From Homework to Fieldwork: Summer 2014 Student Projects

The Penn Museum encourages and supports student research projects. In 2014, we funded 35 students (23 graduate students, 12 undergraduate students) in their fieldwork in 15 different countries. Five of these students share their summer projects.

MOLOYOTI, THRACE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

BY SAMUEL HOLZMAN, GRADUATE STUDENT IN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD (AAMW)

During the summer of 2014, I participated in two archaeological projects and conducted independent archaeological research in Greece and Turkey. In June and July I participated in the Molyvoti, Thrace Archaeological Project, which is a combined excavation and survey conducted jointly between Princeton University and the 19th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities of Komotini, Greece, as well as a merry band of Penn archaeologists (three graduate students from Penn’s AAMW program and Dr. Tom Tartaron). Out on the Molyvoti Peninsula, I supervised the excavation of three 5 m x 5 m trenches in what was once downtown Stryme, a bustling port city that connected maritime routes of the Aegean with land routes north into inland Thrace. Although excavations in the 1950s and 1990s revealed parts of this 4th century BCE city, a single house at Stryme has never been fully excavated, and this is one of the primary objectives of our three-year project. In the late 5th and 4th centuries, great advances were made in urban planning, particularly in the alignment of the street grid and houses to optimize temperature seasonally and mitigate winter winds as a general improvement to public health. I was very interested to see that the plan of the house we excavated used only some of the strategies of temperature control common in the 4th century Greek cities to the south, despite the cooler climate of northern Greece.
I conducted my fieldwork in Bortala Mongol Autonomous Prefecture, a picturesque area of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region less than 30 km from China’s border with Kazakhstan, working alongside archaeologists from the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

We surveyed Bronze Age stone structures (that span the 2nd millennium BCE) in the Bortala River Valley, which are arranged in geometric patterns indicative of use in burial, ritual, or habitation. Preliminary observations and geospatial analyses have identified a strong correlation between the location within the natural environment and purported functions of these stone structures.

At Adonqolu in the Bortala River Valley, we excavated 20 graves, some of which contained human remains with Europoid features, and various bronze objects, including beads, bracelets or anklets, small ornaments, and what look like mirrors. Flat-bottomed ceramic pots with incised patterns helped us date the site to the Andronovo period of Central Asia. To better understand the connection between the structural configurations of these slab graves and their chronological relationship, we dug test trenches to investigate the phases of construction.

The weather in the steppes made it difficult to work at times with temperatures fluctuating between 45 and 95 degrees Fahrenheit and the periodic gales. Packing up the survey equipment or covering the excavation pits before the thunderstorms became part of the daily drill. Teamwork proved to be paramount in this environment, and I was privileged to work with a team that held its own through rain and shine.

Local communities were excellent sources for ethnographic research. I learned to make “milk wine” (you add a dollop of butter and drink it hot) from Mongol and Kazakh pastoralists. I also joined them in felting, a physically demanding craft that is a communal effort.
My fieldwork took me to Iraqi Kurdishistan for my second year as a field director on the Rowanduz Archaeological Program (RAP), which aims to document archaeological remains and assist with cultural heritage management. Additionally, the project helps the Soran Directorate of Antiquities with emergency excavations at threatened sites. This season, I supervised work on three sites damaged by recent construction.

The first site, Banahilk, is located on the edges of Soran and much of it is currently under people’s homes. We were asked to work around the site’s edges to determine the depth of the deposit and where to prohibit further construction. During two weeks of work, we recovered rich remains from the Halaf period (6th millennium BCE), including pottery, obsidian, and bone. After Banahilk, I moved north to Sidekan, near the border with Iran. Construction on a new bank uncovered a burned structure. Over the course of a week, our team cleaned the remains, drew the exposed sections, and conducted some limited excavation. Pottery from the structure dated from the Achaemenid Persian period (559–331 BCE).

Finally, we moved to Gund-i Topzawa, a burned settlement uncovered during road construction last year. We excavated two rooms with ovens and very large storage vessels, as well as part of a suite of rooms. Based on the pottery and C14 dating, this settlement was occupied during the early Iron Age (1250–550 BCE). This is a poorly understood time period in this region of Iraq. Therefore, we hope to return to Gund-i Topzawa next season to conduct large-scale excavation on this informative and well-preserved site.
THE NAXÇİVAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

BY KYLE OLSON, GRADUATE STUDENT IN ANTHROPOLOGY

This past summer I participated in the Penn Museum-sponsored field season of the Naxçıvan Archaeological Project, directed by Dr. Lauren Ristvet, Dr. Hilary Gopnik, Dr. Emily Hammer, and Dr. Vali Baxşaliev. The team is currently investigating the ancient societies that flourished in southwestern Azerbaijan during the 1st millennium BCE, focusing its attention on the relationships between the fortress-based polities that existed in Naxçıvan and the local communities that dotted the surrounding valleys. This summer, we excavated areas in the lower town that surrounded the fortress of Oğlanqala, in addition to geophysical and field-walking surveys, in order to delimit the extent and characterize the nature of this settlement. While six seasons of excavations on the citadel mount have yielded much valuable information about the fortress of Oğlanqala, we are just beginning to study the settlement that surrounded it. The project’s research questions include: was Oğlanqala a planned imperial city, a high-density agrarian city, a low-density agro-pastoralist urban settlement, or was the fortress surrounded by many low-density pastoralist settlements?

Our fieldwork was geared toward the collection of data that could help us evaluate the utility of these four models of settlement dynamics, each of which represents a particular configuration of social variables including but not limited to: population density, spatial patterning, planning, fortifications, mobility, and degree of economic integration.

My work was primarily as part of the survey team; I worked closely with Dr. Emily Hammer and fellow Penn graduate student Bret Langendorfer to process and manage the surface artifacts and data points that we collected and recorded each day. Thanks to Dr. Hammer’s direction this summer, I learned much about the practice of landscape archaeology and survey methodology. I hope to return and continue working towards answering some of the questions described above, as well as new ones that came up during the course of our work.
SURVEYING WAMPUM BELTS

BY LISE PUYO, EXCHANGE STUDENT IN ANTHROPOLOGY FROM UNIVERSITÉ LUMIÈRE LYON 2, FRANCE

In May 2014, I joined a research team directed by Dr. Margaret Bruchac to survey wampum belts in museum collections. In company with Penn graduate student Stephanie Mach, we visited many museums and tribal communities in the United States and Canada.

During our visits to collections, I learned that the wampum belt itself is an archive, holding precious information often not relayed on paper: beads bespoke patterns of trade; areas of repair told us about modes of curation; and weaving techniques reflected socially-driven traditions. We spent hours in each collection, analyzing material features. This intense survey helped me understand the importance of Dr. Bruchac’s “restorative methodology;” combining all possible sources to understand the deep story of a museum object.

Each locale had its own way of curating Native materials. Our interactions with museum staff and Native communities required attention to different social relations and protocols. The complexities of handling sensitive cultural objects contextualized contemporary issues that complicate museum studies. This experience also provided training in the daily practice of field anthropology. Writing articles for our research blog and editing photographs helped me develop a routine to organize data and ideas. I can now begin to compare Northeastern museums, to examine differences between continents, and to put French museum practices into perspective.

The ability to work respectfully with communities is fundamental to contemporary anthropology. During this trip, I learned the importance of sensitively interacting with Native people, curators, and archivists, talking face-to-face to develop trust and reciprocal relations. I also enjoyed the rare privilege of meeting with Native American cultural leaders who kindly shared bits of oral history that are not always represented in museums. As a result, this field research was the most challenging, educational, and exhilarating experience of my year at Penn.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Stephanie Mach, Lise Puyo, and Dr. Margaret Bruchac outside the Tantaquidgeon Museum, Norwich, CT. Photo by Melissa Tantaquidgeon Zobel.