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Jane C. Waldbaum Archaeological Field School Scholarship

I participated in the Thornton Abbey Project hosted by the University of Sheffield in England. Thornton Abbey is a medieval abbey that was founded in 1139 by William Le Gros. Its history has connections with Henry VIII and has been under the ownership of many proprietors over the years. In 2011, the University of Sheffield started its excavations of the grounds to answer many of the abbey's mysteries and to gain a better understanding of abbey life.

The part of the abbey that we were focused on was a few yards away from the gatehouse. We were focused on a medieval hospital to answer questions such as when was the hospital built and constructed, was it associated with the abbey, and who were the people buried around the foundations of the hospital?

Our excavation team stayed in a local farmer's field that was about a 15 minute walk to the abbey. We worked six days a week from 9-5 (with Saturday our rest day). Our day started out by getting some breakfast and making our lunches to take to site that day. After hearing the weather forecast and any special instructions for the day (and playing fetch with the farmer's dog named Alfie who would visit us every morning), we would walk to the site and start our work. Our jobs varied from day to day because the instructors wanted everyone to have a chance working on different parts of the trenches and so not to be stuck with one job for multiple days. The only major rule was that if you were working on excavating a skeleton, you continuously worked on the skeleton until it was bagged up and recorded.

In the four weeks that I was there, we documented and uncovered 69 human skeletons. The process to uncovering a skeleton seemed like hard work (especially in the beginning) but towards the end of the project, a team of two people could have the skeleton excavated and

documented within a day to a day and half. The first step when you found a skeleton was to uncover the skull and see if you had any articulated cervical vertebrae. If the skeleton did, then you likely had a complete skeleton and not just a random, disarticulated skull. We would use our trowels and wooden (or plastic) spoons to uncover the bones to get a feel as to how the skeleton was lying in the ground and if he happened to be missing anything. For example, my partner and I uncovered one skeleton that looked so incredibly weird only to realize that he was laying on his stomach and two other skeletons that I excavated had missing feet (one was a juvenile, the other a very old male). Once the majority of the dirt was removed, we would go back over the body using spoons and paint brushes to expose as much as the body as we could without removing the bones from the ground (which seemed impossible when working with the hands and feet). When the bones had been cleaned off enough, one of the Ph.D. students would GPS the body's location, use geotags around body, and photograph the bones to make a 3D model of the remains later. Once the remains had been cataloged, we were free to label bags and start digging out the bones to place in their respective bags. We had to label the bags with the project name (THOR16), the trench number (TrN), the skeleton number (SKNO65), the context number (5199) and then what bones were being put in the bag (right ribs).

The skeletons that were uncovered were a mix of men, women, and children of all ages. If the abbey was run by men, why were women and children buried here as well? It was theorized that if we tested the skeletons for disease, such as the Black Plague, the skeletons would produce positive results. This could be a great indicator of a migration that was happening during the 1300's of people who were diseased with the Plague were trying to get help for their sickness.

The other jobs of the trenches were mattocking, troweling, shoveling, and brushing. When we were placed into our designated areas for the day, we were usually instructed (if not working on a skeleton) to trowel or mattock to a certain level of earth. This was so that we could examine each level and its contents before continuing down. It was not uncommon to find random, disarticulated animal bones or old rusty nails within each context layer. When finding something like an animal bone, nail or even random human bones, we would have to document it with the GPS and then put it in a labeled bag.

The most exciting find that was uncovered during my four weeks in the trenches was a medieval grave slab. This grave slab belonged to a cannon named Richard who died on April 11, 1317. It was estimated that the slab weighed about two tons. On the slab is a picture of a man (Richard presumably) who is holding a chalice and pointing his finger up towards the heavens. There is a dog laying at his feet and a bible quote which talks about life and death. Deep in the ground underneath this elaborate grave slab was Richard himself. He was in poor condition so one of the graduate students from the university got the pleasure of excavating him. He was also buried in a coffin because there was still chunks of wood that remained in the earth along with rusty nails.

Though we experienced cold rainy England days and the sore muscles from mattocking and digging through layers of dirt, the experience was definitely one of the best experiences of my life. Not only did I have the chance to travel abroad to a foreign country, but I was able to uncover history in its original context. The reason why I chose this field school was because of the chance to excavate skeletons. My field of interest lies in human osteology and human remains and I have never had the chance to excavate a skeleton from its original context until this trip. The Jane C. Waldbaum scholarship helped me pay for the cost of the field school and

helped me learn so much more about archaeology and what it all entails. You can read about archaeology and history in textbooks all your life but it can never compare to the experience of getting on your hands and knees, digging in the dirt, and finding remains and artifacts that haven't seen the light of day since they were put in the ground all those years ago.

To learn more about Thornton Abbey you can visit the project website at

www.thorntonabbeyproject.com



Left: A view of our campsite in the farmer's field after a rainstorm

Bottom: A view of the trench on the last day of excavation. The stone walls are the foundations of the hospital and the holes in the ground is where we excavated a skeleton





Above: The Gatehouse located a few yards away from the dig site

Bottom Left: The author with the trench and hospital foundations in the background

Bottom Right: Richard's grave slab after being removed from the trench





Above: A view of the dig site (circled in red) taken from inside the Gatehouse

Below: A group picture taken on the last day of excavation

