

# A Philatelic View of Early Man

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by George Rohrer

Although the following words do not emanate from the Delphic or Cumaean Oracle, they do reflect a question addressed to an important oracle – in OWA volume III, No. 2. A reader, noting in our journal the 20 cent value from a Cuban set, expressed curiosity about the rest of the issue. This 1697 set of seven stamps is listed in Stanley Gibbons as 1462-1468.

The subject is fossil man. The figures, reconstructed from skeletal remains, are identified at the bottom of the stamps. This is done quite clearly. Yet one not conversant with anthropologist jargon may be bewildered by the unfamiliar terms and frustrated in the effort to fit the pieces together. When early searchers were rewarded with the discovery of a fossil jaw or skull cap, they eagerly presented each newly found creature with a new name. Inevitably there emerged a dazzling array of freshly invented species and genera. Present day anthropologists tend to funnel the various names into convenient summaries – a practice welcomed by both scientists and laymen.

The 1 centavo stamp (SG 1462) is labeled “Homo habilis” and suggests the tool marker.

The 2 centavos (SG1463) bears the designation “Australopithecus”.

The 2 c. “Australopithecus” is the earliest creature of the set. Its numerous varieties are now consolidated into an “Australopithecine” group. Very few scholars accept his as “Man”. The more advanced “Homo habilis” was his contemporary for a while, thus was not a descendant. These types all lived in Africa between 500,000 and 4,000,000 years B.P. (before present).

The Cuban 3 centavos (SG 1464) represents “Pithecanthropus” or Ape-man, named by Eugene du Bois, the Dutchman who found the remains in Java.

The 4 centavos (SG1465), titled “Sinanthropus pekinensis”, is, of course, Peking Man, discovered in China. Again modern anthropologists simplify the nomenclature and consider Java and Peking Man as “Pithecanthropines”, along with others of similar type. They are traditionally dated at half a million years B.P. The descriptive Latin designation is “Homo erectus”.

The 5 centavos (SG 1466) stamp bears the legend “Hombre de Neandertal”. Bones and artifacts of Neanderthal Man have been found extensively in Germany, France, Iraq, Gibraltar, Palestine, Rhodesia, and Southern Russia.

There is no need to remind our readers that this fellow who lived 100,000 years ago is now known to have possessed much higher intellect, skills and general culture than was

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once believed. It is not surprising that modern classification endows him with the status of “Homo sapiens neanderthalensis”.

Concession to the vanity of modern man and the ghosts of his Cro-Magnon forebear is granted by labeling him “Homo sapiens sapiens” in the Tree of Life.

If we ignore considerable ramification within the basic stages, we come up with this uncluttered chronological list:

Pre-man	= Australopithecines
Homo habilis	= Handy man
Homo erectus	= Pithecanthropines
Homo sapiens	= Neanderthal, Cro-Magnon and Modern Man

The last two stamps of the series, called “Hombre de Cro-Magnon”, brings us into the Upper Old Stone Age. This culture prevailed in Europe between 30,000 and 10,000 years B.P.

The art displayed on the 13 centavos stamp (SG 1467) was found in Predmosti, Czechoslovakia, and is in the Moravake Museum in Brno (Brunn). The section of the mammoth tusk in the man’s hand bears the deeply incised engraving of a female figure. The stylization is so sophisticated that it must be unique in Paleolithic art. The drawing reproduced in Figure 1 was copied by the Abbe Henri Breuil (see OWA Volume II, No. 2) from the original rather worn tusk. It will be noted that the motif on three margins of the stamps is based on this geometric pattern.

A great deal has been written in philatelic and other journals about Lascaux. It will suffice here to state that the picture on the 20 centavos (SG 1468) of our set is part of a scene in the diverticule just off the main chamber of that celebrated cave. The jumping cow and two of the five ponys on the wall are illustrated on the stamp, which even portrays some cave artists.

What’s new?

A 1965 issue from Tanzania (Scott 14) shows the 1,750,000 year old “Zinjanthropus boisei”, named and announced by Louis Leakey. His wife had uncovered the lower jaw in Olduvai Gorge in July, 1959, in what was then Tanganyika. This pre-man has since been re-christened “Australopithecus boisei”.

Now comes news of the discovery of another of man’s predecessors, who lived as long as four million years ago. A recent issue of National Geographic describes a pre-hominid found by the Dr. Mary Leakey party at the Laetoli site, just south of Olduvai Gorge. This creature, also an “Australopithecine”, was dated at 3.6 to 3.8 million years B.P.

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In 1976 Richard Leakey announced the finding in Kenya of a skull identified as “Homo erectus” – an undisputed early human. The specimen, found by a member of his team, is almost identical to Java and Peking Men, but is dated to 1.5 to 1.8 million years B.P. The report is corroborated by D. C. Johanson, whose searchers made a similar find as well as in Asia. “Homo erectus” would date back twice as far as previously believed, and would have been contemporary with “Australopithecus” and “Homo habilis”.

Conjectures and interpretations change constantly, but to this writer’s knowledge, no “Man”, however primitive, has been found to have lived earlier than 3,000,000 years ago.

## Identifying the Finds

At the lower right of each stamp appears the picture of a skull, a jaw, or a skull cap. Anthropologists have not failed to study head shapes and cranial capacities with exhaustive thoroughness. Men and apes of all times have had thirty-two teeth. In man, cuspids, or canine teeth are not long as in apes or monkeys. The size of the molars is significant. The jaw is closely observed, being generally “U” shaped in apes and semicircular in man.

Concern is given to the form of pelvic and leg bones, and of hands, since all of these are related to bipedal locomotion. Much attention centers on the age of the earth layer surrounding the finds, evidence of the use of fire, and the quality of tools. (Examples of early man’s tools are shown on the accompanying stamps from Afars and Issas.)

## Datation

Methods of dating fossils have become increasingly refined. The familiar Carbon-14 and Potassium-Argon tests have been supplemented by other schemes. The comparatively recent “paleomagnetic”, “fission track”, and “molecular anthropology” methods are herewith mentioned. Investigation into their workings is entrusted to the challenge of individual curiosity.

There is much activity in the search for man’s ancestors. It has been quipped that searchers are more numerous than early hominids.

Impressive indeed are the achievements of many seekers who have devoted twenty or thirty years to digging among snakes and wild beasts in tropical climes.

Happy stone and bone gathering to these intrepid men and women!

## Postscript:

The style of drawing on the Cuban stamps has seemed familiar for some time. A check of references for this article revealed that the designs had been taken from the paintings of Zenek Burian. Mr. Burian has illustrated Josef Augusta’s *Prehistoric Man* (1960) and *The*

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*Dawn of Man* (1978) by Josef Wolf. Since communication with the Cuban postal authorities is impractical, I don't know what arrangement had been made with the artist. I would be delighted to learn more.

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