Simbi Site Report

The main site at Simbi is important because it contains tools from the Sangoan (or Sangoan-Lupemban) industry. This industry is not well defined, and there is much debate about it. It might have been contemporary with either the Acheulian industry or the Middle Stone Age industry, or it could have been in between the two. The two main questions the Simbi site may possibly answer about the Sangoan industry is, first, the date range of the Sangoan industry and, second, the environmental conditions surrounding the Sangoan industry.

Sally McBrearty first excavated the Simbi site from 1984 to 1986. This covered a fairly small area, approximately 2000 square meters, however, the range of the site does extend for several kilometers. The initial collection done by McBrearty was a surface collection of artifacts and bone. This technique makes it difficult to place the specimens in their original context. Some artifacts lie in situ within sediment overlain with volcanic tuffs, and a more methodical excavation needs to be done to these.

Simbi is located in Eastern Africa, on the western border of Kenya. This is somewhat close to Lake Victoria, and the Muguruk site (50km southeast). It is in the drainage of the Kano River. It is an open-air site that is close to the equator, which means that the site is in a very tropical climate. This presents a main problem. Tropical sites tend to be very damp, which is detrimental to the preservation of artifacts. Also, the tropics are usually forested, or at least wooded, which adds to the deterioration of artifacts and the difficulty in finding sites in those zones. When taking these facts into consideration, it makes Simbi that much more rare and important.
One of the things that make Simbi an especially important site is that there are volcanic tuffs that can be accurately dated. Volcanic activity is uncommon in Sangoan sites, and accurate date estimations have been a large problem in the interpretation of the Sangoan industry. At Simbi, the tuffs are above the main artifact beds, and so any dates are minimum age estimates. In 1986, Alan Deino dated the tuff using the potassium-argon method with laser technology. The age estimates are 40,000 to 65,000 years ago. Also, it must be noted that the tuffs are about 2.5 meters above the artifact bed, which suggest that the actual age of the deposit is much older.

The difficulty in age verification means that determining what the environment was like when inhabited by archaic humans is rather problematic. As stated previously, the site today is in a wooded, damp tropical zone, however, there is some debate as to whether the site was wooded or a savannah-type plain when occupied by the toolmakers. Some have suggested that the Sangoan industry is just a woodworking activity variant of the Acheulian or MSA industries. Due to this and the proximity of the site to the equator, they say that the site was probably much as it is today, damp and wooded. Others, however, contest that the site was a plain-type environment. Direct evidence of this comes from some of the bones found at Simbi, which are from zebras, an open-plains animal. There is also some indirect evidence with regards to the Muguruk site, which is similar to Simbi. Some of the Sangoan tools at that site have been estimated at around 200,000 years ago, which was during a northern hemisphere glacial. During these cooler periods in the northern hemisphere, the tropics recede and the area that Simbi is found in was probably an open plain, which also explains the presence of the zebra bones. Until
an accurate age estimation can be determined and further methodical excavations done to
the main Simbi site, the environmental conditions cannot be proven with any surety.

The specific artifacts found at the Simbi site include the bones of several different
animals, many stone tool fragments, and several full (or complete) stone tools belonging
to the Sangoan industry. The bones belong to medium sized bovids, and either an extinct
Equus olduwayensis or the modern Equus grevyi, both types of zebras. Also, in 1986,
fish bones and elephant tusks were observed at Simbi, but not collected. The tools are
very bulky bi-faces usually with untrimmed butt ends, and picks were also found there.
As of yet, no lanceolate points, indicative of the Lupemban industry, have been found at
Simbi, but there were some at the similar Muguruk site, and so there might be some
found at Simbi upon further excavation. The cores are radial or sub radial, with a few
single platform types.

The presence of the bones of the bovids and zebras and fish indicate that the
toolmakers were probably feeding on medium to large sized grazing and herding animals,
along with fish. Once again, however, this cannot be accurately determined until further
excavations and micro-wear tests are done.

In conclusion, the Simbi site is most useful by narrowing down the age range of
the Sangoan industry, and its bone content. So far, only preliminary excavations have
been done at Simbi, and much of its usefulness is derived from comparing it to what has
been found at Muguruk. The age determination is gotten from the volcanic tuffs and
cross referencing that data with the fact that Sangoan tools at Muguruk were found
stratified over-lying Acheulian tools and under-lying MSA tools. This preliminary age
estimation, along with the plains animal bones found at Simbi, suggest that the site was in
an open-air savannah type environment. Unfortunately, until further work is done at Simbi, we will not have the bulk of information available.