

ARCHE Seminar Series 2023

Prof Kristian Tylén and Dr Izzy Wisher present

“eSYMb: The Evolution of Early Symbolic Behaviour”

Australian Research Centre for Human Evolution Seminar Series 7

Why and how did symbolic behaviour emerge in our species? The ability to produce symbols – from aesthetic practices of decoration and ritual to gesture, and language – appears to be a uniquely human capability, and evidence for symbolic behaviour emerges early in our evolutionary history. Given its importance, it has been subject to extensive study from a wide range of disciplines from archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, semiotics and cognitive science. However, whilst the archaeological record contains an extensive temporal depth of evidence for symbolic behaviour, it is often sparse and fragmentary in nature. This presents significant challenges in interpretation, often resulting in different competing interpretations and hypotheses for the production, use, and development of symbols. Interdisciplinary collaborations between archaeology and cognitive science hold significant potential for generating new methods of inquiry that can facilitate hypothesis testing and the robust evaluation of interpretations.

The ERC funded eSYMb project intends to use methods from cognitive science to better understand the evolution of symbolic behaviour in the archaeological record. By using archaeological materials directly as stimuli in experiments, we can obtain new and complementary evidence to inform inferences about how fundamental aspects of symbolic behaviour may have emerged and developed in our species. In this talk, we will present the different ongoing projects involved in eSYMb – from understanding the psychophysical properties of the engravings at Blombos and Diepkloof c. 100,000 BP, to the processes involved in making animal depictions deep in caves in northern Spain.



Date/Time: Monday 31st July, 2023 at 1pm

Room: N78 -1.12 Seminar Room (Nathan Campus)