Field Report:
The Nemea Center for Classical Archaeology
Summer Field School, 2015
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The University of California, Berkeley under the direction of Dr. Kim Shelton of the Nemea Center for Classical Archaeology (NCCA) has been digging in the southern Corinthia and the Argolid, Greece for well over a decade. At the Panhellenic Sanctuary of Zeus at Nemea and the archaeological rich settlement and ceramics workshop sites in and around the fortified palace at Mycenae, field school students with an interest in the Bronze Age Mediterranean have been exposed to cutting edge archaeological methodologies, site preservation objectives, and artifact conservation techniques. These experiences continue to combine to make NCCA’s archaeological field school unique and rewarding.

The summer 2015 season saw the commencement of excavations within the Late Bronze Age cemeteries located adjacent to the village of Aidonia, northwest of Ancient Nemea. Under the official title of the Tombs of Aidonia Preservation, Heritage, and Exploration Synergasia (TAPHOS), our team built upon the work of field survey conducted in 2014, which identified at least two collapsed chamber tombs at the site, dating from the fifteenth to the thirteenth centuries, BCE. Survey also in 2014 identified two “baza” piles (literally “trash” piles in Greek) – backdirt left over from previous excavations conducted at the site in the late 1970s. Through a cooperative effort between NCCA (including an expert team of graduate student supervisors) and the Korinthian Ephorate of Antiquities of the Greek Ministry of Culture (EFAKor), our 2015 field school team began the task of sieving through these baza piles and mounds of soil looking for objects of material culture that may have gone unnoticed by the previous excavators.

Additionally, on site, work was completed on recovering what was left of the remains of a collapsed chamber tomb that, as it became evident, had been looted in modern times. A Coca-Cola bottle juxtaposed with artifacts that were missed by these looters, underscored the importance and need for the partnership between NCCA and EFAKor to secure the Late Bronze Age cemeteries at Aidonia, preserving and protecting the site and the data it contains for future generations. This area is one of the most highly targeted areas in all of Greece by looters, who
have made off with untold amounts of artifacts, removing them illegally from their original archaeological contexts, and destroying forever the possibility of gaining additional knowledge about this enclave of Mycenaean civilization, about which we know precious little.

Our work on site at Aidonia was quite varied, and an unparalleled learning environment to any classroom I’ve ever been in. Each new day of sifting through layers of the baza piles held the promise of new, exciting, and often surprising discoveries. The opportunity to assist in digging test trenches, “cleaning” stone and rock features, “chasing” bedrock formations, and learning how to identify and describe the color, texture, and composition of soil, helped me to begin to develop my own archaeological “tool box” of skills. Along with gaining practical knowledge on how to properly bag and tag pottery sherds, bone fragments, and small finds of varying kinds, I learned how to properly document our daily and weekly activities in a field notebook. I owe a debt of gratitude in particular to Assistant Field Director, Dr. Lynne Kvapil of Butler University for her patience, expertise, and insights in helping to reinforce many of these lessons. As much as on site excavation demands a great deal of physical stamina and energy, it also requires as much, if not more, mental agility and alertness. Recording observations and maintaining a clear and concise narrative of our daily activities was one of the most valuable lessons I acquired out in the field. Learning how to properly catalogue various types of finds in the field so that they could be properly catalogued and analyzed within the research facilities back in the museum at Ancient Nemea, was a process that will serve me well as I advance in my archaeological and art historical training.

As alluded to, the experience that I was able to gain in the storage and research facilities at the adjacent museum to the Sanctuary of Zeus at Nemea, provided valuable insights into methods and practices around post-excavation study of artifacts and their conservation. Bearing in mind that excavation is inherently a destructive process, it is absolutely essential for the archaeologist to publish her or his findings. The efforts applied in extracting as much information from an object of material culture as possible are critical in aiding this final publishing phase of excavation. In the museum I learned through the encyclopedic knowledge of Leslie Lemire how to not only identify what types of pottery sherds I was looking at (i.e. body, rim, base, etc.), but also through the sherd’s shape and motif (in tandem with comparanda within the museum itself and from Mountjoy’s Mycenaean pottery reference book) what period of Mycenaean civilization many of these seemingly disparate sherds came from. It was with great
satisfaction that our team was in fact able to identify a number of “joins” between sherds. Our conservator in the museum, Maria, was then able to piece together several nearly whole pots, building on an already extensive collection of Mycenaean pottery archived within the museum’s storage facilities. Assuming the sherd(s) were found within the context of a tomb, this process of sherd identification became the primary means by which an accurate date could be determined for the tomb assemblage and, in some cases, the human remains contained therein. Overall, this time spent working in the museum with excavated materials was deeply rewarding and most enjoyable.

In addition to the Mycenaean material coming from Aidonia, I also had the privilege of working with early Byzantine coarse and fine wares under the supervision of Professor Effie Athanassopoulos of the University of Nebraska. Dr. Athanassopoulos had been conducting her own intensive research of the Christian communities that occupied the site at Ancient Nemea, including the Panhellenic Sanctuary of Zeus and its adjacent ancient stadium, during the early medieval period. This continuity of occupation on and around the site at Ancient Nemea speaks to the rich and varied archaeological data that continues to bear fruit all over the northeastern Greek Peloponnese.

Without the generous support of the Jane C. Waldbaum scholarship and the AIA, this experience would not have been possible. I want to thank the selection committee. This archaeological field school experience will prove invaluable as I pursue my academic goals in graduate study of the archaeology and art history of the ancient Mediterranean in the years to come. I also want to acknowledge my team of fellow undergraduate archaeological field students, of whom there are too many to name, from U.C. Berkeley and Butler University, along with our team of workmen, and the individuals within the communities and villages of the northeastern Greek Peloponnese that made this trip not only academically rewarding, but personally fulfilling for us all. Greece has left an indelible mark on my heart, and I am eternally grateful to all those who made this journey possible.
View from Aidonia, Greece.

Panoramic view of Aidonia, Greece.
Posing at the end of a long day of sieving through baza on site at Aidonia, Greece.
Sweeping up with Demetri on site at Aidonia, Greece.

A few of my fellow field school students and I on site at Aidonia, Greece.
Entrance to the museum adjacent to the Panhellenic Sanctuary of Zeus at Nemea, Greece.

Temple of Nemean Zeus in the background at the Panhellenic Sanctuary of Zeus at Nemea.