

UF IN ETHIOPIA: AN UNDERGRADUATE STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM IN STONE AGE ARCHAEOLOGY

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In Spring 2015 UF's Department of Anthropology, Center for African Studies and International Center provided the opportunity for six undergraduates to earn 14 credit hours while participating in ongoing archaeological research in the beautiful highlands of Southwestern Ethiopia. "UF in Ethiopia" offers students the chance to learn archaeological methods at Mochena Borago, a large ~70m wide rock shelter that contains deposits documenting more than 50,000 years of human activities.

Unlike previous field seasons when project personnel were housed at a tented camp on the western slopes of 3000m high Mt. Damota, the 2015 field group commuted 30 minutes each way from the comfortable confines of a hotel in the nearby city of Sodo to Mochena Borago. The undergraduate students worked side by side with professional archaeologists and graduate students from Ethiopia's Wolaita Sodo University, the Ethiopian Authority for Research and Conservation of the Cultural Heritage, Canada's Simon Fraser University and UF in testing a theory that Ethiopia's SW Highlands were a major environmental and cultural refugium for anatomically modern hunter-gatherers during the cold and arid climatic periods of the Late Pleistocene (125-12,000 years ago).

Previous field groups, including archaeologists and geomorphologists from the University of Cologne – our former university partner - focused upon excavating the northern part of the shelter where they exposed ~2m of deposits containing large numbers of obsidian stone artifacts and rare animal bones radiocarbon dated to ~53,000 (the limit of radiocarbon dating) to 36,000 years ago. However, a hard volcanic layer at the bottom of the trenches prevented them from uncovering older deposits necessary for testing the project's refugium theory. Furthermore, some team members thought this hard layer



was the shelter's natural bedrock, meaning Mochena Borago could never yield deposits much older than 53,000 years ago.

In 2014 test excavations on the southern side of the shelter, much to our surprise, revealed archaeological deposits older than 50,000 years but without this hard volcanic layer. Therefore the 2015 field season concentrated upon the southern area of the site where team members expanded the 2014 trenches to expose archaeological deposits more than 2m deeper than the 2014 excavations, and therefore considerably older than 50,000 years. In addition to the stone artifacts found the previous season, the 2015 season yielded a broader array of lithic tools, including large tools made of basalt rather than obsidian - apparently the first of their kind from Ethiopia.

The Refugium Theory calls for such an increase in stone artifact variability, but the 2015 sample is too small to make any valid statistical comparisons. Consequently the 2016 "UF in Ethiopia" field season, scheduled for February and March 2016 and including six UF undergraduates, will continue to focus upon the southern area of Mochena Borago. And

if 2015 and previous field seasons are any indicator, the 2016 UF undergraduates will experience one of the greatest adventures of their life, no matter what their excavations may uncover.

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