Why study the Simbi site in western Kenya? The Simbi contains artifacts from the Sangoan industry, which is believed to coincide with the emergence of the Homo sapiens, the ancestors of modern humans.

The Sangoan industry has been rather difficult to date and classify due to a number of factors. The first being that there are very few excavated samples from reliable contexts. Second, Sangoan artifacts are too old to be dated by radiocarbon methods and nearly too young to be dated by the Potassium/Argon method. Finally, Sangoan sites are found in a variety of environmental conditions. Most of these are humid areas in central Africa that are unfavorable for the preservation of pollen and animal bone (Mcbrearty pp. 159-160). The Simbi site is one of the few sites in Equatorial Africa in which there is a strong artifact to fauna correlation (Mcbrearty pp. 171). The Simbi site is also one of the first Sangoan industrial sites that has been able to be reliably dated due to the presence of a volcanic tuff, which overlies the artifact and bone deposits. This is helpful in providing archeologists a time period with which to relate this industry and some of the major evolutionary stages of our early ancestors.

The Simbi site is located 30 kilometers northwest of the town of Kericho, in western Kenya. The site contains an area of 2000 square meters in which artifacts and bones have been uncovered (Mcbrearty pp. 169). Artifacts are to found lying in situ in a lightly colored, fine grained sediment, which is overlain by a series of volcanic tuffs (Mcbrearty pp. 169-170).
In 1984 Sally McBrearty made a modest amount of surface collections of bone and artifacts. In 1986 the site was excavated by McBrearty and dated by Alan Deino. Deino collected samples of the tuff, which was approximately 2.5 meters above the artifact and bone bearing deposits. Deino applied the Potassium/Argon method of dating to these samples and acquired three dates that ranged between 40,000 and 65,000 years ago. However, McBrearty suggests that the thickness of the deposits separating the dated tuff from the artifact and bone deposits imply that the Sangoan artifacts are over 50,000 years old (McBrearty pp. 171).

Animal bone fossils are abundant at Simbi. Specimens of bovids, equids, elephant tusks and fish skeletons are all present in the area. The presence of the bovid and equid fossil in particular is useful in determining the paleo-landscape at Simbi during this time period. The bovids and equids were grazing animals, which suggests an open, arid habitat during the time when the Sangoan artifacts were in use. The presence of fish skeletons indicate that water from a lake or stream must have been present (McBrearty pp.171). This correlates with the presence of the Kano River from which Simbi is a drainage point (McBrearty pp. 169). The overall faunal representation suggests that Simbi was open arid landscape much different from that of the woodlands currently in the area. This site was hydrated by the Kano River and was adequately equipped to support large grazing animals as well as our hominid ancestors.

A wide array of artifacts, which varied in shape and size, were found at Simbi. McBrearty organized the artifacts into two general categories, large and small. Large bifaces, some with untrimmed butts, and picks were placed into the larger category. There were a number of smaller artifacts found. They consisted of choppers, scrapers on
flakes, and modified and utilized flakes and fragments. Twenty cores have also been found thus far. Over half of them were either radial or subradial, the remainders were of the single-platform type (McBrearty pp. 170-171).

The Simbi site enables one to get a perspective into the Sangoan industry and the Homo sapiens who were utilizing it. The volcanic tuff located at the Simbi site has provided archeologists with samples that have granted dates for which to place the Sangoan industry in. This site also possesses a good faunal to artifact correlation, which enables one to deduce the environmental conditions during this time period and enables one to visualize the environments that our early predecessors were choosing to live in. The Simbi site is unique in that it is the first to provide these two valuable insights into the history of the Sangoan industry to an extent that has thus far remained unseen.
Works Cited