

ANNUAL REPORT: SPITZKLOOF (SOUTH AFRICA) 2014 FIELD SCHOOL

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Students and staff excavating the new and main unit at Spitzkloof B

A five-week IFR Field School at Spitzkloof Rockshelter B in Namaqualand South Africa, took place between July 21st and August 22nd, 2014. The first week was spent in Cape Town, and consisted of daily lectures lead by the co-directors on the background to South African prehistory and how the research at Spitzkloof contributes to our understanding of early modern human behavior. Topics included: human evolution; paleoenvironmental indicators; archaeological methods; the Middle Stone Age of South Africa; the Later Stone Age of South Africa; lithics technology; and rock art interpretations. Specialist lectures were provided by Dr Ben Collins on the identification of animal bones, while Hugo Pinto discussed the intricacies of single context excavation. A nice additional aspect of the guest lectures was that they occurred across Cape Town ranging from the beautiful campus of University of Cape Town to the South African Museum. In addition to the lectures the students went on a field trip down the Cape Peninsula. In their free time some students took advantage of the beautiful scenery and heritage (and wine) beyond Cape Town itself, including the historic Stellenbosch region.

The IFR team drove up to the site on the morning of July 27th and managed to arrive at the shelter with enough time to set up camp and start a *braai* – a traditional South African BBQ. In total our team consisted of 6 students, 2 teaching assistants and 2 co-directors so there was ample one-on-one instruction.

A typical day in our camp started with breakfast and then excavation from 8:30 AM to 12:30 PM when we stop for an hour to have lunch, and to catch up on our site notebooks and/or personal chores like laundry. We continue excavating from 1:30 to 5:00 PM. The afternoons are typically very pleasant since the intense sun moves past the excavation unit just after lunch. Daily student activities included excavation, recording notes and annotating photos on iPads, piece plotting all artefacts over 2.5 cm with a total station, helping with photography, sieving buckets of sediment, sorting/labeling artefacts, and taking copious notes relating to our work, the

environment and camp life in their site notebooks. On Fridays we had the afternoon off and, while this was officially private time, the students enjoyed themselves together, whether going for a group hike or playing sports and games. Fridays were also the day when new provisions meant we could have another *braai* or *potjie* curry or stew (traditional South African iron pot cooked over open flame). Sundays were the most fun as after work we built our own pizza oven in the river valley and everyone contributed by either helping prepare the food or keeping the oven stoked and hot.

We were very lucky to have visitors this trip with senior director of the Archaeological Contracts Office Dave Halkett and his assistant Natalie arriving the first day we began to excavate the site. Dave Halkett is the most experienced archaeologist in the Namaqualand region and his discussions with us were invaluable. They surveyed the valley to get a feel for the location of lithic scatters to inform us on landscape use. Later in the expedition Johan de Waal from Richtersveld Tours brought a team of German botanists to see the shelters and engaged in fascinating discussion of the use of the site, bringing insight into the changing environment over the past 20 years.

The archaeology at Spitzkloof B is very exciting as we have excellent stratigraphy and little evidence for disturbance in the main unit compared to Spitzkloof A. In 2014 we opened the excavation unit and started working where we left off the previous year at ~47 cm below surface. While we are waiting for radiocarbon dates, the lithics suggests that we are in the late Holocene (~8 - 10ka) deposits. We continued to excavate in 50 x 50 cm quads within 3 m² and saw a transition in the lithic raw materials from quartz to cryptocrystalline silicates. The sediment quickly changed from one dominated by roof spall to a lovely micro stratified anthropogenically deposited ash and sediment that including 6 *in situ* hearths. We also opened a new 1 m² unit two meters to the west of the main excavation to evaluate the spatial distribution of artefacts. This was a very worthwhile exercise as it was quite disturbed with burrows and rock fall, providing an opportunity to show the students the variable nature of shelter deposit formation and how critical it is to test deposits before opening large trenches. Hugo Pinto trained the students the theory behind laying down a grid and how to open a new excavation unit. Throughout the four weeks of the excavation portion of the field school we rotated the students between the main and the new units so they could experience excavating both clean and disturbed deposits and expose them to the different teaching styles of the staff. While it was time consuming to excavate using leaf trowels and piece plotting every artifact, it was rewarding to see the precise recording of the association between pieces of the assemblage.

We continued using a new methodology developed by Shannon McPherron and Harold Dibble for piece plotting *in situ* artefacts. We used a Nomad Timble hand held computer wirelessly connected to the Total Station to shoot in the location of the artefacts into a database program called EDM-Mobile (www.oldstoneage.com). The new hand held unit was much more dependable than the system we used last year and so the daily routine was much smoother this year compared to previous season. Overall it helped us save a lot of time as we were able to enter the details of the artefacts directly and quickly into the database on the handheld. Further time was saved by having baggies with pre-printed unique artefacts ID labels ready to receive the corresponding artifact immediately after it was 'shot in' and removed from the sediment.

Towards end of the excavation we were seeing a shift in the types of lithics present, the sediment was becoming concreted in gypsum, and the size of ostrich eggshell beads was increasing matching the layers in Spitzkloof A that date to ~16 ka.

This season we removed another 29 cm of sediment, rock spall, and artefacts. We are very pleased with the richness of the site and the precise spatial data we have been able to collect. The fauna is particularly rich in tortoise and small bovids and there are numerous cultural artifact types including ostrich eggshell beads, engraved ostrich eggshell, crayfish mandibles and even a marine shell. The final days of the excavation were dedicated to closing photographs, drawing the profiles and inter-square stratigraphic correlation. This work was mostly accomplished by the directors and staff while students engaged in laboratory work (measuring the ostrich eggshell beads), data entry (cleaning up the database), and annotating the context drawings. Finally we focused on finishing the sorting the artefacts while other students floated the hearth samples and began to pack up our large kitchen camp.

In the end we had a very successful field season. We improved on our state-of-the-art cave archaeology recording system; using this to collect artefacts with high-resolution provenience data; excavated combustion features with magnificent structure and integrity; retrieved abundant organic and sedimentary samples for radiometric dating and paleoenvironmental reconstruction; and, most relevantly for the present report, trained and enthused students some of whom we hope will eventually become professional archaeologists. In the latter vein, we believe that all the students came away feeling charged with excitement for archaeology, and we expect at least one honour's year/undergraduate independent study research projects and a Masters thesis to follow-on from this experience. The entire team put in real effort and the outcome was a wonderful educational and social experience for all, including the co-directors and staff.