Paleoanthropological investigations of Middle Stone Age sites at Pinnacle Point, Mossel Bay (South Africa): Archaeology and hominid remains from the 2000 Field Season

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ABSTRACT: The Middle Stone Age (MSA) in South Africa has gained increasing attention due to the discovery of bone tools at Blombos Cave, the abundance of ochre suggesting artistic expression, the presence of a variety of lithic assemblages with advanced technological characteristics, and debates over the interpretation of the fauna. Linked to these findings are debates over the antiquity of modern human behavior, with some researchers arguing that the South African evidence suggests an early origin of modern behavior, while others suggesting a late origin. Resolution of these debates relies on two advances: improvements in our theoretical approach, and an improvement of the empirical record in Africa. We initiated fieldwork at Mossel Bay on the southern coast of the Cape to address the latter deficiency.

Our survey to date has covered a 2 km section of 8 km of coastal cliffs, penetrated 1 km inland, and resulted in the discovery of 28 archaeological sites, 21 of which are MSA, and 15 of those are caves or rock shelters. Test excavations were carried out at 3 of these caves, all at Pinnacle Point. Two (13A and 13B) yielded rich MSA horizons with outstanding preservation of fossil bone, and lithic assemblages. Two hominin fossils were found, and the incisor is metrically intermediate between Middle Pleistocene hominins and modern humans. The lithic assemblages are dominated by the early stages of artifact manufacture, and resemble typologically and technologically the regional variant of the MSA (the Mossel Bay Industry), but blades and points are significantly smaller than reported elsewhere. The fauna from both sites display a surprising rarity of small mammal, micromammals, and tortoise, unlike at most other MSA sites from the Cape. The shellfish remains indicate collection from nearby rocky outcrops and very occasionally also from sandy beaches. Collecting rounds targeted the mid- and lower reaches of the intertidal zone.

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