
Revisiting Sibebe rock shelter, Eswatini: New results on the nature and timing of the final MSA in southern Africa

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Abstract

Middle Stone Age (MSA) research in southern Africa has received considerable attention over the past decades. Sites with long stratigraphic sequences and extraordinary preservation conditions have attracted international awareness and produced important insights on human biocultural evolution. Since the onset of MSA research in the 1920s, however, there was always a strong regional preference on certain areas. This geographical bias becomes most evident when comparing the overwhelming amount of MSA sites investigated in South Africa to neighboring countries. While the multifaceted reasons behind this situation are not subject of the study presented here, it is a problematic situation as it constrains our view on Stone Age hunter-gatherers and past human lifeways during the Late Pleistocene. The small kingdom of Eswatini at the eastern border of South Africa is an excellent example. Although considerable research has been conducted here in the 1970s and 80s, demonstrating its rich archaeological heritage, Eswatini barely ever appears on the landscape of comparative MSA research. Here we provide new data on the age and techno-typological successions of the MSA lithic assemblages excavated in 1981 at Sibebe rock shelter by David Price-Williams, situated on the highveld of Eswatini. The assemblages show affinities with the final MSA of KwaZulu-Natal and provide the opportunity to further investigate the nature and timing of the end of the MSA in the southeast of southern Africa. Our findings and ongoing analyses put Eswatini back on the map of active Stone Age research.

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