Simbi: MSA Site Study

Simbi is an archaeological site in western Kenya where Sangoan artifacts have been found. These artifacts are known to overlap with Acheulian artifacts and are important for our understanding of the behavior of MSA/MP peoples in Africa. Though most of our understanding of the Sangoan is very limited, the Simbi site is unique because of its potential to present isotopic age determination for items of the Sangoan nature.

The Sangoan site of Simbi is located 30km northwest of the town of Kericho and about 50km southeast of Muguruk, which is another significant Sangoan site. It is positioned in the drainage of the Kano River in western Kenya. At the time of occupation, Simbi was thought to have quite arid conditions even though most Sangoan regions are now wooded. This suggests an adaptation to a wooded environment. Pollen samples that were excavated also suggest that the site was more open than it is today.

In 1984, Sally McBrearty excavated Simbi and obtained this compilation of artifacts and bone, which are now kept at the Archaeology Division of the National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi. The total excavation of the Sangoan sites is rather limited and inadequate; that is all except for the site of Simbi. The excavation of Simbi was relatively large in comparison to the majority of the Sangoan sites. This site contained bones and multiple stone tools, which most Sangoan sites were not comprised of.
Not only is our complete understanding of the Sangoan quite limited, but the dates of most other Sangoan sites are extremely difficult to determine. This is due to the fact that the Sangoan is too old to be dated by radiocarbon. Some minimum estimates of dates are 38,000-46,000 years old. Most of the methods used are just experimental and more advanced chronological accuracy is needed before a definite answer can be concluded. All of the dates of Sangoan sites are not stable, all except Simbi. At this location, volcanic tuffs cover the top 2.5m of the Sangoan artifacts and fauna. Due to the abundance of volcanic tuff, the method of potassium-argon dating can be applied through laser technology. Preliminary results of dates at Simbi range between 40,000 and 65,000 years old. After more research and consideration to the fact that the volcanic takes up the top 2.5m of the site, it has been concluded that the true age of Simbi Sangoan is definitely more than 50,000 years. Even though Alan Deino had come to these conclusions in 1986, there is still little evidence as to when this site was occupied.

Most Sangoan sites have very little artifacts left behind. Fortunately, Simbi is not one of these. In comparison to the majority of Sangoan sites, Simbi has quite an abundance of artifacts and bone. These were found over a 2000 meters squared area. Some of the large stone tools excavated in this area include bifaces with untrimmed butts and unifacial picks or core choppers. The small tools consisted of choppers, scrapers on flakes, and modified and utilized flakes and flake fragments.
Thirteen out of the twenty cores found at Simbi are radial or subradial cores. Some of these tools tend to be those of the Acheulian period. Also, the fact that this site contained modified flakes and flake fragments, classifies it as MSA/MP.

Another aspect of Sangoan life found at Simbi is bone. These fairly abundant artifacts were found in situ while others happened to be surface scatters. Combining the excavations of 1984 and 1986, there were many types of animal remains found. Some of these include mineralized mammal teeth and jaws, fish bones, and fragments of elephant tusk. These specimens can now be found at the Kenya National Museum, Nairobi. Since this specific article did not give any more detail as to what animal and plant remains were found, it is difficult to pinpoint any type of subsistence change.

Though there is still much research to be done at Simbi, McBrearty and Deino made amazing excavations, which led to new findings about the Sangoan. Their discovery of fauna within the Sangoan artifacts is extremely rare for Equatorial Africa. In the future this will lead to a better understanding of the environmental conditions around a Sangoan site. Someday archeologists hope to compare the Sangoan hunting, scavenging, and butchery practices at Simbi with those of other periods.