

EARLY MODERN HUMAN DISPERSALS OUT OF AFRICA: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD OF NORTHEAST AFRICA AND SOUTHWEST ASIA

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This paper will examine the archaeological evidence of northeastern Africa and southwest Asia, a geographic area where the late Middle/Upper Pleistocene record can be expected to show archaeological signatures of the earliest dispersals of modern human populations from Africa. While the study of recent human evolution is a large interdisciplinary effort with important contributions of evolutionary genetics in particular, only the archaeological record can inform us on the historical fabric involved and on the specific nature of cultural evolution.

Current orthodoxy has it that there was an early 'failed' migration of AMHS along the 'northern route' somewhere in MIS 5, long before the 'successful' migration after ~70 ka ago. Yet, it only takes a brief inspection of the Levantine Mousterian which is associated with these early modern humans, to conclude that there is nothing similar to the African MSA. Hominin material cultures are fine-tuned adaptive systems, forged over generations of agents within the constraints of their biological and cognitive capacities. Pending profound environmental pressure or change such material cultures will tend to equilibrium, establishing their capacity as units of historical measurement. From such a perspective, the apparent contradiction between the fossil record and the cultural patterning in the region of concern constitutes a serious problem.

This puzzling observation forms the starting point of a critical reconsideration of the archaeological evidence leading, possibly, to an alternative interpretation of the earliest history of modern humans. The paper draws the contours of such an alternative model that is much more consistent with the archaeological patterning in the region.