Storage Units in Exotic Places

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Archaeological fieldwork cemented my decision to pursue archaeology. My first excavation experience, a field school in Northern Michigan, introduced me to a few tenets of excavation. My favorites of these were teamwork, the blending of physical labor and intellectual assessment, working outside, and the after-hours camaraderie. These are sometimes forgotten benefits of excavation, eclipsed by the excitement of finding artifacts or features. Lifting objects from the ground that haven't been touched in centuries or even millennia is intoxicating, or perhaps that was the aforementioned camaraderie hitting me the next day. Subsequent seasons brought me new excitement, including learning new languages and living in new countries. Every season brings together diverse personalities, and the atmosphere always seems to oscillate between harmony and implosion, but the ultimate enemy is the end of the field season and the need to finish that unit before we have to pack it up and head home. This race unites the team into a rhythm of flying picks, scraping trowels, and creaky wheelbarrows.

Now, as a fourth year PhD student, my trowel feels like an artifact. The deeper I descend into dissertation data collection, the less I move dirt. Most of my time is spent in perpetual study seasons. Excavation seasons usually are followed by "study seasons," when the material from excavations are analyzed. I'm investigating early animal sacrifice in Rome and nearby settlements by analyzing animal bones from multiple sites. Sitting at a desk for hours inputting data into my laptop is a very different activity than the fieldwork that drew me to this discipline. People outside of archaeology are shocked to hear how I now spend my time in the field. Understandably, processing and analyzing the materials we pull from the ground is time consuming. While we know going in that the time spent digging will be less than that spent in the lab, it is a drastic change and one that is difficult to get used to. My field time is almost

Arizona Anthropologist 27: 48-51.

completely lab time at this point. Most of my favorite aspects of the field have disappeared; I now work inside, sitting all day, in solitude. I still have to contend with the ticking clock, counting down until I have to leave. That still keeps the adrenaline strong. I love analysis, too, but it is very different from excavation.

Most archaeologists are not solely in the field. This is mostly because analysis of artifacts takes longer than excavation. When I was an undergrad chugging along the academic archaeology route, two divergent career fears were bandied around. These came out as stress-inducing advice to my young ears. First piece of advice: you don't want to be a shovel bum. Without a Master's degree, you hit a professional wall in archaeology. To move up the ladder, education and leadership positions are key. You need to carve out a spot for yourself. Second piece of advice: you don't want to be a lab rat. This is on the opposite end of the spectrum. If you become too specialized in one thing and don't keep your foot in the trench, you become an unconnected analyst who receives samples, does some niche analysis, and sends your results back to the "real" archaeologist. The struggle to balance between shovel bum and lab rat is real. I'm still searching for the appropriate fit.

Recently, I've felt closer toward the specialist side of the spectrum than the field side. Nowadays, I spend most of my field seasons looking at faunal material from Etruscan and Roman Italian sites instead of digging. Italian law makes moving these materials from their designated storage space difficult, and, if permission is granted, it can be very expensive to ship the bones. Usually this works to my benefit, since it is useful for me to be on-site so that I can better understand the excavation methods and stratigraphy if I'm analyzing bones from an active dig. I've also been able to advocate for my preferred collection methods and spark some interest in zooarchaeology by doing analysis on-site and, therefore, in sight of the other archaeologists. Visibility has definitely helped foster support for zooarchaeology on sites at which I've worked.

Since the material I investigate is geographically tied to its storage location, either on site or at another facility, I have little control over my work location. Mostly, this involves being

secluded, with boxes and the occasional rat as living company. If I'm lucky, other specialists are quietly laying their artifacts out on their desks, and we sit in companionable silence. Sometimes, I step outside to spy on the dig in action and to get a little Vitamin D. Now, instead of digging in exciting locales, I get storage units in exotic places. I do not think that when I mention I'll be spending my summer in Rome most people picture me in a subterranean chamber in complete solitude meticulously sorting piles of dead animals.

The isolation of collecting dissertation data is a common experience for archaeologists, whether you are analyzing ceramics, faunal remains, human remains, coins, statues, archival texts, and other materials. This is not even limited to archaeology; research is a lonely task. Archaeologists often undertake largely independent projects that involve long hours with just us and our artifacts. Further along in the research, it becomes just us and our database.

Some of the spaces I've worked in can best be described as creepy. Last summer, working in a storage room in the basement of La Sapienza University in Rome, I would sometimes work all day without human contact. Most of the basement interactions involved confusion over what a random American was doing in the basement looking at garbage. These days can be lonely and long. When it is just you and your bones, though, you really get to bond. Plus, that basement was a cool oasis of A/C amidst a scorcher of an Italian summer.

There are benefits beyond occasional air conditioning to these solitary study seasons. I have more flexibility to set my field dates and sometimes my hours, only limited by how late the space stays open. I get to avoid much of the inevitable field drama, since you are hard pressed to have conflicts when you are working by yourself. I still get to live with other archaeologists in the field, leading to some great friendships. I also feel ownership over each faunal assemblage, knowing that I get to draw conclusions from it and know it better than any other person. Most importantly, I get data to support my research. The impressions you get while excavating solidify into numbers and conclusions and new findings. That is truly rewarding, to take years of excavation, weeks of data analysis, and thousands of

spreadsheet cells and say something new about the past. Someday, I'll be able to haul out my metaphorically rusty trowel, but for now, onward towards tales of animal sacrifice and butchery in the ancient world.