

Archaeological Excavations Attract Conservation Students of All Specialties—and Offer Diverse Opportunities

Among the many decisions that conservation students face in the fall is the annual conundrum of the archaeological dig: Should one go on an excavation in the summer? If so, which one?

In one of the more luxurious decisions conservation students make, the opportunity to participate in an archaeological excavation is not to be taken for granted. A select but impressive roster of sites in Turkey, Greece and Italy has long lured students not only from objects conservation, but paper and paintings as well. Last summer was no different: paintings student Caitlin Breare worked for eight weeks with Senior Field Conservator Kent Severson '85 at Aphrodisias, Turkey; paper students Amy Hughes and Emily Lynch joined the small team led by Stephen Koob at Samothrace, Greece; and objects students Brian Castriota, Jessica Pace and Cybele Tom lent their hands to the large team at the Harvard-sponsored dig in Sardis, Turkey, which also included Special Projects Conservators Hiroko Kariya '01 and Jennifer Kim '08.

For over fifty years NYU has conducted an extensive program of excavation,



The Temple of Aphrodite at Aphrodisias

research, and conservation at the ancient city of Aphrodisias, Turkey. For the 2011 excavation season, Caitlin Breare worked as conservator of small finds under the supervision of Kent Severson, Senior Field Conservator, alongside Hakan Dağdelen, student conservator from Ankara Üniversitesi Başkent Meslek Yüksekokulu. This season was a particularly fruitful one for finds, both in quality and quantity. While their primary task was in objects conservation, both students were able to lend a hand consolidating the ancient marble floor tiles.



At Aphrodisias, Caitlin Breare consolidates friable marble on a sculpture fragment

Located adjacent to an ancient marble quarry, it comes as no surprise that some of the most notable finds from Aphrodisias were marble. These included two sculpted heads, two pilaster capitals with figural scenes, and a larger than life-size male sculpture found in the last few weeks of the season. This sculpture's burial environment led to a heavy encrustation of tenacious accretions, which proved a formidable task for the conservators. Other finds included three silver coins, three decorative bronze architectural fittings and a gilded bronze ornament with glass inlays.

The six-week summer season at the Sanctuary of the Great Gods, Samothrace was devoted to the study and processing of previous archeological finds. Since 1938, the Institute of Fine Arts has worked in the Sanctuary of the Great Gods, uncovering the home of its famous mystery cult



Amy Hughes creates structural plaster fills for an ancient cooking pot recovered at the Sanctuary of the Greek Gods, Samothrace

with its series of great, marble buildings, dedicated by Philip II and his successors and seminal in the formation of Hellenistic architecture. Without the hectic schedule necessitated by an active dig, second-year conservation students Amy Hughes and Emily Lynch were able to focus intently on re-treatment of objects on display in the onsite museum and study collection, site maintenance and special projects. This being their first archeological dig, Amy and Emily benefited greatly from the expertise of Archeological Conservator Stephen Koob, who joined the team for the first three weeks of the season. Steve acquainted the student conservators with the site and conservation studio, assisted with complex treatments and even assigned readings from the small library in the studio. The luxury of the 2011 study season was not lost on the students, who often had the time to research ancient materials and techniques before beginning treatment.

The Archaeological Exploration of Sardis, conducted by Harvard and Cornell Universities and co-directed by Nicholas Cahill and Baha Yildirim IFA PhD '01, has a long partnership with the IFA and the Conservation Center, inviting at least two students every year to care for small finds. Capital of the Lydian Empire, which flourished around the 7th and 6th centuries BC, and seat of the famously rich King Croesus, Sardis simultaneously intrigues and confounds with its complex and often topsy-turvy

stratigraphy of Lydian, Persian, Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine layers. The excavation requires a two ten-week season commitment from students, which results in a deep and well-rounded experience of dig life as well as the chance to run and manage the conservation lab in the students' second season. It also allows students to carry-out projects which they can monitor and follow-up with the next year. In his first season, Brian Castriota stabilized a section of wall plaster with graffiti dating to the Late Roman period and created detailed documentation of its recent history of damage and repair. Next summer, he'll be able to assess the efficacy of the consolidation materials and track the success of the treatment.

Most students sign on to an excavation having had no prior archaeological experience, and for many, working with materials such as bronze, glass and bone is also new. In preparation, essential knowledge and many common treatments of archaeological artifacts are covered during an immersive week-long Archaeological Field School coordinated by Kent Severson, held in May at the Conservation Center. Topics include cleaning and stabilization of copper alloys, excavation and lifting of fragile material, mending ceramic vessels, constructing safe housing for storage and—not to be underestimated—living on an excavation.

The learning curve only gets steeper once students arrive on site. At Aphrodisias, Severson



The front porch of the Hieron, Sanctuary of the Great Gods, Samothrace

continues to train the student conservator in each category of material as the need arises. For Samothrace, Stephen Koob spends the first three weeks of the season training the students to work with the materials found at the site, with special emphasis on how to reverse previous treatments and retreat the objects according to current conservation standards. Many of these treatments consist of removing failing adhesives such as shellac, animal glue and polyvinyl acetate (PVA), then upgrading to Koob's adhesive of choice: Paraloid B-72. At Sardis, the efficacy of its two-season commitment is that the returning student can show the ropes to the new student, who similarly shares the knowledge the following year. At all sites, students learn and problem-solve on the job, becoming more independent and more confident in managing the treatment of objects brought into the laboratory and in responding to requests from the field. For instance, Amy Hughes and Emily Lynch conducted extensive photography of small finds at Samothrace as contribution to the publication of an upcoming volume, *Samothrace, vol. 9, Monuments of the Eastern Hill* by Dr. Bonna Wescoat. "The photography was particularly challenging," explains Emily Lynch, "and is a good example of how resourceful conservators need to be in the field, to be able to adapt to unexpected tasks as they arise. We



Jessica cleans plaster fragments from a Roman era ceiling collapse to ready them for consolidation



Emily Lynch and Amy Hughes (right) prepare photography at Samothrace

In the Sardis lab, Jessica Pace and Brian Castriota consolidate fragments of architectural stucco



needed to coordinate our staging of the objects with the rotation of the earth in order to achieve the perfect shot.”

The very diversity of objects and materials emerging from the trenches is an intense challenge, requiring adaptability, creative thinking and some considerable degree of tact and diplomacy in working with others in the team. Directors, scholars and excavators often want different kinds of information and look forward to the conservators providing answers. It is often a precarious line to walk between wanting to offer helpful, exciting information on the one hand, and on the other, conveying facts judiciously and responsibly. “My first season at Sardis,” Cybele Tom comments, “I was surprised when the director asked for my opinion about an object. I remember thinking, dully, ‘Wait, I’m only a student!’, and then realizing with growing horror that I was one of the few people at the dig of whom it made sense for him to ask. That moment was incredibly valuable to my training; it was the first time I faced the fact that as much as there is still to learn, I have to assume ownership of what I do know.”

Cybele Tom cleans corrosion from iron in an attempt to better understand the fragment’s original morphology

When the spirit of collaboration is strong between conservators and archaeologists, results can be thrilling. At Aphrodisias, a coin hoard of 338 Byzantine coins was found, which had a substantial amount of intact woven textile surrounding it. Using light microscopy and polarized light microscopy, skills learned in the first week of school, Caitlin Breare and Kent Severson characterized the weave and identified the textile fibers as a bast fiber; either

hemp or jute. At the same time, IFA PhD candidate Stephanie Caruso exercised her numismatist skills and identified a number of the coins to the 7th century AD. Jessica Pace and Baha Yildirim, co-director at Sardis and former Field Director at Aphrodisias, literally worked side-by-side on an extensive treatment and study of a large columnar altar fragment from the Synagogue complex at the Sardis Excavations. Pace’s painstaking removal of biological growth and old deteriorated fills enabled Yildirim to discern a faint inscription, contributing another piece of evidence to the question of the dating of the Synagogue.

Of course, there is much more to life on site than work. Seminars in which experts share their research complemented everyday discussions on all things archaeological. “The exchange of knowledge and ideas in this unique environment made for an incredibly rich experience,” says Caitlin Breare, “one that has been particularly rewarding in demonstrating the vital role of conservation in archaeological research.” Senior conservators also explain their large-scale projects to student conservators. Kent Severson



supervised a major ongoing site conservation project consolidating and documenting the Hadrianic Baths at Aphrodisias. At Sardis, Hiroko Kariya shared her thought process in selecting appropriate materials for the reconstruction of the altar steps at Sardis’ Temple of Artemis, while Catherine Wil-

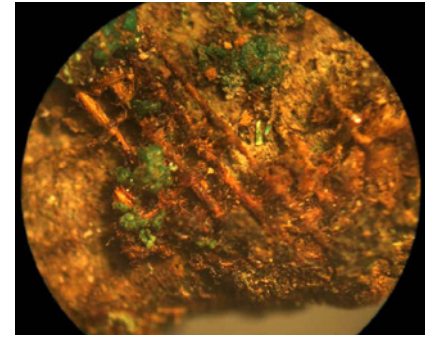
liams, Silver Lining Art Conservation, LLC, invited students to join her at the Synagogue complex where she was dealing with its unstable mosaic floor and complex history of repair.

At all locations, students have at least one day off to explore the surrounding environs, whether that means touring nearby archaeological sites, sampling local cuisine, exploring beaches and waterfalls, or visiting museums. Needless to say, it is a wonderful way to cultivate an appreciation for cultural heritage outside the United States.

Students have only two summers before they start applying for their fourth-year Internships, and summertime is often ideal for bulking one’s resume and arsenal of treatments in one’s portfolio. But the fact that year after year, students from all specialties participate in archaeological excavations is a testament to the rewarding experience they are. This summer 2012, again, paintings, paper, book and objects conservation students will fly off to Turkey, Greece and Italy, knowing that they’ll return with transferable skills, and, perhaps more importantly, with a broader and more personal commitment to the objects they treat during the course of their student and professional careers. •

–Caitlin Breare, Amy Hughes, Emily Lynch and Cybele Tom

Caitlin, Amy and Emily are currently second-year conservation students, and Cybele is in her third year of study



Microphotograph of a Byzantine coin from Aphrodisias with intact woven textile fragment

Alumni News

On October 31, 2011 Paul Schwartzbaum’ 72, Fellow IIC, Fellow AIC, former Chief Conservator/Restorer ICCROM; former Chief Conservator the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museums, was awarded an Honorary Doctorate: Doctor Honoris Causa from the University of Art and Design Cluj-Napoca, Romania in recognition of a long and illustrious career in conservation.

photo credit: Caitlin Breare, Brian Castriota, Gloria Choi, Sayaka Fujioka ’08, Karen Heredia, Amy Hughes, Emily Lynch, Kent Severson, Cybele Tom