

This summer I attended the field school at the University of Michigan's Gabii Project in Italy. Around fifty of us on the dig lived in apartments in the Roman neighborhood of Trastevere, and every morning we bussed out to Gabii, which lies a little over ten miles from the city. Gabii was an ancient Latin city-state that was eventually enveloped into the Roman sphere of influence. The archaeology there provides great insight into both the early history of Latium and the city's development alongside and under Roman power.

On site I worked on a domestic settlement dating to the archaic period. The area was a large open excavation with very delicate stratigraphy. On the first day they armed us with trowels and work boots, and the supervisors wasted no time in setting us to work. While I did have a fairly good idea of what archaeological fieldwork was like, the first couple days contained many surprises. I could never have guessed that each of the infinite shades of brown all mattered, or that one could supposedly clean dirt. I definitely never knew that it was ok to have accidentally pick-axed through a human skull because it lay out of context in a 17th century drainage ditch. The greatest anxiety I had, however, was the constant fear and almost complete certainty that for the last several minutes I had been ignorantly destroying crucial and now irrecoverable layers of archaeology.

Nevertheless, with diligent guidance from our supervisors, the grasp of the necessary techniques and vocabulary came so seamlessly to all of us over the course of the dig that by the end we were all comfortable discerning layers and aiding in the assessments. As I am sure most of my fellow volunteers would agree, the most valuable experience of the field school was to interact with the supervisors as they deduced fascinatingly simple answers from remarkably complex and incomplete sets of evidence. The process by which the archaeologists did this struck me as so casual, yet I knew that every interpretation would in some way affect our understanding of the history.

Therefore, despite all of the Italian history I learned to complement my current studies, the greatest takeaway is having seen very important discoveries at the moment they were pulled out of the ground. While studying in Ohio it is easy for me to forget that the material I am reading is based on actual physical people and places. I am sure this feeling is what almost every archaeologist says is the motive for his or her work, but it is necessary for me to reiterate it here. To me, the affirmation of that point has been the greatest reward, and I give my most sincere thanks to Jane Waldbaum and the scholarship fund for allowing me to have the experience.