Out of SW Ethiopia: a Refugium for Late Pleistocene Hunter-Gatherers?

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During the Spring 2010 and 2011 semesters, thirteen UF anthropology undergraduate majors and two graduate students participated in an ongoing archaeological field project at Moche Borago, a large ~70m wide rock shelter situated on the slopes of a dormant volcanic mountain in southwest Ethiopia. Currently co-directed by Steven A. Brandt of the UF Department of Anthropology and Ralf Vogelsang of the University of Cologne's Institute of Prehistoric Archaeology, the UC Collaborative Research Center/ UF Southwestern Ethiopian Archaeological Project (CRC/SWEAP) is focused upon testing the hypothesis that the SW Ethiopian Highlands were a major environmental and cultural refugium for anatomically modern hunter-gatherers dealing with the cold, arid climates of the Last Glacial prior to human migrations across and out of Africa by ~50,000 years ago.

SWEAP first began in 2006 with funding from the U.S. National Science Foundation, but since 2010 has been funded by the Sonderforschungsbereich or SFB (German Science Foundation) as part of a four year multidisciplinary collaborative research initiative centered at the University of Cologne and entitled "Our Way to Europe: Culture-Environment Interaction and Human Mobility in the Late Quaternary." SFB funds cover all field and international travel expenses for UF and German faculty and graduate students, as well as most Ethiopian field and travel expenses of the UF undergraduates.

As in years past, our Spring 2011 field project was based at a tented camp on the western slopes of Mt. Damota 2200m above sea level and five minutes walk from Moche Borago shelter. Field research focused upon exposing more of the shelter's oldest deposits so that we could have a better understanding of the earliest archaeological cultures. We also put in a new test trench that exposed archaeological deposits potentially dating earlier than our previous

excavations. Our new geologist/geomorphologist from the U. of Cologne conducted further research into the shelter's natural and cultural formation processes, and we continued our systematic site survey of surrounding areas. We also mapped and took samples of natural obsidian flows ~ 20km southeast of Moche Borago which we believe may have been the source of most of the raw material used to make the tens of thousands of stone artifacts recovered from our excavations at the shelter.

The 7 UF undergraduates who participated in the Spring 2011 field season received 14 credit hours in African archaeological field methods through the UF International Center's Study Abroad program. They attended course lectures at UF in January and April, and 8 weeks of fieldwork and travel in Ethiopia during February and March. The students spent the majority of their field time learning how to excavate the rock shelter's very complex natural and human-made deposits dating to ca. 60-40,000 years ago, and to record all stone artifacts and animal remains using Total Stations. They also learned how to conduct systematic archaeological and environmental surveys of the surrounding mountain terrain and neighboring Southern Rift Valley, and discovered Ethiopia's tremendous natural and cultural diversity by visiting national parks and interacting with many of the country's 80 + ethnic groups. Seven UF undergraduates will also attend the Spring 2012 field season.

Steven Brandt is associate professor of anthropology and affiliate faculty in the Center for African Studies. Funding for this project is through the German Science Foundation.