the many honors throughout his life was the Order of the Southern Cross, awarded to him in 1999 by President Nelson Mandela for his contributions to South Africa.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the Editor, N. J. Conard, for inviting this obituary for the *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Urgeschichte*. Additional information and personal memories of Phillip V. Tobias can be found in the thoughtful obituaries by Wood (2012), Grine and Ungar (2012), and Morris (2012).

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