



Foraging strategies during the final Middle Stone Age occupation at Sibudu Cave, South Africa

Benjamin Collins

Department of Anthropology, University of Manitoba, 432 Fletcher Argue Building, 15 Chancellor Circle, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3T 2N2 Canada
Department of Archaeology, University of Cape Town, Private Bag, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 March 2015
Received in revised form 27 September 2015
Accepted 26 October 2015
Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Zooarchaeology
Middle Stone Age
MIS 3
Southern Africa
Sibudu Cave

ABSTRACT

This study discusses the subsistence strategies from the final Middle Stone Age occupation (~38,000 years ago) at Sibudu Cave, South Africa, through identifying which animal resources were exploited, and how they were acquired. The faunal profile suggest that two complementary strategies were being used: one focusing on small (Sizes 1 and 2) ungulates that were most likely acquired close to the site; and the other focusing on larger (Sizes 3 and 4) ungulates that were likely hunted farther away from the site. The final Middle Stone Age assemblage from Sibudu was compared with several others from the broader region that also date to late MIS 3. This comparison, albeit inhibited by small sample sizes, suggests diversity in hunting patterns that is most parsimoniously explained by localised behavioural adaptations to different environments. The late and final Middle Stone Age assemblages from Sibudu were also compared and found to not be significantly different, suggesting similar hunting patterns during the two environmentally similar occupations.

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1. Introduction

Sibudu Cave contains one of the best described Middle Stone Age (MSA) archives in southern Africa, providing a major contribution to our understanding of the evolution of modern cognition and modern behaviour (Bentsen, 2014; Conard et al., 2012; Wadley, 2007, 2010a, 2010b; Wadley et al., 2009, 2011; Will et al., 2014). Zooarchaeological research on the MSA occupations from Sibudu argues for the earliest appearance of trapping and snaring (Wadley, 2010c), and demonstrates complex and varied hunting behaviours during the Howiesons Poort (HP) and post-HP occupations (Clark, 2011, 2013; Clark and Plug, 2008; Plug, 2004; Val, 2015).

However, zooarchaeological research at Sibudu generally focuses on the earlier MSA occupations, leaving final MSA (fMSA) occupation from Sibudu relatively understudied. Previous research on the fMSA faunal assemblage from Sibudu consists of a preliminary description of the fauna and their environmental preferences (Plug, 2004; Wadley et al., 2008), and a taphonomic analysis (Collins, 2013). The assemblage lacks a revised zooarchaeological analysis providing a description of the hunting strategies employed during the fMSA and broader regional and temporal comparisons. Providing a complete description of Sibudu's fMSA fauna is especially important considering the general lack of well-preserved and well-described sites dating to terminal MIS 3, rendering the behavioural diversity seen during this period poorly understood (Mackay et al., 2014; Mitchell, 2008).

This study provides a comprehensive zooarchaeological analysis of the fMSA faunal assemblage from Sibudu Cave. Focusing on the species

present, their relative abundances, habitat preferences, and behaviour, this research examines the hunting behaviours exhibited by Sibudu's fMSA foragers. This information is then more broadly contextualised through comparisons with hunting behaviours from other sites in the region that contain faunal assemblages dating to terminal MIS 3, and with late MSA occupation from Sibudu, which occurs in an environmentally similar context earlier in MIS 3 (Wadley et al., 2008). In this regard, the current study aims to provide a novel and comprehensive examination of Sibudu's fMSA hunting behaviours and greater insight into the diversity in foraging behaviours during the MSA.

2. Site description

2.1. Site background

Sibudu Cave overlooks the Tongati River, and is located 15 km inland from the Indian Ocean and 40 km north of Durban on the east coast of South Africa (Figs. 1 and 2). Historically, Sibudu was located in a Coastal Bushveld–Grassland environment, which consists of a combination of Coastal Scarp Forest and Riverine Bushveld vegetation types (Low and Rebelo, 1996; Wadley and Jacobs, 2004).

Sibudu has a rich cultural sequence, with occupations during the Iron Age, fMSA (~38 kya), late MSA (~48 kya), post-Howieson's Poort or Sibudu (Conard et al., 2012) (~58 kya), Howieson's Poort (~63 kya), Still Bay (~70 kya) and pre-Still Bay (~77 kya) (Jacobs et al., 2008a, 2008b; Lombard et al., 2012; Wadley, 2007; Wadley and

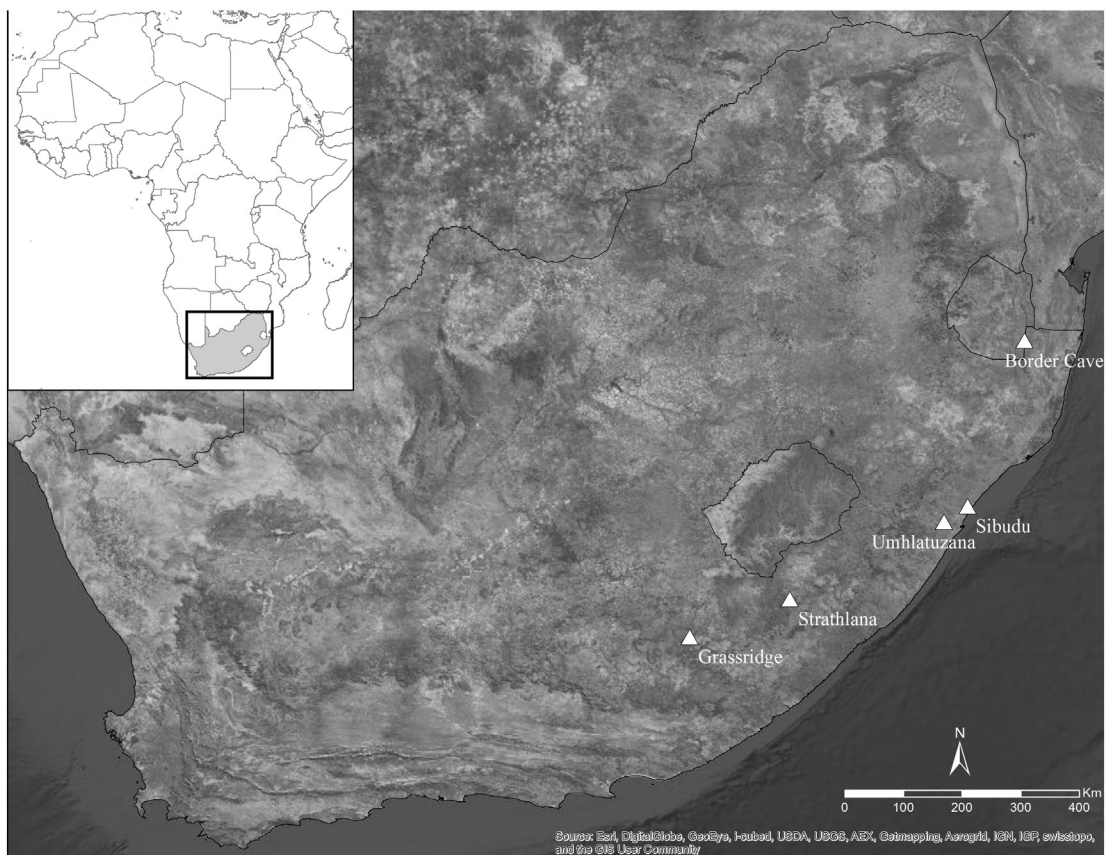


Fig. 1. Map of the sites discussed in the text. Map courtesy of Dr. Colin Wren.

Jacobs, 2006). Older occupations are also present and await dating, while Later Stone Age (LSA) occupations are absent. The fMSA occupation only occurs in the eastern units (C2, D2, D3, E2 and E3) of the

excavation (Fig. 3), and consists of six independent stratigraphic layers: Co, Bu, LBMOD, MC (a hearth feature), and Mou (Fig. 4) (Wadley and Jacobs, 2006).



Fig. 2. Photograph of the view from the site overlooking the Tongati river, taken by the author.

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