

OBSESSIONS WITH WHO DID IT FIRST

"Early human marks are 'symbols'" – a BBC report headline today.

A series of parallel lines engraved in an animal bone between 1.4 and 1.2 million years ago may be the earliest example of human symbolic behaviour.

University of Bordeaux experts say no practical process, such as butchering a carcass, can explain the markings.

But many researchers believe the capacity for true symbolic thinking arose much later with the emergence of modern humans, *Homo sapiens*.

The 8cm-long bone was unearthed at the Kozarnika cave in north-west Bulgaria.

Another animal bone found at the site is incised with 27 marks along its edge.

So what?

There are no comparable cases so early.

Maybe it is a first, but that doesn't mean anything. You may be able to teach a chimp to use language, and doing so tells us lots about language and behavior, evolution and speciation. But it doesn't mean that chimps ever used language or will. Predispositions or capacities aren't necessarily taken up.

I would connect this interest in "firsts" with the master narrative that once something "good" happens it will spread of its own accord. This was at the heart of old diffusionist culture history – agriculture was invented, seen as a good thing, and so spread. Actually, it is clear that history, certainly, doesn't work like this.