MSA Site Report: Duinefontein 2

The site of Duinefontein is important to the understanding of the behavior of Middle Stone Age peoples because of the large number of artifacts found at the site. Even though there were no hominid bones present, their stone tools show that they used the area frequently. There were many large grazing animal bones found at the site, as well as many carnivore bones. At this site we may either be seeing a savaging role on the part of the early humans, or it might have been the carnivores that were savaging the kills made by the early humans. The limited findings that have come from this site make it hard to use as an example of modern behavior on the part of the early humans.

The Duinefontein 2 site was excavated on two different occasions. A preliminary excavation was conducted in August of 1973. G. Avery, K.W. Butzer, Gail Klein and Richard Klein conducted a systematic excavation of the site of Duinefontein 1 in September and October of 1973. Richard Klein is the author of the article and was the leader of the team. The site of Duinefontein 2 was discovered upon the inspection of a bulldozer trench, which was dug for preliminary ground testing for the building of a nuclear power plant. In March of 1975 the South African Museum sent Leonard Stoch, along with students, to conduct rescue operation on the site because of the proposed building of the power plant. Richard Klein later joined the group and was placed in charge. At no time was this a large excavation and both projects were considered tests.

The site is located in South Africa approximately 300 meters from the sea on the farm of Duinefontein. The site is 4 kilometers north of Melkbosstrand and 50 kilometers north of Cape Town. It is an open-air site on a surface that is unstable and shifts with the wind. There is not much grass in the area, so the topology is constantly changing.
Duinefontein 2 is hard to date because of the lack of material suited to radiometric dating techniques. The first clue to the date of the site comes from the sands, which appear to have been accumulated during a time of falling sea level. This limits the site to no later than the early Upper Pleistocene. The best means for dates comes from the animals found on the site. By comparing the fauna to other dated sites, the dates can be narrowed to dates between the mid-Middle Pleistocene and the early Upper Pleistocene. This places Duinefontein at somewhere beyond 125,000 years ago. The Fauna also places an upper limit of 12,000 to 10,000 years ago. While these dates may not be controversial, they are not precise. The inability to correlate the age finding with any other techniques forces us to rely solely on fauna for any dating.

The paleo-environment of the site is difficult to establish. It was probably very similar to the present conditions, although the presence of large grazing animals suggests that the site may have existed of a time when grass was much more abundant. The discovery of the bones of small toads also suggests a marshy area that may have served as a congregating area for the grazing animals.

Details on the classification of artifacts found at the site are not readily available in this article. The focus is on the large number of artifacts found. The ratio of artifacts to bones at the site is very high. In Horizon 2, the first level excavated, the ratio qualifies it as a kill or butchery site. The ratio in the level below, Horizon 3, qualifies it as a camp or occupation site. The extent of excavation is limited, though, in Horizon 3 and further excavation would be required to come to a definite conclusion about the nature of the site. The artifacts in Horizon 3 were also found to be retouched, while the Horizon 2
artifacts were largely unretouched. It is also interesting that some of the bones in Horizon 3 look like they might have been used as tools.

The food remains at the site were the carcasses of many different animals. It has not been determined whether or not the early humans here hunted these animals, or simply scavenged them. The carnivore bones found at the site suggest that the early humans simply scavenged the kills made by these carnivores. Alternatively, the carnivores may have been scavenging the remains of early human meals. There is no evidence that gives us clues as to which way this cycle worked.

Any cultural evidence in the activity area of the site is not apparent from the findings. The artifacts are mainly found next the bones of the animals they were apparently used on. The site may have just been a convenient place to butcher animals because of location. Being next to a drinking area would make it easier for early humans or carnivores to make kills. If the site were a place that attracted grazing animals it would probably not be a good place to live, as this would scare off potential food. Most likely, it was just a popular place to acquire meat.