

# 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 work as an assistant to an archaeological specialist.



If you have questions about any of this, want further information, or want to run a project by me, please contact Dr. Francis ([janef@alcor.concordia.ca](mailto:janef@alcor.concordia.ca))

## 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 hone in on the type of archaeological fieldwork that “speaks” to you and which you may like to pursue in your future studies or fieldwork projects.



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?

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



If you prefer to be out in the open air 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 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.



## 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.

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.

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.

## 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.
- ◆ Look at their track record: Do they publish annual 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?
- ◆ 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. Make sure you are going to get your money's worth and have a good learning experience before you hand over your money.

## Archaeological Institute of America Website

### Fieldwork Opportunities Bulletin

[www.archaeological.org](http://www.archaeological.org)

“Fieldwork – AFOB”

This is THE professional organization for Classical Archaeology, but the fieldwork database contains projects around the world. 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.

## Canadian Institute in Greece

<http://www.cig-icg.gr/>

“Opportunities – Fieldwork”

Limited to Canadian projects, but email the assistant director (Jonathan Tomlinson) to find out about opportunities.

<http://www.archaeologydigs.blogspot.com/>

[http://www.shovelbums.org/index.php?option=com\\_sobi2&Itemid=100](http://www.shovelbums.org/index.php?option=com_sobi2&Itemid=100)

Somewhat more scattered.

You can also look at National Geographic and Earthwatch, but these tend to attract wealthy retirees. They do sponsor some very important project, however, which may match your interests.

## 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 (e.g., no flipflops 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. 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). 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.”

- ◆ Your site may be very hot or very cold, 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.
- ◆ 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.

## 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.

## FINAL THOUGHTS: WHAT NOT TO DO

- ◆ Drinking to excess 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, directors have eyes in the back of their heads and see 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.

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.