



Forskerforbundet: The Brain Power Award 2020

***The Origins of Early Sapiens Behaviour – ‘Mother Africa – Welcome Home’
A public exhibition at the Iziko South Africa Museum, Cape Town 2018-2021***

Produced and funded by the SFF Centre for Early Sapiens Behaviour (SapienCE), University of Bergen

Director: Prof. Christopher Stuart Henshilwood

Web link: <https://www.uib.no/en/sapience>

YouTube Movie Links: <https://youtu.be/RhM2JffTtG0>

<https://youtu.be/yvNFVXMdVpM>

Abstract

The focus of research at the SFF Centre for Early Sapiens Behaviour (SapienCE) at the University of Bergen is the African origins of all Homo sapiens and their early behaviour. In 2018 SapienCE scientists from UiB designed and installed a public exhibition of their research at the Iziko South Africa Museum in Cape Town, South Africa. The exhibition titled ‘Origins of Early Sapiens Behaviour: Mother Africa – Welcome Home’ showcases the unique archaeological discoveries that we have made at the projects archaeological sites that we have excavated in the southern Cape, South Africa over the past 30 years. These sites were occupied by early Homo sapiens, our common ancestors, between 120 000 and 50 000 years ago, a key period in the evolution of modern human behaviour. The ‘We Are All One’ message in our exhibition points to the clear genetic evidence that all people have their origins in Africa. The aim is to celebrate our cultural diversity and install a new sense of pride in all visitors as we celebrate the common African origin of us all.

Background

Archaeologists debate the emergence of modern human behaviour by examining finds from southern African Middle Stone Age sites with emphasis on the artefacts thought to reflect symbolic practice. One of these is the Blombos Cave site in the southern Cape that preserves an extensive record of archaeological evidence in the Middle Stone Age (MSA), integral to research on the oldest evidence for modern humans in sub-Saharan Africa and bears a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition which has disappeared. The symbolic significance of the marine-shell beads, the ochre hashtag drawing and the engraved ochre pieces found at this site, taken with the regular manufacture and use of bone tools, finely made bifacial points, and the probable ability to fish, suggests a cognitive-behavioural package not previously associated with Middle Stone Age people. These finds may be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas or with beliefs, of outstanding universal significance. The conceptual ability to source, combine and store substances that enhance technology or social practices at 100 000 years ago represents ability for long-term planning and suggests conceptual and cognitive abilities previously unknown for this time. Blombos Cave may be considered to be an outstanding example of technological ensembles which illustrates significant stages in human prehistory.

The faunal collection shows that MSA people practiced a subsistence strategy that included a very broad range of animals and food gathering. The extensive shellfish remains provide early evidence for the use of sea foods possibly dating to 100 000 years ago. This represents an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, with land-use and sea-use, which is representative of a culture, or human interaction with the environment. Engraved ostrich eggshell from the Middle

Stone Age at another of our sites, the 65 000-year-old Klipdrift Shelter, also in the southern Cape, demonstrate an engraving tradition that is among the earliest reliable evidence of what may be considered modern practice.

The SapienCE exhibition highlights the Middle Stone Age, and showcases the extraordinary lives of prehistoric humans, our ancestors, who inhabited the southern Cape coast, 120 000 to 50 000 years ago. The primary mission of the exhibition is to display, explain and interpret the origins of our own species, *Homo sapiens*, whose origins lie in Africa, and to produce an educational and inspirational resource for teachers and school children as well as the general public. The focus is to develop the investigative skills of students as well as to nurture their interest in the world around them.

A core aim is to show how people from all nations, creeds and colours share one origin denoting our common ancestors. With this knowledge, the aim is to celebrate our cultural diversity and help break down present conceived boundaries based on culture, religion and race and install a new sense of pride in all our visitors as we celebrate the common African origin of us all.

Archaeological excavations and research over the past 30 years by SapienCE researchers, Prof Christopher Henshilwood, Prof Sarah Wurz, Dr Karen van Niekerk and their team of excavators and international researchers provided the background for the communications and its source. Formal publications in leading science journals on excavations at the three sites provide valuable information. Highly skilled artists carried out the painting of the replicated scanned items to produce exact copies for display and the acclaimed filmmakers, Craig and Damon Foster produced outstanding photography of archaeological artefacts. Their films of recreated scenes of ancient past lifeways provide a powerful visual engagement. A large and magnificent bone, stone and shell mosaic artwork panel together with moving film imagery of hunter-gatherer scenes leave a powerful impact and creates for the viewer, a fully 'immersive' experience of discovery into a distant 'time machine'.

There have been many formal outputs related to the work shown in this exhibition over many years. Outputs have taken the form of journal papers, conference papers, book reviews, book chapters, formal conference presentations, informal presentations to student and societies, films, television reports, radio interviews as well as reports. There have been numerous articles about the SapienCE team's work in international newspapers including front page articles in *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *New York Times*, and many articles in popular journals including *New Scientist*, *Scientific American*, *National Geographic Magazine* and *Time*. When *Nature* published the SapienCE discovery of a 73 000-year-old human made drawing from Blombos Cave in 2018 it reached media all over the world. More than 1000 unique stories were written and published in 70 countries, with a possible outreach of two billion people. The drawing demonstrates that early *Homo sapiens* in southern Africa had the skills to make graphic designs in various media using different techniques at least 30 000 years before drawings first appear in Europe.

The exhibition is helping to break down present conceived boundaries based on culture, religion and race and install a new sense of pride in all our visitors. It is creating huge awareness about the origins of all people. It is showcasing how science can improve our knowledge of our history, to understand what people did and why. The exhibition, and the research behind the discoveries, is exposing a wealth of knowledge to the public and creating awareness in our youth. The 'We are all One' message features strongly, pointing to the evidence that all *Homo sapiens*, people like us, have their origins in Africa and promotes an understanding of our common ancestry. Current genetic evidence and a 'people's history' is richly portrayed to educate visitors of all ages about their own past and to encourage a sense of pride in us knowing that we all come from Africa.

Numerous school groups have visited the exhibition and more than 100 000 visitors have seen the exhibition. Their remarks in the visitor's book have been extremely positive and reflect that the visitor has had an uplifted, educational and rich experience. This exhibition has been highly successful in uniting people from across the globe, in making us aware of our common origins and that our future lies not in xenophobia but in working together as one global nation.