

### Prehistoric Research in South Africa

In another column of this issue of *NATURE* (see p. 998) we publish an announcement of action taken by the Government of the Union of South Africa which will play a part of great importance not only in the advancement of the study of the prehistory of the sub-continent, but also ultimately, it may be asserted with confidence, in the elucidation of the whole problem of the distribution and development in culture of early man. The joint geological and archaeological survey of certain sections of the Vaal and Riet River valleys, for which arrangements are being made by the Directors of the Geological Survey and the Bureau of Archaeology of the Union, will cover an area which in the view of local archaeologists, and indeed, as has been shown notably and convincingly by the exploratory work of Prof. C. van Riet Lowe, is of cardinal importance in the correlation of geological and archaeological data in South Africa and the determination of their relation to evidence of climatic variation. As the survey will occupy fully the services of two geologists and an archaeologist for at least eight months, the undertaking will be costly; but the expenditure is justified, even in present financial conditions, by the fact that this key area will be inundated when the dams now in course of erection across these rivers have been completed.

THE study of the prehistory of South Africa has made great strides in an incredibly short time, thanks to the enthusiasm of local archaeologists and the insight with which they have applied and adapted to local conditions the lessons of European archaeology. When, however, the survey now initiated has been completed and its results, whatever they may be, have been made available for correlation with those of analogous studies in other parts of the world, where the records of pluviation and glaciation are being interpreted and brought into relation, the study of prehistory at large will be deeply indebted to the Government of the Union of South Africa for its public-spirited promotion of this investigation while opportunity still served, and to the South African Association for the Advancement of Science for its services to research in urging upon the Government the desirability of an undertaking which not only will promote understanding of the conditions of a problem of the first importance in human history, but also holds out every promise of being of crucial influence in the future of prehistoric studies.

### Sign Language as a Form of Speech

In his Friday evening discourse at the Royal Institution on December 13, Sir Richard Paget discussed "Sign Language as a Form of Speech". The clue to the relationship between bodily gestures and the gestures of the mouth which produce speech was given by Darwin in 1872—namely, in the sympathy of movement between man's hands and his mouth. Charles Dickens, thirty years earlier, in "Pickwick Papers", had noticed the same effect. The deaf mute sign language is natural and universal among deaf

deaf of all countries. The Red Indians of North America had a similar language of signs by which they could all communicate. In 1929, William Tomkins published his "Universal Indian Sign Language", which described 700–800 signs. The sign language of the aborigines of North-West-Central Queensland was described by Walter E. Roth in 1897. Garrick Mallery, writing in 1881 on the Indian sign language, described also the sign language of the Neapolitans. He concludes that all these languages are only dialects of a single language—the gesture speech of mankind. Recently, the Russian Academy of Sciences has discovered a sign language, used by women only, in Russian Armenia—also a pictographic script, twelfth to seventeenth centuries, which in many instances illustrates the sign language. Mr. Ivan Sanderson has recently discovered a sign language in the Cameroons; but hitherto gesture languages have been largely ignored. Many people think any alteration of spoken language is sacrilege; actually, all spoken languages are still primitive and unsystematic. Sign language is capable of great development as a universal language. Abstract ideas can be expressed in signs exactly as in spoken language—namely, by metaphorical reference to concrete ideas. Signs—unlike words—can be quantitative as well as qualitative, and shapes can be signed by direct imitation. In experimenting with the development of a new sign language, the vocabulary has been based on C. K. Ogden's 'Basic English' (850 words), but a much shorter sign vocabulary will suffice.

### Archaeological Museums

THE problem of the preservation and proper display of archaeological collections and the associated 'finds' from the excavation of archaeological sites is discussed by the Editor of *Antiquity* in the December issue of that journal. Briefly stated, the points to which he directs attention are two: the restrictions of space which preclude display according to modern methods, and differentiation to meet the respective needs of the 'ordinary' man and the student; and secondly, the necessity of a better organisation and distribution of the archaeological material available for exhibition. In connexion with the second point, he is clearly preoccupied with the position of the British Museum (Bloomsbury), and here, as he points out, the question of reorganisation and distribution involves legislation. Further comment on the allocation of space to archaeological exhibits may perhaps be postponed, pending the publication of a promised article in *Antiquity* which will deal with museum buildings.

THESE questions, however, serve to remind us that there are other aspects of the museum problem, which inevitably must be discussed, if, and when, the organisation of collections and their exhibition come under consideration. How far will it be advantageous, for example, to attempt to define the function of the local (that is, locally owned or municipally owned) museums, or to draft some scheme of co-operation between them and the