

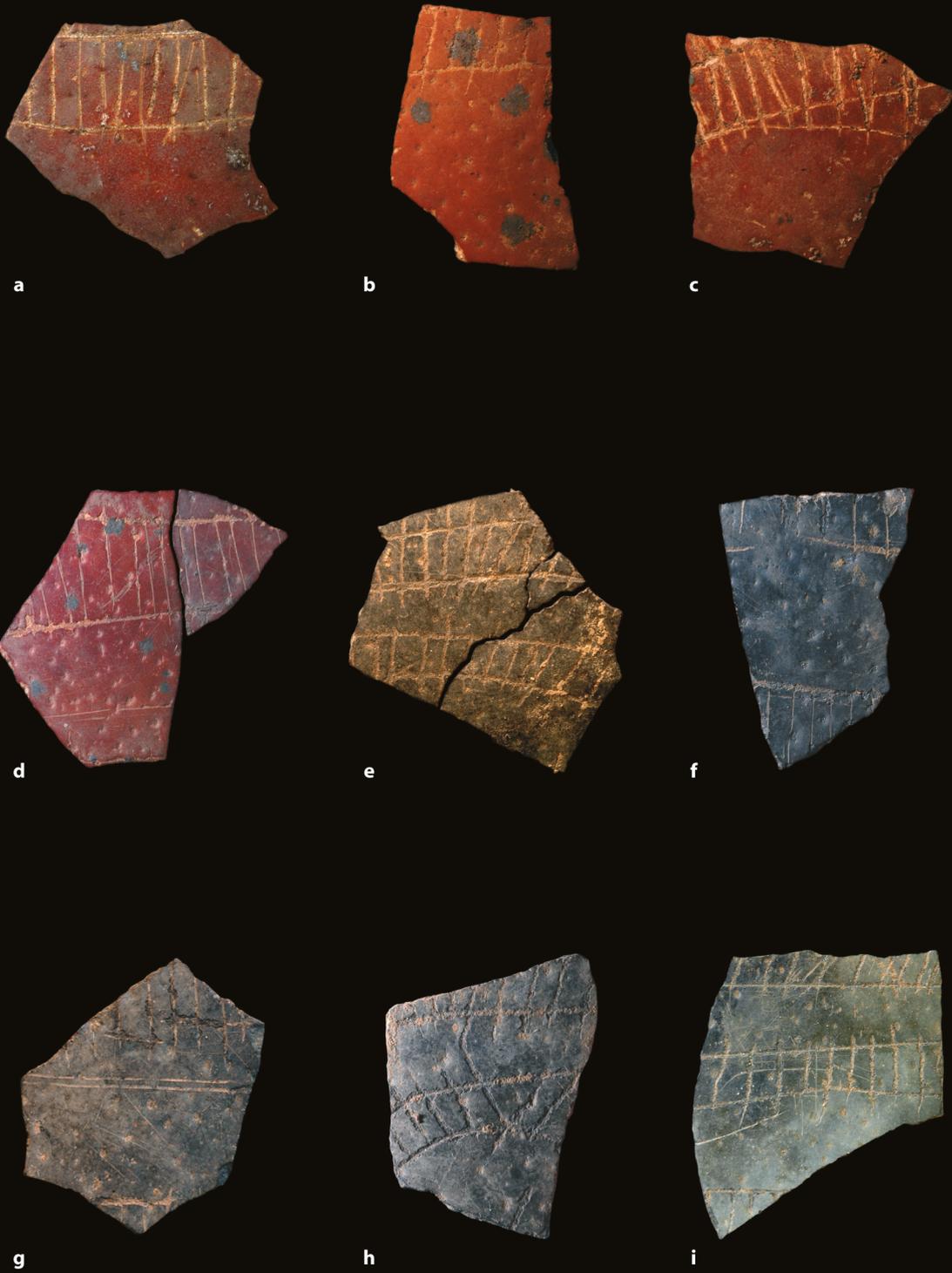
ENGRAVED OSTRICH EGGSHELL CONTAINERS FROM THE MIDDLE STONE AGE AT DIEPKLOOF ROCK SHELTER (SOUTH AFRICA): a 60 000 Year-old Graphic Tradition

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Diepkloof rock shelter is a large quartzitic sandstone shelter (250 m²) located around 200 km north of Cape Town (Western Cape). It overlooks the Verlorenvlei River at 14 km from its mouth on the edge of its current shore. Excavations conducted since 1999 have gradually exposed one of the most complete archaeological sequences of the Middle Stone Age in southern Africa. A section nearly 4 m deep shows for the first time a continuous sequence of Pre-Still Bay, Still Bay, Howiesons Poort and Post-Howiesons Poort occupations dating from before 130 ka to about 45 ka. Although ostrich eggshell fragments are documented throughout the sequence, the engraved ones are associated only with several contiguous layers within the upper half of the Howiesons Poort complex. To date, more than 370 engraved eggshell fragments, most of which were found in two layers, have been collected in a sub-sequence of around fifteen layers. These repetitive engravings show that a relatively limited range of motifs was realized, following simple geometric rules. The use of decorated eggshells as containers, as historic !Kung groups did, is suggested by the presence of a few engraved or non-engraved fragments clearly originating from the edge of a perforation. The rich assemblage of engraved fragments has been dated to approximately 60 000 BP by thermoluminescence and OSL. This is currently the earliest known evidence of a graphic tradition. This unique collection raises new questions concerning the symbolic practices and cultural identity of Anatomically Modern Humans at this time.

Symbolic manifestations of behaviors are currently universally considered to be the most reliable indicators of “cultural modernity”. Symbolic practices indeed reflect organized social conventions and can be found archaeologically in different forms, depending on the nature of the material support used and the type of transformation to which it was subjected. In all cases, the existence of such practices requires a complete adhesion to the collective rules of the social group concerned. The repetition and codification of these practices enable us to perceive traditions within certain categories of objects.

It is thus crucial to know where, when and in what form such symbolic behaviors merged in the course of human evolution. In the Middle Stone Age (MSA) in southern Africa, we find solid evidence of technological innovations and very early symbolic behaviors preceding the dispersion of Anatomically Modern Humans into Eurasia, around 50 000 years ago. The earliest symbolic practices documented in southern Africa consist of shells whose intentional perforation led to their interpretation as personal ornaments. The engraving of portable objects, such as ochre pieces, bones, and ostrich eggshells is another example. The idea that specific marks always reflect attempts to make figurative representations can be debated. Because the number of archaeological



Fragments of engraved ostrich eggshells of the EOES (Engraved Ostrich Egg Shell) complex in the Howiesons Poort at Diepkloof rock shelter (Western Cape), found in layers OB2 (a, c) and Frank (b, d-i). They display several aspects of the most common motif at Diepkloof. The hatched band, of variable width and space between hatches, appears to have been realized up to three times on the same container. Conjoins grouping up to 17 fragments and pieces such as fragment c, situated at the junction of two extremities of one band, indicate that this type of decoration usually had a circular shape.

collections is still limited to small samples of stratigraphically contemporary pieces, the range of variability of motifs remains poorly documented and interpreted. Engraved elements are characterized by the remarkable diversity of their motifs, the choice of materials used as supports and their chronocultural contexts. Rather than considering the practice of engraving as a simple and homogeneous phenomenon, it now appears particularly important to focus on observed differences and to evaluate their role in the appearance and evolution of symbolic expression.

Among the few sites in southern Africa at which engraved objects have been found, Diepkloof rock shelter is currently the only one to have yielded a significant assemblage of engraved ostrich eggshells (figure). The discoveries made over the past ten years, along with those previously made at the site, make this a particularly rich and absolutely unique collection. The large assemblage of engraved eggshell fragments nonetheless displays only a limited range of geometric motifs, thus introducing the notion of group identity (through the following of rules) and individual expression (manifest by a certain stylistic latitude).

The limited range of motifs, along with their diachronic variability, provides convincing evidence for a type of symbolic expression. The very large assemblage of engraved eggshell fragments discovered at Diepkloof, in a particularly well preserved geoarchaeological context, as well as the indisputable intentionality of the incisions and their mutual organization, provide an opportunity to study the most reliable collection available to illustrate what appears to be the first known graphic tradition.





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