DEBATING MODERN BEHAVIOUR IN SOUTH AFRICA

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss which Middle Stone Age artifacts could qualify as symbolic markers and how these may be interpreted within the modern human behaviour debate. Symbolic behaviour can be recognized when artifacts have been deliberately constructed and maintained in a conventionalised relationship with other material culture – it can be recognized when repeated designs in time and space occur. This approach is preferred here above methods that attempt to identify symbolic behaviour in terms of conscious ‘symbolic storage’. It is not possible to determine whether symbolic storage occurred consciously and intently as this process frequently takes place outside conscious awareness and intention ‘to store’.
In this paper reference will be made to finds of 'obvious' symbolic markers such as engraved ochres and ostrich eggshell as well as shell beads from the Middle Stone Age. Whether conventions can be recognized from South African Middle Stone Age lithic assemblages is also addressed. The final part of the paper discusses whether this evidence is sufficient to infer the origins of symbolic behaviour. The role that biological markers could play in constraining and guiding the hypotheses designed for the recognition of modern behaviour is also discussed.
The engraved ochres from Blombos, Still Bay was, until recently, a unique find. The Blombos ochres date to 77 000 years ago and have a geometric pattern engraved on the one face. In 2008 Alex Mackay & Aara Welz published the find of scored or engraved ochre from Klein Kliphuis (KKH) associated with artifacts of Howiesons Poort age. The Klein Kliphuis site is 400 km from Still Bay, just north of Clanwilliam. This ochre is ground and fractured, and scored in a cross-hatched manner. Like the ochre from Blombos, the KKH ochre has three dominant horizontal lines.
Engraved ostrich eggshell from Howiesons Poort levels at Diepkloof has been reported by Parkington et al (2005). These intentionally produced incisions include hatched and radiating lines. Another incident of intentional engraving occurs in the lowermost layers of the Howiesons Poort at Klasies River. A midshaft of a limb bone of a very large bovid has four equidistant parallel lines that were engraved by a sharp stone point.
these artefacts indicate that intentional incision on bone, ochre and ostrich eggshell was a convention followed by some populations in the Cape of South Africa from at least 77 000 years ago.
Bouzouggar et al (2007) & Zilhao (2006) recently suggested that the use of Nassarius beads constitute a convention amongst anatomically modern humans. Nassarius beads are known from Blombos in South Africa, from a site in Morocco, and also from Quafzah cave in Israel. New finds of shell beads of similar age from South African sites is in the process of being reported. The increase in finds of early beads increase confidence that the production of *Nassarius kraussianus* beads in the Late Pleistocene constituted conventionalized thinking and therefore modern type behaviour.
Until recently the perception of Middle Stone Age stone tool technology was that it contrasts with the Later Stone Age (and Upper Palaeolithic) in that technological conventions of a relatively short duration (around 10 000) do not exist. New excavations and re-interpretations are changing this perception.

The Still Bay techno-complex is considered as a ‘modern type’ lithic industry and is identified by its *fossiles directeur*, the lanceolate bifacial point.
New excavations at Sibudu have shown that the Still Bay is geographically widespread and dating of these occurrences to around 70 000 years ago indicates that it was of relatively short duration. The Still Bay further occurs at sites like Peers Cave, Diepkloof, Hollow Rock Shelter, Klein Jongensfontein and Trappieskop. Its distribution and time-constrained occurrence qualify the Still Bay as a convention.
Howiesons Poort

- intensified focus
- Sibudu, Diepkloof, Rose Cottage, Klein Kliphuis, Pinnacle Point, Klasies River
- Fossiles Directeur approach but numbers of backed artefacts relatively low (0.27% at Klasies River)
- technology

The Howiesons Poort is probably the best known Middle Stone Age techno-complex – it is known from several sites south of the Limpopo River and it dates to around 65,000 years ago. There has been an intensified research focus on the Howiesons Poort the past 5 years and efforts have been made to move beyond the *fossiles directeurs* approach to describe its technology. The *fossiles directeurs* approach is, however still dominant in recognizing the Howiesons Poort, as the mere presence or absence of backed artifacts is still interpreted and indicating Howiesons Poort affinities. However the expectation should be that it is improbable that small assemblages would produce backed artefacts. These geometrics usually occur in quantities lower than 0.27% of the total assemblage size.
Markers for the HP:

Another typological marker of the Howiesons Poort, not often discussed, is the presence of ‘strangulated’ and heavily notched blades.

The presence of non-quartzite raw material is often considered as an indication of Howiesons Poort affinities (e.g. Thackeray 2000). Nonetheless, it is unlikely that that an increase of non-quartzite raw material can be used as a marker for the Howiesons Poort – not all Howiesons Poort assemblages are associated with such an increase: At Nelson bay Cave and at Klasies River the dominant raw material is quartzite (27% silcrete in the SW sample and 33% in the D sample). It may be that the presence of non-quartzite raw materials simply reflects the distance from available silcrete or other fine-grained raw materials.

The strongest signal for the Howiesons Poort techno-complex is the presence of a blade production strategy, accompanied by intensive rubbing of platforms that are associated with small butts and diffuse platforms. These attributes have been described for the Klasies River and Rose Cottage Howiesons Poort. At both these sites a variant of the soft hammer technique have been used.
The Still bay and HP indicate the ONSET of innovation and inventiveness?

- Hypothesis: the HP and Still Bay ‘anticipates’ LSA type patterning

‘The HP was a very original and innovative industry; but it did not persist and did not give rise to the LSA. In a sense it was both “modern” and “non-modern”.’

(Soriano et al 2007: 701)

At this stage, the Howiesons Poort and Still Bay are the only sub-stages of the Middle Stone Age that have been researched adequately. Does this indicate that only the Howiesons Poort and Still Bay are conventions in the sense of modern behaviour? Some argue that the Howiesons Poort and Still Bay ‘anticipate’ Later Stone Age-like, and by inference, modern cultural patterning. For example, for the Howiesons Poort Soriano et al (2007:681) states that:

“It has been suggested that between 80 and 35 ka the Middle Stone Age record of South Africa reveals episodes of inventiveness and innovation, punctuated by apparent returns to more conventional technologies. One such episode is the Howiesons Poort.”

On page 701 it is further stated that:

“The HP was a very original and innovative industry; but it did not persist and did not give rise to the LSA. In a sense it was both “modern” and “non-modern”.”
The hypothesis, that only these techno-complexes reveal episodes of inventiveness and innovation, is unlikely to be true. This hypothesis is based on inadequate information and it is highly probable that new research will prove it wrong. Other possibilities for lithic conventions in the Middle Stone Age are:

- MSA I (currently described for Klasies River – Wurz 2002)
- MSA II Levallois point industry (currently described for Klasies River – Wurz 2002)
- A technocomplex with denticulates (an example is the Ysterfontein assemblage currently under study)
In the Ysterfontein assemblage (probably dating to around 90 000 years ago) silcrete is the dominant material (diorite and quartz also occur in significant proportions). Hard hammer and soft hammer techniques have been used to produce blades of a variety of sizes and Levallois-like flakes. The outstanding aspect of this industry is the presence of denticulates. The reduction strategy is completely different from the Howiesons Poort, Still Bay, post and pre-Howiesons Poort sub-stages.
Hypotheses on modern behaviour are constructed on the basis of archaeological evidence only. The archaeological hypotheses for the development of modern behaviour contrast with scenarios for the evolution of biological modernity. The most important biological hallmarks for modernity include habitual bipedalism, changes in the vestibular system, modern breathing capabilities, modern brain size and associated re-organisation. The modern configuration of the biological traits have all been in place by 600 000 years ago whereas the scenarios suggested for the development of modern behaviour date to after 250 000 years ago.
Approach to the formulation of hypotheses

- New archaeological finds determine and change hypotheses
- The hypothesis for modern behaviour should be holistic and multidisciplinary
It is proposed here that the development of modern behaviour should be regarded as a process that took place in the Middle Pleistocene. By 600 000 years ago there is a marked increase in brain size. This brain enlargement within the Homo lineage means that brains had to reorganise - reorganisation is driven by co-evolutionary processes (Deacon 2003). A period of time, thousands of generations, in which behaviours and the genes co-evolve is necessary to fix new changes in the genome.

The cultural model that is most consistent with the biological data, is that modern behaviour was already a feature of populations that lived 250 000 years ago. If it is assumed that symbolic abilities are the result of a co-evolutionary process in which behaviour drive the direction of brain development, then modern symbolic behaviour must have been a trait of the ancestor of Neanderthals and modern humans.