Excavations at Bizmoune Cave (Essaouira): first findings on the Aterian on the south Atlantic coast of Morocco

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INTRODUCTION

There is striking diversity in evolutionary trajectories across Africa and Eurasia between 200,000 and 30,000 years ago. North Africa was home to a distinctive population of humans as well as a unique archaeological complex, the Aterian, characterized by ‘bespoke’ appearance of traits such as personal ornaments. Recent research has done much to clarify (though not resolve) the temporal limits and climatic associations of the Aterian (e.g., Barton et al. 2013; Bouzouggar and Barton 2012; Dibble et al. 2011; Strode et al. 2014). Ultimately, understanding the uniquely dermed cognitive and behavioral features of late Pleistocene hominins requires documenting their behavioral flexibility and adaptive potential.

Excavations at Bizmoune have been initiated with the goal of expanding the ecological range of well excavated Aterian sites in Morocco. The site was selected in part because of its location: It is situated well to the south of better-known Aterian sites near Rabat, Casablanca and Oujda.

SITE LOCATION AND HISTORY OF RESEARCH

Bizmoune cave is located in southwestern Morocco, about 15 km inland from the city of Essaouira on the Atlantic coast. Bizmoune “Lamenes’s den” in the Berber language) was discovered and tested by one of us (AB) during a regional survey in 2007.

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CONCLUSIONS

Bizmoune Cave represents the westernmost end of the geographic distribution of Aterian sites in North Africa. Further excavations at the site promise to contribute to understanding of geographic and ecological variability within Aterian material culture and adaptations, as well as late Pleistocene chronology in southwest Morocco. Bizmoune also has the potential to provide new evidence about Aterian economies. The presence of edible marine shell in a site ca. 15 km from the coast is unexpected, as this is farther than shellfish are typically transported before processing. There is also evidence for a decline in occupational intensity toward the end of the Aterian occupation, between layers 4 and 3 (trench 1) although we do not know if this is purely a local phenomenon.

REFERENCES CITED