The Caves of Karura Forest

Introduction

In front of you, facing each other deep inside the forest, stand two very ancient caves. The Karura Forest caves have formed over millions of years by periodic floods, that gradually widened and then hollowed-out cracks in the volcanic trachyte bedrock that lies beneath the forest floor and the wider Nairobi region.

In recent historical times, it is said Mau Mau freedom fighters used the caves as a hideout during Kenya's independence struggle and, even today, some local people consider them to be sacred places.

In 1939, pieces of old pottery, animal bones and ancient stone tools were recovered from a small trench dug by Louis Leakey inside the caves, showing they were occupied by groups of herders and hunter-gatherers hundreds, if not thousands, of years ago. Sadly, however, almost all of this information was subsequently lost due to the advent of the second world war.

In 2010 and 2011, the Friends of Karura Forest (FKF), with archaeologists from the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) and British Institute of Eastern Africa (BIEA), carried out new archaeological excavations to re-discover the history of the caves.

What is Archaeology?

Archaeology is the scientific study of past people, their cultures, activities, and interactions with the environment, based on the excavation and study of the objects ('artefacts') they used and left behind. It is the best way we have to find out about the past before written records.

The artefacts and other remains (e.g. animal bones, pollen) recovered by archaeologists are only of scientific value when their buried context is recorded and studied. Excavations must be very carefully controlled to recover all possible data: only then is it possible to build an accurate picture of the past.

Caves are excellent places to find archaeological remains because they were used by people as natural shelters from the wind, rain, and cold before they learned to build houses. The sediment they trap builds up over time into a series of layered ('stratified') deposits, each of which covers and protects the evidence left behind by the previous people in the cave.

Generally, the deeper that remains are found, the older they are, but to find out their *actual* age, archaeologists look for materials like charcoal, which decay at very regular rates that can be measured in the laboratory, allowing us to know how long they have been buried. This is called radiocarbon dating.

Excavating the Caves

Archaeological excavations were undertaken to understand the history of the Karura Caves' occupation. Preliminary survey by a small team of archaeologists from the National Museum of Kenya (NMK) revealed the potential of stratified deposits in areas of the caves where surface finds were also identified. Three archaeological trenches, covering a total of 10 metres square were then carefully placed in these locations. Extensive excavations were undertaken inside and at the entrance of Cave 1, while a smaller test trench was dug inside Cave 2. Over the course of 3 weeks the caves were gradually excavated, as shown below:

1. This 3 square metre, L-shaped trench was positioned inside Cave 1 to maximise the chance of finding archaeological remains. Each square was dug in 10cm thick levels, so that the depth and position of finds could be recorded and related to datable charcoal.
2. A theodolite was used to measure very accurately the depth of each level as digging progressed, and to map in 3 dimensions the positions of all stone tools, bones, potsherds and other items as they were uncovered and before they were put into labelled bags.
3. Within each of the 10cm thick levels excavated, all the sediment loosened from around the archaeological finds by the excavators' hand-tools was carefully scooped up, removed from the trench, and put into buckets, to be taken away to a special sieving area.
4. The left over sediment from each layer in each square was sieved through a 4mm mesh, to collect any small finds not identified inside the trench: microliths (very small stone tools), pieces of ochre and ostrich eggshell, and small beads were found using this method.
5. Next to the trench are some small piles of rocks that are parts of the cave floor, wall, and ceiling that became buried by the cave sediments through natural processes. Their removal from the trench was necessary to allow the excavation to continue.

Past People in the Caves

Different types of artefacts and evidence of human activities were uncovered. Combined with radiocarbon dates, their laboratory analysis sheds new light on the past use of the caves (see poster: Archaeology of the Caves). The most recognisable finds included:

Lithic tools
Large numbers of sharp-edged stone tools made from materials including obsidian (shown here); a distinctive glass-like volcanic rock. These artefacts show Stone Age hunters used the caves.

Faunal remains
Teeth and bones of wild bush pig, roan antelope and dik dik show the past habitat at Karura, and may have been hunters' prey. Domesticated cattle, goat and sheep bones show herders once used the caves.

Ceramic fragments
Pieces of pottery in different forms and designs representing different traditions indicates that various groups of Pastoral Neolithic and Iron Age herders used the caves, and traded with more distant groups.

As required by Kenyan law, all archaeological specimens were transported to the National Museums of Kenya archaeology section lab for further analysis and safekeeping.

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For more information about this research, please contact the Friends of Karura Forest.