

Eminent South African anthropologist Tobias dies

June 7 2012, by DONNA BRYSON



In this photo taken Wednesday July 26, 1995, leading South African palaeo-anthropologist, Phillip Tobias, displays his latest archeological discovery in his lab in Johannesburg. Tobias died Thursday June 7, 2012 aged 86, after a three-month illness. (AP Photo/Adil Bradlow-file)

(AP) — Anthropologist Phillip Tobias, internationally renowned as an authority on human evolution and remembered for his love of humanity, died Thursday, South Africa's University of the Witwatersrand said. He was 86.

In a statement, the university where Tobias studied and then taught and conducted research until the 1990s, said he died in a Johannesburg hospital after a long illness.

The university said Tobias's name was synonymous with research at the

Sterkfontein caves near Johannesburg where an ape-man's skeleton — millions of years old — known as Little Foot was discovered. The area, now a World Heritage site, is where over a third of all known early hominid fossils have been found.

Lee R. Berger, who studied under Tobias and went on to follow him as the leading researcher in his field at the university, compared Tobias to famous paleoanthropologists the Leakeys — a family of scientists who have made significant anthropological findings in East Africa— and said he excelled in a variety of scientific fields beyond the study of the evolutionary links between primates and humans. Tobias was involved in early genetic studies and taught anatomy to generations of top South African doctors.

"He was a polymath and was absolutely of that classical generation," Berger said.

Nick Barton, of Oxford University, said Thursday that Tobias "was one of the greats in human evolutionary studies."

A South African colleague, archaeologist Lyn Wadley, said Tobias also should be remembered for speaking out against apartheid.

In 1986, during a period that saw clashes between anti-apartheid activists and the white racist government's security forces that some historians have compared to civil war, Tobias spoke at a university meeting that drew thousands of students and staff members. He and others urged the government to free detainees and end a state of emergency that gave it broad powers to crack down on protests and dissent.

"Today, in the emergency, freedom is under siege as never before," Tobias said.

Wadley said Thursday: "The thing that I really admired so much is that during the darkest ages of South Africa, when he could have got a job anywhere in the world, he chose to stay here, because this was his country, where he could make a difference."

Wadley said Tobias would ask his first-year students to send him their photographs before classes started. He would memorize names and faces, and greet scores of students by name during the first class, she said.

"That was sort of symptomatic of his love of people," she said.

In a statement, South African President Jacob Zuma lauded Tobias for leading the nation's efforts to reclaim the remains of Saartjie Bartmann, a South African slave who was taken to Europe and displayed in life and then in death as an ethnological curiosity — known as the "Hottentot Venus" — in the 19th century.

Bartmann's fate has come to symbolize Europe's arrogance and racism in its relationship with Africa. After becoming South Africa's first black president in 1994, Nelson Mandela asked that her remains be taken from a French museum and brought to South Africa. After years of negotiations led by Tobias, Bartmann was brought home in 2002 and buried in southeastern South Africa. Her grave has been declared a national heritage site.

"We have lost a renowned scientist, a scholar and a unique human being," Zuma said of Tobias. "Our country remains eternally proud of his work."

Berger said he and his mentor had a father-son relationship, and, as fathers and sons sometimes do, once had a falling out. They had reconciled by 2009, and Tobias was among the first people to whom

Berger showed newly unearthed remains nearly 2 million years old that were evidence of a previously unknown species that scientists say fit the transition from ancient apes to modern humans.

"He cried," Berger recalled. "It was what he'd been waiting to see discovered in southern Africa.

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