

PLOTTING THE PAST – THE FIRST MODERN HUMANS IN SOUTH AFRICA, AND A SCENARIO FOR THE FIRST FARMING VILLAGES



A couple of recent press comments about new discoveries have caught my attention because of what they reveal about [the way academics build their careers and how archaeological field projects get turned into stories about the past.](#)

Basically it comes down to this – [archaeologists want their site to be the discovery that will rock to its foundations our understanding of the past – so they resort to mythology.](#)

The first claim [from South Africa and about the first modern humans](#) [Link] [better Link]–

Delicate shell beads dating back 75,000 years are the latest evidence that humans started to act modern almost as soon as they started to look modern, scientists said on Thursday.

Found in a cave overlooking the Indian Ocean in South Africa, the beads are made of tiny shells deliberately pierced and strung, archeologist Christopher Henshilwood and colleagues from France, Britain and Norway reported in Friday's issue of the journal Science.



“These beads are symbolic, and symbolism equates with modern human behavior,” Henshilwood said in a telephone interview.

The finds show that the early humans who used Blombos cave were capable of abstract and creative thought much earlier than previously thought, the researchers believe.

Another reports [excavations of a prehistoric village in the Jordan Valley](#) – the claim here is [Link] –

“People seemed to be getting along pretty well.” Not

something one would expect to hear about the Jordan Valley, or, for that matter, about the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA) period, 11,500 years ago, when hunter-gatherers began to coalesce into sedentary communities.

But Ian Kuijt of the University of Notre Dame believes it to have been the case. The evidence which Kuijt and his students have unearthed at Dhra challenges traditional academic views about the origins of greed and power. The strong may not have victimized the weak when village communities formed for the first time, as most anthropologists believe; in fact, by Kuijt's reckoning, the Levant had another 3,000 years of relatively equitable existence before significant signs of economic and social disparities appeared.

The shell beads. I have already commented on this search for the origins of modern humanity. Here though I am more interested in the way the archaeologists are making extraordinary claims on the basis of a few more beads. They claim that the beads are evidence of symbolic and creative thought – the title of the Reuters article is “Ancient Beads Push Back Birth of Human Creativity”.

“The Blombos cave beads may have been used as jewelry, to decorate clothing or even as an early type of bookkeeping”, said Henshilwood, who led the study. ...
“Now we have evidence at 75,000 years ago for people to

be able to store information outside the brain, in an artificial information device like a book or a computer.”

“We don’t know exactly how they were used, but we do know that in all instances where beads are used in hunter-gatherer societies, the beads have meaning. They are not merely decoration.”

Even jewelry communicates information, Henshilwood argued. “If you are wearing a Bulgari necklace, you are making a statement,” he said. “Or a rosary.”

The beads, carried from a river about 12 miles away, are part of a site where carved ochre dye sticks 77,000 years old were found two years ago.

Nearby stones with burn marks also have been dated to 77,000 years ago. Sand in the cave was also carefully dated and the different levels do not seem to have been mixed up – so the beads were not, for instance, made a few thousand years ago and then buried in older layers.

The findings nearly double the era of intellectually modern humans, Henshilwood said. “It had appeared that

people were not particularly modern in Africa until about 40,000 years ago," he said.

Other teams were preparing to publish similar findings that could disprove the earlier assumptions about the rise of modern humans.

"Now there is evidence coming out," he said. "People are now saying 'perhaps we were wrong.'"

Just last month a team working in Tanzania announced they had found beads dating back at least 40,000 years and perhaps tens of thousands of years earlier. ...

People who used the cave were likely related to modern Africans, he said. "I think these people probably were genetically related to the San people in South Africa," Henshilwood said, referring to people also commonly known as Bushmen and the original modern inhabitants of southern Africa.

"I think they behaved in much the same way as people behaved until recently, living relatively well off a coastline that was very productive, and having the capability to do many things like symbolize and speak

properly.”

Just what kind of reasoning is this? Anatomically modern humans have been identified from about 130k years ago. There is sporadic evidence for beads and the use of red ochre pigment from 70k years ago. So there is hardly a coincidence of biological speciation and cultural expression. Put the association of biology and culture to one side then. Henshilwood is also saying that essentially modern cultural experience began in the era of his site, and claims continuity with contemporary communities in south Africa. The evidence – those beads and red ochre from other sites – an early writing and computing system, he claims. *Is he serious?* Is this just media hype? I hope so – because it is a [load of tosh](#).

The village in the Jordan Valley.

Scholars have traditionally assumed that as Neolithic society abandoned hunting and foraging for agricultural subsistence practices, large-scale food production and storage facilities emerged – leading the way to inequalities in wealth and the accumulation of power. Some experts believe that this was the precursor to widespread social inequality and a prevailing world order of the “haves” versus the “have-nots.”

Kuijt says otherwise: Farming, at least the modern understanding of it, appeared well after the founding of early sedentary Neolithic villages. Early Neolithic villagers likely engaged in low-level manipulation of naturally occurring plants, but true domestication did not appear until thousands of years later. And with

domestication came such telltale signs of disparity as luxury items, burial goods and elite “neighborhoods.”

Excavated evidence at Dhra, however, bears none of these indicators of class difference. It appears – no matter how hard it is to reconcile this evidence with our contemporary views of human nature – that Neolithic society may have lived in mutual harmony for generations.

Well there is a kind of reaction against Rousseau here (agriculture = property = inequality), but I recognise none of the “experts” Kuijt is supposedly showing to be so wrong through his excavations of this village. “Kuijt says otherwise” – so who is he disagreeing with? I don’t know, and I am well versed in the research. The article in the online Daily Star just doesn’t make any sense to me as an archaeologist. His argument is quite mundane. All I see is someone making outlandish claims for the importance of his work. Another [load of tosh](#).

Now these two archaeological sites are clearly very interesting. They have considerable relevance for some interesting contemporary debates about origins (of modern humanity and agriculture). But step back from this and look at what is going on.

First, note some problems with the interest in origins. The search for origins leading to the present tells you more about the present than the past.

Henshilwood is making some extraordinary claims for his Blombos site – that it is showing that accounts of hominid origins have been Eurocentric and he is correcting the story with his research *at this site*[\[Link\]](#). It all happened in South Africa (not Europe) – this is where people first became people – at Blombos cave. And Nelson Mandela is patron of his project, so the story of his site must really matter. South Africa was tops way back when – a story fit to justify investment in this site.

Kuijt is a young(ish) academic at Notre Dame with a reputation to make. He needs a big story for his fieldwork, his site at Dhra – not least because his university has given him over \$45k and the National Science Foundation \$189k to research the origins of agriculture. The fieldwork needs to make a mark. So why not tell the press that you have a new theory supported by only this site that will overturn orthodoxy? That is maybe worth a quarter of a million.

An old story maybe – academics use hype, erect false opposition and straw men, and exaggerate the importance of the uniqueness of their work to make a career.

It is quite legitimate, of course, to put all the evidence together to make an argument about corporeality and identity, food production and social rank or class. But that will remove the unique significance of one site and its field project. And this is the irony of the fascination with the origin claimed found in one site – symbolic beads or primitive communism in the Jordan Valley – single finds don't matter until part of a pattern – and then the significance of the unique find is lost.

Even then consider the time spans – Blombos cave is one of a few known in the 95 thousand years between anatomically modern humans and the paintings found in Chauvet cave and marking the earliest spectacular manifestation of what has been called the human symbolic revolution. There is no legitimate way of turning this kind of evidence into a story of creativity discovered, bookkeeping and Bulgari necklaces. Except in myth. And that is what these archaeologies are – myth.

Here is a vital point about the character of the archaeological past.

The remains of the distant past are but specks in an ocean of nothingness. One site will never make that much difference to an historical narrative that we may recognise and identify with. By this I mean that so much has gone that we need to carefully assess our ability to construct coherent narratives of the sort that “this is the way people lived then because of this factor and that”. Archaeological discoveries do not deliver stories of the past, only stories of a project to investigate the past.

I am not saying that we can only stick to rudimentary description of the tatty remains of the past. I am from a school of cognitive archaeology that has established the validity of an archaeology of mind – an archaeology of invisible

traces, if you like. Shell beads and red pigment do indicate an interest in modifying the body and a concern with personal identity may be inferred. No. What I mean is that the stories Henshilwood and Kuijt use to justify their research are inappropriate in serious archaeological field research that focuses upon a site. Field projects cannot legitimately deliver the kind of story we are presented with in these press releases and comments.

So what other kinds of story of the past are there that are rooted in particular finds and places? Watch this space for my new book!

Here are some comments about the relevance of cladistics and the scale of prehistoric time to our archaeological efforts to reconstruct the past – [\[Link\]](#)