
Obituary

J. Desmond Clark: 1916–2002

A Tribute

No one who has attempted to grasp the elements of African prehistory or theorize about the course of prehistoric events in Africa from human origins to the emergence of agriculture can miss coming face to face with the prodigious and influential writings of J. Desmond Clark (born in London, April 10, 1916). He was a leading force in shaping thoughts and directing research through his site reports, review papers, talks, discussions, and numerous meetings (with 18 books and over 300 papers in journals and collected works to his name). He organized and presided over the section for prehistory during the Second Pan-African Congress in 1952 in Algeria. Three years later he organized the Third Pan African Congress in Livingstone, which earned him center stage in African prehistory, a place he continued to dominate for the rest of his life.

Clark landed his first job as curator of the Rhodes-Livingstone Memorial Museum in Livingstone after graduating from Cambridge in 1937. He was an indefatigable archaeologist; as soon as he assumed this position, he began to organize museum displays and a field project in Zambia. With the outbreak of WWII, as a sergeant in a field ambulance, he began to record and collect information on sites in the Horn of Africa. After the war, Clark began a research project at Kalambo Falls, in 1953. His excavations were meticulous and innovative. He pioneered an environmental approach to Africa's past—an approach that has since become a dominant streak in African archaeology.

Clark's prominence was felt in the 1960s, influencing a new generation of African prehistorians, when he became a professor at the University of California, Berkeley. Together with F. Clark Howell, Sherwood L. Washburn, and later Glynn Isaac, he formed a formidable team that defined what African prehistory was at that time. In 1967, the tenets of this school became evident in *Background to Evolution in Africa* (edited by geologist Walter Bishop and Clark).

Clark's regional interests encompassed the whole continent and beyond. From the Air Mountains of the Central Sahara to the Porc Epic in Ethiopia, and from Africa to China and India, Clark's intellectual vigor and perceptive outlook made an indelible impact. Clark revealed his intellectual breadth, command of details, and

remarkable ability to create a seamless synthesis in *Prehistory of Africa*, published in 1970. After his retirement in 1986, Clark's sharp mind and amazing memory, in contrast to his failing eyesight, endowed him with a legendary aura at the end of his life; his presence at conferences and symposia was a source of delight, respect, and veneration.

Fekri A. Hassan
Editor



Fig. 1. Desmond Clark and Louis Leakey at the 3rd Pan African Congress, 1955 (Courtesy of The George and Mary Foster Anthropology Library, University of California, Berkeley).