

## 4 Old European Texts from South Africa

Stuart L. Harris, October 2011

### Summary of Old European Texts from South Africa

The oldest inscription yet discovered dates to 162,000 BC at Pinnacle Point in South Africa. Called Old European, this script appears on nearly every continent, and continued in use until the nineteenth century in Scandinavia. The people living in South Africa wrote epitaphs on pieces of red ochre and deposited them in cave floors. Examples of their texts occur at Pinnacle Point and Blombos Cave, including a love story. The last of these people migrated from South Africa to Europe during a warm spell around 35,000 BC.

Table 1: Old European syllabary from South African inscriptions.

	A	Ä	E	I	O	U	Y
	 a	 ä	e	 i	o	 u	y
	AKA 					URO 	
H	 ha	 hä	he	hi	ho	hu	yu
J	ja	jä	je	ji	jo	ju	
K	 ka	kä	ke	ki	ko	ku	ky
L	la	lä	le	li	 lo	lu	 ly
M	 ma	mä	me	 mi	mo	mu	
N	 na	 nä	 ne	ni	 no	nu	 ny
P	 pa	 pä	 pe	pi	po	> symbol" data-bbox="685 675 715 705"/> pu	py
R	 ra	 rä	 re	ri	ro	ru	
S	 sa	 sä	se	si	so	su	sy
T	 ta	 tä	te	ti	 to	tu	ty
V	va	vä	ve	 vi	vo	vu	vy

## Background on the Middle Stone Age

The Middle Stone Age (MSA) in Africa began around 300 kya (thousand years ago) in Kenya and Zambia, marked by cognitive changes in our species, especially the discovery of how to make composite tools with super glue from red ochre.<sup>1</sup> Small, sharp, narrow blades from obsidian could be glued into handles of bone or wood, a vast improvement over the edge of a river cobble. Think of trying to trim hair with a river cobble.

By adding powdered red ochre and a little bit of water to fresh acacia tree gum, gluing two pieces together, then gently curing with heat for four hours, the glue will set like epoxy: strong, flexible and waterproof. This invention spurred the development of hafted tools such as bi-faced spear heads, backed knives and handled scrapers that characterize MSA. Razor-sharp bladelets could be struck one after another from prepared cores, greatly improving the yield from a flint core and the efficiency of the stone knapper. When mounted in a curved piece of wood or bone, these bladelets made a sickle to reap tough reeds for making mats and roofs. In a different configuration they could scrape hides. Spread along the seam of two hides, stitched tight and dried without heat, it formed a waterproof seal.

Besides body painting, red ochre played a significant role in tanning of hides. Red ochre mixed with fat is a tanning agent. Red ochre prevents hides from rotting during the early stages of tanning; yellow ochre does not. Ochre helps hides dry rapidly, become pleasingly thin and soft. And red ochre colors hides red during tanning.

For a time they stayed in Kenya, then abruptly branched out across the world. One group traveled to South Africa, apparently by sea along the east coast of Africa. They stayed at Florisbad Cave in 259 kya, then just as suddenly disappeared. For nearly a hundred thousand years South Africa lay vacant, a testimony to the difficulty or impossibility of overland migration from north to south.

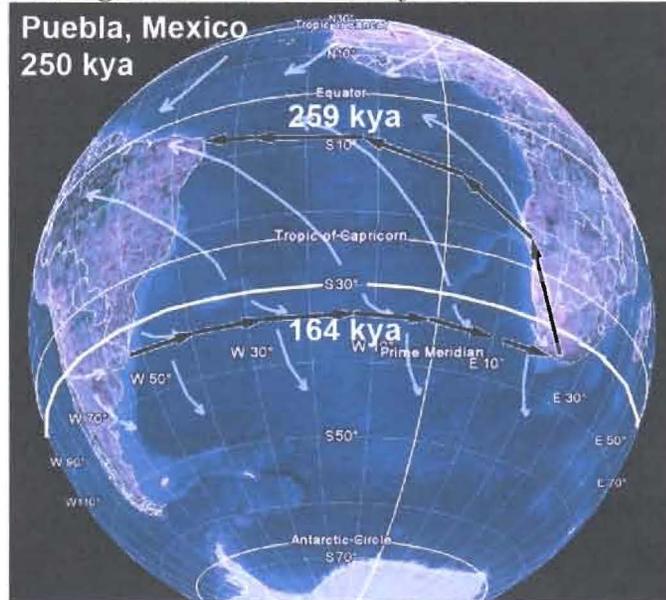
From South Africa they next appear in Mexico, where Middle Stone Age hunters resided at Hueyatenco and Valsequillo near Puebla around 250 kya<sup>2</sup>, with a generous margin of error. This migration route could only have been by sea, paddling up the west coast of Africa then riding the westerly winds to Brazil. From Brazil, some paddled north to Mexico, others south toward Argentina, though no sites have been identified.

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<sup>1</sup> The secret was lost until 2005, when Lyn Wadley deduced how it was made by examining the residue on backed blades. "When water was mixed with fresh Acacia gum and red coloring in the first stage of manufacture, it formed successful glue after it was heated – the stone inserts could not be pried from their shafts. Wet resins require more loading agent than drier resins in order to make them manageable." Wadley, Lyn; Putting ochre to the test: replication studies of adhesives that may have been used for hafting tool in the Middle Stone Age; 2005; *Journal of Human Evolution*, V 49, Issue 5, pp 587-601.

<sup>2</sup> Hueyatenco, the youngest site beside a lake in the Valsequillo region south of Puebla. Upper Hueyatenco has leaf-shaped points, knives, burins, scrapers, percussion and pressure flaking from a prepared striking platform, bone tools.

*Figure 1: Possible sailing routes between West Africa, South America and South Africa.*



Analysis of mitochondrial DNA suggests a bottleneck occurred in the human population around 170 kya; apparently a catastrophe killed off nearly all our female ancestors.

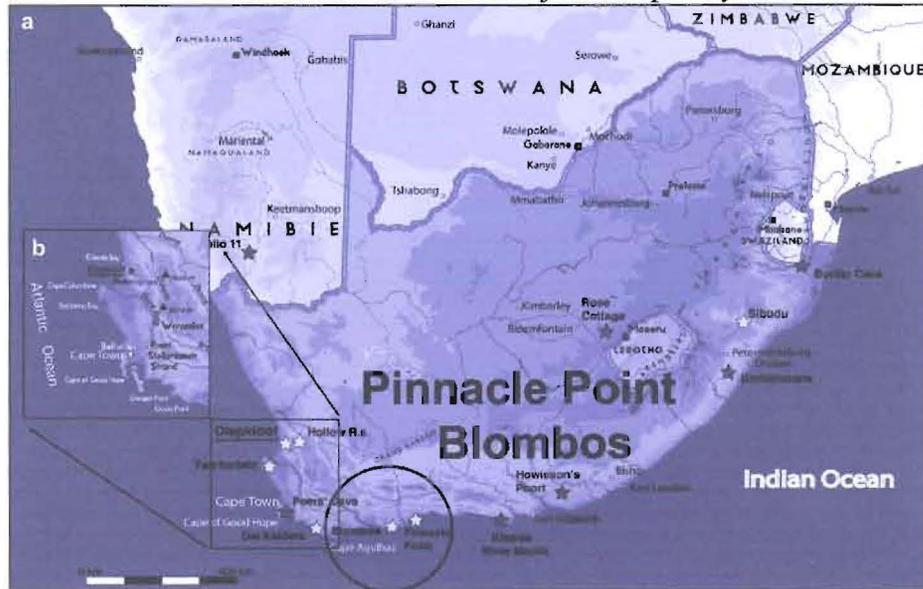
Among the survivors were people who lived in the Americas, people who remembered their origin across the sea. Something caused them to migrate out of South America, probably the same catastrophe that caused a bottleneck in the species. Survivors from the cold regions of South America paddled across the Atlantic back to South Africa, riding the Easterlies.

When they reappeared in 164 kya at Pinnacle Point Cave in South Africa, they were adapted to cold and brought startling inventions: bone spear points to exploit the sea, fishing nets, bone needles to sew leather, burins to drill holes in leather, leather clothes or shoes, ochre paints to adorn the body, shell necklaces, heat treatment of silcrete to improve knapping, leaf-shaped spear points (called Howiesons Poort) for light spears thrown with an atlatl, and most amazingly, an alphabet to write epitaphs on pieces of ochre.

The script at Pinnacle Point Cave is fully mature, indicating that writing commenced much earlier. One possible place is Puebla, but so far no one claims to have found pieces of ochre. A cold grassland in North or South America near the sea would better fit the cold weather lifestyle. Is there a cave near the sea that overlooks the Argentine pampas?

Although these people lived in South Africa for over 100,000 years, they left inscriptions at only two caves, Pinnacle Point and Blombos, thus indicating that not every one was literate.

Figure 2: Tourist map of South Africa showing the location of Pinnacle Point and Blombos Caves. Stars mark the locations of contemporary sites.



Beginning around 45,000 BC, an unknown mechanism created oscillating warm periods called Dansgaard-Deschger events (Figures 3 and 3). Animals grazing in the Sahara and Middle East could migrate north to take advantage of vast new grasslands. When it turned cold, these same animals retreated south to the north shore of the Mediterranean Sea, the highlands of Iran and through the Middle East to Egypt. Unlike today, North Africa and the Middle East were well watered, with grassy lowlands and forested hills. Immense lakes traversed the Sahara.

Figure 3: Oscillating cold and warm spells.

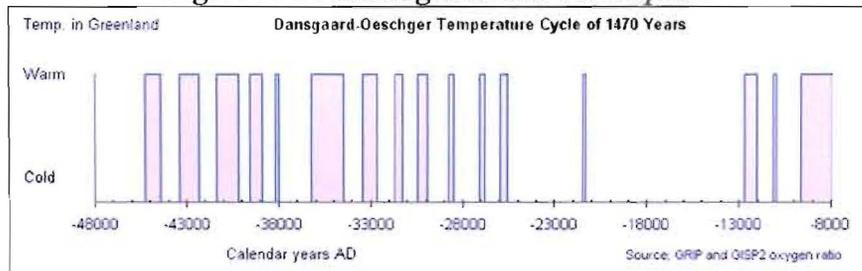
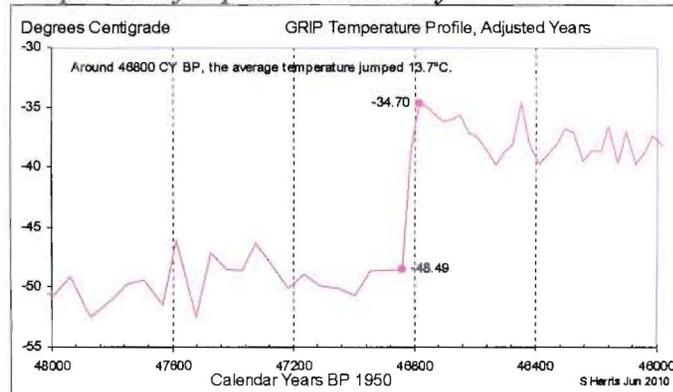
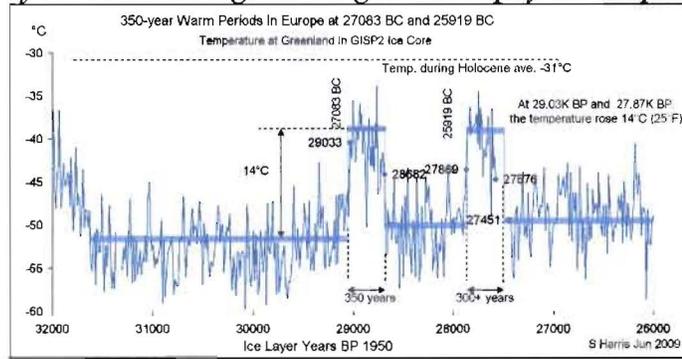


Figure 4: Temperature jump at the summit of Greenland circa 44,800 BC.



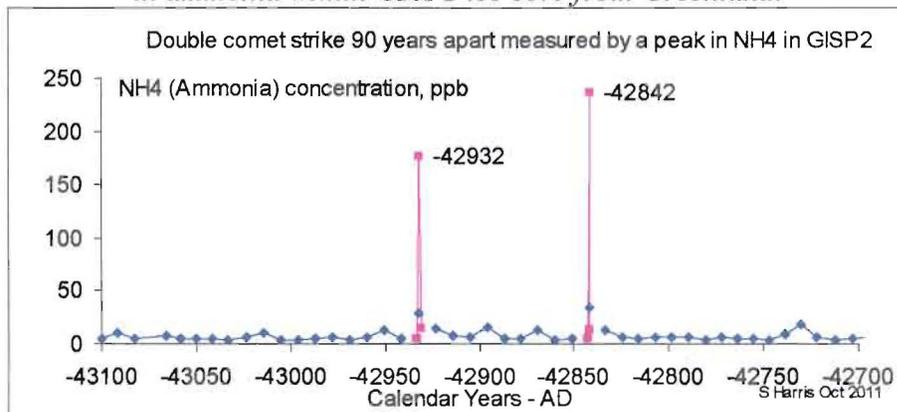
The transition between warm and cold was abrupt, as shown below from a continuous plot of temperature derived from an ice core in Greenland. Temperatures rose or fell 14°C (25°F) seemingly overnight. Thus to survive the sudden onset of blizzard conditions, animals and humans had to move long distances swiftly. During these cold intervals, glaciers and permafrost blanketed the hills of South Africa.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 5: Close-up of ice core readings showing how abruptly the temperature could change.



Two thousand years later, in the middle of a warm spell in 42,930 BC, a comet collision ended the Mousterian / Middle Paleolithic of Europe by incinerating every large animal including Neanderthals. Ninety years later a second collision finished off anyone still alive (Figure 6).<sup>4</sup>

Figure 6: Double comet strike that terminated the Neanderthals in Europe, measured by a spike in ammonia within GISP2 ice core from Greenland.



Improved accuracy of radiocarbon dating has pushed Neanderthal dates ever older, until none can cross this barrier, although some may have survived in Africa; a Spanish skeleton from 25,000 BC has characteristics of both Neanderthals and humans.

At the onset of this warm period, many South Africans migrated north to the Middle East, apparently by sea along the east coast of Africa. Further progress north into Europe and Asia was blocked by Neanderthals. They likely traveled in skin-covered canoes that were easy to make and portable. They could fish and travel across the giant lakes that dotted the Sahara.

<sup>3</sup> Colin A. Lewis, Patricia M. Hanvey, The remains of rock glaciers in Bottelnek, East Cape Drakensberg, South Africa, Trans. Roy. Soc. S. Afr., 48, Part 2, November 1993.

<sup>4</sup> GISP2 ice core from Greenland measured two tremendous spikes in NH4 from comet impacts, the first in 44886-44877 BP measured 177 ppb, the second in 44796-44787 measured 237 ppb, against a background of 5 ppb.

After the comet strike of 42,930 BC, Neanderthals no longer blocked migration routes into Europe. The hunters from South Africa were free to move into the vast plains of Europe and Russia, delightfully cool, and to establish semi-permanent camps along rivers. Archaeologists call these people **Aurignacians**, mammoth hunters, and so too were the people from South Africa.

The last documented appearance of Aurignacians in South Africa was at Sibudu Cave, a major production site for ochre, in 38.6 kya (36,600 BC). The weather again turned warm, and this time Aurignacians left South Africa for good. They arrived in the Middle East, lingered awhile, and then dispersed across the world. Some paddled west across the Mediterranean, others paddled north into central Europe, still others traveled east into the hills of India. They crossed into the Americas from both the Atlantic and Pacific, and paddled down the coasts. Their camps appear at Monte Verde in Chile (33,370 BP), El Cedral in Mexico (33,300 BP), and Meadowcroft Rockshelter in Pennsylvania (31,400 BP). These Aurignacians were literate and artistic; they decorated caves in France and Spain and carved realistic figures of humans and animals in Germany.

### **Middle Stone Age African Sites**

Africa contains a substantial number of Middle Stone Age sites, many with tell-tale ochre used to glue bladelets into wood or bone handles, but only two sites yielded writing. Between 259 kya and 164 kya, South Africa lay empty, a testament to the difficulty of crossing the continent by land.

300 kya	Twin Rivers, Zambia, ochre, backed blades
> 284 kya	Kapthurin Formation, Kenya, points, ochre, backed blades
259 kya	Florisbad, S. Africa, MSA, skull fragment, teeth
235 kya	Gademotta, Ethiopia, MSA
230-70 kya	Bir Tarfawi, Egypt, MSA, tools stayed the same over this period
164 kya	Pinnacle Point Cave, S. Af., ochre, bladelets, heat treated points, shellfish
130 kya	Blombos Cave, S. Africa, ochre, shellfish
100 kya	Blombos Cave, S. Africa, inscription on ochre
82 kya	Grotte des Pigeons, Morocco, shell beads with ochre, Aterian
80 kya	Rose Cottage Cave, S. Africa, backed blades, burins, HP tech
77 kya	Stillbay, S. Africa
74 kya	Border Cave, S. Africa, rockshelter, skeleton, HP tech.
73 kya	Blombos Cave, S. Africa, inscription on ochre, shell beads
72-71 kya	Sibudu Cave, S. Africa, ochre production, ochre-based glue, shell beads
70 kya	Klassies River, S. Africa, backed tools, thin blades, points, HP tech
66 kya	Howiesons Poort, S. Africa, cross-hatched ochre, bone points, HP tech
61-58.5 kya	Sibudu Cave, S. Africa, ochre production, bone points, bone needle
38.6 kya	Sibudu Cave, S. Africa, MSA

## 162,000 BC, Pinnacle Point Cave

Pinnacle Point Cave, also known as PP13B, contains the earliest record of modern men returning to South Africa from some distant land by 164 kya. For over 100,000 years the caves along the southern coast of South Africa had lain vacant. Then one day fully modern people arrived, as much fishermen as hunters, adapted to the cold climate of winter in South Africa. In addition to nets and bone spear points for hunting fish, they made burins to drill holes through leather, so the pieces could be sewn together to make warm clothing and shoes to clamber over sharp rocks in search of shellfish.

Along the coast of South Africa grow a huge variety of shrubs from two families, the fynbos and renosterveld. Trees are almost non-existent, perhaps because of perennial fires every 15 years or so. One way shrubs survive is through production of tubers or geophytes. These tubers have high carbohydrates and low fiber, whose taste and consistency improves with cooking. Unlike fruits, nuts and seeds, most modern species do not eat these tubers. However, the nutritious plants once supported a diverse array of wildlife that is now totally absent. The sea lay far away across a gently sloping shrubland, at times 90 km away.

*Figure 7. Fynbos landscape along the coast of South Africa contains 9000 different species.*



## Pinnacle Point Ochre 81770: ‘Lovely family of the earth’

### Description

Pinnacle Point artifact number 81770 (NCS 3257 Y80R) is an intensively ground fragment of ochre described as coarse siltstone, moderately haematized, weighing 10.1g.<sup>5</sup> Taken from the oldest level LC-MSA, it dates to 164 ± 12 kya. It contains an epitaph written in Old European, the oldest surviving inscription on Earth.

### Translation

This sophisticated epitaph reads left-to-right two different ways, as shown below.

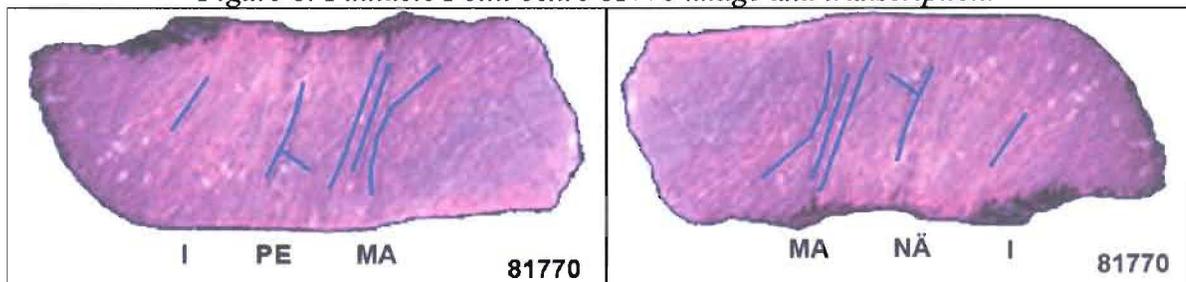
**Old Eur:** I PE MA. MA NÄ I.

**Finnish:** Iha pe’e maan. Maahan näet iät.

**English:** Lovely family of the earth. In the ground you will see [face] east.

### Image and Transcription

Figure 8: Pinnacle Point ochre 81770 image and transcription.



### Notes on Translation

**I** = *iha* ‘lovely’ fr. *ihana*; K 47.141 ‘Air Spirit, **lovely** (*ihana*) virgin’

**PE** = *pe’e* ‘family’ fr. *pere*; K 18.505 the big **family** (*pere*) must be fed’

**MA** = *maan* ‘of the earth’; K 17.248 “from my liver, horrible creature **of the earth** (*maan*)”

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**MA** = *maahan* ‘in the ground’; K 04.473 ‘After the tears had got **into the ground** (*maahan*)’

**NÄ** = *näet* ‘you will see’; K 24.053 “**you will see** (*näet*) how the hay crackles”

**I** = *iät* ‘east’; K 01.144 ‘She swims **east** (*iät*), swims west’

<sup>5</sup> Curtis W. Marean, et al., Early human use of marine resources and pigment in South Africa during the Middle Pleistocene, 2007, Nature 449, 905-908.

## 97,000 BC, Blombos Cave

### Blombos Cave Description

The topmost level M1 of Blombos Cave dates to  $72.7 \pm 3.1$  kya, roughly the same time that Toba erupted in Sumatra, killing much of the planet. Habitation continued until a sand dune blocked the cave entrance, 35 meters up a cliff, circa  $70 \pm 5$  kya.

The GISP2 ice core from Greenland records a significant comet impact about 200 years before Toba erupted, causing a huge spike in ammonium ( $\text{NH}_4$ ). A fragment struck South Africa, because ochre M1-6 describes the aftermath of the event.

Within the highest occupation level M1 were found:

- 400 Still Bay bifacial foliate points from silcrete, whose nearest source is 30 km away.

- 60 perforated beads from freshwater shells, with the closest river being 20 km away.

- 2 large chunks of ochre from a source 5 km away, now covered by the sea.

- Carved bone tools

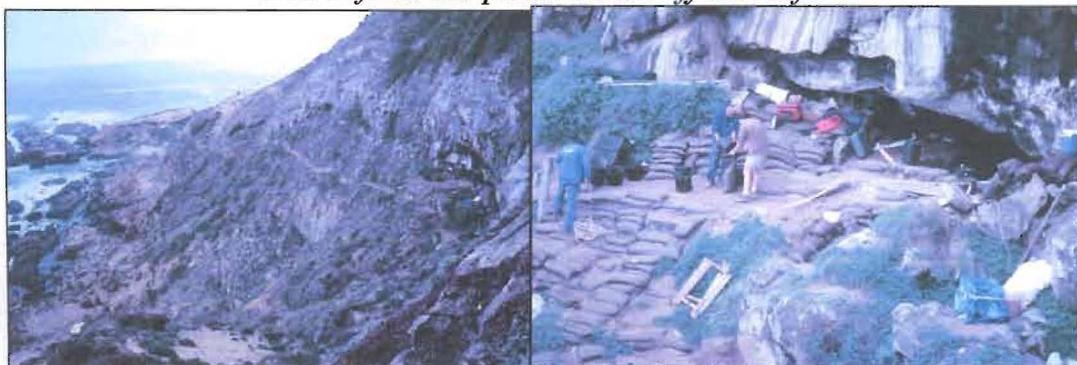
- Fish bones from large fish, seals and dolphins.

- Low density of shellfish because the sea was 10 km away.

### Discovery by Christopher Henshilwood

As a boy, Christopher Henshilwood played in Blombos cave on land owned by his parents. In 1993, for his PhD dissertation in archaeology, he decided to dig at Blombos, little realizing how important it would become. Beneath a layer of beach sand he found leaf-shaped points that were attached to light lances thrown with an atlatl or spear-thrower. The earliest points came from southern France and northern Spain about 19,000 years ago, so he reasoned that the cave was occupied more recently. But radiocarbon dating on charcoal indicated the points were over 40 thousand years old, the limit of the technology. Five years passed before other types of dating were tried, and these all agreed that the points were about 70 thousand years old, and deeper levels were about 100 thousand years old. This discovery cemented the Out of Africa hypothesis espoused by geneticists.

*Figure 9: Photo of Blombos Cave 35m up the cliff face that today faces the sea, with a working area in front and pieces broken off the roof.<sup>6</sup>*



<sup>6</sup> Photographs of Blombos Cave and its inscribed ochre come from a superb article by Christopher Henshilwood, Francesco d'Errico and Ian Watts entitled "Engraved ochres from the Middle Stone Age levels at Blombos Cave, South Africa", published in the Journal of Human Evolution, V57, Issue 1, July 2009, pp 27-47.

## Blombos Ochre M3-1: 'Now hail strikes down many forever'

Blombos M3-1 is a small, flat piece of ochre shaped like a knife blade, inscribed with an epitaph on the narrow back, from top to bottom. The point at the bottom suggests it was pushed part way into the cave floor to allow most of the inscription to be visible. It comes from level M3, layer CH-CI, dated  $98.9 \pm 5.5$  kya.

### Translation

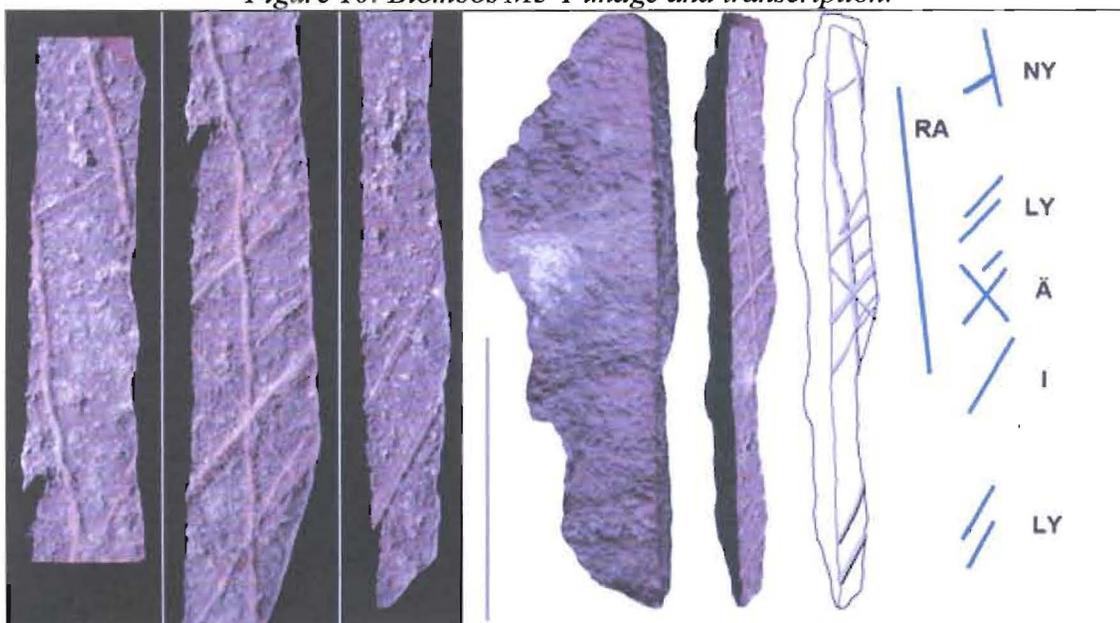
**Old Eur:** NY RA LY Ä I; LY

**Finnish:** Nyt rae lyöä äijä iän; lyöä.

**English:** Now hail strikes down many forever; it strikes down.

### Image and Transcription

Figure 10: Blombos M3-1 image and transcription.



### Notes on Translation

**NY** = *nyt* 'now'; K02.303 'Now (*nyt*) make the turf grow'

**RA** = *rae* 'hail' from *raetta*; K14.318 'down came iron hail (*raetta*)'

**LY** = *lyöä* 'strikes down' fr. *lyöda*; K31.044 'to strike down (*lyöä*) the grownups'

**Ä** = *äijä* 'many'; K 16.271 "many (*äijä*) have come here"

**I** = *iän* 'ever, forever'; K01.114 'ever (*iän*) her virginity'

**LY** = *lyöä* 'it strikes down'; K31.044 'to strike down (*lyöä*) the children'

## Blombos Ochre M3-2: 'Handsome man in the ground'

Three fragments, M3-2, M3-5 and M3-11, were broken after being inscribed. An epitaph of a man overlies multiple scratch marks to generate ochre powder. The point at the bottoms suggests it was pushed part way into the cave floor to allow most of the inscription to be visible. The pieces come from level M3, layers CH and CI, dated  $98.9 \pm 5.5$  kya.

### Translation

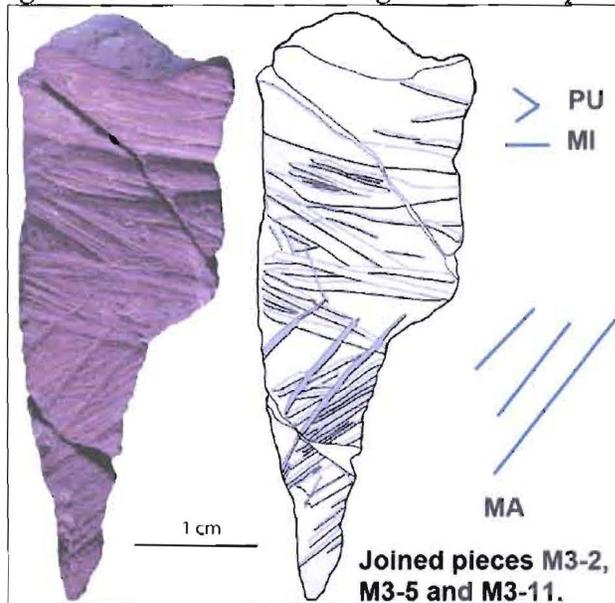
**Old Eur:** PU MI MA

**Finnish:** Puhas mies maahan.

**English:** Handsome man in the ground.

### Image and Transcription

Figure 11: Blombos M3-2 image and transcription.



### Notes on Translation

**PU** = *puhas* 'handsome'; K18.597 'a handsome (*puhas*) man was in the stern of the vessel'

**MI** = *mies* 'man'; K18.597 'a handsome man (*mies*) was in the stern of the vessel'

**MA** = *maahan* 'in the ground'; K 04.473 'After the tears had got into the ground (*maahan*)'

## Blombos Ochre M3-3: 'I wish peace'

Blombos M3-3 is a large piece of ochre inscribed on one end with a two-word epitaph, from level M3, layer CI, dated  $98.9 \pm 5.5$  ka.

### Translation

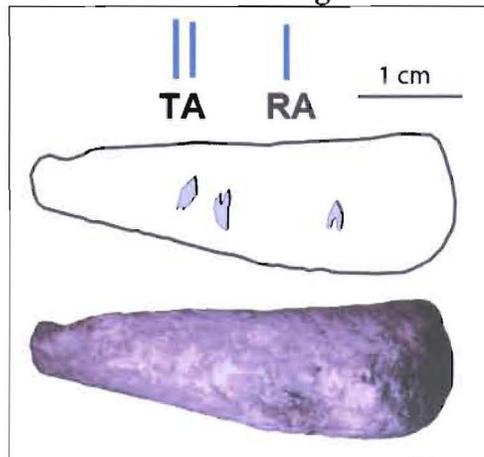
**Old Eur:** TA RA.

**Finnish:** Tahon rauha.

**English:** I wish peace.

### Image and Transcription

Figure 12: Blombos M3-3 image and transcription



### Notes on Translation

**TA** = *tahon* 'I wish, I want'; K03.055 "If I wish (*tahon*) to rival"

**RA** = *rauha* 'peace'; K 32.489 "Grant peace (*rauha*) to the cattle"

## Blombos Ochre M3-4: 'Father made peace'

Blombos M3-4 is a tiny piece of inscribed ochre, shaped to look like a death mask with two slit eyes and a nose. It comes from level M3, layer CI, dated  $98.9 \pm 5.5$  ka.

### Translation

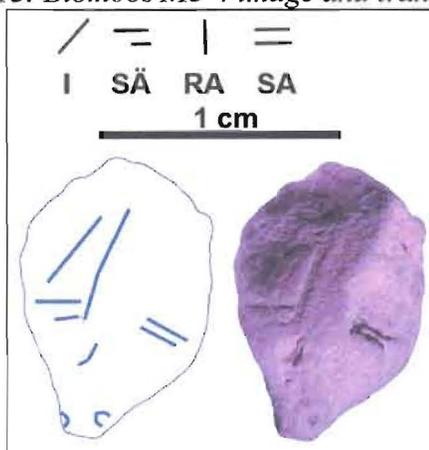
**Old Eur:** I-SÄ RA SA

**Finnish:** Isä rauha sai.

**English:** Father made peace.

### Image and Transcription

Figure 13: Blombos M3-4 image and transcription



### Notes on Translation

**I-SÄ** = *isä* 'father'; K36.065 'His **father** (*isä*) uttered these words'

**RA** = *rauha* 'peace'; K32.371 "Grant **peace** (*rauha*) to the cattle"

**SA** = *sai* 'he made, he got' from *saada* ; K01.270 'there **she made** (*sai*) the coasts smooth'

## **71,000 BC, Blombos Cave**

Twenty-eight thousand years after the first inscriptions in Blombos Cave, a second group of hunters wrote more epitaphs on pieces of ochre and buried them in the floor of the cave. The Old European script remained the same, so the language had not changed over an immense period of ninety thousand years.

The topmost level M1 of Blombos Cave dates to  $72.7 \pm 3.1$  kya, roughly the same time that Toba erupted in Sumatra, killing much of the planet. Habitation continued until a sand dune blocked the cave entrance, 35 meters up a cliff, circa  $70 \pm 5$  kya.

Stone M1-6 'Dilapidated Earth' is the oldest surviving narrative, a heroic love story that ends in tragedy. A fisherman wrote that there had been a terrible fire, everything burned, nothing left to eat. He will organize a group to look for food from the far-away sea to save the life of a young woman. The young man never completed his story, the entire party died in the attempt, so a shaman scratched a fisherman's net over the inscription and buried the stone as his epitaph.

The young woman died soon after. Her epitaph was written on stone M1-5 'Woman of the Earth', by the same shaman, who designed the inscription as a fish bone and buried her stone next to his.

This ancient love story moved me to expand the narrative, adding details about the catastrophe and the dangers that still lurked along the coast.

## Blombos Ochre M1-1: 'Ever her truth'

### Description

Blombos M1-1, a small piece of ochre inscribed with an epitaph shaped like a person. It comes from level M1, layer CA, dated  $71 \pm 3$  kya. Above layer CA is sterile sand dated  $70 \pm 5$  kya.

### Translation

The large character TO, shaped in this case like a person walking in side view, begins the inscription, which reads from top to bottom. The pronoun –SÄ could mean either 'his' or 'her', except that letter I has been arranged to look like breasts, so –ssä means 'her'. Letter SA, which could have been placed anywhere along her legs, looks like a short skirt, the earliest indication of what women may have worn. Letter RA looks like a boundary line on the ground that she is stepping over. None of the lines to the left look like letters, so they may represent woods or stylized ancestors.

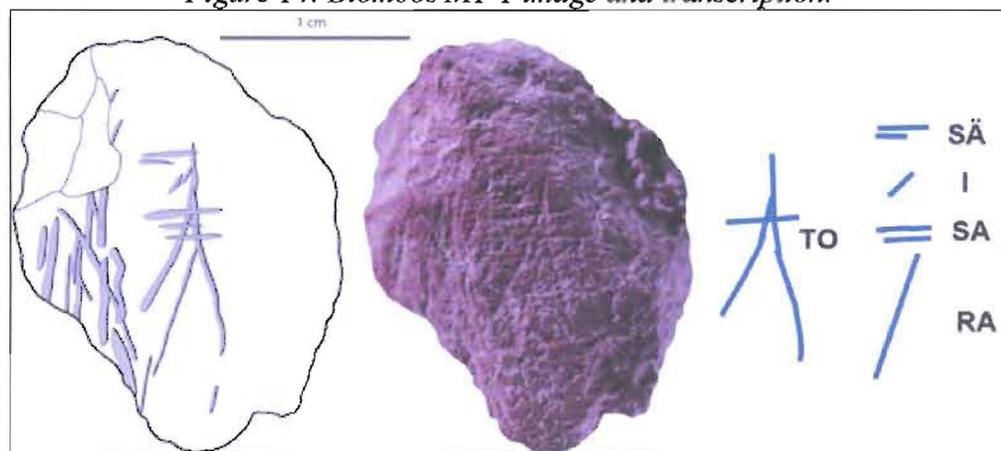
**Old Eur:** TO-SÄ I: SA RA.

**Finnish:** Toessä iän: saan rauha.

**English:** Ever her truth: I will get peace.

### Image and Transcription

Figure 14: Blombos M1-1 image and transcription.



### Notes on Translation

**TO-SÄ** = *toessä* 'truth'+ *-ssä* 'his, her'; K18.171 "Now tell the real **truth** (*toet*)"

**I** = *iän* 'ever'; K01.114 '**ever** (*iän*) her virginity'

**SA** = *saan* 'I get, I will get'; K 16.148 "**I will get** (*saan*) a hundred charms yonder"

**RA** = *rauha* 'peace'; K 32.371 "Grant **peace** (*rauha*) to the cattle"

## Blombos Ochre M1-2: 'I end in peace'

### Description

Blombos M1-2, a small piece of ochre shaped like a point, inscribed with an epitaph in Old European, from level M1, layer CA, dated  $71 \pm 3$  kya. Beach sand dated  $70 \pm 5$  kya caps layer CA.

### Translation

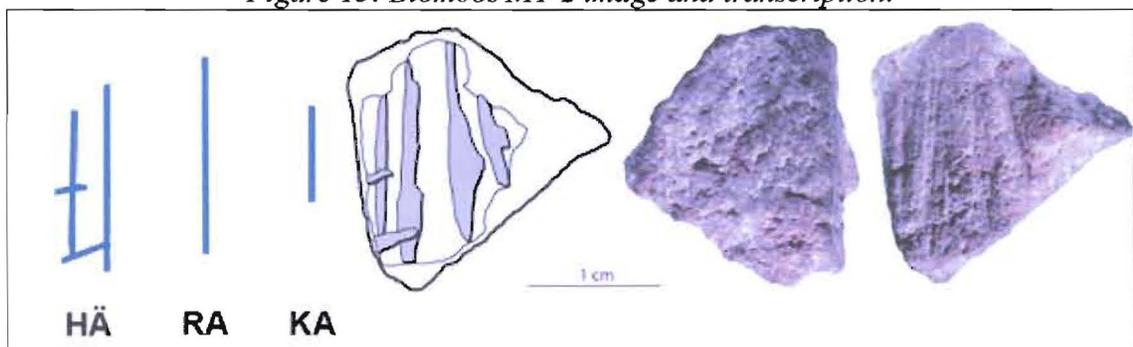
**Old Eur:** HÄ RA KA.

**Finnish:** Hää'än rauhan kauan.

**English:** I end in peace for a very long time.

### Image and Transcription

*Figure 15: Blombos M1-2 image and transcription.*



### Notes on Translation

HÄ = *hää'än* 'I stop, will end'; K11.087 "I will certainly **stop** (*hää'än*) the women's laughter"

RA = *rauhan* 'in-of peace'; K32.371 "Grant **peace** (*rauha*) to the cattle"

KA = *kauan* 'for a very long time'; K48.312 "not cause pain **for a very long time** (*kauan*)?"

## Blombos Ochre M1-5: 'Woman of the earth'

### Description

Blombos M1-5 (SAM 8937), a large piece of ochre with an epitaph on the narrow edge, is a companion to M1-6. Both come from level M1, layer CC, dated  $72.7 \pm 3.1$  kya.

### Translation

**Old Eur:** AKA MA, MA; I NÄ Ä, [I NÄ Ä].

**Finnish:** Akka maan, maahan; iän näe hän, [iän näe hän].

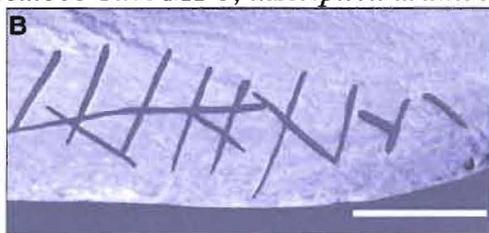
**English:** Woman of the earth, into the earth; ever he will see her, [ever she will see him].

The design of AKA meaning 'woman' is the reverse of URO meaning 'man'.

I NÄ Ä can be read in two ways, so was meant to be repeated.

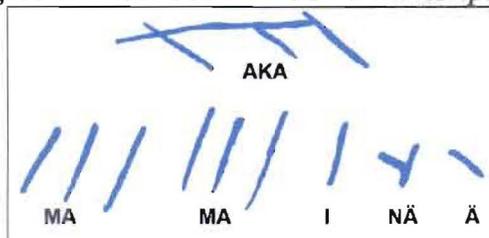
### Image

Figure 16: Blombos Cave M1-5, inscription drawn like fish bones.



### Transcription

Figure 17: Blombos Cave M1-5 transcription.



### Notes on Translation

**AKA** = *akka* 'woman'; K16.335 There was a **woman** (*akka*) in Death's Domain'

**MA** = *maan* 'of the earth'; K02.302 "old ruler of the soil, mistress **of the earth** (*maan*)!"

**MA** = *maahan* 'into the earth'; K 04.473 'After the tears had got **into the ground** (*maahan*)'

**I** = *iän* 'ever, eternally'; K 01.114 '**ever** (*iän*) her virginity'

**NÄ** = *näen* 'I see, I will see'; K 25.101 Now this **I see** (*näen*) without asking"

**Ä** = *hän* 'he, him'; K 43.295 '**He** (*Hän*) rejoiced greatly at that'

## Blombos Ochre M1-6: 'Dilapidated earth'

### Description

M1-6 (SAM 8938), a relatively large piece of ochre in the shape of a fish, is a companion to M1-5. The polished flat side carries the longest inscription of any in Blombos Cave. Over this was scratched in a shaky hand an epitaph in the shape of a fish net. Both come from level M1, layer CC, dated  $72.7 \pm 3.1$  kya.

### Translation

#### Old European:

Beneath: RÄ MA, PA-LO, NO. SA RE NE, U RA-PU. PE VI.

Epitaph: Double AKA, triple URO, (caught like fish in a net for) MI

#### Finnish:

Beneath: Rähjä maa, paloi, noen. Saan rehu neien, uuet raput. Perhe vien.

Epitaph: 2 akkat, 3 urohot, (tartui kala verat verkkon) mie.

#### English:

Beneath: Dilapidated earth, burned and sooty. I will get some food for the maiden, fresh crabs. A family I will take.

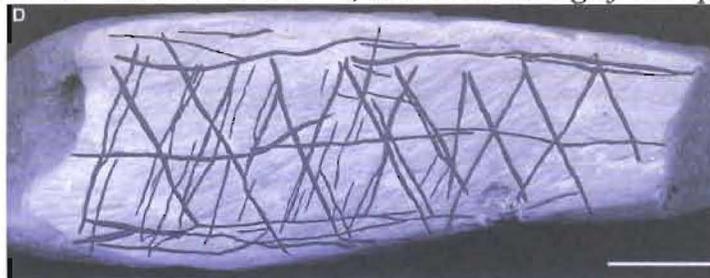
Epitaph: 2 women and 3 men (caught like fish in a net for) me.

### Image

*Figure 18: Blombos Cave M1-6, photo of inscription on ochre.*



*Figure 19: Blombos Cave M1-6, artistic rendering of inscription.*



## Transcription

Figure 20: Blombos Cave M1-6 transcription beneath fishnet overlay.

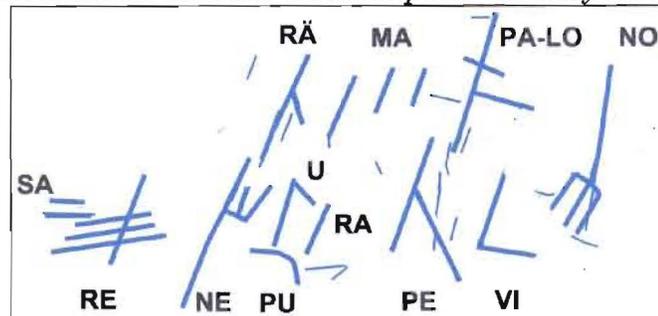
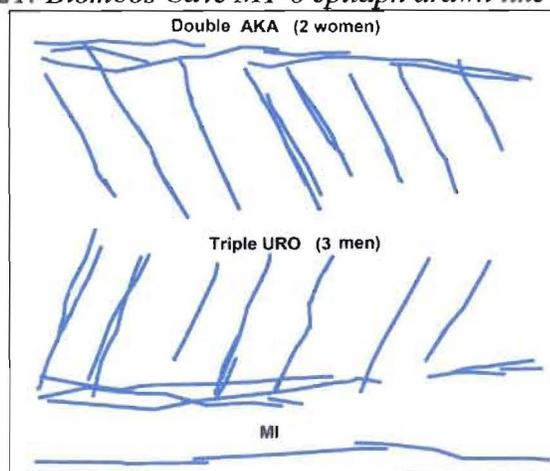


Figure 21: Blombos Cave M1-6 epitaph drawn like a fishnet.



## Notes on Translation

### Beneath the epitaph

**RÄ** = *rähjä* 'dilapidated'; not in K

**MA** = *maa* 'earth, ground'; K03.296 'Lakes splashed over, **the earth** (*maa*) shook'

**PA-LO** = *paloi* 'burned'; K28.050 'its eyes **burned** (*paloi*) like fire'

**NO** = *noen* 'sooty'; K28.231 'A young man, **sooty-looking** (*noen*) from his fire'

**SA** = *saan* 'I will get'; K13.019 "**I will get** (*saan*) a better woman here"

**RE** = *rehu* 'some food' fr. *ruoka*; K 26.028 "set out **some food** (*ruoka*) quickly"

**NE** = *neien* 'for the maiden'; K 19.479 '**for a maiden** (*neien*) to weave cloth in'

**U** = *uuet* 'fresh, new'; K32.214 "**fresh** (*uuet*) milk to Apple"

**RA-PU** = *raput* 'crabs, crayfish'; not in K.

**PE** = *perhe* 'a family'; K18.505 '**the big family** (*perhe*) must be fed'

**VI** = *vien* 'I will take'; K31.359 '**Shall I take** (*vien*) him to Russia?'

### Epitaph

Triple **URO** = 3 *urohot* '3 men'; K03.279 "Such men (*urohot*) I enchant"

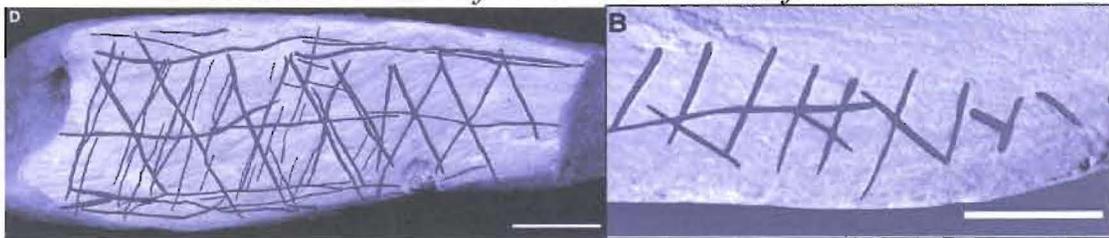
Double **URO** reversed = 2 *ei urohot* '2 not-men, i.e., women'

**MI** = *mie* 'I, me; K07.093 "I (*Mie*) will carry you from the sea"

## Blombos Stones M1-5 and M1-6: Revenge of Father Sky

Dilapidated Earth, burned and sooty.  
I will get some food for the maiden, fresh crabs.  
A family I will take.<sup>7</sup>

*Blombos M1-6 like a fish net and M1-5 like a fish bone.*



The oldest love story in the world tells how Father Sky took revenge on Mother Earth. It was written 73,000 years ago, before Toba exploded in Sumatra and blocked all light from the Sun, two centuries before man and great apes nearly vanished from years of bitter cold.

It began while Mother Earth attended her yearly journey around the Sun. Of a sudden she noticed a passing comet, a Sky God, who proudly swept his long pale tail through the blackness of space. At every pirouette the Sky God grew brighter, until his head rivaled the sun and his tail crossed the heavens, imitating the pathway of stars.

At the very tip of South Africa, on a narrow plain facing the sea, a clan leader worried that the Sky God posed a grave danger. She approached the son of a renowned elder, a fisherman who studied the skies like no other. “Fisherman, I would have your opinion about the Sky God.”

“Mistress, this is no ordinary Sky God, it is Father Sky, and he has us in mind.”

“How can you be sure, fisherman?”

“Every day he gets larger, but his position never varies against the background stars. My father said to be wary of such a pattern, for that is how the ancients foretold the appearance of Father Sky, who brings implacable death.”

“Yet we live, fisherman. There must be a way out.”

“My mother told me that Father Sky rains sheets of fire and churns the seas to flood. Mother Earth will come to our defense and fight Father Sky, who will scream in agony and ignite the skies, making her tremble in fear.”

“Then we may have a chance, fisherman. Blombos<sup>8</sup> lies above flood level but the cave opening lacks protection from fire. We can build a thick stone wall across the entrance to stop the flame and make it strong enough to withstand the fear of Mother Earth.”

“Her trembling might exceed anything we can imagine, Mistress, and collapse part of the roof.”

<sup>7</sup> Inscription on a piece of ochre from Blombos Cave in South Africa, uncovered in 1993 by Christopher Henshilwood on his parent's property for his dissertation in archaeology.

<sup>8</sup> The etymology of Blombos is unknown. Piilo means ‘hiding place’.

“A chance we must take, fisherman. Run to my brother and tell him our plan. With so few of us, both clans can fit inside.”

Blombos lay part way up an irregular cliff, hidden behind shrubs and fragrant flowers, high enough to escape any waves that might appear from the sea just visible beyond the shrubland to the south. Ages before, when the sea licked the base of the cliff, others had leveled the floor and enlarged the workspace in front of the cave.

While women stored fishing nets, spears, bedding, food and other valuables in recesses within the cave, men carried up stones to build a fire-proof barrier across the entrance. They interlocked the rocks to withstand the most violent shaking, to screen out direct light but allow air to filter through. On the fateful evening, the two clans crammed into the cave, blocked the entrance and sang songs to lift their spirits.

Mother Earth marked the approach of the confident intruder and deftly spread her invisible filaments like a blue and white spider. Try as he might, Father Sky could not escape her net, which tore him apart, rent him into fragments. She laughed at his twisting agony, recoiled when he trumpeted vengeance and threw bolts of lighting, and shuddered from impacts that seared her delicate skin.

Around midnight bright flashes flickered through cracks in the stone wall, soon followed by the loudest trumpeting imaginable as Mother Earth tore asunder Father Sky. Then a concussion of heat ignited the entire plain below, a roaring firestorm that flung burning bushes against the cave face, filled the outside air with smoke and ash. Mother Earth shuddered again and again, threatening to knock down the protective wall, and dislodged a weak section of the roof. The collapse filled the cave with choking dust and injured a young woman. “Open the cave,” screamed some, but others demurred, knowing that just to breathe such hot air would kill them.

By morning, Mother Earth stopped shuddering. At midday she directed a light rain to fall, hissing on hot rocks, cooling and cleaning the air. Across the plain, little remained of shrubs and bushes.

The clans cautiously opened the cave entrance and pushed hot rocks down the cliff. In the smoky light people appeared like grey phantoms, covered with dust, and realized how lucky they were. “We’re alive, we’re alive, and we outwitted Surt!”<sup>9</sup>

“You know its bad luck to mention his name,” said the clan leader. “Yes we are alive, but all the others have vanished, and so have the animals and plants we need.” She attended the injured maiden, washed and wrapped her deep wounds, all the while singing her songs of healing. “My dear child, I fear the worst without my salves.”

“What is it like outside?” asked the maiden, fighting bravely against the throbbing pain.

“Dilapidated Earth, burned and sooty,” replied the taciturn fisherman staring out. He retrieved a large piece of polished ochre and wrote down his observation.

“Fisherman, my niece is weak from loss of blood. If she doesn’t eat, she will surely die.”

“I will get some food for the maiden. Fresh crabs. I will take a family with me.” He added his promise to the piece of red ochre and left it with the injured maiden to comfort her.

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<sup>9</sup> Surt comes from surut meaning ‘griefs’; *Völuspá* 52 names Surt as the comet that caused Ragnarok: “Surt fares from the south, with the scourge of branches; the sun of the battle-gods shone from his sword.”

At the mouth of the cave, a crabbing party of three men and two women hoisted net bags for crabs and hollow gourds for water, edged down the sloping cliff and started south across the blackened plain. They reached the beach at low tide.

"I've never seen so many crabs," said a woman. "Look how frantically they scoot about."

"I don't like it," said the fisherman. "There's something wrong, the tide is too low. We mustn't stay long. Just grab a few crabs and return to the cave." But the cave was far away, and when the fisherman looked back, a curling wave filled the horizon.

The next day, both clans picked through debris swept inland by the huge wave, carried the broken bodies to the base of the cliff and burnt them on a pyre. Amid sad keening, they gathered at the lip of the cave and recounted the lives of the five caught by Surt.

The young maiden spoke last in a trembling voice, passing around the fisherman's ochre to touch and imbue with spirit. "Before he left, the fisherman wrote these runes: 'Dilapidated Earth, burned and sooty. I will get some food for the maiden, fresh crabs. A family I will take.' I have added an epitaph, which looks like a net that traps his words, just as Father Sky trapped them with a wave: 'Two women and three men, trapped like fish in a net for me.'"

The clans buried the bloodstone two hands deep beneath the packed earth of the cave floor, along with a few ashes collected from the pyre.

A quarter moon later the maiden died from infection, a terrible misfortune, for she was to be the next shaman. Sadly, the two clans again gathered outside the cave to sing her virtues.

"We will bury this sacred bloodstone beside the other," said the clan mistress, passing around a second piece of inscribed ochre. "As you can see, the runes resemble a fishbone, trapped by Father Sky as surely as the others. She and the fisherman might have married. This is what the bloodstone says:

A woman of Earth, into the earth;  
ever will he see her, ever will she see him.

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