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Engraved ochre from a Middle Stone Age context at Klein Kliphuis in the Western Cape of South Africa

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Abstract

This paper reports on a piece of engraved ochre recovered from a Middle Stone Age context at the rock shelter site of Klein Kliphuis (Western Cape, South Africa). The ochre was associated with a mixed assemblage of Howiesons Poort and post-Howiesons Poort MSA artefacts, suggesting that it is substantially younger than similar finds at Blombos Cave. The implications of the find for arguments concerning the nature of Late Pleistocene behavioural evolution are discussed.

Keywords: Middle Stone Age; Modernity; Engraved ochre; South Africa

1. Introduction

A great deal of discussion has recently been focussed on the nature of human behavioural evolution in the late Pleistocene (see Chase, 1991, 1994; Chase and Dibble, 1987, 1990; D'Errico and Henshilwood, 2007; D'Errico et al., 2001, 2003; Deacon, 2001; Henshilwood and Marean, 2003; James and Petraglia, 2005; Klein, 1989, 1995, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003; Marean and Assefa, 2005; McBrearty and Brooks, 2000; Mellars, 1989; Noble and Davidson, 1991; O'Connell and Allen, 2007; Shennan, 2001; Wadley, 2001). Though the issue itself is not new, a slew of recent finds from Middle Stone Age (MSA)/Middle Palaeolithic (MP) contexts in Africa and the Levant has helped to (re)ignite debate, centred on whether behavioural evolution in this period was gradual, episodic, or abrupt (revolutionary). To an extent, this debate has become increasingly concerned with the appearance and significance of symbols and decorative items, at the expense of changes in technology and subsistence (e.g., Bouzouggar et al., 2007; Brumm and Moore, 2005; Cain, 2006; Chase, 1991, 1994; Chase and Dibble, 1987; D'Errico et al., 2001, 2005; Henshilwood et al., 2002; Lindly and Clark, 1990; Parkington et al., 2005; Vanhaeren et al., 2006).

This paper reports on a piece of ochre from an MSA context at the site of Klein Kliphuis in southern Africa. The ochre is ground and fractured, but more importantly, scored in a cross-hatched manner which we consider to imply an element of design. To that extent, it is argued that the ochre might reasonably be described as engraved. Finds of engraved ochre from the site of Blombos Cave, some 400 km south east of Klein Kliphuis, have been used to argue for the formulation and deployment of symbols among MSA people, and, further, to imply the existence of complex communicative systems at this time (Henshilwood et al., 2002). The ochre from Klein Kliphuis is considered in light of these arguments. We contend that the implications of such finds for the Late Pleistocene human behavioural evolution debate are not straightforward, and that this lack of clarity is in large part a consequence of deeper ambiguities in the debate itself.

2. Late Pleistocene human behavioural evolution: origins and development of the debate

The potential significance of the find to be discussed derives largely from its relevance to the debate about how,

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when and in which ways human behaviours changed over the course of the Late Pleistocene. It is beneficial therefore, to give brief consideration to the origins and development of that debate, with particular attention given to the roles of symbolism and of the southern African archaeological record.

That the transition from Middle to Upper Palaeolithic was underwritten by a change of fossil form has been established for well over a century. In southern Africa, the transition from Middle to Later Stone Age was initially ascribed to the same causes—the replacement of ''Mousterian'' by ''neo-anthropic elements'' (Goodwin and van Riet Lowe, 1929). At that time southern Africa lacked Europe's skeletal evidence, and the comparison was largely based on purported technological similarities between the Middle Stone Age and Middle Palaeolithic, and the presumption that human behavioural evolution proceeded along a sequence of universal stages.

Excavations of the deep MSA sequences at Border Cave (Beaumont et al., 1978; Butzer et al., 1978; Rightmire, 1979) and Klasies River (Singer and Wymer, 1982) were, in many ways, pivotal to much of the debate that has ensued. In providing firm evidence of anatomical continuity across the MSA/LSA transition, the Border Cave and Klasies sequences created something of a conundrum—that changes in technological and faunal assemblages potentially similar to those witnessed across the Middle to Upper Palaeolithic transition, had occurred without a similar change of fossil form. The Klasies faunal data in particular were taken to indicate substantial differences in the ways in which MSA and LSA peoples hunted (Binford, 1984; Klein, 1974, 1975, 1989; Singer and Wymer, 1982). Though from distinct points of view, both Klein and Binford inferred that differences in the suites of fauna between MSA and LSA sites were products of different hunting abilities. In the absence of an anatomical basis for this change in behavioural capacity, the remaining avenue of explanation was taken to be behavioural.

In Europe, the Middle to Upper Palaeolithic transition heralded a very conspicuous rise in (potentially the appearance of) art and purportedly symbolic behaviours, including ornaments and music. In southern Africa, though there was no comparably dramatic efflorescence, such items were more readily apparent in the LSA than they had been previously. If art, ornamentation and music could be taken to be behaviours definitive of humans as we know them, then the logical inference was that humans not exhibiting these behaviours were in some important way less like us. With regard to the anatomical continuity apparent in the southern African record, this inference necessitated distinguishing human groups on the basis of behaviours—thus the origins of the concept of 'behaviourally modern humans'.

Klein's (1989, 1995, 1999) resolution of these issues was both elegant and problematic. If the increased prevalence of purportedly symbolic behaviours could be taken to reflect a (dramatic) improvement in the capacity of humans to communicate, then attendant changes in the record (for example, the rapid, global spread of *H. sapiens*, sustained occupation of new ecological zones, and changes in faunal and lithic assemblage composition) might also be explicable in similar terms. An increased capacity for communication would have allowed a more complex integration of individuals in social and economic endeavours, with consequences for hunting efficiency, technological innovation and, ultimately, survival.

Though McBrearty and Brooks (2000) subsequently argued that most if not all of the markers of behaviourally modern humans were present in Africa prior to the LSA/UP, it has been with the symbolic underpinnings of Klein's argument that much of the debate in this region has become focussed. A number of recent finds have been proffered as evidence for the presence of symbols and symbolic behaviours in the African MSA/MP (e.g., Bouzouggar et al., 2007; Cain, 2006; D'Errico et al., 2005; Henshilwood et al., 2002; Parkington et al., 2005; Vanhaeren et al., 2006). One consequence of these finds has been to weaken arguments for a 'symbolic revolution', at least in Africa. Another, and potentially more important consequence, has been to highlight the theoretical under-development of the archaeological concept of 'symbolism', and, more crucially, our capacity to link material objects to language and communication. The question, ''What, in archaeological terms, constitutes a symbol?'', remains anything but clear (''What isn't a symbol?'' even less so). Moreover, as Botha (in press) has recently discussed, even where it can be agreed that an object is imbued with symbolic significance there are few if any clear-cut implications for the presence (or absence) of complex communicative systems such as language.

In part, the symbolic aspect of the debate has been able to function without a theoretical exegesis of these components thanks to a circularity in the formulation of the debate itself (though see Chase, 1991, 1994). The observation that certain kinds of material remains are common late in the archaeological record but much less common earlier seems sound enough. However, the notion that populations lacking such items must have been in some way non-modern is both a presumption and a conclusion. Neither on ethnographic nor archaeological grounds does there appear to be a necessary basis for associating a ''modern'' mode of behaviour with a set of archaeological correlates. To that extent, phrasing the debate as a search for 'modernity' has been misleading (cf., Chase, 2003; Chase and Dibble, 1990). As Kusimba (2005) has pointed out, the diversity of hunter-gatherer lifeways even in the limited ethnographic present renders reliable criteria for defining modern humans difficult to ascertain. This is also true archaeologically, a point evident in contexts such as Australia, where the first ~40 ka (using O'Connell and Allen's (2004) conservative figure) of the occupational history of the continent bears more limited testimony to any of modernity's markers than does the African MSA (Brumm and Moore, 2005). If a poverty of these markers over a large geographic and temporal span is not sufficient to preclude the characterisation of a population as modern, then the absence of such markers generally cannot be taken to be meaningful in these terms (O'Connell and Allen, 2007). If the absence of such markers is not necessarily meaningful, and their presence is not linked by any logically necessary chain of inference to a mode (or modes) of behaviour, then we need to ponder what we are in fact pursuing (Chase and Dibble, 1990).

More recently, discussion has returned to the empirical roots of the debate—exploring patterns in the occurrences of various