

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Thinking in Symbols

Modern human culture underwent a “creative explosion” in Ice Age Europe 40,000 to 10,000 years ago. The evidence, which ranges from fantastic cave paintings to elaborate graves to innovative tools, is a sure sign that human symbolic thought—our ability to create and combine meaningful symbols to represent the world—was in full bloom. What evolutionary steps seeded this mental flowering? This Human Bulletin video follows the ongoing excavations of Christopher Henshilwood, an archaeologist who is seeking the earliest evidence of our species’ unique mental powers. Recent finds dating to 72,000 years ago at his South African excavation site, Blombos Cave, are slowly shedding light on an era of human culture that has been all but dark.

CLASS DISCUSSION

Establish Prior Knowledge

Draw a happy face, a dollar sign, and a peace sign on the chalkboard. Explain that these are all familiar symbols. Call on students to interpret what each sign symbolizes. Then ask students to suggest other symbols and their meanings. Tell students that the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the places we worship and the places we shop send messages about who we are and how we conceive of ourselves. These are symbols that are recognized by people around us. Discuss with students when they think symbolic thought began to evolve in humans.

Exploration

Have students watch the feature and read the essay, “Jewels of a Creative Mind.” Use the following questions to guide a class discussion:

- What type of thinking is unique to human beings?
(Answer: Humans are the only organisms that use symbolic thought—a means to express themselves through words, images, music, jewelry, clothing, and other symbols.)
- What were some of the steps mentioned in this feature that occurred in human evolution that led to our ability to use symbols? (Answer: bipedalism, brain size)
- What do anthropologists rely on to learn how people behaved 200,000 years ago?
(Answer: They rely on artifacts that they find through excavating.)
- Why is Blombos Cave important to understanding the behavior of humans that lived 75,000 years ago?
(Answer: Artifacts found there show that people were using materials in a symbolic way.)
- What types of artifacts have been found in the cave so far?
(Answer: Shell beads; ochre, a red pigment, which could be used to adorn the body.)
- How do they compare to artifacts found in other areas?
(Answer: Similar shell beads and ochre were found at other sites in Morocco and Israel that date back from 82,000 to 135,000 years old. This may signify that bead-working was common in Africa before people migrated to Europe.)

Wrap-Up

Use the following question to wrap up your discussion:

- Do you think the findings at Blombos overturn the current thinking that Europe was the birthplace of modern human thought? Why or why not?
(Answers will vary.)