

Kevin McKain

AIA Award

I want to thank the Archaeological Institute of America and the Jane C. Waldbaum Scholarship in making my first ever excavation possible. It was because of their generosity that I was able to partake in the Contrada Agnese Project at Morgantina as a member of the Environmental Team. I knew since going to college that I wanted to be an archaeologist but I had no direction or clue of what I wanted to study within it. It wasn't until I took a class at my university where I became fascinated in the world of archaeobotany. From there I got an intern position at the University of Pennsylvania under the direction of Dr. Chantel White where she told me an archaeobotanist friend of hers was looking for applicants to join her team at Morgantina. The head archaeobotanist on site was Dr. China Shelton, and along with project director Dr. Alex Walthall, selected me to be the junior archaeobotanist for the excavation.

Morgantina is a Greek Hellenistic site that was ultimately taken over by the Romans after the fall of Carthage. The site fell due to the fact that Morgantina sided with Carthage because they believed they would win, but as Dr. Walthall put it, "You should never bet against the Romans." The site looks to discover what the daily life was like for someone who lived there during the third and first centuries BCE.

Being a part of the environmental team, I had the chance to work with Dr. China Shelton and graduate student Martha Wendel from the University of Cincinnati. Under the direction of Dr. Shelton, I learned all the ins and outs of what it is like to be an archaeobotanist on site. Some of the core skills I learned from her include how to collect soil samples from the field using different sampling techniques to ensure that what we were looking at was a representative sample of the site. I also learned how to use a floatation tank to separate the soil into two

different categories: light fraction and heavy fraction (this will be explained later on).

Additionally, I learned how to sort the heavy fraction and pull out important material to be further analyzed by not only our team but other teams as well.

My day started at 8:00 A.M. which I learned to be thankful for since the dig team started 7:00 A.M. Our main base of operation was located in the small town of Aidone in which we stayed during our almost two-month duration there. It was a ten-minute walk from the apartment I stayed in to the school in which our field lab was set up. The school also housed the Conservation, Finds, and Pottery teams. My first task there along with Martha was to sort the backlog of heavy fraction samples from the previous year which we powered through in five days. Since the dig team was still not at context soils yet, we couldn't start floating samples. In the meantime, we had the opportunity to wash bone for Dr. Michael Mackinnon from The University of Winnipeg. Dr. Mackinnon helped us learn basic bone identification as well as how to point out distinct features. Some of the most interesting features I learned how to identify were the butcher lines where the meat was cut; the more butcher lines meant the worse the butcher was.

Once when buckets started filling up of context soils it was time to go down to site and start floating samples. Our floatation tank consisted of your everyday plastic trashcan, a hole cut in the side at the top to allow runoff, a small mesh bag attached to the runoff spout to catch the light fraction, and a one-millimeter mesh inside the tank to catch/hold the heavy fraction. The water used in the tank came from a hose on site which was on during the entire process to keep new water cycling. So, what does floatation even do? Floatation is the process of separating the soil so that it can be analyzed further and this is done by pouring the soil into the tank. As the soil goes into the water the dirt separates and falls to the bottom of the tank, the heavier material

then lays down on the bottom of the one-millimeter mesh. This can be anything from rocks, bone, pottery, nails, the occasional coin, and heavier plant material; this is called the heavy fraction. The material that doesn't sink floats on the top and flows through the opening on the side into the small mesh bag; this material is called the light fraction and it consists of light wood charcoal, carbonized seeds, and random modern-day debris that was present in the soil. Some of the most interesting carbonized material we found were olive seed pits/casings, grape seed casings and some perfectly carbonized barley seeds. Finally, the last part of the floatation process is to clean out all the dirt that has settled on the bottom but it's not really at the bottom anymore, the tank is now filled with it. Martha, on-site supervisor Dr. Randall Souza (he just loved it so much), and I would take turns scooping out the muck and throwing it over the wall where the runoff went. This was an incredibly messy job, and while tourists usually wanted to know what we were doing, they avoided any interaction with us during the process.

After a long day of sorting material in the morning and floating samples in the afternoon, it was time to go home, take a shower with amazing (not at all) water pressure, and get ready to go to dinner. We ate at the same time every day and the meals were made by two brothers who lived in town. The dishes varied from different kinds of pastas, meats, and sides but the one constant was a big scoop of salty salad. Dinner was one of my favorite times not just for the food but because I got to hear about everyone else's day and the discoveries they had on site while digging. Everyone became very close and it didn't matter what team you were a part of, it just felt like one big family.

The weekends were our time to either just relax or to go out and explore what Sicily has to offer and I did just that. Me and a group of friends would travel every weekend by bus and by foot to see so many extraordinary places. We explored cities, climbed volcanoes, relaxed on

beaches, tried new food, and got lost countless times. Even when the weekend was coming to an end, there were no grumbles, everyone was excited to get back to work because it didn't feel like work to us. To us it was exciting and new and we couldn't wait to discover what Morgantina had to offer.

I just want to thank the AIA and Jane C. Waldbaum one more time for making this trip possible, as well as Dr. Alex Walthall for being an amazing project director who was always excited to see what the environmental team has found that day, and Dr. China Shelton for teaching me the techniques needed to be an archaeobotanist in the field; I couldn't have asked for better supervisors. I will never forget my first excavation experience with all the great friends I made, things I learned, places I visited, and the overall feeling of belonging to one big family. I hope that future winners of this award can have a similar experience to mine because it was truly unforgettable.



Uncovered walls on-site at Morgantina halfway through the dig this season.

Martha and I floating samples using the flotation tank.



Some members of the CAP team and I playing in a local soccer tournament one weekend.