This summer I had the pleasure of attending Archaeotek’s 2017 excavation in Transylvania, Romania, under the direction of Andre Gonciar. Based in Canada, this program operates in conjunction with the local archaeology museum in Deva.

Romania, especially Transylvania, is a rich archaeological source, as it was heavily settled by the Romans throughout the second to fourth centuries. Back then, the region was referred to as ‘Dacia’ and inhabited by the formidable Dacian tribes, led by the warlord Decebal. In AD 106, Trajan defeated Decebal and razed the capital, Sarmizegetusa Regia, rebuilding it as Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa on a site 40km away. Seizing this province provided Rome with a new source of revenue, in both taxes and gold mines. Records of Trajan’s exploits can be seen today in Rome, on Trajan’s Column. Funded by profits from the Dacian campaign, it records the events of both Dacian wars: the first in AD 101-102 and the second in AD 105-106. In short, Romania is a fascinating historical region that I was very excited to explore further.

In the 2017 season, the Archaeotek team continued excavation on the site of a Roman villa, potentially a mansio, or inn, built on high terrace along the major road between Sarmizegetusa and Apulum. Though originally assumed to be a villa, new-found irregularities caused the team to reconsider the purpose of the structure. Since the project’s beginning in 2012, the site had been yielding artifacts not usually found in typical Roman villas: a massive gateway at the entrance, a second floor with a balcony overlooking said gate, and most strangely a surrounding stone wall with painted plaster on the exterior. The current hypothesis is that it was a road-stop for relatively well off travelers. The second-story floor above the gate was well insulated, with decorated inside and outside walls, the floor paved with three different types of tesserae, giving whoever stayed there a beautiful view of the lush valley. The stone wall, along with the painted plaster, suggests the owner of the complex was wealthy, and not afraid to flaunt it.

During the excavation we stayed with families in the nearby village, Rapoltu Mare, which was much, MUCH better than living on a camp-ground. Our day initially began with 7:00 breakfast at the ‘dig house’, though as the 2017 summer heat took hold, it was moved to 6:00 (all the food we had was traditional Romanian, which involved lots of chicken, vegetables, and soups. It was delicious). An hour after breakfast started, the digging began. Our site was rented from a local farmer who, like the many farmers in the past 1,500 years, had become tired of stones destroying his plow. We got a fascinating archaeological site to excavate, record, and re-bury, and he got a team of Americans to clean his field without losing profit. Win-win. Our three weeks of digging
were spent dealing with these stones around the “villa” courtyard. When the building collapsed, the roof went first, and then the walls overtop. After more than 1,500 years of plows going over this layer, these walls and roof tiles had been disturbed so much that most had lost their context, ending up in the “plow-zone.” These plow-zone materials we removed, the rest we excavated, drew and photographed, and then removed to reveal the next level. This continued until we hit the clay floor of the courtyard, where we made a fascinating discovery: make-shift rooms and hearths within the space. Our working hypothesis was that after the Romans left Dacia, our villa had been re-settled either by Germanic people or by some of the local peasants, taking advantage of the Germanic threat that forced the Romans out. Finding a giant roofed structure, they had apparently built their own adobe houses within until the roof collapsed on top of them. Lacking the skills to rebuild the Roman roof, they abandoned the site. Overall our site revealed, in order: Paleolithic, Neolithic, Dacian, Roman, and - potentially - Germanic occupation.

In the field we were taught how to (and how not to) use a trowel and brush, how to use a Total Station, and sift earth for small finds. In the lab we cleaned pottery fragments, and measured phosphates to determine where to dig the next trenches (the more phosphates, the more human/animal activity). While we were not digging or in lab (we dug until 12:00, and then either lab or digging 14:00-17:00 depending on weather), we were at lecture learning more about archaeological theory and the Dacians.

Archaeotek’s field school provided us with more than just archaeology experience. While the days were long, they were rewarding, and we had the weekends free to explore Transylvania. On the second weekend we had a group trip to several sites in the area. On Saturday we travelled to Corvin Castle, one of the largest castles in Europe and one of the top seven wonders of Romania; The Church of St Nicholas, the oldest operating orthodox church in Romania; and Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, the site of the Roman Dacian capital built by Trajan. On Sunday we visited Roșia Montană, where we got to explore gold mines that had been in use since the Roman occupation. The same day we drove to the Scărișoara Cave, one of the biggest ice caves in the Apuseni Mountains of Romania, and one of the natural wonders of the country. That following weekend a few of us travelled to Sibiu, a BEAUTIFUL city to the East, notable for its Saxon architecture.

This experience would not have been possible without the Jane C. Waldbaum scholarship committee and the Archaeological Institute of America. I plan to follow a career in museum work, which requires an in-depth understanding of excavation and artefact cataloguing. Learning archaeology in the classroom is possible, but going out into the field is a completely different endeavor. Without funding opportunities like these, many students would not be able to have this first-hand experience. I would also like to thank the Archaeotek team for their hospitality and comprehensive field school; in just four weeks I have learned how to excavate, use a Total Station, measure phosphates, lay out a GPR grid, and to stay away from palinka. Noroc!
Corvin Castle, also known as Hunyadi Castle, is a Gothic-Renaissance castle in Hunedoara County. It is one of the largest castles in Europe and one of the top seven wonders of Romania.

Entrance to the dig house’s dining room. The program had rented a garage and guest house from a local family to use as the dig-house.
View from a bell-tower in the heart of old-town Sibiu. To the left is Piața Mica.

The family who owned the dig-house procured Carpathian sheepdog puppies during my time there, and I miss them.