

**Palaeoenvironments of the Middle Stone Age at Sibudu Cave,
KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa: An analysis of archaeological
charcoal**

Volume II

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Science, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg,
in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Johannesburg, 2005

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

_____ day of _____ 2005

ABSTRACT

Analysis of charcoal from Middle Stone Age layers at Sibudu Cave, KwaZulu-Natal, shows evidence of environmental change during the Last Glacial. Layers analysed encompass the end of the cold stadial, Oxygen Isotope Stage (OIS) 4, and the warmer interstadial, OIS 3. Layers are divided – on the basis of lithic industry associations and taxonomic content – into the Howiesons Poort (HP) (dated to ca. 61 000 years ago), and the early, middle and late post-HP assemblages (ca. 60-55 000, 55-50 000 and 50-33 000 years ago respectively). This project aims to identify evidence for environmental change, characterise this change using qualitative and quantitative analyses, and compare the results to evidence from other proxies at Sibudu Cave and elsewhere in South Africa.

HP layers (GS, GR, GR2) are dominated by evergreen forest taxa, including *Podocarpus* spp., *Buxus* sp., *Brachylaena* sp., *Sapium/Spirostachys* and *Ptaeroxylon obliquum*. *Kirkia* sp. suggests a warm, woodland savanna habitat grew beyond the forest vegetation. Early post-HP layers (Eb, SPCA, BSp) contain taxa from evergreen, riverine forest communities, including *Erica* spp., *Leucosidea sericea*, and *Rapanea melanophloeos*. Some of the taxa in these layers suggest a shift in vegetation, possibly related to the marine regression of the Last Glacial, bringing taxa currently found further inland towards the site. Fewer evergreen forest components, and more bushveld taxa, are present in the middle post-HP (RSp, OMOD, MOD) than in the previous layers. Some of the taxa are only found in northern South Africa in regions that are significantly drier than modern KwaZulu-Natal. These layers also contain more *Acacia* spp. and other Fabaceae taxa and fewer *Erica* spp. than the samples from the early post-HP. This may be a result of environmental change, a change in wood selection, charcoal fragmentation, or sampling bias. Layer Bu, within the late post-HP, contains evergreen and deciduous taxa many of which are found in KwaZulu-Natal today. *Kirkia* sp. again provides evidence for a dry habitat not

currently found in the region. Many Types were defined in Bu, which may indicate a vegetation community for which there is currently no reference material.

Temperature and moisture indices produced using the Factor Analysis suggest warm and moist conditions during the HP layers. During the early post-HP conditions became cooler with intermediate moisture levels. Subsequently, conditions were warm and dry (middle post-HP) and then warm with a little more moisture indicated (late post-HP).

Good fuelwoods were routinely collected during the post-HP. In contrast, the HP layers are dominated by *Podocarpus* spp. and many of the good fuelwoods, such as *Acacia* spp. and *Erica* spp., are absent. This pattern may be a result of changes in the environment, sample bias or a development of awareness of wood properties between the HP and post-HP occupations.

The charcoal results corroborate palaeoenvironmental interpretations provided by seeds and macrofauna from Sibudu Cave. When the Sibudu Cave data are combined with data from other sites it is apparent that, although conditions in the summer rainfall region during the Last Glacial were generally dry, there is evidence for localised variation in vegetation and climate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are extended to Professor Bernie Moon, head of the School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, for allowing and supporting this study. I am also indebted to Professor Lyn Wadley for providing access to the Sibudu charcoal assemblage as well as providing excellent supervision, discussion and encouragement throughout my research. Thanks to my thesis committee for comments on the project proposal, and particularly to Marion Bamford for providing access to obscure literature.

I am grateful to the staff (Drs. Chester Cain and Bonny Williamson) and students (Dr. Grant Cochrane, Christine Scott, Marelize Lombard and Grant Hall) of the Ancient Cognition and Culture in Africa (ACACIA) research programme for fruitful discussions on many aspects of this project from its conception to conclusion. Christine Scott provided invaluable field assistance and I am particularly appreciative of Christine and Chester for patiently discussing ideas concerning approaches to charcoal analysis. Zenobia Jacobs has provided the single grain Optically Stimulated Luminescence dates for the Middle Stone Age sequence at Sibudu Cave and has kindly permitted the use of all the available dates, some of which are provisional.

During this project, reference collection specimens were collected by Lyn Wadley, Christine Scott and Grant Cochrane. Geoff Nichols, Professor Kevin Balkwill, Lyn Wadley and Christine Scott assisted with identifying voucher specimens. The National Biodiversity Institute is thanked for the use of data from the National Herbarium, Pretoria (PRE) Computerised Information System.

The School of Animal, Plant and Environmental Sciences (APES) provided access to a muffle furnace. Caroline Lalkhan, Abe Seema and Professor Mike Witcomb of the Electron Microscope Unit in APES assisted by preparing specimens for the Scanning Electron Microscope, providing technical advice, producing negatives and allowing

me access to the facilities after normal working hours. Members of the central photography unit at the University of the Witwatersrand produced photographs for the database. Lyn Wadley, Solveig Schiegl, Ina Plug, Chester Cain and Ray Renaut allowed me access to the results of their seed, phytolith, macrofauna, taphonomic and pollen analyses, respectively. I am grateful to Wendy Voorvelt for allowing me access to electronic section drawings and to Grant Cochrane for Figures 3.6 and 3.7.

Dr. Katarina Neumann assisted by teaching me detailed wood anatomy, charcoal identification, and analytical procedures in the unit of African Archaeology and Archaeobotany at the J.W.Göethe University, in Frankfurt. Dr. Francis Thackeray (of the northern Flagship Institute) generously gave time to discuss data analysis and presentation, and Professor Louis Scott (of the University of the Free State) advised upon appropriate data analysis techniques. He also read and made comments on an early version of the quantitative analysis. Professors Paul Fatti and Jackie Galpin of the statistics department at the University of the Witwatersrand recommended appropriate statistical techniques.

Proof reading and editorial work was undertaken by Professor Lyn Wadley and Dr. Ross Damiani. Ross Damiani also assisted with graphics production, provided advice on thesis organisation, and his tireless patience throughout the research. Family and friends are also thanked for assistance with formatting and printing.

This project was funded by the University of the Witwatersrand through post-graduate merit awards (2001-2003) and University Council Scholarships (2002 and 2003). A National Research Foundation (NRF) “Women in Science” scholarship and a Karen Fredman Local Merit Scholarship were received in 2002 and 2003, respectively. An ACACIA bursary, awarded by Professor Lyn Wadley and funded by the NRF, was held between 2001 and 2003. The Palaeoanthropology Scientific Trust awarded a grant in 2004 to enable the completion of this project.

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