

The Center for the Advanced Study of Hominid
Paleobiology and the Department of Anthropology
present

Early Modern Humans on the Edge of Land and Sea: Pinnacle Point's Contribution to Our Understanding of How Humans Became Unique

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Lecture: 10:00 AM – 11:00 AM

Q & A Session: 11:00 AM – 11:30 AM

The lineage that leads to modern humans appeared before 100,000 years ago in Africa and shared the planet with several other hominin species that soon went extinct after modern humans left Africa. This final chapter in the human origins story occurred primarily during world climatic conditions that were colder than today and when much of Africa was uninhabitable. In the Cape of South Africa a unique confluence of rich resources on the land and sea, even more productive during glacial climates, provided the ideal refuge and incubator for the modern human lineage and its unique behavioral suite. Pinnacle Point on the south coast of South Africa provides a long and contextually rich record of this region and early modern humans, and in this talk I will synthesize that record and discuss how it informs us on modern human origins. The surprising nature of this record is that it documents the origins of a host of novel human behaviors, and that forces us to ask the question “why”? Ethnographic and archaeological data from around the world shows that the rich and predictable nature of a coastal cuisine leads to behaviors and cultural complexity unusual for hunter-gatherers, but those selfsame resource characteristics lead to heightened levels of intergroup violence. I suggest that expanding the diet to this stable and predictable resource base may have led to unusually cooperative behaviors at the origin point of our lineage in this location, creating a new highly prosocial species that excelled at expanding its range at the expense of its sister lineages. This coastal adaptation forged the modern human adaptation we see among us today, an adaptation grounded in a complex cognition signaled in these South African sites by shell middens, sea shells, pyrotechnology, and small but lethal tools.

No tickets or RSVP are required to attend this event.

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