

Linguistic implications of the earliest personal ornaments

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Personal ornaments play many different roles in human societies, but all are eminently symbolic. Personal ornaments represent a technology specific to humans that signals their ability to project a meaning onto the members of the same or neighboring groups by means of a shared symbolic language. Human language is the only known natural system of communication that has a built-in meta-language that enables the generation of other hierarchically structured symbolic codes. Once created, these codes are shared by the members of a society and transmitted, as with language, from one generation to another. Research conducted in the last few years has dramatically changed our view of the origin of bead manufacture and use. Until recently the invention of personal ornaments was considered to be synonymous with the colonisation of Europe by Anatomically modern populations bearing the Aurignacian technology, some 36,000 years ago. We know now that marine shells were used as beads in the Near East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa at least 30 kyrs earlier and for some sites up to 100 kyrs earlier. Five sites, Skhul and Qafzeh in Israel, Oued Djebbana in Algeria, Grotte des Pigeons, in Morocco, and Blombos Cave in South Africa have yielded evidence for an ancient use of personal ornaments.