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Q1(c)

Osteodontokeratic culture and its makers.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 1 · 10 marks · Paleolithic

(i) Paleolithic

Core demand of the question

- Define osteodontokeratic culture
- Name its proposer, site and putative makers
- State what the bone-tooth-horn assemblage was said to show
- Examine the taphonomic critique and what remains usable

Revision summary

Osteodontokeratic means a supposed bone-tooth-horn culture named by **Raymond Dart** at **Makapansgat**.

The claimed makers were *Australopithecus prometheus*, now placed in ***Australopithecus africanus***.

Dart read clubs, saws and daggers from antelope parts, and inferred hunting and violence.

C. K. Brain showed that leopards, hyenas and cave processes explain much of the assemblage.

The idea survives as a taphonomy lesson, not as a real industry.

Osteodontokeratic is defined by site, claimed maker, and the later critique.

Introduction

Raymond Dart gave the name osteodontokeratic culture to a supposed bone, tooth and horn tool kit from **Makapansgat** in South Africa. He said australopithecines made those tools and used them to hunt. The idea is now taught as a warning: do not call every broken bone a culture before taphonomy has been done.

Body**Dart's claim**

At **Makapansgat** Limeworks Dart described a non-stone industry. He read long bones as clubs, mandibles as saws and scrapers, canine teeth as projectiles, and horns as daggers. He called this **osteodontokeratic** (bone-tooth-horn) and gave it to *Australopithecus prometheus*, a name later folded into ***Australopithecus africanus***.

- **Site:** **Makapansgat**, South Africa, in australopithecine-bearing cave breccias.
- **Background:** Dart's **Taung child** (1924) had already placed australopithecines on the human side of the family. In the 1950s the osteodontokeratic papers tried to give those hominins culture without stone tools.
- **Story attached:** Hunting, and even interpersonal violence. **Robert Ardrey's** later "killer ape" popular writing drew on this mood, even though Ardrey was not the field scientist.

Why the idea was tempting

If early hominins made tools from carcass parts, culture would be older than the Acheulean handaxe, and hunting could be pushed deep into the Pliocene. That fitted a mid-century taste for "man the hunter" and for African origins after Taung.

The critique that stuck

C. K. Brain, especially in *The Hunters or the Hunted?* (1981), showed that many supposed tools are the signature of **leopards, hyenas and cave collapse**, not of artisans. Tooth marks, spiral fractures and the over-representation of certain bones match carnivore dens and geological concentration. A famous related image is the leopard puncture in some australopithecine skulls: the hominin was prey, not always hunter.

The fossils at the site remain australopithecine. The culture does not survive as a real tool tradition.

- **Lesson:** Hominins present in a cave are not automatically tool-makers. Osteodontokeratic is a taphonomy parable, not Africa's first industry.
- **What remains useful:** The debate professionalised faunal analysis. Hunting versus scavenging, and how cave assemblages form, still rest on Brain's ground, not on Dart's clubs. Later accepted bone tools, such as some from Swartkrans, are a different and much more cautious file.

Flow diagram

Dart -> Osteodontokeratic
Osteodontokeratic -> Makapansgat A. africanus
Osteodontokeratic -> Killer-ape reading
Killer-ape reading -> Brain taphonomy
Brain taphonomy -> Carnivore and geology not tools

Conclusion

Dart named a bone-tooth-horn culture and gave it to **Makapansgat** australopithecines. Taphonomy took the culture away and left the fossils. The significance is methodological: culture must be demonstrated, not read off every broken bone.

Facts & figures

Raymond Dart

He described the Taung child in 1924 and later proposed an osteodontokeratic culture at Makapansgat for australopithecines.

Makapansgat

A South African limeworks cave with australopithecine fossils and a bone assemblage that Dart read as tools.

Australopithecus africanus

The species into which Dart's *A. prometheus* is now placed. Presence at Makapansgat does not prove bone-tool manufacture.

C. K. Brain

His taphonomic restudy, notably *The Hunters or the Hunted?* (1981), showed carnivore and geological agencies behind many supposed osteodontokeratic tools.

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