Umbeli Belli and its significance for the final MSA of southern Africa

Gregor Bader\textsuperscript{1}, Chantal Tribolo\textsuperscript{2}, and Nicholas Conard\textsuperscript{3}

\textsuperscript{1}University of T"ubingen – Germany
\textsuperscript{2}IRAMAT-CRP2A, University Bordeaux Montaigne – Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique - CNRS – France
\textsuperscript{3}University of T"ubingen – Germany

Abstract

The final MSA of South Africa represents one of the most enigmatic periods of the Stone Age. Several researchers undertook investigations in the transitional phase between Middle (MSA) and Later Stone Age (LSA), but we still know surprisingly little about the end of the MSA itself. In the light of an increasing awareness that the original criteria used to distinguish the MSA and LSA such as the presence of personal ornaments, organic tools and art are no longer valid, this lack of research is curious. Most assemblages associated with the final MSA date between roughly 40 and 20 ka, but many of them require redating and a detailed reinvestigation. While the majority of these assemblages provide strong LSA characteristics such as bladelets, bipolar cores and the near absence of MSA points, the assemblages from KwaZulu-Natal, specifically Sibudu and Umhlatuzana remain exceptional. Numerous bifacial and unifacial points and occasional hollow based points have been considered to be the most characteristic features. In 2016 we were able to relocate the archaeological site Umbeli Belli ca. 100 km south of Sibudu and excavate a stratigraphic sequence of about 1.50 m subdivided into 9 archaeological horizons. Umbeli Belli provides a large assemblage of lithic artifacts from the final MSA and LSA. The MSA yielded among many other tools four hollow based points. Thus, in awareness that four isolated points cannot be used to characterize an assemblage of several thousands of pieces, we examined the uppermost MSA assemblage associated with layer 7 with a preliminary focus on the retouched tools. Here we show that the hollow based points from Umbeli Belli are only a minor feature embedded within a diagnostic technocomplex. Furthermore, we present new OSL dates and evaluate the relevance of Umbeli Belli for discussions about the changing lifeways at the end of MIS3.

Keywords: South Africa, final MSA, lithic technology