The Matjes River Shelter; Evidence in Regard to the Introduction of Rock Painting into South Africa

by

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With Two Textfigures and One Plate

The thirty feet deep deposits in the Matjes River Rock Shelter was first worked by Prof. T. F. Dreyer [1] and [2]. The material obtained was very significant but various circumstances have, together, contributed to make it advisable that the indications yielded by this cave be not unduly stressed until further light on the deposits could be obtained by confirmatory "digging".

Of such various circumstances the one which weighed most heavily with Dreyer was that the basis on which the skeletal material for submission to the late Sir Arthur Keith was chosen, was that of the abnormal — the disharmonious — crania which up to that date were described as "South African". A possible description by us might have been considered as undeserved criticism of that distinguished scientist.

In comparison with two other very large cave-deposits of that area (the Robberg Cave and the Zitzikamma Shelter), the Matjes River Shelter was in such condition that, in spite of the damage caused by two parties of University students and numerous vacation skull-diggers, Dr. A. C. Hoffman, Director of the National Museum, could, after he and the Assistant Director had cleared the surface "rubble" (during operations to enclose the site as a National Monument), report to the Historical Monuments Commission, that a very large part of the deposits, showing Dreyer's perfectly clear-cut "steps" cut into the mass, were still beautifully preserved. Luckily Dreyer had left a very large part of the deposits, and especially the lower layers, intact for future possible "control" work.

Drs. Hoffman and Meiring, after having cleaned up the site for fencing, could clearly demarcate the layers mentioned by Dreyer and were particularly interested in the following archaeological aspects:—

(1) The possible interruption of the Mossel Bay implements (in the layer with the "burnt" heads) by "Smithfield-like" implements;

(2) collection of further Wilton artifacts, and

(3) the nature of the "transition" between the "Wilton" layer and the layer with "large Bushmen" above it, i.e. M.R.B. or "Mytilus" layer.

SMITHFIELD INFLUENCE?

Dreyer's M.R.D. layer contains many skulls some of which tend to resemble the more ancient M.R.X. skull and are characterised by a cremation burial ceremony which here appears for the first time. Together with these are a long- and high-headed race, the best specimen, highly carbonised, being in the Transvaal Museum. This M.R.D. layer was largely worked for Smithfield implements, but the evidence for such was not strengthened at all, and thoughts of such influence can be dismissed.

THE WILTON LAYER

In a large area of deposits there must naturally be variations in detail from point to point; burials, when there are many, such as, for example, in the most cen-

tral part of the shelter with the best protection against weather, and other surface disturbances are often confusing, but the definition of the "Wilton" layer agrees well in depth, thickness and material contents with the layer described by Dreyer as "Wilton". The main difference is the absence of Mossel Bay points which were quite common (probably secondarily) at Dreyer's "churchyard" site.

A definition of the "Wilton" layer, as exposed during the 1953 excavations, is as follows: It is separated from the underlying M.R.D. layer by a two-inch basal band of closely adpressed Donax shells. Its top layer also contains a fair amount of Donax shells covered by a layer (one to one-and-a-half inches thick) of roof-debris. About 50 feet from the lower entrance of the rock-shelter, a large rock forms a depression in the "Wilton" layer but not interrupting the layer. Apparently the fall of the rock was contemporaneous with the formation of the layer of roof-debris. What shell is present between the limits of the "Wilton" layer is almost wholly Donax, whilst above the roof-debris the shell is almost wholly Mytilus. These "Wilton" people thus showed the same preference for Sand-mussel and distaste for Blue Mussel, which fish and present-day fishermen still show.*)

The "Wilton" layer was first described by Dreyer [2] as yielding some Mossel Bay type implements together with smaller artifacts in chalcedony and the chalcedony and quartz crescents so characteristic of all Wilton assemblages. The quartzite points can, we think, be removed from the list of artifacts in true association with other contents of the layer, as disturbances of surfaces can be accepted to have taken place — even deep disturbances — during the occupation of such surfaces.

Dr. Hoffman and the writer were very fortunate in the small section of the Wilton layer which was chosen for intensive investigation. There was obtained a very fine collection of crescents and other microliths, and besides increasing the numbers of the known types, added to the list of these.

Dreyer [2], according to his finds in 1933, calls the layer C — "Wilton without pottery." In 1953 only one small potshred was found approx. one inch square. All the layers are without pottery and this single piece was found in the uppermost portion of the Wilton layer. The ostrich egg-shell must, however, have been the water-container of the Matjes River Wilton — as it still is among the desert-living hybrid Bushmen of today — and both in 1933 and 1953 such containers were found, complete or in pieces. One, which was recovered in 1953 had a perforated hole at one end in which a bone "tube" or pipe could have been inserted and such a pipe with the correct diameter was recovered from this layer. We are thus strongly of the opinion that this tiny potshred was brought into the shelter by people later than the "Wilton" so that it is in false association with the "Wilton" layer — just as the Mossel Bay-type points are. I may point out here that the Mytilus layer, immediately above the place where the potsherd was unearthed, had been extensively disturbed by indiscriminate "skull-diggers."

NAME: "WILTON"?

If one is prepared to call any and every lithic industry which has microlithic crescents "Wilton", then the M.R.C. layer must also be called that. The chalcedony and quartz microliths of the M.R.C. layer do not include all the forms usually associated with Wilton, but there are sufficient to justify the use of the term "Wilton". There are small crescents — some perfect in shape and execution — in chalcedony and clear quartz, blunt-backed blades, points, burins, chisels, scrapers [both thumbnail (scarce) and semicircular], and some others which are somewhat indeterminate. The collection is so informative that we wish to call this **Wilton** —

*) It may be of interest to note that the rocks in the sea near the shelter are nearly completely denuded of Blue-mussel today, but the "Mytilus" layer in the shelter must contain several tons of Blue-mussel shells

the Matjes River Wilton.*)

In addition to the ostrich egg-shells used as water-containers and the microlithic implements, the following tools may also be listed:—

(1) **The perforated stone.** The bored stone, here somewhat cylindrical with the hole bored from both ends — thus with a constriction in the middle of the bored hole — is, at Matjes River, found for the first time in the Wilton layer. The Mytilus layer has numerous flattish bored stones, but generally are badly made and from a much softer rock, a laminated shale which readily disintegrates into flat sheets. Such cultural contacts between the Wilton and the large Bushmen will be mentioned also later.

The weighted digging stick indicates that a part of the food of the South Africans then consisted of "veldkos" (field food), e.g. "uintjies" (*Moraea edulis*), "baroe" (plants of the genera *Fockea* and *Cyphia*), etc., which was a most enjoyable item of the evening meal for Western Province children of fifty years ago (and in places still is).

(2) **Indications of the use of Bow and Arrow**. The food of the Matjes River Wilton man was not that of a "strandloper" and remains of small buck, dassie, bushpig, carnivores, and the Cape Buffalo, prove his ability as a hunter with bow and arrow. Whether he also made use of snares and of pit-falls is a matter for speculation but the Wilton man was more of a hunter than the later strandlopers.

Arrow-straightener. The Hoffman-Meiring excavation has produced a type of arrow-straightener that is, we think, new (fig. 1). It has transverse grooves around it, so that the arrow can be tied in position and then dried, perhaps with a moderate degree of heat.

Bone implements. Besides the bone and ivory implements listed by Dreyer [2], the latest excavation (of 1953) produced a very large assortment of bone and ivory needles and awls necessary for the preparation and use of the skins of mammals obtained in the chase. Some of these needles could have been used as arrow-tips. Many of the awls are made from fish-bones but only exceptionally from the bones of birds (the 4 bone pipes are from bird bones) although most of the bone awls recovered from the Mytilus layer were nearly solely manufactured from such bones. Further bone-implements for scraping the skin were also procured and Dreyer [2], has already drawn attention to these. Blunt-backed knives for skinning and burins, with which grooves could have been cut for fixing crescent-barbs, are present in the assemblage and there seems very little doubt indeed, that the Wilton man was proficient in the use of bow and arrow.

(3) **Rock-painters.** Dreyer [2] and Meiring [3] have already pointed out that the M. R. Wilton people must have been painters on rock. The inclusions in the layer which leave one no alternative whatever but to accept them as painters are:—

(a) The prescence of slightly hollowed flat slabs, red with ochre, accompanied by long, oval quartzite pebbles with the one end of each worn down to a smooth flat surface by use. This type of grinder is similar to that of the present-day "Bushman" — not like that of the Bantu.

(b) Pieces of haematite, limonite and carbonite of iron have been found. The Hoffman-Meiring excavation also produced a piece of an almost black gum about the size of a one inch cube, which seems rather too brittle to have been used for fixing the crescent barbs in the arrowhead but may perhaps have been a constituent of paint.

(c) Besides the oval and triangular objects in slate (paint palettes) obtained by Dreyer [2] and figured by Meiring [3], the 1953 excavation yielded five more palettes. They were also of good quality slate but only one of the 1953 ones is, as regards symmetry and finish (but considerably smaller), equal to the 1933 oval. The other four 1953 palettes are somewhat lacking in symmetry and are not so perfectly alike in thickness throughout.

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*) The contents of this layer recovered in 1953 are so informative that a full description, embodying the material already described by Dreyer (2), will be published later on.

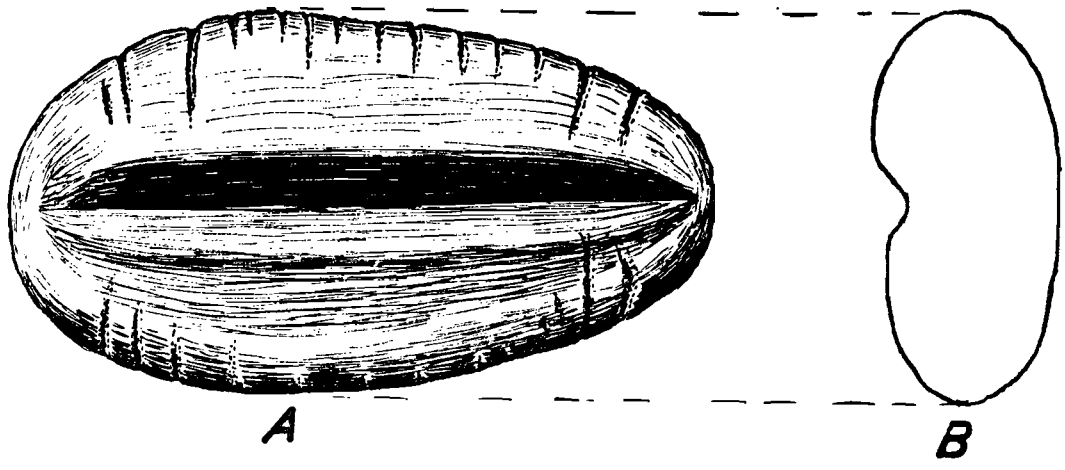

FIG. 1.

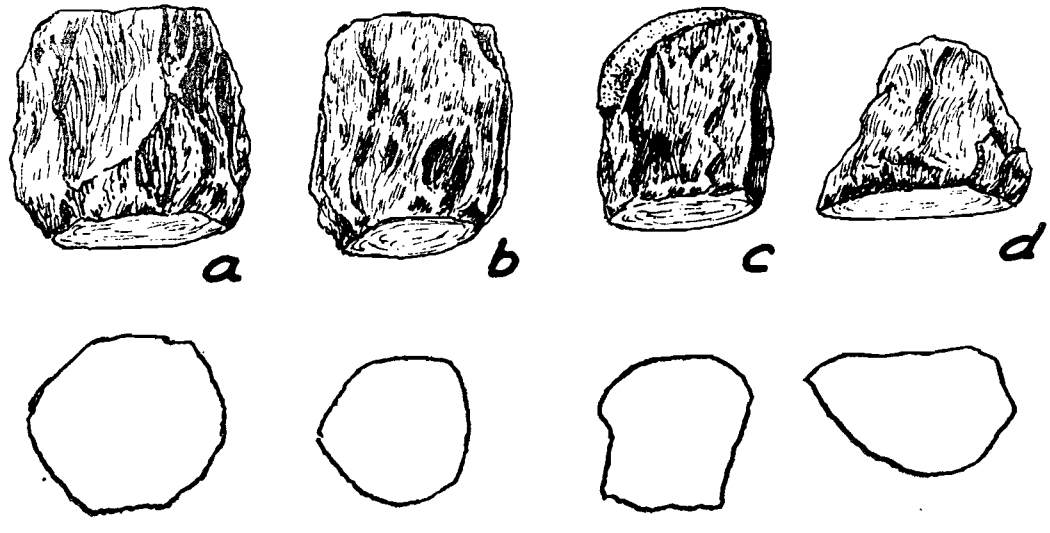

FIG. 2.

TEXTFIGURE 1.— A. *View of arrow-straightener, from above.* B. *Cross-section.*
TEXTFIGURE 2.— *The four 1953 paint-pestles with outlines of rubbing surfaces a. and b. have rubbing surfaces at both ends; c. upper end has original rock surface; d. pestle of haematite.*

Palettes are present in the M.R.B. (Mytilus) layer, but the "Bushman" copies of these palettes are thicker, comprised of laminated shale and irregular in outline, approximating towards the circular.

Such palettes have before now been found in South Africa and described, amongst others, by Peringuey, Hewitt and Heese, and have also been referred to as associated with Rock-paintings.

(d) The 1953 excavators also brought to light four very small pestles, two with two opposite ends flat, with three of coarse sandstone and one of haematite (fig. 2). It is not easy to decide the exact purpose of these but their rough texture suggests an abrasive action for them; whether this was in relation to the primary finishing off of the smooth, flat surfaces and the rounded edges of the palettes; or whether they could have been intended to smooth rough places within the surfaces to be painted; or whether they were for mixing and smoothing the paint on the palettes can not be determined. It seemed suggestive, however, that one was found contiguous to a palette.

CULTURAL STATE

This Wilton group of people can by no means be said to be uncultured if one takes into consideration:—

(1) The trouble and "loving" thought expended on their burials, vide Dreyer [2];

(2) the size, symmetry and elegance of their slate palettes, vide Meiring [3];

(3) the comparative high quality of their ornamentation — ivory and bone "aprons", scalloped nacre pendants, ivory beads, ostrich egg-shell beads, ivory and bone skin-fasteners, and the pendants of bush-pig teeth, vide Dreyer [2] and Plate 1;

(4) the comparative high quality of the bone awls and needles, together with the stout, chisel-ended bones imply a high development in the curing and preparation of skins, possibly for the making of clothes.

The facts so far mentioned leaves us no option but to deduce that:—

(1) The Matjes River Wilton skeletons represent a group of people who were **Rock-painters.**

(2) As a group. they show such an eye for form, symmetry and finish that the art of naturalistic painting — and probably the oldest type of rock paintings — should not have been beyond their abilities.

(3) They were followed, in the occupancy of the shelter, by a group of Bushmen, who were of fair size and not yet pygmies. This group is extra-ordinarily homogeneous although one or two do show individual characters not usually recognised as Bush — they are the M.R.B. group. Hybridisation on a small scale may be assumed since cultural contact (vide bored stones and palettes) certainly did take place but not in the shelter as the Wilton here ends abruptly and the new M.R.B. occupants apear as abruptly.

(4) The choice of a bad material (laminated shale) by M.R.B. people could have been a forced one; but the form and finish of the bored stones and of the palettes do not encourage one to expect much aptitude along other lines from these people.

(5) If the claim that the more superficial paintings where paintings are superimposed, are not up to the standard of the "covered" ones, then the results obtained at Matjes River would indicate that the more recent, less artistic, paintings are derived from Bushmen who had had cultural, and perhaps also racial, contacts with the true painters — such as are indicated by the Wilton people of the Matjes River Shelter.

WHO WERE THE MATJES WILTON PEOPLE?

The better preserved skulls from the M.R.C. or Wilton layer have been fully described by Meiring [3], with drawings, with measurements for each particular skull as well as for the group of skulls as a whole and with the usual indices.

It must be remembered that at the time the present writer did this work, Human Morphologists here, and in London, had peopled South Africa in pre-historic times

(the term Pleistocene became almost meaningless) with a hotch-potch of "San", "Boskopoids", "Cape Flats Man", "Australoloids", "Springbok Flats Man", "Primitive Korannas", "Matjes River Man", "Rhodesian Man", and "Florisbad Man", so that a thesis adding Mediterranean, Aurignacian and Negro to the already long list would almost certainly not have achieved its purpose.

It was nevertheless pointed out (Meiring [3]), that the Wilton group included Caucasoids (particularly Skull no. 4), and attention was drawn to the Negroid skulls (Nos. 5 and 8 — particularly the dolichocephalic No. 5). A third type, represented by Nos. 1 and 6, of a known race was that of the Cro-Magnon (according to Boule [4]), they still show in the present-day Guanches). The other skulls showed a mixture of characters of these three types and the measurements and indices obtained for the whole group were not so far removed from those of the Aurignacians, the painters of Europe (and probably also of North Africa), that the non-South African painters of Matjes River could not be represented as the painters from the North with some, recent, negro admixture on their way South.

In fact, even in Europe the rock painters seem to have been a very mixed race if we accept the verdict of the Encyclopaedia Brittanica — 14th edition, page 234. Under **Aurignacian Culture** we read: " . . . and develops in France into the rich Middle Aurignacian, the tools of which often show a wonderful fluting technique difficult to copy even today . . .

"The tools of the period are quite unlike the Mousterian ones. Gone are the endless side-scrapers with "resolved" chipping. Instead we have beautifully made end-scrapers, keeled or otherwise, in which percussion flakes rise fanwise to a central point. Burins are numerous, and points having a sharp working edge and blunted back appear and develop . . . and also some bone tools among which the bone point with a split base is common . . .

" Ceremonial burial is known, the bodies being often buried in red ochre with beautifully made implements as well as ornaments and necklaces, sometimes made from sea-shells, which have been imported from a considerable distance. The skeletons are of more than one type, denoting either an intermixture of races or the development in situ in Europe or elsewhere of variations of the original stock. These variations, all covered by the generalized term 'neoanthorpic race' include Cro-Magnon man, Combe-Capelle man and perhaps, too, the Grimaldi 'infants', an old woman and young man, who are said to possess some negroid characterstics."

As regards the Wilton of the Matjes River it must be borne in mind that the Culture needs revision and classification almost as much as does the Middle Stone Age. One does not, on archaeological grounds, know whether to expect its makers to be an offshoot of the Aurignacian-Azilian of Europe (which at one site at least, vide the Encyclopaedia Brittanica, seem to grade into each other without apparent external influence), or of the Capsian of North Africa.

The Matjes River skeletal does not allow us to determine this question as to the European or North African origin of the Rock-painting Art of South Africa. We, however, have certain pointers:—

(1) The collection as a whole shows perhaps too many modern Negro characters

(2) The miscegenation, which is obvious, is rather of a late date, and is between types which can not only be called neanthropic but modern.

(3) Although the mean measurements and co-efficients do approximate to that of the Cro-Magnon skulls of Europe, the whole group can, with a few exceptions, be grouped into skulls which are more, and others which are less negroid (or Caucasoid — but not so clearly in the latter case).

(4) The racial miscegenation did not take place on a footing of equality.

There is one skull which would not be out of place in a collection of skulls from the South Western Mediterranean. Its supra-orbital ridges are typical European, or shall we say, neither negroid or Bushman-like; the orbital processes of the frontals project straight down, the interorbital space is narrow and the orbits are typical European; the nasal bones project forwards and show a fairly marked nasal ridge;

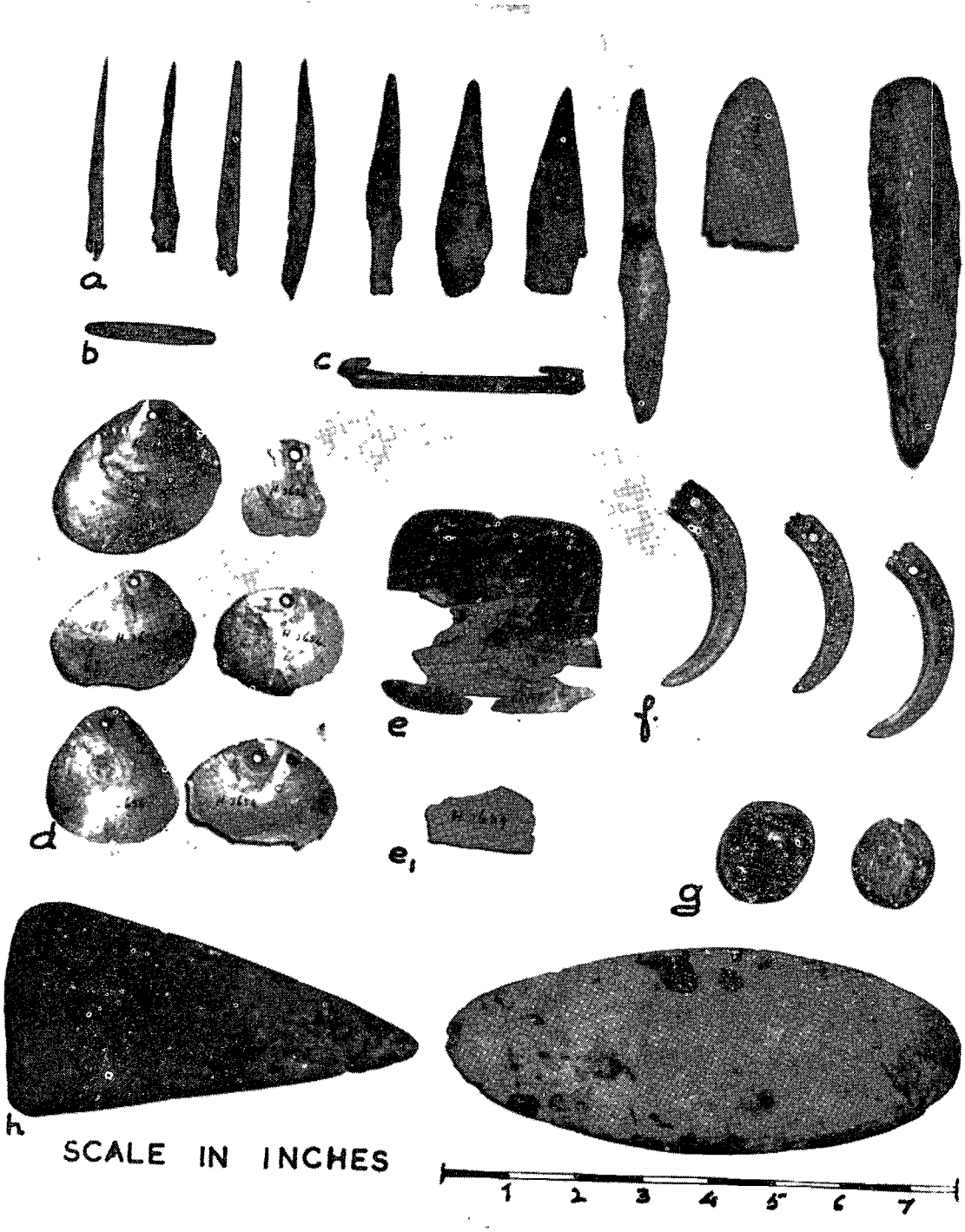

PLATE 1.— Cultural objects associated with Skull No. 4. a. Awls and skin scrapers, of bone; b. Ivory skin-pin; c. Peculiar double-headed "crochet-needle", of bone; d. Six shell pendants with scalloped edges; e. Ivory "apron" with incised edge; e1. Small piece of an "apron" of bone; f. Three pendants made from teeth of Potamochoerus sp.; g. Two ivory beads; h. Slate paint palettes.

the nasal aperture has its widest diameter well above the lower border of the nasal cavity; the jaws are orthognathic; the chin is marked by a strongly developed ⊥-shaped chin-bone; the squamous suture is high and well-curved; the forehead is rather steep and perhaps somewhat narrow; the parietal region is well-developed but nobody would call the cranium pentagonal or infantile — it is well-rounded.

This skull, No. 4 of Meiring [3], is the skull which Dreyer [2] found associated with his paint palette, the only triangular palette or "paint-knife", the necklet of ivory bored "beads", pig canines, nacre pendants with scalloped edges, and with the pelvic apron with scalloped edges, Plate 1. This burial assemblage could very well be that of a rock-painter, bearer of the Art of painting from some far-removed area round the Mediterranean Sea.

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4) Boule, M. (1923): "Fossil Men."