Origins and evolution of Modern Humans Behaviour:
a view from North Africa

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One of the most keenly debated issues in human evolutionary research concerns the African origins and dispersal of Homo sapiens. Until recently, Northwest Africa has been a much neglected region despite the occurrence of early Homo sapiens with the “Middle Palaeolithic” finds. In this region, several sites contain stratified sequences with exceptionally well-preserved organic remains offering rich sources of multi-proxy data for palaeoenvironmental and chronological studies.

The Northwest Africa is of key interest in the understanding of human evolution and behavioural development. A broader theme identified and could be discussed in the session concerns the nature, chronology and human associations with the cultural North African MSA, LSA and Early Neolithic. New chronological data move the LSA back in time to more than what it was known in North Africa. From calibrated record of AMS dates, the data of this region are compared with the global marine isotope record.

Sites in North Africa provide rare sources of information on the lives of early modern humans. Amongst the best evidence for early expansion of MSA people in the Mediterranean is in Northwest Africa where sites abound of MSA, LSA and Neolithic ages, ca. 7,000 to at least 200,000 yr ago. Unlike Europe, some of these cultural phases appeared to have occurred exclusively within Homo sapiens populations. Another distinctive characteristic is the abundance of symbolic artifacts and other behavioral indicators of cultural modernity that appear within North African MSA contexts, perhaps 50,000 yr earlier than in Europe. Conversely, the transition from the MSA to LSA was relatively late (25-20,000 yr ago) compared to many areas outside Africa.

Amongst the key issues to be identified so far are: How early is the North African MSA, does its appearance signify the arrival of new populations, is there any relationship between the LSA and MSA, what is the environmental context of these two technologies.

This session seeks to unite archaeological, geological and geochronological approaches to better understand the spatial signature and temporal dimensions for these cultural changes in humans for North Africa.