

ANNUAL REPORT: SPITZKLOOF (SOUTH AFRICA) 2013 FIELD SCHOOL

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Students excavating at Spitzkloof B

GENERAL

A five-week IFR Field School at Spitzkloof Rockshelter B in Namaqualand, South Africa, took place between July 1st and August 4th, 2013. 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. We were very lucky to have guest lectures by prominent South African researchers and leaders of the cultural resource management industry, including Prof. John Parkington, Prof. Timm Hoffmann, Dr. Antonia Malan, Mr. Ben Collins, Mr. Dave Halkett and Mr. Tim Hart. Topics included: Pleistocene timeframes and climates; the archaeology of earliest *Homo*; the archaeology of modern human origins in Africa; the Holocene prehistory of the Western Cape region; the botanical history of Namaqualand and how it impacted hunter-gatherer and pastoralist mobility; the history of the settlement of Cape Town; a zooarchaeology laboratory; and the prehistoric record of Namaqualand. A nice additional aspect of the guest lectures was that they occurred across Cape Town ranging from the beautiful campus of the University of Cape Town to the historic castle of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). In addition to the lectures we took the students 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 4th and managed to arrive at the shelter with enough time to set up camp and start a *braai* – a traditional South African barbecue. In total our team consisted of 5 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 stopped for an hour to have lunch, and to catch up on our site notebooks and/or personal chores like laundry. We continued excavating from 1:30 to 5:00 PM. The afternoons

were typically very pleasant as the intense sun moves past the excavation trench just after lunchtime. Daily student activities included excavation, recording notes and annotating photos on iPads, piece plotting all artifacts over 2.5 cm with a total station, helping with photography, sieving buckets of sediment, sorting/labeling artifacts, and taking copious notes relating to our work, the environment and camp life in their site notebooks. When the wind was particularly intense and we were obliged to cover the excavation unit, we left the camp to survey in adjacent valleys or further afield in which case we'd take the 4x4. On Fridays we had the afternoon off and, while this is officially private time, the students typically enjoyed themselves together, whether going for a group hike or inventing and playing new 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 rock-and-sand pizza oven in the river valley and everyone contributed by either helping prepare the food or keeping the oven stoked and hot.

We were fortunate to have visitors this trip, with Dr. Timm Hoffmann and his graduate student Sarah arriving the first day we began to ready the camp. They surveyed the valley to collect data on the tree species that are present today in order compare the species identified in the charcoal analysis with modern analogues. This presented a great opportunity for students to informally ask Dr. Hoffmann questions related to the regional botany, geography and history that he had raised in his lecture in Cape Town. Later in the expedition Dr. Jayson Orton and Dr. Lita Webley, both specialists in the Holocene period archaeology of Namaqualand, visited the site for the day, bringing insight (and fresh produce) that was appreciated by all.

RESEARCH

The archaeology at Spitzkloof B is very exciting as we have excellent stratigraphy and little evidence for disturbance compared to adjacent Spitzkloof A. In 2013 we opened the excavation unit and started working where we left off the previous year at ~20 cm below surface. Although we are waiting for radiocarbon dates, the lithics suggest that we are in the pre-pottery cultural period of the Holocene Later Stone Age known as the Classic Wilton (~8000-2000 BP). We continued to excavate in 50 x 50 cm quads within 4 m². Immediately after beginning to excavate we found a large and beautifully preserved *in situ* hearth surrounded by tortoise carapaces and other food remains. It was satisfying to be able to show the students a real example of the domestic spatial distribution of hearth-centered artifacts, particularly how they concentrate in greatest frequencies close around the hearth but decrease moving away from the hearth. 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 also started using a new software package specifically developed (by Shannon McPherron and Harold Dibble) for rapidly piece plotting *in situ* artifacts. We used HP iPaq hand held computers connected to the Total Station via a bluetooth transmitter to shoot in the coordinates of artifacts directly into this database program, called EDM-Mobile (www.oldstoneage.com). While there was a steep learning curve to keep the total station and the units running smoothly, by mid-way through the excavation we had it conquered. Overall it helped us save a lot of time as we were able to enter the details of the artifacts directly and quickly into the database on the handhelds. Further time was saved by having baggies with pre-printed unique artifact 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 and the number of ostrich eggshell beads was dropping off. There was also a reduction in the presence of roof spall making the last excavation days much easier to trowel. We are clearly transitioning into a different time period with distinctive paleoenvironmental signals. This season we removed another 27 cm of sediment, rock spall, and artifacts. 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 and even a marine shell pendant. We are still not operating as fast as we know we can, but we are proud of the progress made especially considering this year saw the introduction of a new excavation system. We expect our speed and efficiency to increase markedly in the following season. The final days of the excavation were dedicated to closing photographs, drawing the profiles and inter-square stratigraphic correlations. This work was mostly accomplished by the directors and the head TAs, with the secondary TA leading the students in intensively sorting through remaining bags of sieved material.

OBSERVATIONS

In the end we had a very successful field season. We flexibly adopted and implemented a new state-of-the-art cave archaeology recording system; used this to collect artifacts 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; located and mapped a number of new landscape lithic scatters and quarry sites; 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 two honor's year/undergraduate independent study research projects to follow-on from this experience. The entire team put in real effort. The outcome was a wonderful educational and social experience for all, including the co-directors and staff.