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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF MAJOR PLEISTOCENE PALAEOART SITES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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A literature survey shows that Africa south of the Sahara has as yet produced only a dozen palaeoart sites of Pleistocene age, of which the following seven have yielded multiple finds:

Chifubwa Stream Shelter in northern Zambia. Excavations there in 1951 revealed a sequence comprising surface soil with a few Iron Age sherds, 2 m of sterile sand, and then up to 0.7 m of red earth on bedrock with a Later Stone Age assemblage belonging to the Nachikufan 1 industry. The shelter wall, from well above the modern surface to 3 cm above the Nachikufan level, was covered by random cupules and many incised and rubbed petroglyphs, some coated by red or black paint. No viable dates come from this site, but the Nachikufan 1 elsewhere in Zambia dates to between 11 000 and 21 000 ^{14}C / 25 000 cal BP_{Hulu}, and it is therefore considered probable that the Chifubwa petroglyphs were made at some time within that interval.

Apollo 11 Cave in southern Namibia. A dramatic find during 1969 and 1972 excavations in this small cave on the side of a gorge was the recovery from one of the upper levels of a cluster of seven painted plaques with images that include a possible therianthrope. A radiocarbon sample from above one of the slabs was dated to 28 000 ^{14}C BP, and a subsequent study of ostrich eggshell fragments from two levels on the outer side of the trench indicated that the Later Stone Age strata there range back to 41 000 ^{14}C years ago. These findings indicate that the Apollo 1 art has a calendrical age of about 32 000 ^{14}C BP_{Hulu} and that they relate to the middle reaches of the Later Stone Age.

Pomongwe Cave in southern Zimbabwe. Excavations there in 1960 and 1979 uncovered a long sequence, in the much-disturbed basal Later Stone Age level of which were found two slabs that feature red-painted patches with well-defined outlines. These items, which are presumed to have spalled from the cave wall, certainly predate an overlying assay of 13 000 ^{14}C years ago, and most possibly lie between 20 000 ^{14}C years ago and the regional end of the Middle Stone Age at 48 000 cal BP.

Nswatugi Cave in southern Zimbabwe. This site, some 2 km west of Pomongwe, was first excavated in 1933, and again in 1975, when the upper unit in a 4 m and more Middle Stone Age succession was found to have an age of > 42 000 ^{14}C BP. That level was distinguished from those below it by the presence of largish segments, which would suggest a temporal correspondence with the 60 000-70 000 years old Howieson's Poort industry of South Africa. From it came two slabs, each with a single haematite-coated surface that have been interpreted as palettes for the application of liquid pigment.



Pleistocene palaeoart sites in sub-Saharan Africa.

Blombos Cave on the south-western Cape of South Africa. Excavations since 1992 in this small coastal cave have probed Middle Stone Age strata containing a 70 000-77 000 years old Still Bay assemblages overlying earlier material dating from 85 000-100 000 BP. From both have come 15 engraved siltstone slabs, including some with cross-hatched designs, that are taken to reflect a single palaeoart tradition spanning some 25 millennia.

Hollow Rock Shelter in the south-western Cape of South Africa. Excavation of the shallow deposits in this shelter in the Cederberg mountains produced a Middle Stone Age assemblage of Still Bay type that is undated, but likely to have an age in the 70 000-77 000 year range. Together with the lithics were found two notched haematite fragments; one with a series of notches on a concave ground edge and the other thin and roughly rectangular, with notches around much of the periphery.

Wonderwerk Cave in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa. Fieldwork from 1978 to 1996 in this horizontal and 141 m deep solution cavity established a sequence extending from historical times to basal Oldowan at ~2.0 million years BP. Palaeoart from these include incised haematite plaques from Middle Stone Age contexts, one dated to about 70 000 BP and the others from a level with a basal U-series age of 152 000 BP, as also five incised slabs from a Late Fauresmith level, with U-series dates of 270 000-280 000 years ago.

Also of note are localities that have produced early evidence for the deliberate retrieval of pigments, believed to have been mainly used for body decoration, of which the oldest presently known occurrences are at the following site: **Kathu Pan 1** in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa. Excavation between 1979 and 1982 of the 11 m deep infill of this karstic doline revealed a stratified succession which included a 540 000 years old Fauresmith level containing a number of smoothed haematite and specularite fragments. A few small haematite pieces also came from the underlying Acheulean level with an estimated age of 0.7-0.8 million years ago.

The present sub-Saharan evidence indicates that the use of pigments arose by at least 540 000 years ago, that incised patterns range back to at least 270 000 years ago and that iconic depictions commenced by at least 32 000 years ago.



