

## Feeding the Fire: Fueling the Discipline with Collaborative Fieldwork

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Peer-reviewed papers in many scientific disciplines, including archaeology, tend to conspicuously lack information about the people, inspirations, and sources of creativity driving the research process. However, archaeologists are well aware that for every new idea published in the literature, there were conversations over a beer, interesting questions raised during classroom discussions, or seemingly tangential sources of inspiration. Archaeological fieldwork, as it turns out, can be one of the most fertile arenas for developing novel ideas in the discipline.

I first learned this working for two summers in southwestern France on a Paleolithic site called La Ferrassie. The site is quite old, containing Middle Paleolithic layers and a Chatelperronean layer attributed to Neanderthals, as well as early Upper Paleolithic layers attributed to modern *Homo sapiens*. La Ferrassie is unique in that it preserves the transition between the Neanderthal and modern human occupations of Europe. The site is also famous for its Neanderthal burials and its unique Mousterian lithic technology.

La Ferrassie was a huge collaborative endeavor, involving a large international team of project directors and specialists as well as about twenty student volunteers from around the world. Many of the project directors had worked together for years, meeting in France to conduct fieldwork on a yearly basis. Working alongside this team, it soon became clear to me why fieldwork, in combination with multi-specialist interdisciplinary teams, is one of archaeology's biggest strengths as a discipline. Fieldwork can be an opportunity for intense idea exchange among researchers, especially when the team is only able to meet once a year, as is often the case. As a student volunteer working and living alongside the research team for six weeks, I had the benefit of seeing this process for myself. Every day during the excavation, project directors were on site deliberating over the site stratigraphy, analyzing finds

from the site, and developing interpretations. And this process of inquiry and discussion was not confined to the site. Back at the field house, where all of us lived and ate together, conversations between researchers about the project continued over dinner or a glass of wine.

For students like myself who were volunteering for the project, working at La Ferrassie was an enriching experience because in addition to our interactions with the project directors, we were able to challenge each other to be creative and adept archaeologists. Among peers who were as interested in Paleolithic archaeology as myself, I found it easy to ruminate with them over unresolved questions in Paleolithic archaeology. Why did Neanderthals seem so uninterested in eating fish? Was there cultural exchange between Neanderthals and modern humans? I also remember having discussions while excavating at the site about questions which do not appear in scientific journals, and to which we may never know the answer. Did Neanderthals have names for each other? Did they have humor? Did they flirt? Surrounded by like-minded teammates, fieldwork created a safe space to have fun asking the unusual questions, to be curious, and to be imaginative. As developing archaeologists, having these discussions and posing creative questions was a significant part of our intellectual development. Even the seemingly frivolous questions are important. While the question 'Did Neanderthals have humor' may never be posed in a peer-reviewed archaeological paper, trying to understand in what ways Neanderthals were like us and in what ways they were different is one of the driving sources of inspiration for many Paleolithic archaeologists. What we were really asking is "What does it mean to be human?"

The inherent collaborative nature of archaeological fieldwork and the productive atmosphere that comes with gathering passionate scientists in one place are common features to a variety of archaeological projects, and I would argue that these elements of fieldwork help kindle the creativity driving much of archaeology as a discipline. The La Ferrassie project certainly benefited from these aspects of fieldwork. However, there were additional benefits to fieldwork perhaps more unique to the La Ferrassie project in particular which emerged during camp life.

During the six weeks of excavation at La Ferrassie, the project directors and volunteers stayed in a nearby town, where the team owned a small house. The student volunteers, numbering about twenty, camped in the pasture behind the house. Central places included a communal area for cooking and eating meals, a fire pit, and (being Paleolithic archaeologists) an area dedicated to flint-knapping. After the workday, groups of volunteers could be found scattered about the campsite preparing food or sitting around the flint-knapping station engaged in conversation. Evenings at camp were always enjoyable. We started a fire every night and would sit in a circle around it and sing songs, talk, or think quietly until one by one we left to sleep. As anyone who has ever lit a campfire knows, the dancing flames could provide hours of entertainment late into the night.

By what was mostly coincidence, certain aspects of camp life began to faintly parallel the aspects of the lives of the Neanderthals and early modern humans we were studying. Flint-knapping was a good way to learn about the skills and forethought necessary to make stone tools, but importantly we also learned that it could be a very social activity. Additionally, our group size was similar to that speculated for Pleistocene foragers, and we were able to experience what it was like to work and live communally with about twenty people and get to know them very, very well. These similarities, although superficial, sparked conversations among us about Neanderthal life and helped us imagine how their lives may have been.

This was exemplified by our discussions on fire. The importance of fire in camp life cannot be understated. The fire pit was the focal point of our attention every evening, structuring where we sat, who we talked to, and what we did. The fire brought us together to sing, play games, and to occasionally launch into debates about (unsurprisingly) Neanderthals and their relationship with fire. In the evenings we talked about how fire use may have started and how often or in what ways Neanderthals may have used it, leading us to on several occasions attempt to start a fire using flint or sticks. We were never successful, adding to our respect for the people we studied.

Unresolved questions about Neanderthals and fire use aside, on quiet evenings when the flames were dancing mesmerizingly we could all agree that fire was the world's first equivalent to plasma screen TVs.

While it may seem that in the field and at camp we only thought about and related our experiences to Paleolithic archaeology, this is far from the case. Archaeological fieldwork involves a whole suite of experiences, social interactions, and forgings of friendship that are largely peripheral to the science. Rather, my purpose here is to argue that embedded in the structure and organization of archaeological fieldwork are opportunities to think informally and creatively about the research. A field season at La Ferrassie or at any archaeological project can be a productive arena for developing and exchanging ideas, making fieldwork all the more integral to the discipline of archaeology.