

OBSESSIONS WITH ORIGINS

BBC Science/Nature has picked up on the occurrence of red ochre dating back 90k years at Qafzeh cave, Israel (after a recent article in Current Anthropology). Associated with burials, the pigment is taken to indicate symbolic and ritual thought (red=dead).

The typical argument then goes that this is a momentous leap in human evolution. And the date is early – much earlier than the usual date of c50k or later, the middle/upper palaeolithic boundary, when all sorts of evidence appears for cultural and symbolic practices. You might, as many have done, call it the origin of the modern mind.

So did it all actually happen much earlier?

And what are the implications?

We can quickly get into the old culture/biology debates. Did a genetic change trigger this behavior? (My colleague here at Stanford, Richard Klein, seems to think this.) Or was it to do with sociality? Was it associated only with anatomically modern humans? (Apparently not.)

How about putting aside this obsession with biology versus culture, and the search for simple origins and causality (a gene changes and history begins)? Let's note that there was no revolution of human consciousness (it took at least 50k years, and probably more like 100k). Let's not make this radical division between biology and cultural behavior – they have been associated for some 100 thousand years, and the linkage is not entirely unique to humans.

We are so bogged down in these old stories of simple narrative causation – this happened and caused this – and the further back you go, of course, it has to be biology that triggers it all.

We need much more complex thinking that transcends origins and culture/biology splits.

What took so long? And look what happens when people started living much closer

together in villages – that's when things take off.