

MIDDLE STONE AGE SYMBOLIC MATERIAL CULTURE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

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The classical Out of Africa scenario for the emergence of our species is based on the axiom that cognition is a species specific character shaped by natural selection. In other words, a new cognition would stem from the classic Darwinian process of isolation, random mutation, selection of advantageous characters, and speciation. By shaping our species, natural selection would have provided this species with a new cognitive setting resulting in the ability of producing complex technologies, symbols and embody symbols in material culture. The corollary of this axiom is that human populations of the past with different morphological characters, recognised by paleoanthropologists as belonging to different fossil species, must have had different cognitions and those considered different from us were probably unable to produce a symbolic, or fully symbolic, material culture. Recent discoveries shake the foundations of this axiom. In Africa, new genetic and paleoanthropological evidence support the view that a variety of transitional human groups with a mosaic of primitive and derived features lived side by side and exchanged genes between 300,000 and 12,000 years ago. This Africa “multiregionalism”, matches surprisingly well the pattern highlighted in Eurasia by genetic data. It also fits well the patchy pattern we observe when examining the earliest instances of symbolic material culture in Africa: artifacts suggesting symbolic practices (pigment, beads, burials, engravings, mathematical notations) do not appear as a single package, and some of them are not found in large regions of the continent before few thousand years ago. The fall of the one-fossil-species-one-cognition axiom suggests that symbolic practices were the outcome of complex and non-linear evolutionary trajectories, triggered by biological but certainly also environmental and social factors, that need to be understood and traced at regional scales.