

Remains of humanity

Yoel Rak

The Origins of Modern Humans: A World Survey of the Fossil Evidence.

Edited by Fred H. Smith and Frank Spencer.

Alan R. Liss: 1984. Pp.590. \$70, £53.

IN THE late 1930s only the fact that a group of human fossil remains was discovered at the same site on Mount Carmel spared each specimen from being assigned to a different taxon — a “separate form of humanity”. There can be no better manifestation of the changes in approach and thought regarding the appearance of anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* than the articles offered in *The Origins of Modern Humans*. There has long been a need for such a volume, to bring together data on the enlarged fossil record and demonstrate the innovations in our methods of assessment of that record. One is reminded that almost 30 years have passed since the appearance of the last attempt to summarize the state of the art in this area, *Hundert Jahre Neanderthaler 1856-1956*, published in commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the first Neanderthal discovery.

Of the 11 contributions in the book, the first two are of a general nature. F. Clark Howell introduces matters with a comprehensive survey that in essence summarizes the contents of the whole volume. And as historical background and past ideologies must be considered in any attempt to assess theories of the appearance of modern humans, the second chapter, written by F. Spencer, concentrates on the history of the fossil discoveries and their interpretations. It is unfortunate, however, that the three main evolutionary models of early *H. sapiens* so clearly depicted by Spencer are again independently described several times in following chapters, creating a rather tedious redundancy.

The heart of the book consists of the nine remaining contributions, which are devoted to the skeletal remains found in various regions of the Old World and the New: Europe (covered by C.B. Stringer, J.J. Hublin, B. Vandermeersch; F. Smith; and D. Frayer); western Asia (E. Trinkaus); Africa (P. Rightmire, G. Brauer); east Asia and Australasia (M.H. Wolpoff, Wu X.Z. and A.G. Thorne); China (C.L. Brace, Shao X-q. and Zhang Z-b); and the Americas (R.C. Owen). The articles are to a large extent organized according to a similar pattern. Initially there is an up-to-date account of the fossil record and its chronology, thus allowing the reader to become acquainted with a number of little-known specimens, that being followed by interpretation of the fossils, primarily phylogenetic. The geographical scope of the book as a whole is both broad and well-balanced; as such it is refreshingly free of the Eurocentric bias that, as the editors

remind us, formerly plagued anthropological thought. Similarly, the range of approaches and opinions of the various authors reflects most of the current thinking on the topic. Only by close attention to the differences in approach to morphology and to the differing biological models of each author will the reader comprehend how the same group of specimens is considered “archaic”, “primitive” and “generalized” by some, and “advanced”, “specialized”, “derived” and “modern” by others.

The views of most of the contributors are already well known, but publication of their current research in one volume provides for the first time an overall perspective on the appearance of anatomically modern *H. sapiens*. Because of the range and diversity of the contributions, the references accumulated here by themselves constitute a veritable treasure trove.

Still, there are some criticisms. Detection of the polarity of a morphocline in the period under discussion is admittedly difficult because of the relatively short time span involved, the polymorphic nature of the species, and, lastly, the fully modern volume of the brain in the hominids considered (a criterion which had dictated polarity in earlier stages of human evolution). Nevertheless, more of the contributors could have attempted to deal with the question of evolutionary trends through a more rigorous functional interpretation of particular morphologies. Culture with its effects on morphology is the primary topic of those who do offer an adaptive interpretation. Such an approach, along with precise dating, might ensure that a greater degree of certainty could have been accorded the somewhat speculative statements on migration, local development and replacement.

The importance and overall quality of the book are not seriously marred by several other deficiencies. A world map showing all the sites mentioned would have been most useful (the two maps which do indicate sites unfortunately portray the same region and most of the same fossil locations), while the quality of some of the photographs and drawings leaves much to be desired. A greater effort could have been made to standardize the names of fossils and sites; the skull from Saldanha, for example, appears under three different names. Finally, although the book deals with the fossil evidence, some reference to genetic studies would have been in order.

The editors and contributors to this book have provided us with an enlightening review of the problems surrounding the origins of anatomically modern *H. sapiens*. Readers will need some prior familiarity with the fossil record, and with anatomy and population genetics. For such people this will be an invaluable source of reference. □

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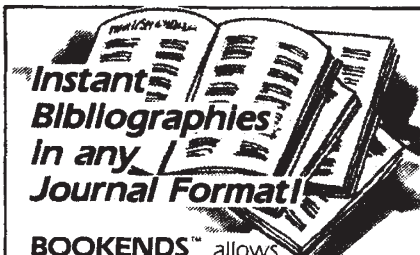
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