
Tracing Palaeolithic Occupation along the Eastern Red Sea Coastline

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Abstract

The role of coastal landscapes and resources in dispersals has long been the subject of debate, particularly in assessing the conditions and timing of global dispersals of modern humans from Africa. Coastal landscapes potentially provide highly attractive concentrations of different marine and terrestrial resources but are not uniformly attractive to exploitation. Current discussions into the extent to which Pleistocene coastal areas were exploited by hominin populations are hampered in large part due to their submergence by Holocene sea level rise. New data on Palaeolithic coastal occupation directly related to palaeoshorelines, from both terrestrial and underwater contexts, are therefore urgently needed. A UK-Saudi team DISPERSE is addressing these issues through archaeological survey along the Red Sea coastline of Saudi Arabia, a region key to dispersals along both the Northern Nile/Levant) and Southern Route (Bab el Mandab/Hanish Sill) from Africa into Arabia. This paper presents new data on Early and Middle Stone Age artefacts, primarily from the Red Sea coastline of the Harrat Al Birk lava fields, located by the UK-Saudi team between 2012-2017. This 100km coastline contains numerous raised fossil beach deposits and coral terraces, some associated with Palaeolithic artefacts. In particular, the Dhahaban Quarry site has yielded over 400 lithics, 19 of which were stratified in deposits below a fossil beach complex. The nature of these deposits and their associated archaeology are discussed in the context of the challenges involved with identifying and assessing the Palaeolithic record of coastal region exploitation, and the future potential for offshore investigation in the region.

Keywords: Palaeolithic, coastlines, geomorphology, sea level, dispersals

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