

# Modern behaviour patterns: middle stone age record of africa



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Is there evidence for the establishment of modern behaviour patterns in the Middle Stone Age record of Africa?

Behavioural modernity refers to developed behavioural traits we associated with 'modern' humans (Jacobs & Richard, 2009). These behavioural traits are what distinguish modern humans & their recent ancestors from other extinct hominids as well as both current & past primates. What we now classify as modern human behaviours are cultural universals shared by all individuals, these behaviours include traits like language, religion & decoration, or what's known as the behavioural B's: blades, beads, burials, bone-tool making & beauty (Calvin, 2004). This essay discusses the evidence for the establishment of modern behaviour patterns in the Middle Stone Age (MSA) record of Africa.

What is the Middle Stone Age record?

The MSA was a period of African prehistory generally considered to have spanned between 280,000 years ago & 50-25,000 years ago. The term MSA is used synonymously with the term "Middle Palaeolithic", used in the remainder of the Old World where comparable artefacts & traditions are found & is now closely associated with the appearance of behavioural modern humans. (Clark, 1998)

Innovations

A range of innovations characterise the MSA, this following section talks about some of these, why & how they came about.

Technology

<https://assignbuster.com/modern-behaviour-patterns-middle-stone-age-record-of-africa/>

There is marked variation in Middle Stone Age assemblages, which could have been caused by a number of factors including environmental conditions, resource type & availability, choice of different reduction techniques & strategies of tool manufacture. Technological patterns in these assemblages reflect early stages of modern human behaviour, with little standardisation within them.

The beginning of the Middle Stone Age is identified by changes in the lithic components of the industries, namely, by the disappearance of bifaces (handaxes and cleavers) of the Acheulean type and the appearance of composite tools which incorporated points signalling the beginning of the reorganisation of technology (Zenobia & Roberts, 2009).

Tool kits of this time included prepared core technology aka the Levallois method of flake production in which a core was carefully prepared on one side so that a flake of a certain, predetermined shape and size could be produced with a single blow (\_\_\_\_). Composite tool kits also became common in this time period. These composite tools allowed tools to be hafted to other items, most commonly wood to create spears, and included triangular flakes, denticulates (tools retouched to form a serrated edge), awls used to perforate hides and retouched points and scrapers. Occasional grinding stones and bone points have also been found during this time period

The most potent evidence for behaviourally modern stone tools come from the sites of Still Bay (SB) & Howieson's Poort dated between 72-71 ka & 65-60 ka respectively (Zenobia & Roberts, 2009). Among the Still Bay toolkit are

bifacial flaked points that probably formed parts of spearheads, whereas the Howieson's Poort toolkits include blade-like tools that were blunted on one side & hafted as part of composite weapons.

These Middle Stone Age assemblages contain significant evidence of modern human behaviour which is reflected in raw material procurement, exchange patterns, adaptive behaviour, & mastery of craftsmanship (Onjala, 2006).

### Hunting & gathering

The emergence of modern hunting capabilities is one of the behavioural traits which classify modern human behaviour, there is a great deal of debate as to the effectiveness of the hunting strategies of MSA humans & thus whether the individuals of this time period were in fact ' behaviourally modern'.

One argument presented is that MSA individuals were less effective hunters than their LSA successors (Faith, 2008), Klein in his paper *The problem of modern human origins* argued that this was a result of a major neural change that took place between 50-40 ka, creating humans with a fully modern intellect. Klein believes there were several behavioural & technological consequences of this change such as the development of more effective hunting capabilities, & the ultimate dispersal of modern humans into Eurasia (Klein, 1994). Most researchers however, maintain that MSA individuals were fully adept hunters & thus the emergence of modern hunting skills is one of the modern behavioural traits that appeared during the MSA (Faith, 2008)

Many sites from across Africa show accumulation of fish remains from fresh water, brackish & marine environments, these sites include Klasies River, Herolds bay & Hoedjies Punt open sites among many others. The fish found at these sites are often too large to have been introduced by coastal birds & therefore point to the development of fishing techniques. At Blombos cave, South Africa, these include deep water varieties pointing to a large increase in technology. Some sites also contain marine mammals such as Die Kelders where remains of Cape fur seals have been found.

Inland sites contain remains of many mammals, usually medium sized herbivores such as zebra, eland & antelopes, all of which were common during the time period. Unlike the LSA, hunting of larger dangerous animals appears rare, which Richard Klein suggests indicates the individuals of this time period had not developed the technologies to deal with this kind of behaviour. Mortality profiles for animals from the MSA suggest the key target range for hunting during this time period was the young or the old animals which were weak or vulnerable.

While hunting is one possible accrual of meat resources it is likely that a large range of meat gathering strategies were used during this time period including scavenging, long distance hunting & ambush hunting (Scarre, 2013)

#### Site modification, Art, Ornamentation & Symbols

A major signifier of modern behaviour is the organized use of space. While this is not common during the MSA there are a few examples of site

modification, most commonly arc-shaped “ walls” of stone, possibly created as wind breaks. (Scarre, 2013)

Evidence for art, ornamentation & symbolism however have been found at several sites across Africa. Many items from sites across Africa have been found to have been intentionally marked with abstract geometric symbols both carved & painted (Wurz, 2014). These items most notably include engraved ochre, bone & ostrich shell; Engravings & paintings & beads.

Of the engraved items, possibly the most notable from this time period is a ~ 77, 000-

year-old piece of dark-red ochre with a cross-hatched pattern bounded by parallel lines engraved on one side recovered from Still Bay (Wurz, 2014) while other engraved items include bone from Blombos Cave & at Klasies River a bone engraved with four parallel lines has been found (Wilkins, 2010). Egg shell is another item which has frequently been engraved upon, examples include from the site of Diepkloof in the Western Cape, where 270 fragments of intentionally marked ostrich eggshell believed to have been used as containers have been recovered dating to 60kya & including geometric motifs such as straight parallel lines, cross-hatching, & a hatched band (Wurz, 2014). Other sites including engraved egg shells in their assemblages include Howieson’s Poort & Apollo 11 (Wilkins, 2010)

Beads as personal ornamentation are the last aspect of art, ornamentation & symbolism that will be discussed in this essay. Beads made from shell occur from around 100, 000 years ago in some sites in Africa (Wurz, 2014) the most notable of which being the collection from Still Bay at Blombos Cave <https://assignbuster.com/modern-behaviour-patterns-middle-stone-age-record-of-africa/>

where over 40 beads made of *Nassarius kraussianus* shells. Keyhole perforations had been created in each shell, most likely with a bone tool, were then strung & worn as personal ornament. Some beads also contain ochre residue, although whether this is from deliberate colouring or from transfer when worn is unknown (Henshilwood & Dubreuil).

## Conclusion

The innovative technologies and social practices mentioned above are only one part of a behavioral montage that spread through Africa during the MSA. Rapid advances in human cognition were manifested in material-culture practices not previously observed in the Africa or anywhere else in the world supplying evidence for Africa as the place of establishment of modern behaviour.