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Jane C. Waldbaum Archaeological Field School Scholarship Report on the Gabii Project

As a Classical Philology major and a history enthusiast, I knew a lot about Roman history when I arrived at Gabii. I quickly realized, however, that historical knowledge and archaeological knowledge were two very different things. At Gabii, I was always learning something new and wonderful, and I can honestly say that the Gabii Project was one of the most fruitful educational experiences that I have ever had, simply because my beginning knowledge of the field was so slight. For this reason, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the AIA and the Waldbaum Scholarship Fund. Without this scholarship, which I used to pay part of the tuition of the Gabii Project, I would not have been able to participate, and I would have missed an amazing opportunity to grow as a classicist.

Gabii, an ancient Latin city that lies 18 km outside of Rome, has been since 2007 the site of excavations under the direction of Professor Nicola Terrenato of the University of Michigan. This year, there were three areas open on site – Areas C, G/H, and I. I was assigned to work in Area G/H under the supervision of Professor Andrew Johnston of Yale University. This assignment pleased me very much, for several reasons. First, many of the stratigraphic units (SUs) that we would be excavating in G/H would come from the imperial and Republican periods, which are my primary fields of interest (whereas in Area C, for instance, they were working in the Iron Age). Second, since G/H was a newly opened area, I would be able to witness the archaeological process from the very beginning. Third, G/H looked fascinating, with the remnants of the ancient road running through the center of the area and with ashlar blocks and other wall constructions thrusting up through the soil on either side of the road.

Our first week or so at Gabii was spent “cleaning”. Due to G/H’s status as a freshly opened area, we had to clear away the top few feet of soil, which were virtually useless

(archaeologically speaking), before the true excavation could begin. This was my first major lesson in archaeological technique. Although we kept special finds, we discarded most of the pottery, bones, and other ancient things that we discovered, since the soil was too disturbed for the location of these items to tell us anything. In other words, the stratigraphy of the layer was destroyed and accurate dating and analysis was impossible. So our goal was to remove this top layer (SU Zero) as quickly as we could and to arrive at our first contextualized SU beneath.

The days of cleaning, when we were not worrying too much about the soil we were removing, provided a good chance for me to familiarize myself with my tools. I soon figured out that my trowel could hang from one of the belt-loops on my work pants—a useful discovery, since we were perpetually whipping out our trowels to determine the size of a stubborn rock. Then there was the pickaxe, which proved much easier to use than I had feared, although there *was* more skill involved than merely slamming the pickaxe into the soil with all one's strength. Professor Johnston was fairly confident that we had a lot of SU Zero between us and contextualized soil, but he didn't want to take any chances. We had to carefully pickaxe in a consistent direction, observing the section of the earth as we went to check for changes or irregularities, and we also had to be very conscious of the way the pickaxe felt as it struck the earth. If we noticed any change in texture or compaction, or if we even *suspected* that there was a change in texture or compaction, we would pull out our trowels and investigate. Even the shovel seemed a new acquaintance in the context of archaeology. We could not use the point of the blade to dig into the earth, since that might damage the stratigraphy and obscure critical distinctions. Instead, we carefully scooped using the sides of the blade. The most complicated part, however, came next: the shovel toss. Due to the nature of the site, and the delicacy of the earth in many areas, the wheelbarrow was not usually placed right next to the shoveler. In fact, it



*Figure 1: Here am I (on the far left), performing a shovel toss.*

was often located a few feet above and four or five feet away. A teammate would tilt the wheelbarrow in the direction of the shoveler, but still, the dirt had a long stretch to fly through the air before it reached the safety of the wheelbarrow. The trick was to balance the weight of the dirt

properly and flick the shovel upward; if this was done correctly, the shovelful would plop neatly into the wheelbarrow. Fortunately, I was a natural at shovel tossing, and shoveling soon became one of my favorite activities. Pushing the wheelbarrow was also an adventure, because often there was a veritable obstacle course of boards and ramps to traverse before one reached the spoil heap. That spoil heap, looming in the distance and growing inexorably, was proof that we had been working hard, even if we had not excavated an official SU yet.

Finally, in the middle of the second week, we arrived at the bottom of SU Zero and Professor Johnston said it was time for Area H's first SU. During our cleaning process, we had uncovered the tops of several ashlar walls that probably dated to the early or mid-Republican period, and one messy wall that we guessed was imperial and seemed to have been built through the middle of a larger, Republican room. Now, we would begin excavation of "Room 1", which was bounded on the south side by a beautiful ashlar wall and on the north side by the imperial construction. Our first SU was a tough one, a thick layer of rubble that seemed to have resulted from a building collapse. But we were happy that we were done cleaning, and we did not mind

the difficulty of breaking through the hard surface and then shoveling the rocky soil. Now that we were dealing with contextualized dirt, we added a new step to our work rotation. The person holding the wheelbarrow, in addition to merely tilting it toward the shovelers, was also responsible for sifting. We soon developed a rhythm—four shovelfuls, sift, four more shovelfuls, sift. At first, it was hard to distinguish between fragments of pottery, tile, bone, marble, iron slag,



Figure 2: Here I am, sifting a shovelful of dirt. (Photo Credit: Eli Jenkinson)

and rock, but soon I learned the tricks. Tile was thicker and coarser than pottery—and usually the distinctive shape of the *imbrices* and *tegulae* made it evident that the fragment in question had once resided on a roof, not on a table.

Bone had a curious sheen to it, and as a last resort it could be licked (although I never employed this particular method). Marble smelled like sulfur when one whacked it with one's trowel. Iron slag had highly irregular shapes and lots of strange, bulbous lumps—and it was very heavy. And rocks, although sometimes they impersonated pottery very well, typically crumbled or fell apart when slight pressure was applied. Glass was the one thing that I never mistook for anything else. It shone brightly when uncovered and, if it was not rescued in time, it would flake and tiny, paper-thin sheets of glass would fly away in the wind. We also had “special finds”—bronze coins, lead strips, lamps, and bone pins, and the occasional stamped tile, dice, or game-piece. I was astounded by the frequency of our finds and at the two-week point, I already felt much closer to and more knowledgeable about the ancient Latins.

This knowledge gained in the field was supplemented by laboratory work. The laboratory rotations, which put us in the lab once or twice a week, helped me to understand better the significance of the items that we were extracting from the soil in the field. Before coming to Gabii, I tended to lump all archaeologists together into one category. Gabii shattered these preconceptions and made me realize the variety of specializations within the archaeological world. In the field, we worked with people whose forte was fieldwork and excavation. But in the aptly named Finds Lab, we learned how to wash and identify pottery, and our supervisors explained how the pottery was dated and then was used to date the different SUs. Environmental lab and zooarchaeology lab were also fascinating. In enviro, we learned how to float soil and then how to pick through it, looking for charred seeds, wood, and other tiny finds. In zooarchaeology, we sorted through bones and learned basic distinctions between the bones of cows, pigs, etc. In addition to these laboratory rotations, our professors and supervisors gave lectures on epigraphy, topography, ancient textile production, ancient building materials, a Gabii-centric history of Latium, and the Harris Matrix. This last lecture on the Harris Matrix, a way of organizing stratigraphic information, was critical for our understanding of archaeological procedures and also for our grades, since we had a final project in which we had to draw the Harris Matrix of seventeen SUs and then write a paragraph explaining our choices.

Meanwhile, back in the field, we were making progress, and my lab experiences helped me to understand the goal of the field excavation much better. After listening to the pottery and bone experts, I knew which pieces of pottery and bone were diagnostic and so should be kept—and there was a whole new level of excitement behind each find, because I knew how much valuable information could be extracted from it in the lab. The seamless interconnection between the various sectors of the site amazed me and made me realize just how much painstaking work

an archaeological site entails. Never again will I take for granted the facts about ancient life that fill my history textbooks, for I now know how much time and careful thought archaeologists put into each decision.

The last three weeks of the season were very exciting. This was partially due to the fact that I now felt much more confident in my archaeological skills, but also because we were finally getting down to some exciting SUs. We discovered a fascinating layer of burned soil, full of charcoal and iron slag. Our environmental specialists, to whom we sent soil samples, said that they had never encountered an SU so rich in charcoal at Gabii, and they left the lab to pay a visit to inspect the SU for themselves. It seemed that this SU represented a destruction layer, which meant that we were getting closer to the floor of the mid-Republican building, but we also suspected that this particular part of the building might have been used for some sort of production, due to the unusually high quantity and large size of the iron slag. As if this was not exciting enough, we uncovered some basalt slabs under the charred earth. There was a circular opening in the slabs, which, Professor Johnston speculated, marked a well, or a vat, or something of that sort.

On the last day of the excavation, we were sad to pack up our tools and leave Area G/H for the last time. Many of our questions about the nature and function of the room that we were excavating will have to wait until the 2017 field season. There seem to have been several occupation phases, but the exact use (and extent) of the room during these phases remains unknown. Only further excavation can dispel the mysteries of Gabii, and I hope that I will be able to return sometime in the next few years to learn more of the story of Area G/H.

My five weeks at Gabii were an amazing experience, and I learned so much about the archaeological process in all its aspects, from fieldwork to lab work to documenting the finds and SUs with the newest technology. Now I feel comfortable on an archaeological site; I am no expert, but I can distinguish subtle soil changes with my trowel and identify all the most common artifacts and materials that one might find on a Latin site. My knowledge of Roman history has also grown, for the Gabii Project took us on two field trips: one to the Roman Forum and one to the Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia. In addition to these program-sponsored trips, my fellow workers and I traveled to Hadrian's Villa, Pompeii, and Herculaneum in order to see other archaeological sites. All of this archaeological and historical knowledge will enrich my studies immensely as I return to the University of Dallas for my senior year, and after my experiences at Gabii, I feel even more strongly that all philologists should participate in an excavation at least once.



*Figure 3:* Here I am, posing on the last day of excavation.

I offer my deepest thanks to the AIA and the Waldbaum Scholarship Fund for making this experience possible for me. And now I will conclude this report with a photo of myself sitting on site, as it looked after the last day of excavation.