We are often asked about the planning that goes into the design and construction of an exhibition—questions that are answered and decisions that are made well before an exhibition opens to the public. On February 7, 2015, Beneath the Surface: Life, Death, and Gold in Ancient Panama will open at the Penn Museum. This 2,000-square-foot exhibition will include over 200 objects from the Museum’s collection. Expedition’s Editor Jane Hickman and Associate Editor Katherine Boas sat down with Clark Erickson, Curator of the exhibition and Curator-in-Charge of the American Section, and Kate Quinn, Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs, to discuss how Beneath the Surface came together.

What is Beneath the Surface about?
CE: Our exhibition is about the people of Sitio Conte in Panama, also known as the Cochlé culture. From about 750–1000 CE, this culture flourished. The Cochlé created a highly recognizable style that influenced later cultures up
until the colonial period—a style that is known throughout the world. The exhibition is also about the people who excavated the site and those who have studied and conserved the material.

KQ: The story of Burial 11—the human skeletal remains and the objects—will be our anchor to understanding this culture. We will also tell stories about the excavation that will help us better understand the archaeologists who excavated at Sitio Conte and what it was like working in Panama in 1940.

CE: In addition to the gold that this site is famous for, we will display a wide range of objects: made of resin, of whale and shark teeth, dog and deer teeth, and polychrome pottery that is quite expressive in terms of iconography, colors, and aesthetics.

What were your goals in creating this exhibition?

CE: For me, it’s about peopling the past. Over a thousand years ago, the people of the Cochlé culture in Panama made pottery, gold ornaments, and objects of bone and other materials, which were later placed in burials. Then Penn Museum archaeologists recovered these objects in 1940, and researchers have studied them ever since. We are taking an anthropological approach to this exhibition by focusing on the people behind the objects. We will visualize the past using excavators’ drawings and photographs as well as digital technology and 3D models. Our second goal relates to showing the finds in context, what archaeologists call provenance. We know exactly where these objects came from and how they were associated with burials in the cemetery. What is striking about this material, like most of the Penn Museum’s collection, is that we excavated it, so objects will not be divorced from their original contexts.

KQ: Just adding to what Clark said, it is most important that visitors walk away understanding the context. Some of this material was part of a past traveling exhibition—River of Gold—but that was put together more like an art exhibition. Reverential treatment was given to the gold objects. What we hope to do with Beneath the Surface...
is to provide an understanding that people wore many of these objects. They are not just art. The gold, pottery, and other objects were used in the context of daily life. And each piece had a purpose within the context of the burial. These are objects that were used, not just beautiful things.

**How did you come up with the concept of “beneath the surface”?**

**KQ:** We knew early on that we wanted to recreate Burial 11 [the primary burial] so visitors would see the full context as they came into the exhibition. Visitors will walk in under the surface. When they enter the gallery, they are “underground,” as if they are actually looking at the burial in the ground. So the title of the exhibition is connected literally to what the presentation inside the exhibition will be. And we worked hard to pull out new stories about the excavation, the archaeologists, and the finds.

**The stories surrounding the excavations at Sitio Conte are complex and multilayered. How are you interpreting them for a public audience?**

**CE:** Modern excavations have video cameras on site, and maybe even an ethnographer at some of the larger digs. Blogs include time-lapse photography that would be posted on the web every day. But in 1940, things were quite different. Voices come through in archival materials: the diaries kept by Mason and Merrill, detailed field notes, to-do lists, to-purchase lists, and correspondence that took place before, during, and after the excavation. It tells us a lot about the planning of the project.

**KQ:** One of the strongest interpretive strategies that we will employ is the use of first-person narrative. Of course, the authoritative voice of the Museum will come through on some of the text panels. But the visitor will also hear direct, first-person commentary from the archaeologists on site, from a physical anthropologist and an archaeozoologist [who discuss the human skeletal remains and objects made from animal teeth], from Clark, and from the many others who worked on this material. We want the public to hear different perspectives, so they can come to their own conclusions about the burial. For example, why were the bodies found facedown? Why were specific pieces placed on the back of the bodies? Objects will be presented at the same level as they would have been buried in the ground. Multi-media devices, including a touch screen with line drawings and photographs, will allow the visitor to investigate all three levels of the burial.

It sounds like visitors will have choices. You are not simply telling one story to everyone. Using touch screens, they will decide what they want to learn about the site. If they are curious about the men and women in Burial 11, they can focus on that aspect of the site. Or they can look specifically at pottery or gold or another class of objects.

**KQ:** Yes, that’s our hope. The goal is to have as much free choice as we can with the interactives. We will also have kiosks surrounding the burial, which will allow visitors to come face-to-face with experts on this material.
explore in depth the iconography or the technology, the significance of the collection today, conservation methods, and other aspects of the site that interest them.

**CE:** We have a treasure trove of archival visuals for this exhibition: excellent photographs taken during all stages of the excavation including the objects as they were uncovered. We have over an hour of movie footage, some of it in color, which will be used to create video clips. Both human osteologist Janet Monge and zooarcheologist Kate Moore will be discussing the human and animal skeletal material found in the graves. Over the last ten years, Panamanian archaeologist Julia Mayo has been excavating near Sitio Conte, using modern techniques and making discoveries similar to those made in 1940. We hope to involve Dr. Mayo in the exhibition or related events.

*Burial 11 is the key component of the exhibition and it became the central focus of the excavation itself. What is the significance of Burial 11 and how will you portray the individuals found in the burial?*

**CE:** Twenty-three well-documented skeletons were found in Burial 11. One of our major concerns from the start was to make sure we depicted the dead with respect. We need to show where the bodies were in order to contextualize the objects. We may use schematic drawings of the skeletons based on field drawings. Visitors will learn about the 23 individuals, based on drawings and photographs as well as the many objects that were found with the bodies.

**KQ:** We have incredible line drawings and photography, so we know where almost every individual was buried. We discussed several ways of depicting these men and women, including making casts of skeletons or even using Plexiglas body forms. But that proved to be too complex. The visitor would not have been able to see all of the objects with 23 skeletons in place. We decided to focus on the Paramount Chief—the man who was identified as the most important in the grave. When a visitor first walks into the exhibition, he or she will come face-to-face with the chief. He will be three-dimensional, standing there as if he was alive. He will be wearing some of the objects that were buried with him. And then you will see him again in the context of the burial.

**CE:** In addition to the Paramount Chief and other males in the burial, we have evidence of a juvenile or adolescent and at least one woman. One of our interns pointed out that this woman is worth focusing on, because she wears gold and is found with some very interesting objects. She was found with an incredible imitation “shark tooth” necklace with little triangular teeth, just like shark teeth, but made of gold and probably sewn onto clothing. She also has an apron that was made with dog teeth.

How long has *Beneath the Surface* been in development? And how would you describe the development process?

**CE:** We have been talking about this for well over a year. We started by looking at the objects. The American Section—Lucy [Fowler Williams], Bill [Wierzbowski], and I—met with Director Julian Siggers and Head Conservator Lynn Grant to talk about a new approach to the material. Julian was very interested in exploring new directions and perhaps traveling the exhibition again. We began weekly meetings with Kate, which turned into twice-a-week meetings. We worked through the concepts, which objects we would include, the topics, themes, how...
material will be arranged, and the actual text panel and label copy as well as multimedia. It’s really been a team effort, which included important research done by our undergraduate interns and work-study students. The students will probably be identified as curators as they did quite a lot of work on the exhibition.

Who is the audience for this exhibition?
CE: Our audience will be the knowledgeable public. We are also hoping to attract the Latin American community in Philadelphia and the mid-Atlantic region, artists, jewelers, world travelers, archaeologists, and historians.
KQ: There will be something in this exhibition for everyone, a hierarchy of content that will appeal to different age groups and interest levels.

Do you have a favorite object or group of objects?
KQ: Yesterday I stopped down to the photo studio as they were going through initial photography of the polychrome pottery, and the “Fat Shaman” was there [see page 20 on the conservation of this object]. There is a lot of amazing pottery in the exhibition, including some remarkable representations of animals. The gold, of course, is spectacular, but, for me, the character of the Coclé people comes through in the pottery.
CE: I have two objects that I especially like. One is labeled “Cat’s Paw,” and it is a bag that holds a collection of the phalanges of a large mammal of the feline family, probably a puma or a jaguar. Throughout Amazonia, we see jaguar skins with the head and paws in place. So we suspect this may have been status clothing used in shamanism and in ceremonies. The second object is a spectacular dog tooth necklace with meticulously drilled holes.

After seeing the exhibition, what do you hope visitors come away with? What do you want them to tell their friends?
CE: I hope they recognize and appreciate the achievements of the native peoples of Central America, past and present: their knowledge systems, rituals, beliefs, art, artifacts, and especially their use of technology. Also, how this site was excavated... it was conducted as systematic archaeological field research that recorded sufficient evidence for us to interpret the site well after it was destroyed through excavation.
KQ: We want visitors to walk away with an understanding that these objects are connected to humans, and that objects can tell stories about human beings. By seeing these artifacts presented in a very specific and different context than what one is typically used to seeing, a round piece of sheet gold is no longer a work of art, but a plaque that was worn to show the status of a person. Through this exhibition, we hope visitors have a sense that these objects were connected with real people. We should feel a reverence for the people, as opposed to the objects.
The Rowanduz Gorge includes striking vistas, caves, and waterfalls.