Blombos Cave, South Africa

Summary

Blombos Cave is an important site on the Southern Cape of South Africa for supporting “modern behavior” of the Middle Stone Age people. Many contend that the MSA people were not fully modern in behavior because the artifact remains do not support the working of organic material, fishing, and other advanced behavior. They also project that these behaviors may not have originated in Africa. However, at this particular site, evidence supports all three, and dates to as far back as at least 40,000 years ago. Bone artifacts have been excavated and could possibly be worked in symbolic ways, as well as fish remains with bone tools, including tools of the Still Bay industry. This evidence supports a substantial amount of “modern” developments were made by these MSA people.

Excavation

Excavations were carried out at Blombos Cave in 1993 as well as 1997. Because of the success of the previous work at the cave, excavations will continue to 2001 with yearly excavations planned for the next three years. They have found a Later Stone Age deposit, and estimate it to date within 2,000 years. There are sterile layers below this LSA deposit, but as they kept digging, they found layers containing artifacts of a Middle Stone Age industry, particularly the Still Bay. Despite the small size of the excavations, many important discoveries have been made there, giving insight into the past lives of the MSA peoples who resided at the cave.

Location

Blombos Cave is found at the southwestern tip of Africa. The cave is found approximately 100 meters from the coast of the Indian Ocean, and is about 35 meters above sea level. Because of the evidence of shellfish and fish at the MSA levels, there were probably
similarly high sea levels at that time. There were warmer interstadials around 50,000 to 60,000, 80,000 and 100,000 years ago, which also occurred during Last Glacial. Tests have concluded that at 50,000, 80,000, 100,000 years ago the shore distance to Blombos Cave was approximately 1 km. The distance increased as time advanced, but because the MSA artifacts range around 50,000 and 60,000 years ago, the distance to the shore was smaller.

Dates

Like many other MSA sites, the dates for the approximate occupation time at the cave are not solid. Archaeologists have attempted to use radiocarbon dating and archaeological finds, such as tools, to develop an educated estimate of the age of this site. Most tend to agree that the site was inhabited approximately 50,000-60,000 years ago. Carbon and Nitrogen analysis was used to measure the dates of the bone points. They took samplings from the MSA levels, and the LSA levels, to compare the content of Carbon and Nitrogen. The LSA samplings contained a larger amount of both Carbon and Nitrogen, due to the fact that the LSA materials were younger and therefore better preserved. They estimate the bone points of the MSA to be slightly older than 40,000 years.

Paleo-Environment

Blombos Cave is located on the coast of the Southern Cape of South Africa. It is thought by archaeologists that the habitation of the cave occurred during the warmer parts of the Last Glacial period around 50,000-60,000 years ago. Currently, the cave is situated approximately 100 meters from the coast and 35 meters above sea level. At the time of habitation the distance from the site to the coast would have been about 1 km, indicating that, seal levels have risen slightly since the time of habitation. Fluctuating climate has affected the distance of the cave from the sea for thousands of years. At one point during the Last Glacial Maximum (17,000 years ago) the site was as far as 160km from the coast. This distance of the cave from the coast
most likely played a large role in the inhabitants’ decision to work, hunt, and possibly live at the site. Marine artifacts found in the cave suggest that the artifacts were brought from the sea directly to the cave for processing or consumption.

Artifacts

The cave consists of Middle Stone Age and Later Stone Age deposits. The Middle Stone Age artifacts are classified under the Still Bay industry. The most dominant artifacts in the assemblage are bifacial points, known as Still Bay stone points. These points were possibly used as spearheads and were made by pressure-flaking the raw material silicrete. Other artifacts that have been discovered were made from raw materials that were not local, suggesting that, the inhabitants of the cave were traveling large distances to acquire specific, preferred materials. The interesting fact about the stone artifacts is that nowhere else in South African MSA sites are they found to be as dominant as they are at this site. Excavations at the cave also uncovered about 20 pieces of worked bone. Most of these bones (which are probably from seal) have been shaped to use for the purposes of piercing, gouging, or drilling. Two of these bone tools were worked into points by polishing and grinding, and possibly firing. There is evidence on the tools that they were hafted, that is, they were probably bound to a shaft of some type. One bone point even appears to have been polished with ochre. These two bone points are significant because they are the first bone artifacts that have been associated with an assemblage older than 40,000 years ago. This proves that bone tools were a part of some MSA peoples’ tool kits. Another piece of bone appears to have been incised or carved with a stone tool. Some believe that these marks are just the results of butchery, while others believe that the marks may be a form of decoration. To return to the subject of ochre, hundreds of pieces of it have been found at the site. It is speculated by many scholars that the pigment from the ochre was used in painting objects or
bodies. This would support the view of certain archaeologists that these people had developed a sense of art and symbolic thinking.

**Food Remains**

Archaeologists have found the remains of various types of shellfish and large fish, some of which may have weighed up to 50 pounds. The most common types that were caught were catfish, black musselcracker, and red stumpnose. It is uncommon for the remains of such large fish to be discovered at MSA sites in South Africa, making Blombos an interesting site. Because no evidence of bone hooks have been found, some speculate that the inhabitants of the cave lured the fish close to the shore with bait and then speared the fish. These finds suggest to the archaeologists that the inhabitants of the cave were using tools, bone and stone, to exploit the nearby marine resources. This is important in that it suggests that inhabitants of the cave had developed a sophisticated means of subsistence. The remains at the cave also suggest that the inhabitants were exploiting terrestrial animals such as antelope, eland, hares and tortoises.

**Activity Areas**

Archaeologists believe that they have located what could be determined as hearth and tool manufacture areas within the cave. This suggests that the residents of the cave had developed a distinct pattern of spatial use within the confines of the cave. With the information that tools and food remains were found, it can be hypothesized that the cave was at minimum used as a site for the consumption of food and was most likely used as a home base. Either way, the inhabitants of Blombos Cave had developed a taste for seafood and had developed the tools that gave them the ability to process this food.