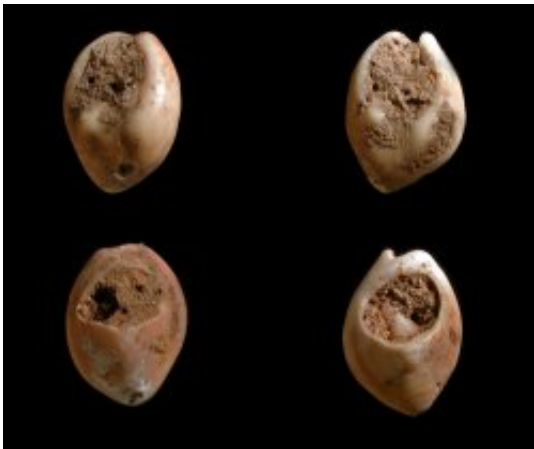


Discovery of oldest human decorations -- thought to be 82,000 years old

June 5 2007



The shell beads. Credit: Ian Cartwright, Institute of Archaeology.

Archaeologists have discovered shell beads believed to be 82,000 years old – making them the oldest dated human decorations.

These finds of handmade beads, in a limestone cave in Morocco, suggest that humans were fashioning purely symbolic objects in Africa 40,000 years before they did it in Europe. A paper on the discovery is published in this month's *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

The discovery of beads at the Grotte des Pigeons, Taforalt, in Eastern Morocco was made by an international team of archaeologists from the UK, Morocco, France and Germany, led by Oxford University's Institute

of Archaeology.

Twelve Nassarius shells were perforated in their centres, and showed signs of being suspended or hung. They also appeared to have been covered in red ochre, like other less well-dated African beads. These symbolic, decorative objects are considered early signs of modern human behaviour and mark shifts in human development. Similar beads have been found at sites from Algeria, Israel, and South Africa, which probably date back to about the same time or slightly after the finds from Taforalt.

Lead author Professor Nick Barton, Director of Oxford's Institute of Archaeology, said: 'Bead making in Africa was a widespread practice at the time, which was spread between cultures with different stone technology by exchange, or by long-distance social networks.

'A major question in evolutionary studies today is "how early did humans begin to think and behave in ways we would see as fundamentally modern?". The appearance of ornaments such as these may be linked to a growing sense of self-awareness and identity among humans, and cultural innovations must have played a large role in human development.'

Preliminary work by the team has also shown that these Nassarius shells are not isolated occurrences, but are present at various other sites in Morocco. The researchers are waiting for the dating results for these, but they may turn out to be even older than the discovery at Taforalt.

Source: University of Oxford

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