



Middle and Late Stone Age of the Niassa region, northern Mozambique. Preliminary results



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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:
Middle Stone Age
Late Stone Age
Mozambique
Lake Malawi

Located between modern-day South Africa and Tanzania, both of which have well-known and extensive Stone Age records, Mozambique's Stone Age sequence remains largely unknown in the broader context of African Pleistocene prehistory. Such lack of data occurs despite the key geographical location of the country, in southern Africa at the southeastern tip of the Great Rift Valley. As such, Mozambique is an area of interest to evaluate the origins and dispersion of *Homo sapiens* within Africa, particularly in relation to Middle Stone Age contexts and associated early modern human ecology and cognition.

This paper focuses on preliminary survey results from the Niassa District, near Lake Niassa (also known as Lake Malawi) in northern Mozambique. The results include the discovery and location of more than 80 new surface lithic concentration localities, as well as data from two new sites, the open air surface site of Ncuála and the rock shelter of Chicaza. For Chicaza we provide a series of new radiocarbon dates for the Iron Age and Late Stone Age occupations based on preliminary testing carried out at the site.

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1. Introduction

The anatomical and behavioral evolution of early modern humans within Africa is a main topic of research in Paleoanthropology today, likely because the emergence of our species is a key event in human history. Our evolution has been thought to be a slow and gradual cultural evolution in Africa, starting perhaps as early as 200 ka. While the earliest fossil evidence for anatomically modern humans (AMH) seems to come from east Africa (Clark et al., 2003; White et al., 2003; McDougall et al., 2005), the emergence of modern cognition is apparently later and largely based on evidence from southern Africa as early as 160 ka ago (Marean et al., 2007; Marean, 2014).

In the last decade, eastern and southern Africa have become the central region for studying the emergence of modern human behavior (Wadley, 2001; Henshilwood and Marean, 2003; Marean and Assefa, 2005; Marean et al., 2007). Many new discoveries of

symbolic behavior and expansion of ecological niches by anatomically modern humans come from caves in the Western Cape region of South Africa (Henshilwood et al., 2004, 2011; Marean et al., 2007). In the eastern portion of South Africa, excavations at Sibudu rockshelter have shed additional light on modern human behavior (d'Errico et al., 2008; Wadley, 2010). Despite these discoveries, little is known about the origin, timing and processes through which these new behaviors spread. The major question, thus, is why the emergence of AMH, both biological and culturally, took place in specific regions of Africa. There are still large regions in eastern and southern Africa for which we lack detailed information for the Middle Stone Age (MSA), the critical period to understand the processes of AMH emergence. This patchiness of data makes it difficult to address broader questions on the origins and dispersion of Stone Age cultures at a continental scale.

Mozambique's Stone Age sequence remains largely unknown, despite its key geographical location, between eastern and southern Africa. For instance, the well-known map published by McBrearty and Brooks (2000: 478, Fig. 1) showed a remarkable density of sites in eastern and southern Africa but the entire area of Mozambique was blank, despite punctual previous fieldwork

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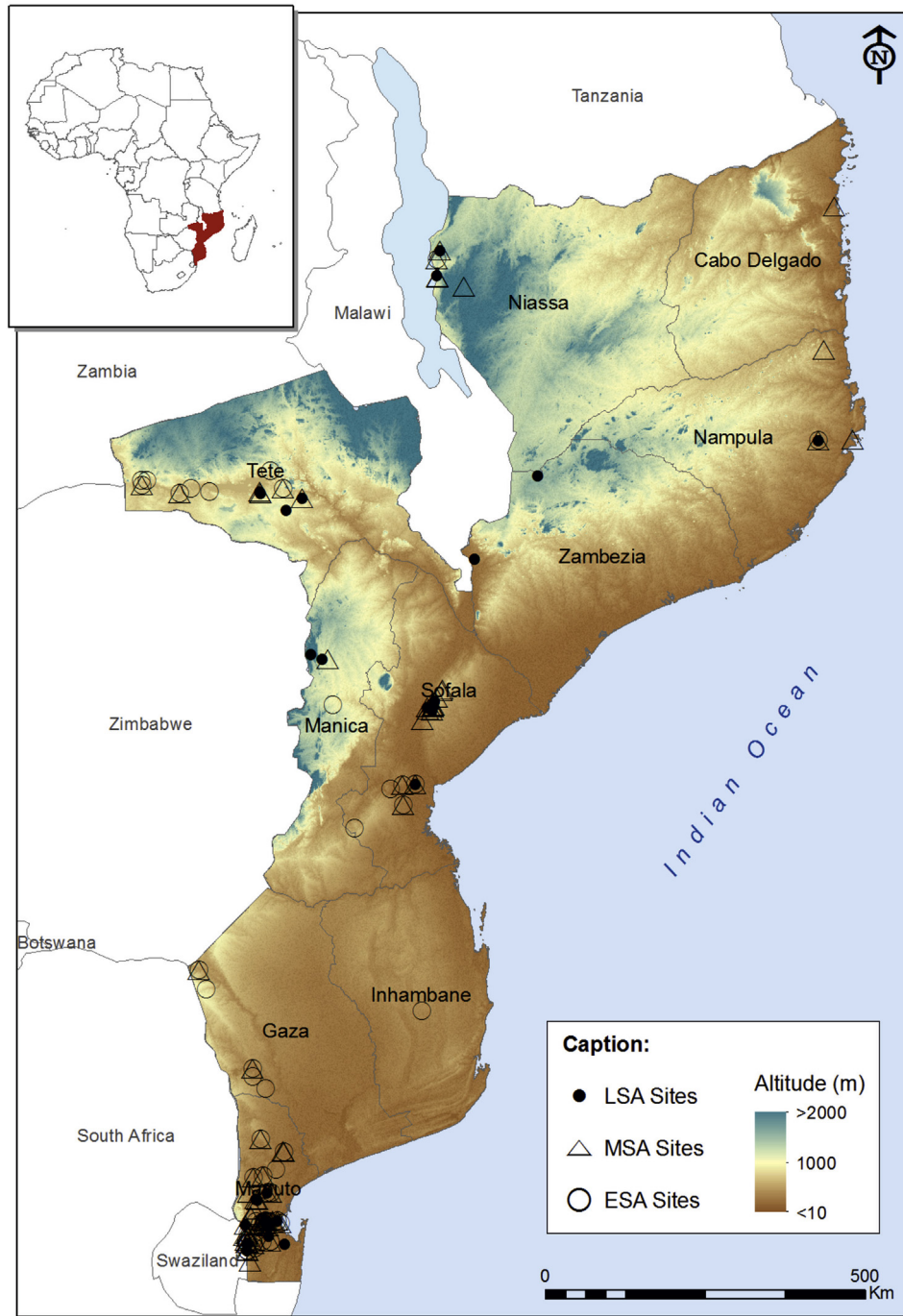


Fig. 1. Map with the location of the Stone Age sites known up to 2013 in Mozambique.

developed up to 1980. This apparent lack of relevant archaeological contexts does not necessarily reflect the nonexistence of such records, but it does highlight an important gap in archaeological research in the country. For the few sites we do know from Mozambique, there is often little or no accurate information on the chronology or cultural characteristics of the assemblages other than generic attributions to Early Stone Age (ESA), Middle or Late Stone Age (LSA) phases.

A compilation of the known archaeological sites in Mozambique was published by João Morais some 30 years ago (Morais, 1984). There were roughly 100 Stone Age sites listed, resulting from geologic and archaeological survey carried out by Lerenó Barradas,

an agronomic engineer who carried out geologic and archaeological survey in southern Mozambique (Barradas, 1945, 1947, 1955, 1964, 1965; Adamowicz and Nhatule, 2011), and field campaigns by Santos Júnior in the context of the so-called Anthropological Missions of Mozambique (Missão Antropológica de Moçambique). The latter involved six missions respectively in 1936, 1937, 1945, 1946, 1948, and 1955/56 (Rodrigues, 1998/1999, 2004), with the identification of close to 90 Stone Age sites incorporated into a series of archaeological maps of Mozambique (Santos Júnior, 1937, 1938, 1940, 1941, 1944, 1946, 1947, 1950) and reviewed by Roque (2002) and by Roque and Ferrão (2004). No excavations were carried out except for some testing in the rock shelter of Caimane, a

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