

# 7 Our long, slow cultural evolution

*Culture is roughly everything we do and monkeys don't.*

FitzRoy Richard Somerset (Lord Raglan)

**W**e live in a highly complex and diverse cultural world, and many of us have experienced first-hand the explosive pace at which culture has evolved in the last several decades. Artefacts from the archaeological record indicate that our human lineage has always been set apart by its uniquely rich material culture. Tangible, physical archaeological artefacts – mostly in the form of stone tools – provide incomplete but critical links to understanding the broader, less tangible aspects of our cultural evolution, such as languages, customs, beliefs and ideas. Biologically we may be more or less the same in body and brain as when our species first evolved, but culturally we have become far more complex. Indeed, culture is the most defining feature of our species. Because it is through our culture that we view, understand and engage with all aspects of our world, it is critical to ascertain when, where and how fully modern cultures – those that define modern people living today – evolved. The record suggests that it took at least 100 thousand years from when anatomically modern humans (AMHs) evolved 200–160 thousand years ago and when our species attained a level of cultural complexity commensurate with present-day hunter-gatherers approximately 70 thousand years ago. When and where in Africa do new, innovative cultural items first appear in the archaeological record, and how can this record inform us about what drove our long, slow cultural evolution?

## The rise of symbolism

Look around – symbolism is everywhere. Difficult to define, symbolism capitalises on our acute visual powers and our ability to think abstractly, allowing us to express and understand meaning in objects or symbols. These meanings are understood by many who see them, like the international signage guiding us when travelling in foreign countries. Language is perhaps the most obvious example of symbolism, and language is considered by many to lie at the core of what makes us uniquely human. In addition to language, every one of us projects symbolic meaning in the clothes and jewellery we wear; our hairstyle, make-up, tattoos and body piercings; as well as our gestures and the way we walk. Although not always understood by others in the way we intend, all of our symbolic expressions are there to convey, intentionally or subconsciously, who we are as individuals and in what ways we are different from or similar to others. Symbolism lies at the heart of modern behaviour because it reflects our ability to form unique abstract mental constructs of the world, with diverse beliefs, ideas and customs shared or understood by a culturally bound group.



Like language, the presence or extent of symbolism is difficult to assess from the archaeological record because few material items in which symbolic behaviour is expressed end up being preserved. Plus, it is difficult to know from our modern-day perspective to what extent particular artefacts carried symbolic meaning to those who possessed them. It can be a struggle to understand the meaning of symbolic items of our children’s generation, let alone items belonging to generations going back tens of thousands of years. Therefore, symbolism is a particularly good example of how absence of evidence from our current perspective does not necessarily imply an absence of symbolic behaviour in the past.

Symbolism was part of our lineage at least as far back as *H. erectus* based on the earliest known engravings on shell, and the beautiful as well as functional hand axe discussed in Chapter 3 (p. 116). When language was established in our lineage is

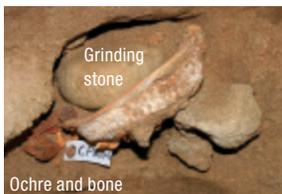
Our symbolic world: international signs guide us; IMF directors and goths form distinct subcultures; and the symbols for peace and Mercedes automobiles look similar but convey very different meanings

uncertain, but perhaps *H. heidelbergensis* was talking by 400 thousand years ago. The use of ochre as body paint probably extends back 280 thousand years and is the earliest evidence of self-adornment, a modern human universal behaviour (HUB). The use of ochre, inherited from our most recent predecessor, appears to have intensified with the arrival of our species based on the marked increase in ochre at archaeological sites. One of the most exceptional examples of how ochre was worked comes from an ochre-processing toolkit found at Blombos Cave. Blombos Cave is located on the south coast of South Africa, 100 kilometres west of the Pinnacle Point caves where, as discussed in the previous chapter, the earliest evidence of a seafood diet is associated with pyrotechnology and an apparent increased use of ochre.

The ochre toolkit at Blombos consists of two large abalone shells, quartz cobbles used to powder the ochre, small flakes and fragments of ochre, as well as fragments of charcoal and bone. Except for the series of natural small holes that run along the peripheral edge, the bowl-like shape of abalone shells makes for a perfect natural container. It is a beautiful container as well, lined in multi-coloured iridescent mother of pearl (nacre). The use of containers is a HUB and these abalone shells, dated to 100 thousand years ago, are the earliest known containers. Either collected for food at low tide or found washed up on the beach, the abalone shells were used to mix the various ingredients that went into making liquid ochre pigment or paint. The butter-like liquid marrow from bones, for example, may have been used as a binding agent for the ochre, with charcoal added to vary the hue. So, in addition to the first use of containers, the toolkits also demonstrate the first ochre-processing workshop. This workshop required advance planning to assemble the many components, and likely involved experimentation to arrive at the desired ochre slurry most suitable to apply to skin or animal hide, to use medicinally or to add to sticky substances for hafting stone tools to wooden handles.



Looking out to sea from the interior of Blombos Cave (far left), where excavations (left) have uncovered an ochre-processing toolkit (lower left); living abalone and its empty shell lined with nacre (below)



## HUMAN ORIGINS



Perforated tick shells (Skhul Cave)

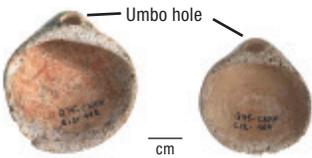
The prevalence of ochre staining on the oldest shell jewellery indicates that ochre paint was applied either directly to the shells or from their rubbing against ochre-painted skin or clothing. The earliest evidence of people collecting shells, not for their food content or for use as tools, but solely for their beauty and use in jewellery or as keepsake items, comes from whole perforated tick shells (small marine snails) found in the Levant (Skhul Cave) and at the opposite ends

of Africa between 130 and 80 thousand years ago. Clamshell pendants occur in the Levant at sites in Israel, and the collection of keepsake shells is documented at coastal sites in South Africa.

The first shell beads and shell pendants worn as jewellery are widely considered to document the earliest unambiguous evidence for the establishment of a shared symbolic cultural tradition. Shells interpreted to have been strung and worn as pendants consist of one of the two shells (valves) that enclose the large saltwater bittersweet clams of the genus *Glycymeris*, a marine bivalve mollusc. A total of ten *Glycymeris* shells were recovered from the Qafzeh Cave in Israel and are around 90 thousand years old. Several are stained by red or yellow ochre, and most have a hole in the umbo located at the top of the shell. About half the *Glycymeris* shells on a modern beach have a hole in the umbo, drilled by animals that prey upon them. Those shells lacking a natural hole could have had one purposefully drilled by those who collected them.

Either way, rubbing of the sinew, leather or other material used to string the shell as a pendant most probably cut the irregular notches observed on the edge of the holes.

The shells used as pendants occur naturally on Mediterranean beaches, which were located 50 kilometres from the Qafzeh Cave at the time of their collection. The shells were not collected for food, because *Glycymeris* burrows in sandy sediment offshore in water too deep for people to reach. It is only after they die that their shells may wash up on the beach. The shells are often found bleached white and abraded by waves washing them along the shore. It is unlikely people made the 50-kilometre journey to the coast for these shells alone, but to what extent those living in the Qafzeh Cave had a seafood diet is unclear, as no marine food



*Glycymeris insubrica*



Fossil

Modern

*Glycymeris connollyi*

Fossil shell (*Glycymeris insubrica*) pendants from Israel (Qafzeh Cave) with a hole in the umbo and a modern example; fossil shell (*Glycymeris connollyi*) from Pinnacle Point (no hole in umbo) and a modern example