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The revolution that wasn't: a new interpretation of the origin of modern human behavior

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Abstract

Proponents of the model known as the "human revolution" claim that modern human behaviors arose suddenly, and nearly simultaneously, throughout the Old World ca. 40–50 ka. This fundamental behavioral shift is purported to signal a cognitive advance, a possible reorganization of the brain, and the origin of language. Because the earliest modern human fossils, *Homo sapiens sensu stricto*, are found in Africa and the adjacent region of the Levant at >100 ka, the "human revolution" model creates a time lag between the appearance of anatomical modernity and perceived behavioral modernity, and creates the impression that the earliest modern Africans were behaviorally primitive. This view of events stems from a profound Eurocentric bias and a failure to appreciate the depth and breadth of the African archaeological record. In fact,

many of the components of the “human revolution” claimed to appear at 40–50 ka are found in the African Middle Stone Age tens of thousands of years earlier. These features include blade and microlithic technology, bone tools, increased geographic range, specialized hunting, the use of aquatic resources, long distance trade, systematic processing and use of pigment, and art and decoration. These items do not occur suddenly together as predicted by the “human revolution” model, but at sites that are widely separated in space and time. This suggests a gradual assembling of the package of modern human behaviors in Africa, and its later export to other regions of the Old World. The African Middle and early Late Pleistocene hominid fossil record is fairly continuous and in it can be recognized a number of probably distinct species that provide plausible ancestors for *H. sapiens*. The appearance of Middle Stone Age technology and the first signs of modern behavior coincide with the appearance of fossils that have been attributed to *H. helmei*, suggesting the behavior of *H. helmei* is distinct from that of earlier hominid species and quite similar to that of modern people. If on anatomical and behavioral grounds *H. helmei* is sunk into *H. sapiens*, the origin of our species is linked with the appearance of Middle Stone Age technology at 250–300 ka.



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Keywords

Origin of *Homo sapiens*, modern behavior, Middle Stone Age, African archaeology, Middle Pleistocene

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