



# AFRICA UNEARTHED

High plateaus next to ocean-like lakes: how would our ancestors have coped with such different environments? And how did they deal with extreme climate change?



Wanting to answer questions such as these spurred Dr Jessica Thompson from the School of Social Science to spearhead a major archaeological dig in Malawi, central Africa, that has attracted scholars and scientists from all over the world.

"Driving through northern Malawi several years ago, I was struck by how diverse the landscape was over such a short distance," says Dr Thompson. "I also knew that large-scale 'megadroughts' had swept through this area between 135 and 75 thousand years ago, around the time that biologically modern people first emerged.

"I began to wonder how this would have structured movements and challenged the innovative capacities of those early human populations: would they have used the environment to their advantage – or would they have abandoned the area altogether?"

Fortunately for Dr Thompson and her team of specialists in palaeoclimate research, geomorphology, dating of

sediments and, of course, archaeology, the northern Malawi region has unearthed rich Stone Age treasures.

"During 2011, our team discovered an undisturbed layer full of stone artefacts that had been buried by over a metre of sediment," she continues. "Many could be refitted to show how they were made, and geological and dating work shows they were most likely found where they were discarded – between 42 and 22 thousand years ago.

"Most importantly, preliminary dating work at nearby sites indicates that even older sites may be present, which means we can construct a sequence of similar 'snapshots' over time."

The project team is working closely with the local community, and delivers educational programs and training through the Cultural and Museum Centre Karonga. The site has also become the destination of choice for the Archaeological Fieldwork course at UQ, where student enrolment has tripled within a year.



Looking towards the future, Dr Thompson says, “Whether we continue our fieldwork long-term depends on whether our discoveries spark new questions, but I believe there is much research potential still to be found in the archaeological deposits of northern Malawi.”

#### **MALAWI EARLIER-MIDDLE STONE AGE PROJECT**

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