A short article in The Friend of 26 July 1932 announced a major scientific discovery which was to put Florisbad (and Bloemfontein) firmly on the map for physical anthropologists and archaeologists. Originally named Homo helmei after Captain R. Egerton Helme who had helped Dreyer with funding for his excavations in the late 1920s, the Florisbad skull immediately became a part of the debate on the evolution of modern humans in sub-Saharan Africa.

Dreyer published a detailed description of the skull in The Friend of 13 August 1932. He concluded his article with:

... at the time that Europe was inhabited by the Neanderthal people, South Africa had a somewhat related but, at least in some ways more human (in the sense of resembling Homo sapiens) race. A close study of the stone implements of this race may indicate that it was, or was related to, the ancestral form of the Cro-Magnon race.

Dreyer refined his view, and in 1947 published a detailed comparison of the Florisbad and Matjies River skulls, in which he postulated that the evolutionary line in southern Africa proceeded from the Florisbad skull through the Matjies River people to modern Bushman. Matjies River is a Later Stone Age cave site, containing numerous burials, on the southern Cape coast which Dreyer had excavated in the early 1930s. Although it was likely that the Florisbad skull was at the same evolutionary level as the Neanderthals in Europe, it was not on that line (for a further discussion of Dreyer’s theory see Brink’s article in National Museum News no. 31 of 1986). Dreyer’s views were in contrast to those of people such as Drennan who considered that Florisbad was an African variant of the Neanderthals.

In 1983 R.J. Clarke reconstructed the cranium and discovered that Dreyer’s 1932 reconstruction was not completely accurate. In the earlier reconstruction the face was small and looked more modern, whereas in Clarke’s reconstruction the face is much larger and has an archaic appearance. This of course has implications for previous work on the skull, especially as many of the measurements on which these studies are based have been changed.

The Florisbad skull is now accepted as an archaic Homo sapiens. This means that it is representative of people who
were almost, but not entirely, modern. Fully modern people appeared in southern Africa about 100,000 years ago, so Florisbad is probably somewhere in the region of 120,000 years old.

We do not know very much about the individual whose skull has been the focus of so much attention over the last 60 years. The skull was part of a natural accumulation of fossil bones in an old spring eye, and the sex, age at death, and the manner of death cannot be established. However, we do know that the body was scavenged after death by hyaenas as the skull still bears the traces of chewing by these animals.

The Florisbad skull continues to be of interest in the debate on the development of modern humans in sub-Saharan Africa. In the last couple of years alone two American PhD. students have visited the Museum to examine the cranium, and no study of the southern African hominid evolution is complete without reference to Florisbad. The 25th July 1932 was an important day, not only for Prof. Dreyer and the National Museum, but also for Science.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


