Tracing late Quaternary highland-dryland social connectivity in southern Africa with ostrich eggshell bead strontium values: preliminary results

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Résumé

Humans have frequented southern Africa’s highest reaches – Lesotho’s Maloti-Drakensberg Mountains – for at least 90,000 years. As with many high mountain systems worldwide, the Maloti-Drakensberg cast a rainshadow over neighboring arid lowlands (the eastern Karoo Desert). Based on previous archaeological and paleoenvironmental work in highland Lesotho, researchers have posited that source populations for human dispersals into the mountain zone often originated in the Karoo, particularly during phases of enhanced regional aridity or climatic instability. Lesotho’s mid/high-altitude temperate grasslands may have been attractive to lowland desert foragers because they offer topographical resource diversity and stable supplies of key resources, including surface water and aquatic resources. Such dynamics would have necessitated the existence and maintenance of strong cultural linkages between these ecologically contrasting macro-regions. To begin testing these hypotheses, we are conducting strontium isotope analyses of ostrich eggshell beads recovered from Sehonghong, a highland Lesotho rock shelter with a record of human occupation stretching from the late Holocene to early Marine Isotope Stage 3 (~57 ka), and constructing terrestrial strontium isoscapes in both regions. This paper presents our preliminary results, which demonstrate the existence and persistence of highland-dryland exchange networks and hold implications for tracing the development of social strategies for long-term survival in the southern African interior.

Mots-Clés: Mountains, foragers, social networks, ostrich eggshell beads, colonization, southern Africa, Middle Stone Age, Later Stone Age

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