
Phytolith investigations at Sibudu Cave: towards understanding the Middle Stone Age of South Africa

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Résumé

This study presents a detailed Middle Stone Age (MSA) phytolith record from Sibudu cave located in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. Sibudu cave is a well-studied archaeological site with deposits that have yielded an abundant assemblage of lithic, fauna and plant remains within a well-dated context. Phytolith analysis was applied to understand early human plant interactions at Sibudu and the environment in which they lived. Phytoliths at Sibudu are well preserved and are abundant, and although they many appear heat altered, they are identifiable and give insights into the vegetation type at Sibudu during the MSA. This has allowed for the identification of the types of plants utilised by early humans at Sibudu. An abundance of blocky and globular phytoliths may suggest an abundance of dicotyledonous plants at Sibudu that were the major source of fuel at Sibudu. Grass phytoliths occur in lower amounts and are possible evidence of kindling. Phytoliths that may not be related to fuel use are also present especially sedge phytoliths that corroborate the evidence of the use of sedges as bedding at Sibudu. This study shows that phytolith analyses can contribute to our understanding of early human-plant interactions and their environment and can provide a more complete understanding of the monocotyledonous plants mainly grasses, a currently missing component of the botanical studies at the site.

Mots-Clés: Phytoliths, vegetation history, Middle Stone Age, Sibudu, South Africa

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