

The Archaeological Fieldwork Experience



Participation in archaeological fieldwork is a good way to supplement your undergraduate degree, especially in situations where archaeology courses are not numerous.

The main point of fieldwork is to learn the techniques of archaeological data collection:

- what constitutes this data and how it can be obtained, processed, and studied
- how this data can be used to interpret and understand the past

The term “archaeological fieldwork” is very broad and can encompass many activities and experiences: Excavation, Survey, Underwater Excavation. It can also include work on artifacts in museums, internships, or as an assistant to an archaeological specialist in the field.



If you have questions about any of this, want further information, or want to discuss a potential project, contact Dr Francis or Dr Buell.

How to Find the Project that is Right for You:

There are two types of projects: Field Schools and Volunteer-Based Projects.

For first-time students, a Field School is your best bet. This is a teaching-based project designed to give you expose and experience with the broadest possible range of archaeological techniques and activities. You may start in a trench, digging, but then be rotated to learn about surveying, artifact processing and analysis, artifact conservation, archaeological drawing and photography, sifting, etc. This broad spectrum will allow you to try different things and learn a range of skills, while helping you to focus on the type of archaeological fieldwork that “speaks” to you and which you may like to pursue in your future studies or fieldwork projects. Keep in mind that the cost of Field Schools can vary widely; in order to get credit, you will have to pay tuition, which can be extremely expensive in the US; some projects will let you participate without paying tuition, but you will not be able to gain credit for your work.

In your search for a good-quality project, you should be looking for experience in as many different tasks as possible.



Your choice of an archaeological fieldwork project may be impacted by several factors, and you should sort these out before you start searching for a project or submitting applications:

What type of project?

Do you have a strong back? Can you squat or lean over for several hours at a time without distress? Are you physically strong? Do you have good upper-body strength? Are you ok working outside in extreme temperatures and climate conditions?

If yes, then an excavation project may be for you.



If you prefer to be out in the open air, moving about, and enjoy hiking and camping, then perhaps an archaeological survey project will suit you.

This entails walking across the landscape of a given area (fieldwalking) and noting/collecting artifacts that you find on the surface. It also involves elements of geology and botany, which may be of interest to some students.

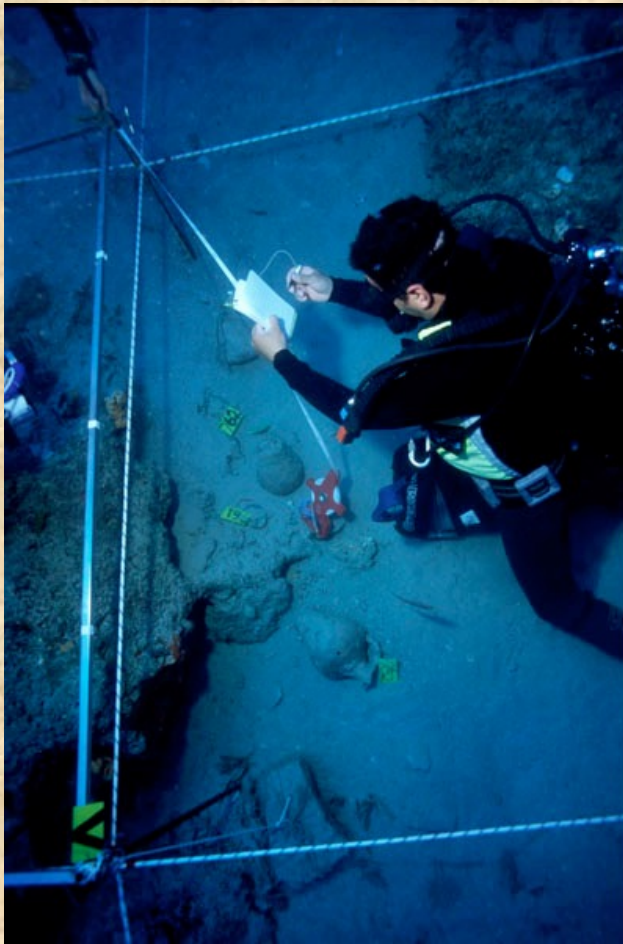


Figure 7.1 : Walking the Field



Do you swim like the fishes? Perhaps you might like to try Underwater Archaeology.

You must be SCUBA certified (at various levels; individual project requirements may vary) before you apply, but this can be obtained in Montreal. There are many fewer opportunities are available for underwater archaeology, and most of these are available in North and Central America, although some underwater sites in Spain take volunteer students. You must ensure that you have the appropriate, minimal SCUBA training before you go to the site; make sure that you contact the project directors about this.



Other Considerations:

- How much time can you give to this project? All projects have their own time-lines and schedules. If you can only participate for two weeks, do not apply to a month-long project. Most project taking students will work at some point during the summer so you will have to calculate this in terms of your other summer activities. Some projects have rolling timelines: one session may begin in May, and another in June; these will provide you with some flexibility if timing is an issue.
- How much can you afford to spend? Costs for your participation will be given to you in advance of your arrival so you will know what to expect. If you are short of cash, why not consider a project around or near Montreal or in Canada? There are projects in Ontario and in western Canada that take students. The general skills you learn are transferable, regardless of where you do your fieldwork. Also keep in mind tuition costs.
- What is your comfort level? Are you afraid of snakes? Work in Ireland or Newfoundland. Are you unable to function in very hot weather? Don't go to Israel in August; try Britain. Do you need a flush toilet? Find an urban project with facilities. Decide what you will be able to live with and be sensible about how you think you will cope. There is nothing worse for you—or the project directors—to get into the field and realize that you're not comfortable with the situation.

How to Find a Fieldwork Project:

There are many advertisements and websites dedicated to archaeological fieldwork opportunities, but these are not all equal:

- You want to look for a site that is run out of an academic institution (university, college, or museum) by reputable academics; directors should have a PhD and a history of fieldwork.
- Look at their track record: does the project publish annual, academic reports on their work? Do they integrate graduate students into their publications and research or simply put their own name on everything? Do they have a clearly defined statement about the project and are their goals clearly articulated so that you can understand the point of the project and how you will be contributing to it?
- Do they spell out what tasks you will be doing and what you will learn from these experiences?
- Do they list equipment, experiences, and details of living conditions, etc.?

All projects should have an email address for a contact person—if you are seriously interested in a project, write to this person and ask all the questions you want. If they do not reply or are vague in their answers, perhaps you want to look elsewhere (with the caveat that some things cannot be known, even by the directors, until closer to the date of participation). In general, make sure you are going to get your money's worth and have a good learning experience before you hand over your money and commit yourself and your time.

Finding a Project:

Here are a few of the main resources for fieldwork opportunities:

Archaeological Institute of America Website, Fieldwork Opportunities Bulletin

<http://www.archaeological.org/programs/professionals/fieldwork/afob/>

This is THE professional organization for Classical Archaeology, but the fieldwork database contains projects around the world of different cultures and periods. Also play around with their sample fieldwork projects and look at annual reports, etc. in the Fieldwork section to get an idea of how projects work and what their expectations for assistants might be.

Canadian Institute in Greece: <http://www.cig-icg.gr/opportunities/fieldwork> (no fieldwork opportunities listed at present, but worth checking and you could always write to the assistant director for information).

Limited to Canadian projects in Greece. For Canadian projects in other countries, visit department websites for Classics and Anthropology (and maybe art history) departments across the country; <https://www.cac-scec.ca/classics-programs-in-canada/>

Also:

Israel and Vicinity: <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/digs/>

France: <https://archeologie.culture.fr/france/fr/focus/chantiers-benevoles>

UK: <https://www.archaeology.co.uk/digs>

American Anthropological Association:

<https://www.americananthro.org/LearnAndTeach/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1907&navItemNumber=653>

Society for American Anthropology: <https://www.saa.org/education-outreach/teaching-archaeology/teacher-training-field-opportunities>

You can also look at National Geographic and Earthwatch, but these tend to attract wealthy retirees and are volunteer-based; you won't get the same range or depth of experience as you would with an academic Field School. They do sponsor some very important project, however, which may match your interests, and they work all over the world.

The Application Process

It is a good idea to select several projects and then narrow down your choices; spots may not be available, for various reasons, and it is good to have some choice. It is useful to run your selections by Dr Francis or Dr Buell in order to confirm that the projects are viable and will offer good teaching.

Most projects will have an application form on their website. You will submit this, and most will also want the names of references, which should be academic professors from whom you have taken some courses. If you are not a Classics major, you may choose professors in other areas, but make sure that you ask them before providing their names and give them time to write their letter.

Projects are looking for students who are dedicated to their studies, enthusiastic, get along with others, can complete tasks, and are detail oriented. These qualities are more valuable than prior archaeological experience.

You may also have to submit a medical form or waiver filled out/signed by a doctor. This attests to your physical fitness for the work and is a prerequisite of most projects. It is also highly advisable to get or update your tetanus shot before leaving, and make sure that you alert directors to any medical issues you have.

What to Expect on your Project:

- You will be doing physical labour for many hours at a stretch (not necessarily every day, but fairly consistently). Even if you work with artifacts, you will have to heave heavy boxes and bags around). You will need strength and stamina as well as appropriate footwear and a hat, if you're working outside (e.g., no flip flops in trenches).
- You will need great reserves of tolerance and patience, both for the work itself (which may on occasion seem silly or redundant – it all has a point) and for the living and working situation you are in. You will be living and working with the same group of people over time; things like work schedules and access to sites and artifacts can change without notice. Be cheerful and flexible.
- You may be living in fairly rudimentary conditions, sharing rooms and bathrooms and kitchens, or even camping. You may have to cook for yourselves, if you are away from urban centers.
- The work schedule, especially in hot climates, is frequently governed by the weather, and work is done very early (starting at 6am or before). Some areas start extremely early to take advantage of daylight hours. You will then work through with only short breaks until 1-2pm, have a break of several hours, and then be expected to re-appear for artifact work, computer entry, etc. Make sure that you are not the last one in the van in the morning or on the site, even if you are not a “morning person.” Make sure you understand all the rules for working on site, as these may be governed as well by local laws and practices. Work hours can also shift, depending on numerous things; you should be prepared to be seconded to other tasks in the event that your planned work is postponed or cancelled. Directors will always endeavour to keep your training going in some way.

- Your site may be very hot, very cold, or very wet, depending on location. It is useless to spend your time and energies complaining about the weather. Make yourself as comfortable as you can and get on with your work. Make inquiries before you go about how best to handle extreme weather conditions and pack accordingly.
- You may be immersed in a foreign culture with different food, languages, and customs. People may not speak English or French. Adapt yourself, do a bit of background research, and try to learn a few words (please, thank you, good morning) in the native language, and always smile pleasantly when you interact with the locals. Try the food, even if it isn't to your liking, and be polite. Try to remember that you are a guest in their country.
- Most projects work Monday through Friday, depending on local customs. You will also normally work a half-day on Saturday and have Sunday free. Many projects arrange field trips on Sundays to nearby museums or other sites, and you should always take advantage of these opportunities.
- It is a very good idea to speak to friends and contacts, including on social media, who may have participated in fieldwork already. This may allow you to find a project that suits you, but you can also get good insider information on how specific projects are run, what to expect, and particular details of the work and life on site.

Financing Your Fieldwork:

It is normal for students to pay all their own expenses for the first few years on fieldwork projects, until you have some expertise that the directors will pay for, usually when you are a graduate student.

Make inquiries at various offices and departments around Concordia. See if there are bursaries or scholarships specifically for fieldwork or summer study abroad. The Archaeological Institute of America (see website) also has some funds for students participating in their first fieldwork projects. The Quebec government has “Student Mobility” bursaries as well. Sometimes even bits and pieces of money obtained from various sources can help towards your expenses.



Academic Credit for Fieldwork:

It is always desirable to get academic credit for the work you are doing in the summer. If you participate in a Field School run by another university, you will have to enrol in a number of credits from that host institution. You need to clear this with an academic advisor before you go. When you return and have your grade, you can apply for a “Transfer Credit (<http://cmll.concordia.ca/exchange-programs/field-schools/>), which will move these credits to Concordia (no fee involved). You are allowed to take up to 30 credits at another university under this program.

Please consult the official CMLL document on obtaining credit for archaeological fieldwork:

<https://www.concordia.ca/artsci/cmll/programs/undergraduate/classics/archaeological-fieldwork.html>

NOTE: Sandra Woywood-Page in CMLL has informed me that students participating on fieldwork projects for credit in the summer of 2021 will be permitted to apply for transfer credits to Concordia.

Final Thoughts

- Drinking to excess, if necessary, is best done on Saturday nights when you do not have to work the next morning. If you are incapacitated, you are hindering the work of your colleagues in your trench or on your transect, you are hindering the progress of the project, and you are making yourself look bad in front of directors and supervisors from whom you may some day want a letter of reference. Like your mother, field directors have eyes in the back of their heads and see/hear everything.
- Complaining about the locals and their customs. Things may be very different where you are, but that doesn't mean that the locals are obliged to see things your way. Accept differences and learn from them.
- Do not expect because you have taken an archaeology course that you know best in the field; respect the experience of your field directors and other students, and always ask questions or ask for help if you are uncertain about an assigned task.
- Finally, respect local customs. Foreign archaeologists are allowed to work where they do because of the kindness and respect of locals, including local governments. If you are insulting in your behaviour or dress, it will be noticed and may have ramifications on the ability of the project director to gain the required permissions for future seasons of fieldwork.