A PAST ADORNED:

The Function of Adornment in Early Human Societies

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Preface

Adornment is one of the oldest expressions of human imagination. Long before cities and formal systems of writing, humans built their bodies. Based on the current findings of the archeological record, human communities began creating beads, pendants, pigments, and other ornamental objects as early as 150,000 years ago. These forms of adornment helped people negotiate and express identity within their communities. Fashion is often described as a visual language. In this sense, people communicate ideas about themselves through the clothing they choose. For those who study Fashion, this semiotic system is familiar as a structured exchange of information that is interpreted through colour, material, silhouette and any other identifiable visual markers from one individual to another or group. Through fashion, people can assert their place within a group, but it goes beyond the simple act of recognition. In a small group, where all members know one another, what function does role recognition play? This paper aims to position that, since the earliest material evidence of personal ornamentation in the archaeological record, such practices have both conveyed meaning and contributed to world-building. It visually reinforces and affirms the decisions a group has made. It materialises the intangible: relationships, values, emotions and the collective thoughts a community shares.

Every ornament, from the simplest pierced shell to the most ornate crown reflects an act of imagination. Tens of thousands of years ago, it was an essential step in human evolution to understand that objects carry meaning beyond conventional practical function.

To adorn is to construct—it is through the visual and tactile elements of ornamentation that humans give form to the imagined.

"The archaeological record tells us only what people did in the past, not what they were capable of doing."

— Steven Kuhn and Mary Stiner, *Paleolithic Ornaments: Implications for Cognition, Demography and Identity*

Situating Adornment in the Paleolithic

The Paleolithic period (or Stone Age) spans roughly 3.3 million years ago (mya) to 10,000 ya and typically marks the earliest production and use of lithic (stone) tools by the *Homo* genus. Dates are general and differ region to region, with evidence of specific tool technologies rising earlier or later, depending on the area. During the Lower Palaeolithic (c. 3.3 million to 300,000 ya), earlier hominin groups such as *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus* developed simple lithic tools made by pounding flakes (knapping) off stone to create sharp edges that could cut and scrape, eventually leading to symmetrical bifacial tools such as handaxes and cleavers[1]. These early technologies relied on locally available stone selected for their fracture properties, suggesting increased knowledge of raw materials through trial and error as well as varying skill proficiencies[2].

Fig 1. Lower Paleolithic handaxe found at Haute-Garrone, France.

The Middle Palaeolithic (c. 300,000 ya to 50,000 ya) saw the rise of *Homo sapiens* in Africa, alongside greater behavioural evolution in the form of regionally diverse tools, fire use for tool-making, big game hunting, ritual practices and the production of personal objects[3]. Research into tools from certain sites, such as Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, have revealed that the types of stone used came from distant sources, implying a certain selection bias in materials based on knowledge of their properties[4]. The hunter-gatherer societies of the Middle Palaeolithic were by nature mobile and preferred multi-use tools that

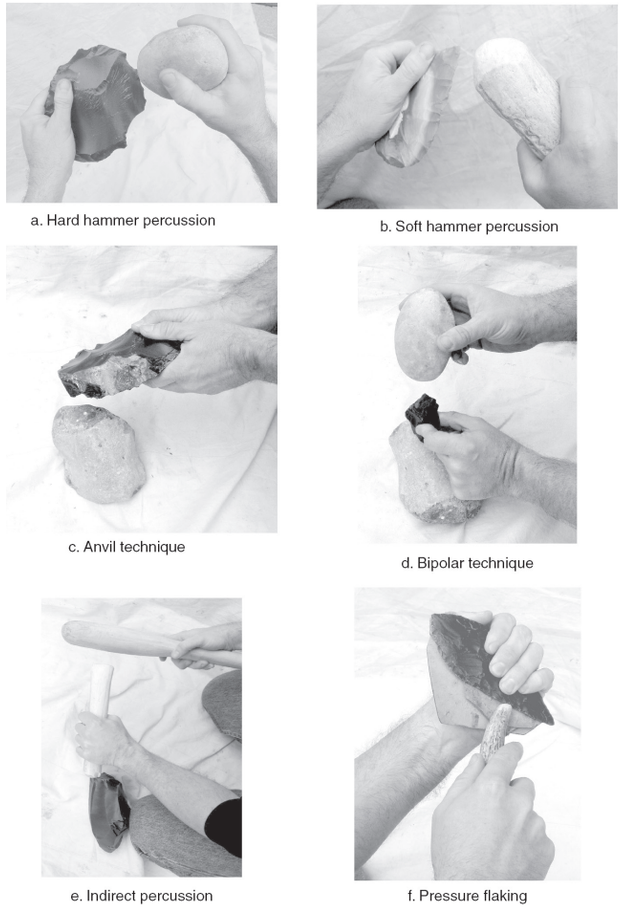

Fig 2. Different types of knapping techniques

could be transported easily, developing simple but diverse "tool kits"[5]. Social organisation during the Middle to Upper Palaeolithic is also suggested through burial practices. At Qafzeh Cave in the southern Levant, early *Homo sapiens* burials dated to roughly 90–100 thousand ya include deliberately placed individuals in pits with red ochre, indicating increasingly ritualised treatment of the dead and a growing concern with social identity, memory, and group affiliation[6]. The use of pigments becomes more archaeologically visible in the African Middle Paleolithic, where engraved ochre pieces and pigment-pro-

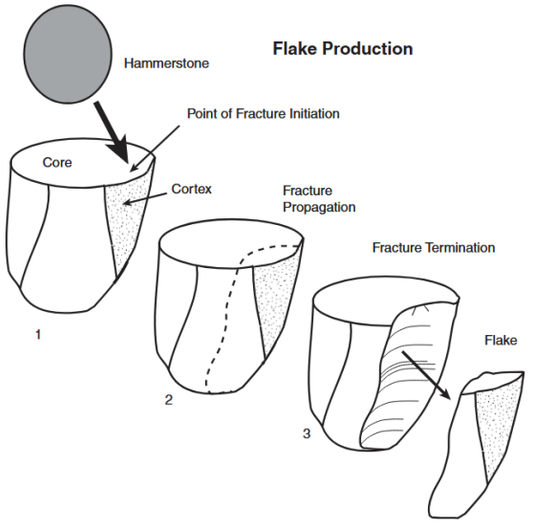

Fig 3. Flake production for knapped tools

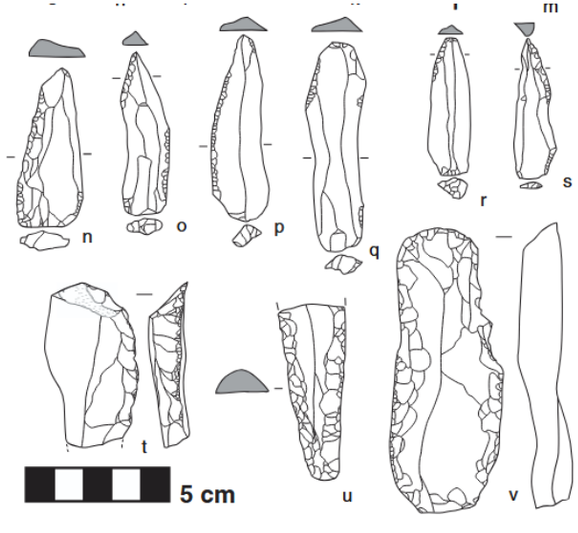

Fig 4. Various Upper Paleolithic blades

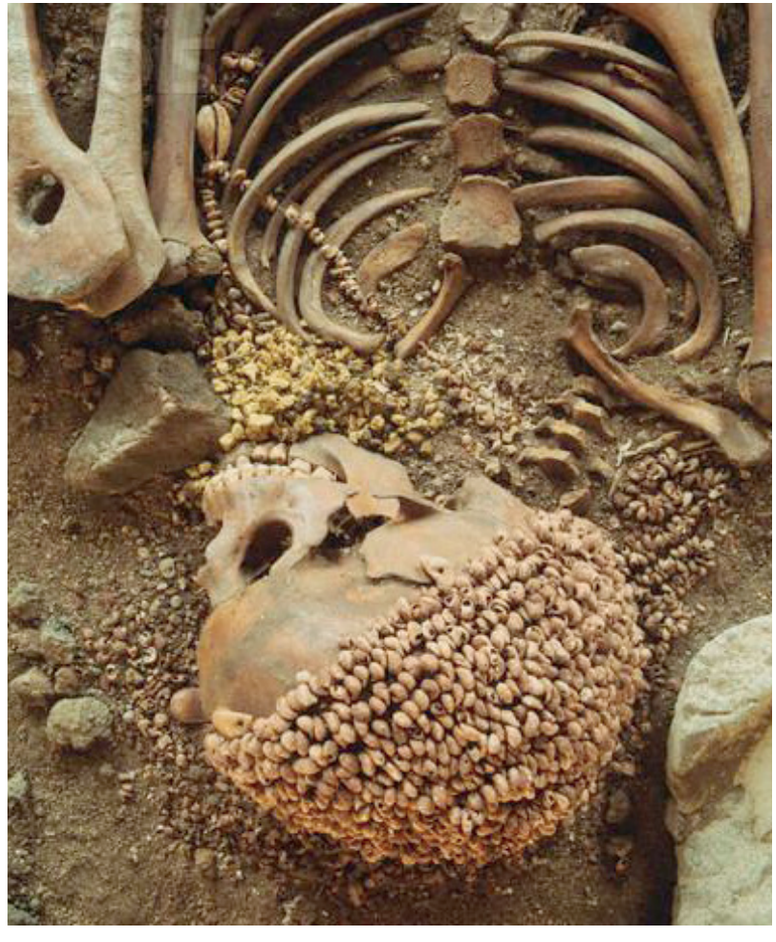

Fig 5. Burial of teenage boy found at Arene Candide cave in Italy, c. 28,000 ya. Nicknamed the "Prince", the skeleton is lying on a bed of red ochre and surrounded by fine grave goods such as ivory pendants and a flint blade. The boy is wearing an ornate cap made of hundreds of perforated marine shells. The staging of the body suggests that this individual was valued by his community.

cessing kits from sites like Blombos Cave indicate abstract marking behaviours before the widespread appearance of figurative art, pointing toward symbolic capacities that would later be expressed more intensely through ornamentation[7].

The Upper Palaeolithic (c. 50,000 ya to 12,000 ya) sees several technological advances such as composite tools, specialised hunting equipment such as atlatls (spear-throwers) and fishhooks, and

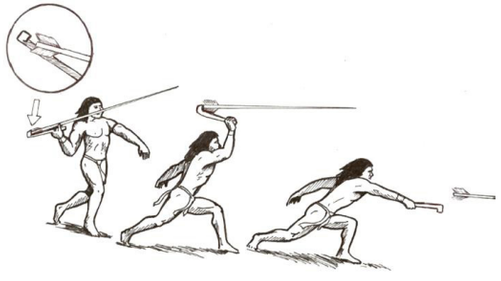

Fig 6. Atlatl use.

a dramatic expansion in the use of bone, enabling finer workmanship for things like needles and decorative objects. Beads are the most prolific adornment artefacts found in both number and distribution. At present, the earliest known beads consist of pierced marine shells from the late Middle Palaeolithic deposits at Blombos Cave. In East Africa, ostrich eggshell beads appear somewhat later, with estimated dates reaching back to about 40,000 years ago[8]. In "Paleolithic Ornaments: Implications for Cognition, Demography and Identity", Kuhn and Stiner remark that shell beads from different sites are not particularly unique; the swatches of available artefacts show consistent choices in manufacture by early *Homo sapiens*[9]. Humans could collect naturally perforated shells or puncture one themselves with bone or antler tools, resulting in a simple, replicable design. Beads and other decorative items offer valuable evidence about cognitive evolution and the changing social dynamics, especially with population growth and the increasing number of 'strangers' among early humans[10]. This act of making, wearing, and caring for exemplifies the kind of material engagement through which early humans mediated their engagement with the world. Kuhn and Stiner write that symbols can be recognised by their standardised and repeated forms. Body ornaments such as

Fig 7. Perforated shells *(Glycymeris insubrica)* found at Qafzeh Cave, Middle Paleolithic.

beads exemplify this, demonstrating the extent of human capacity to produce and communicate shared symbolic meaning[11].

The Neolithic (c. 12,000 ya to 4,500-2000 ya) typically marks the beginning of agriculture and more permanent human settlements. This resulted in population growth and increasingly complex social and cultural dynamics, though it is important to note that, like the Palaeolithic, markers of the Neolithic vary greatly based on geographical location, developing for example, straightforwardly in Europe but in stages in other regions such as the Levant[12]. Compared to the simple, knapped tools of the Palaeolithic, there is an increase in groundstone tools: tools made through abrasive techniques such as grinding and polishing which would become well-suited for more refined personal objects. The complexity of tool making increased, taking substantial time in manufacturing and requiring hours to produce, compared to the few minutes it would take to pound off flakes for Lower/Middle Palaeolithic tools[13].

The gradual transition from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic represents a significant leap in human cognitive evolution, made evident through the increasing sophistication of tool use and object production. The vast archaeological record emphasises how material culture serves as an invaluable lens for understanding the emergence of complex thought, revealing how early humans conceptualised their survival, environment, social relationships, and ultimately their own identities.

Fig 8. Fragment of an atlatl made of reindeer antler depicting a bison licking an insect on its back dating roughly 15,000 ya. Found at La Madeleine, Dordogne Valley, France.

Fig 9. Shell fishooks found in Jerimalai cave in East Timor.

Fig 10. Various personal ornaments found at the Poiana Ciresului site in Romania, c. 20,000 ya.

Fig 11. Various Paleolithic bone needles.

"Human life consists of ceaseless and varied interactions among people and myriad kinds of things."

— Michael Schiffer, *The Material Life of Human Beings: Artifacts, Behavior and Communication*

Forming Culture Through Materiality

The availability of material and technology impacts what can be created, but so does conceptual vision, that is, what people imagine can be created or want to create. This may be influenced by physical limitations (such as brain functions or environment) as well as cultural factors like language, religion or philosophy. What objects people interact with and how becomes culturally specific.

Technology, as a form of material culture, is a major force of cultural formation and change, altering how people carry out everyday activities. The rapid developments in Western culture through industrialisation occurred through specific tools: the power loom, electric lighting, washing machines, etc. These developments changed the way everyday activities were carried out as well as affected what other types of goods could be created and at what scale. This process of change has occurred again and again in different places and at different speeds, outlining how technology both shapes and is shaped by culture.

Objects influence embodied practices by determining how tasks are performed: the ease, the speed and the sensations. Over time, these repeated interactions make certain behaviours normal and natural. They also create a shared experience that others can relate to. In Materiality and Society, Tim Dant outlines how culture is mediated through interactions with objects, through making, using and upkeep. Object interactions are a defining characteristic of humans; "...in no other species do the variety of artefacts and the diversity and complexity of interactions begin to approach those found in even the most materially impoverished human societies"[14]. By facilitating daily and ceremonial rituals, they affect individuals' relationships to things and how people interact with each other. As Dant writes, "...objects have embedded within the materiality of their design and manufacture a series of cultural values that shape the practices…on the other end of these material interactions are other people who are both shaping and sharing the culture"[15]. Objects can shape perception by structuring how people interact with their environment, influencing what feels possible. By engagement with material things, people come to see and understand the world in culturally specific ways. Culture, at least partially, is therefore produced through the ongoing interaction between embodied human experience and the material objects that organise daily life.

Dant argues that material culture studies have overlooked the physicality of objects, their material qualities and interactions with the human body, in favour of symbolic meaning. The same could be said for the field of fashion studies, which frequently emphasises semiotics. Often described as a visual language, fashion, understood here as the multitude of ways one can fashion the body (from clothing to hairstyles to tattoos), is something that can be read by another person or group. Much of our understanding of historical fashions has come from these connections. A dress made of silk from the 18th century belonging to a wealthy person or the popularity of red lipstick during World War II signalling American patriotism. However, this semiotic framing is incomplete. Such an approach overlooks the ways in which material qualities like texture, weight and flexibility shape how adornment is experienced by the wearer. Significant research has gone into how fashion affects the way people interact with the world. For example, the rise and fall of corsets in women's fashion is rather extensively discussed in relation to its physical effects on the body. Initially they held up the many layers of dress, therefore easing the burden of weight, and later, they restricted movement in the increasingly mobile lives of 20th-century women. This text focuses on the experience of wearing and embodying ornamentation. It considers not only the social signals these objects communicate but also how they are felt on the body, how that experience shapes perception and cognition, and how it ultimately structures human interactions.

Material Engagement Theory

Understanding culture as something produced through material engagement requires rethinking how meaning itself is formed. Objects of adornment and the mechanical processes involved in their production and wear offer a compelling case for how cognition is supported by physical external factors. Malafouris introduces Material Engagement Theory (MET) as a different approach to examining how cognition is

formed by analysing human interactions with material culture. Cognitive science has often viewed the mind like a computer that receives and detangles meaning from information (cognitivism)[16]. This view has clear connections to semiotics, particularly in its emphasis on signs, symbols, and representational systems. Malafouris' critique is that within this framework, meaning is not enacted or lived but processed, and the brain is simply a "disembodied input-output machine characterised by abstract, higher level logical operations"[17]. His theory challenges representational models of cognition on two central grounds. First, the assumption that cognition occurs mainly or only inside the head, and second, the idea that cognition is fundamentally computational in nature. Malafouris expresses scepticism towards cognitivism, especially as it appears in archaeology and anthropology, particularly its reliance on the development of representations to explain modern human cognition or define "behavioural modernity"[18]. He argues that this focus risks oversimplifying cognition by reducing it to the presence or absence of symbolic capacity, rather than examining how thinking actually unfolds in practice. Importantly, MET does not discredit the

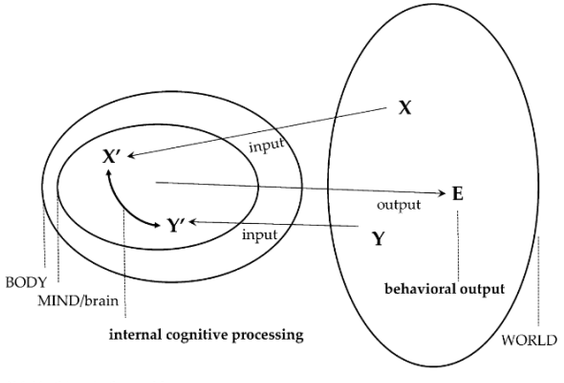

Fig 12. View of the mind that visualises how representations are formed in the mind.

significance of representations but rather argues that their cognitive significance lies primarily outside the mind, in the dynamic interactions between humans and their material environments[19]. In this sense, mental imagery less significant than the external objects, tools, and environments that participate in the formation of thought. This approach is particularly compelling for the study of material culture, since material objects often function representationally, depicting or suggesting ideas, social relations, and other abstract concepts. Further, by applying Embodied and/or Extended Cognition theories to the study of lithic tools for example, archaeologists can better understand processes of learning and the development of technical skill[20].

Representation is only one dimension of material culture's broader meaning-making ability, it extends to structuring actions and creating perception through use and manipulation. In parallel, Embodied Cognition theory reframes the relationship between mind and body outlined in traditional philosophical theories about cognition (dualism, materialism, idealism). Instead of treating the body as a passive vessel that houses the mind, Embodied Cognition insists that the mind is fundamentally structured through bodily engagement[21]. Thinking is not something that happens only in the body but rather is shaped and realised through physical interactions between bodies and material culture.

"If there is such a thing as human agency, then there is material agency; there is no way human and material agency can be disentangled."

— Lambros Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement*

Body Schema

In “Is it me or is it mine? The Mycenaean sword as a body part”, Malafouris begins from the premise that “Material culture has the ability to change and shape our bodies by extending the boundaries of our body schema”[22]. This neural map, or body schema, is “ an unconscious body map responsible for the constant monitoring of the execution of actions with the different body parts”[23]. Its introduction in 1911 by Henry

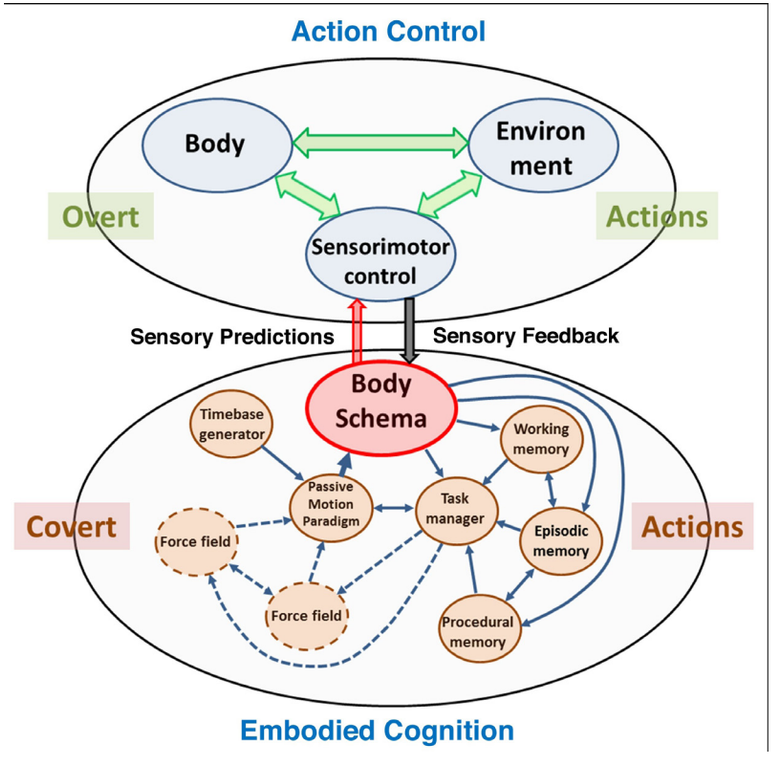

Fig 13. Diagram showing body schema as a model for processing information.

Head and Gordon Holmes related it to their clinical work on patients suffering from brain injuries to understand how damage to different cortical regions affected sensation. They observed that patients' sense of bodily sensations and coordination, especially in relation to their limb functions, was disrupted. They wrote:

> It is to the existence of these "schemata" that we owe the power of projecting our recognition of posture, movement and locality beyond the limits of our own bodies to the end of some instrument held in the hand. Without them we could not probe with a stick, nor use a spoon unless our eyes were fixed upon the plate. Anything which participates in the conscious movement of our bodies is added to the model of ourselves and becomes part of these schemata: a woman's power of localisation may extend to the feather in her hat.[24]

This suggests that the boundary between body and object is not fixed, but can be extended through interaction. In his argument, Malafouris turns to the evolution of the human hand, asserting that beyond its ability to manipulate objects and execute orders from the brain, it has sensory and perceptual significance. As he writes, the hand is “one of the main perturbary channels through which the world touches us, and which has a great deal to do with how this world is perceived and classified”[25]. The hand exemplifies how the body and material engagements co-constitute perception and meaning-making. How can this idea change approaches to archaeologically understanding the way people in the past conceptualised themselves?

Extending the Body

Malafouris situates the Mycenaean sword within the funerary contexts of the Mycenaean Shaft Graves (c. 1600 BCE). He notes that the careful arrangement of objects around the deceased shows deliberate attention to the position and form of the human body. This placement suggests that identity and memory are materially staged: “Being narrated and commemorated is thus objectified”[26]. The presence of swords in these

graves, corresponding to an increase in other funerary gifts and wealth signal the Mycenaean veneration for the military lifestyle. Wealth (in the form of material objects) is not just a consequence of position or status, it participates in creating and legitimising social identities. A central focus of Malafouris' paper concerns the boundary between body and object (sword): how tools and weapons become perceptually and functionally integrated into bodily experience. Importantly, Malafouris clarifies that he is not anthropomorphising the sword in a metaphoric sense, nor claiming that Mycenaeans literally believed it to be 'alive'. To reduce the sword's significance to symbolism alone would be to confine it solely to representation. Instead, he proposes that the sword is alive within human cognition similarly to the hand as it affords new possibilities for action that were previously unavailable, such as clasping the hilt[27]. In other words, the sword restructures the user's body schema. Just as the hand adapts to and is reshaped by the tools it grasps, generating new motor habits, the sword elicits specific gestures via its visual markings and design[28]. This response from the body by the object exemplifies a form of agency. Malafouris concludes, "the Mycenaean is not simply using a new weapon but extending and transforming himself"[29].

The Mycenaean sword is a tool that exists as an embodied extension of the body, cognitively alive within the warrior's sense of self. The sword offers a model for thinking more broadly about how material culture adheres to and transforms the body. The integration of the sword into the body schema suggests that other body-bound objects can extend cognitive processes by mediating how bodies move, feel, and are perceived within social spaces.

Fig 14. Gold and bronze Mycenaean swords from the shaft graves in Mycenae Greece.

“The blind man’s stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch.”

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

Material Selves

If the body schema is not fixed to the skin, but is rather a moldable radius, then when an object participates in conscious movement it becomes incorporated into the model of the self. Following Head and Holmes' statement of a woman's self extending to the feather in her hat, and the later elaboration by Merleau-Ponty in his example of a blind man who navigates the world via a stick, an object in contact with the body becomes the new tip of perception. This is as true of tools as it is of 'decoration'. The handling of objects becomes second nature, as natural as bodily functions. Using utensils to pick up food may become more familiar than using hands to eat. Or consider a craftsperson who works with such ease that their tools become limbs, extending the abilities of their body. Even more so than extending these abilities, body-bound objects participate in the construction of social identity. A Mycenaean warrior can not function as such without a weapon. A seamstress can not sew (practice her craft) without a needle. So the question when it comes to adornment is whether identities can be fully assumed, stabilised, or recognised without the material 'stuff'? By making particular actions possible, objects extend the brain's perception of the body's capabilities. Jewellery, for example, is not a tool in the normal sense of helping to carry out a task. However, its cultural and symbolic force is profound. One need only observe times in history where communities are stripped of objects of their culture, such as the suppression of Indigenous regalia in North American residential schools. This suppression resulted in de-individualisation and cultural erasure, eliminating tangible ties to Indigenous ancestry and the social systems that had previously structured identity. The loss of material culture led to an erosion of embodied memory and identity.

Certain adornments can become so ingrained in the body that they are perceived as familiarly as one's ears or fingers[30]. This does not even account for adornment practices fixed to the body, such as tattooing, scarification, or the treatment of hair, which merit separate discussion not within the scope of this text. Adornment is therefore intimately bound to assumptions of identities, shaping how individuals inhabit their roles and experience the world through materially extended

bodies.

Materiality and Memory

Some of the earliest evidence of adornment offers a compelling place to ground these ideas archaeologically. Shell beads discovered in Upper Paleolithic deposits at Blombos Cave in South Africa are among the earliest evidence of ornamentation practice, dating to about 75,000 ya,

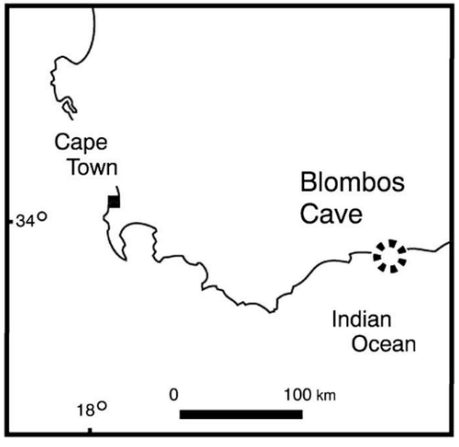

Fig 15. Blombos Cave location.

and provide a case study for understanding adornment as both technological and cognitive innovation. Fashioned primarily from small marine shells (*Nassarius Kraussianus*), these shells were carefully selected before being perforated with bone tools[31]. Bead clusters

Fig 16. Possible stringing arrangment for the shell beads found at Blombos Cave.

found at the site are thought to represent single pieces of beadwork[32]. Microscopic damage around the shell openings indicates they were

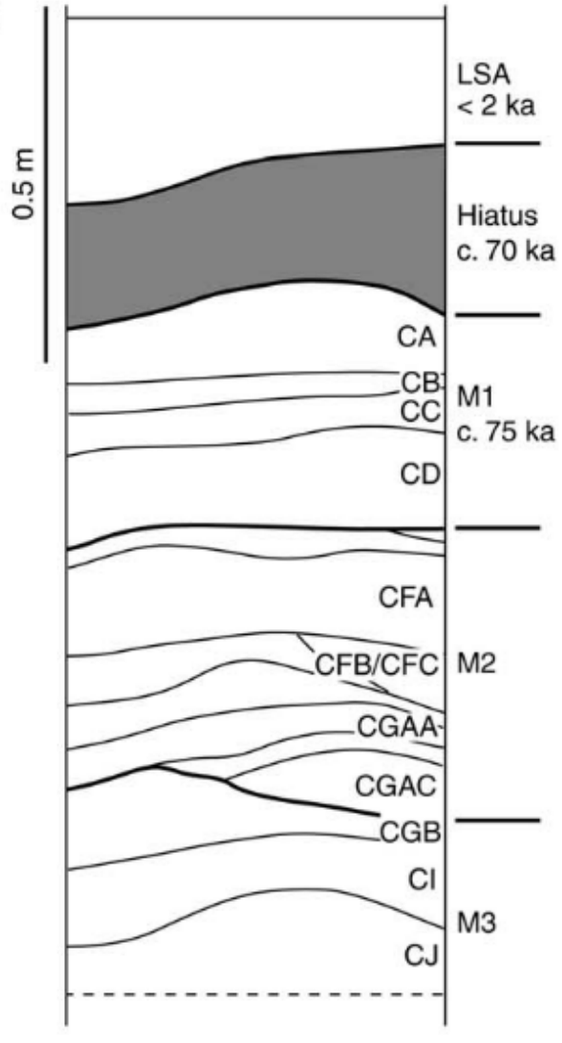

Fig 17. Stratigraphy of Blombos Cave. ‘ka’ can be read as ‘years ago’.

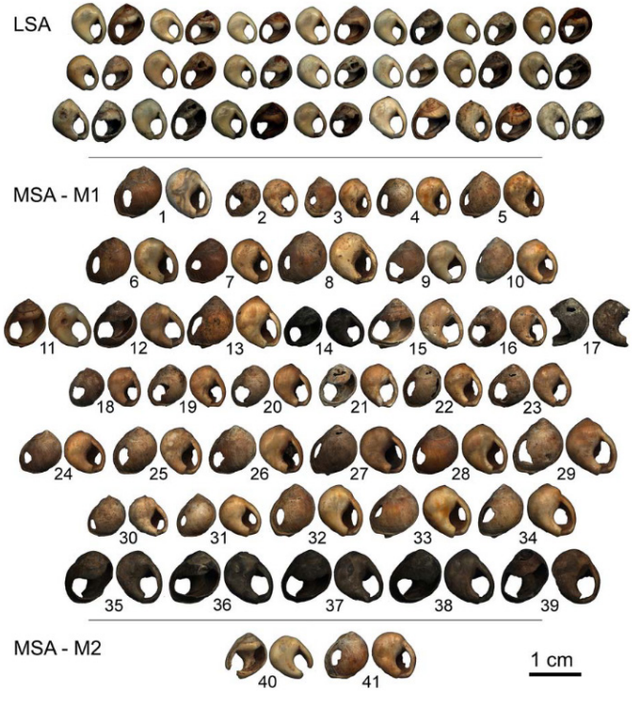

Fig 18. Perforated shell beads found at Blombos Cave, sorted by layer level.

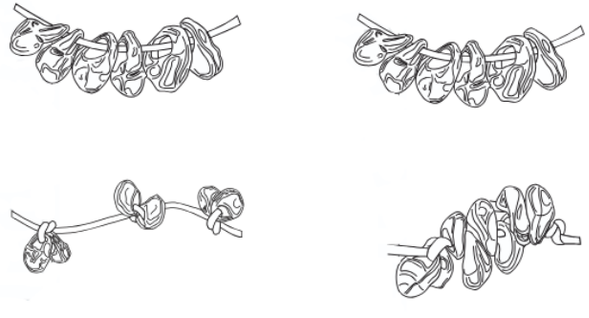

Fig 19. Other possible stringing arrangements.

unnaturally altered, with wear patterns showing they were strung and rubbed against thread, skin, or other beads. Findings on the use-wear also indicate that bead stringing arrangements differed between the lower and upper layers of Blombos Cave, suggesting these styles changed over time[33]. Colour may have contributed to their symbolic significance and added another layer of complexity to their production as many beads are stained with red ochre[34]. The process required

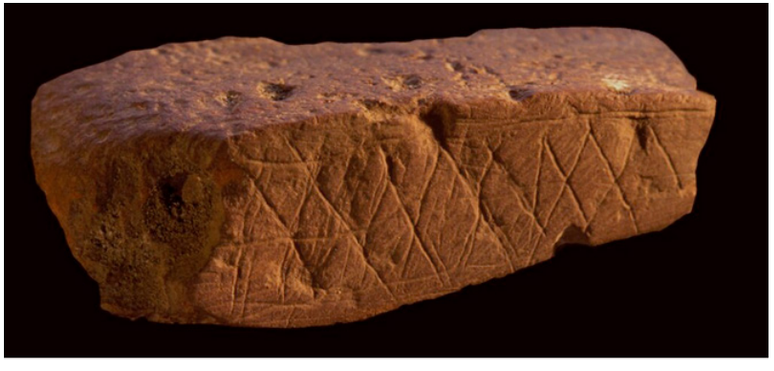

Fig 20. Engraved lump of ochre from Blombos cave, approx 100,000 years old. Markings would have produced too little powder pigment to be practical, engraving points to symbolic behaviour.

knowledge of material properties, fine motor control, and repeated practice. In this sense, the beads are technological achievements as much as tools for furthering human cognitive abilities. They demonstrate the capacity to transform natural materials into objects that function.

Personal objects allow information to persist beyond the lifespan of the individual who created or wore them. This semi-permanent materiality ensures that social signals, personal identity markers, or symbolic meanings are maintained across generations[35]. Beads and/or beaded objects can be transferred between people where they store cultural knowledge[36]. They function as vessels of memory, embedding social and symbolic information within material form and enabling the continuity of a group's collective identity.

Through the framework of MET, these beads can be understood as

active participants in cognition. Their significance lies in the dynamic interaction between body and object. Objects worn on the body can affect posture and bodily awareness since they are in constant contact with the body. Beads move as a body moves, press into the skin, and produce subtle sounds when they touch one another or hit a surface. They break, they stain, they leave visible and tangible marks on the skin. Over time, the wearer calibrates their gestures and reactions in relation to the way the beads behave (material agency). In other words, the beads become incorporated into the body schema. They are part of an extended cognitive system in which thinking unfolds through engagement with material objects.

If the mind is not separate from the body but shaped through bodily activity, the act of wearing changes how a person experiences their own physical limits. Weight at the neck or wrist, friction against skin, and the visibility of colour in one's peripheral vision all contribute to an altered sense of presence. The beads operate as a tactile interface between internal awareness and social visibility. It mediates how the

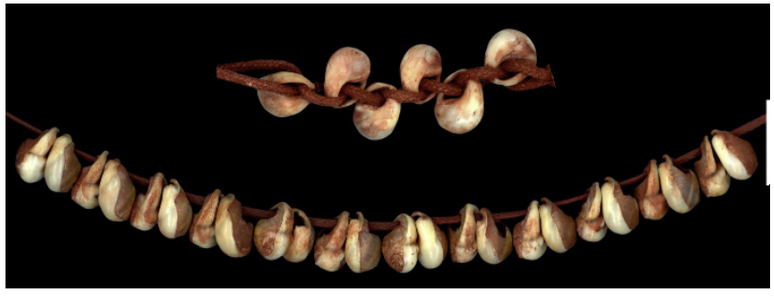

Fig 21. Ways in which Blombos Cave shells could be strung, based on wear experiments with *Nassarius kraussianus*.

wearer understands themselves and how they are encountered by others. Through continued use, these objects would have reinforced collective cultural memory and group belonging. The bead is in constant contact with the body. It participates in movement and routine. Its presence accumulates meaning through touch where it is reinforcing the sensory experience of daily life. Even under the assumption that such beads were reserved for ceremony rather than daily wear, their

Fig 22. Paleolithic bone awls.

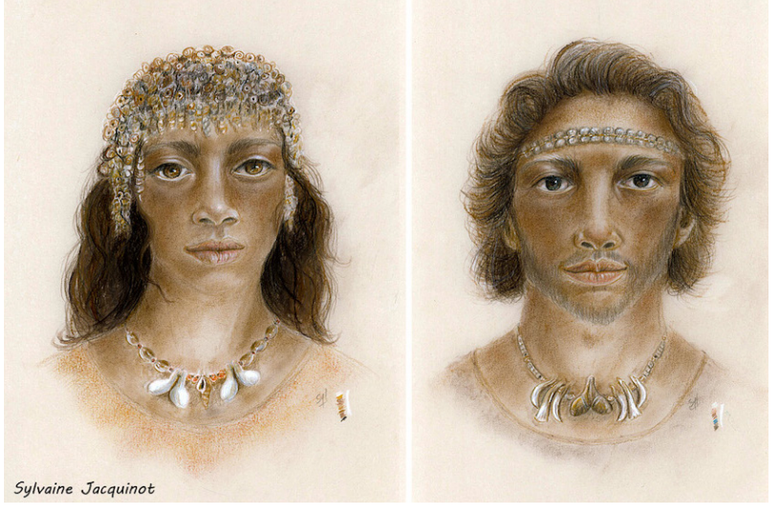

Fig 23. An artistic rendering of how the European Gravettian peoples may have worn their adornments 30,000 years ago.

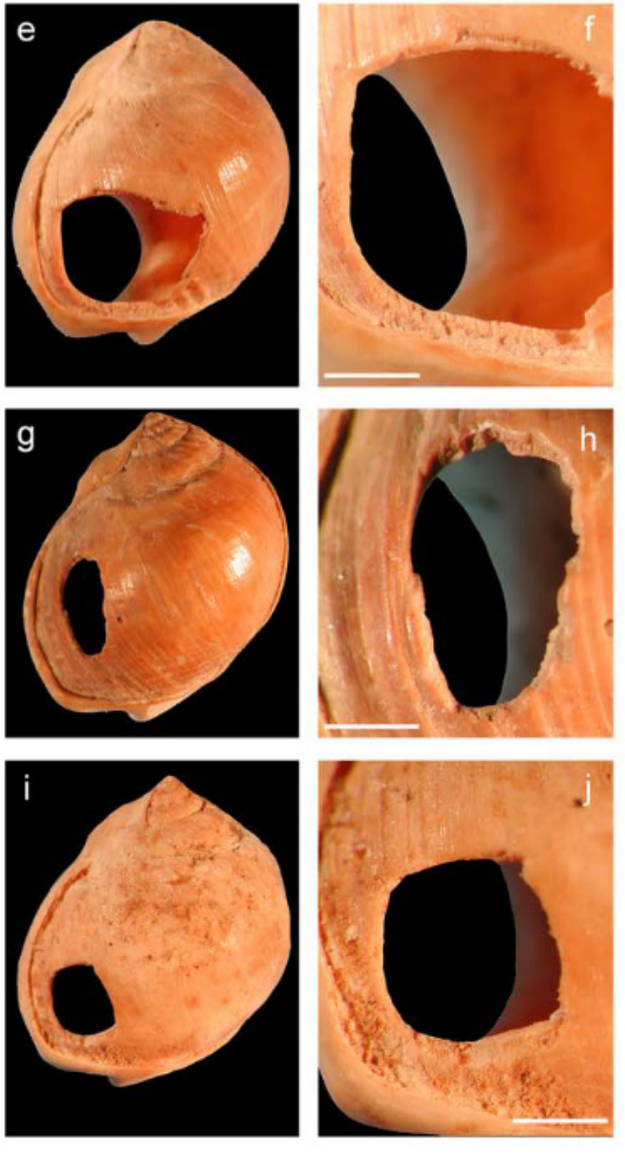

Fig 24. Close up of Blombos Cave shell perforations. Analysis shows that the perforations are not naturally occuring.

role in shaping identity remains significant. Objects worn during these infrequent events may carry even more weight in helping bring that role into being. A woman on her wedding day is recognised as a bride, but that transformation is put in action materially through objects that structure how she moves, feels and is seen. In part, adornment performs the role as she does.

Contemporary practices may illustrate the ongoing cognitive and social roles of body-bound objects and help us imagine the ways in which prehistoric beads may have shaped identity and memory. For example, in Indigenous traditions, beading is often taught inter-generationally. It serves as a connection to ancestry and the current community. Research into contemporary Indigenous beadwork highlights its role in embodied identity formation, where beadwork reinforces identity despite the loss in cultural memory[37]. Indigenous perspectives emphasise the creation process, the stringing, stitching and arranging of beads that are a meditative process[38]. Despite the focus on making, one can also imagine how the act of wearing allows individuals to then connect to their identity knowing that the process used to create the beaded pieces have been repeated by their ancestors time and time again. This continuity can be used to imagine the role of prehistoric beads, suggesting that even in early contexts, they carried important social and personal meaning.

Fig 25. Tasmanian Aboriginal shell necklace. Stringing shells requires patience and material knowledge passed down through generations. Shell necklaces have long been used by Indegenous people for adornement, tokens and trade.

Final Thoughts

To perforate a shell and suspend it on the body requires an understanding that found materials can be recontextualised. The human body must appear as a constructable surface in the minds of early humans, much like the rock they knapp into tools. Early humans recognised the capacity of objects to change the structure of their lives. While modest in scale, prehistoric beads reveal a profound shift in how humans related to their surroundings. Materials gathered from the landscape were reconfigured into forms that remained with the body, accumulating meaning through touch, wear, and memory.

Adornment participates in the formation of identity by shaping how bodies inhabit the space they are in. Through repeated wear, sensations become embedded within everyday gestures and routines. There is a practical function in how they organise interaction between people and environment. By making affiliations and roles visible, adornments operate as devices that help structure social life. A bead, pendant, or pigment mark can function as an instrument through which identity is negotiated within a community.

The archaeological record preserves only fragments of these experiences, yet even these fragments suggest that ornamentation occupied an important place within early human societies. Prehistoric adornment reflects an enduring human tendency to build meaning through objects that remain close to the body, where thought, touch and social life continually intersect.

Figures

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Adornment is one of the oldest expressions of human imagination. Long before cities and formal systems of writing, humans built their bodies. Through fashion, people can assert their place within a group, but it goes beyond the simple act of recognition. In a small group, where all members know one another, what function does role recognition play? This paper aims to position that, since the earliest material evidence of personal ornamentation in the archaeological record, such practices have both conveyed meaning and contributed to world-building. It visually reinforces and affirms the decisions a group has made. It materialises the intangible: relationships, values, emotions and the collective thoughts a community shares.

Every ornament, from the simplest pierced shell to the most ornate crown reflects an act of imagination. Tens of thousands of years ago, it was an essential step in human evolution to understand that objects carry meaning beyond conventional practical function.

To adorn is to construct—it is through the visual and tactile elements of ornamentation that humans give form to the imagined.

"The human body must appear as a constructable surface in the minds of early humans, much like the rock they knapp into tools."