

Yijun “Betty” Xie

AIA Jane C. Waldbaum Archaeological Field School Scholarship - Final Report

Situated near central Romania, Odorheiu Secuiesc is a city filled with rich history, beautiful scenery, and delicious baked goods. It was here that I stayed for four weeks learning how to carry out field work and critically, how to engage and interact with the individuals, history, and artifacts present at each site.

This experience was carried out under Archaeotek and their Medieval Funerary Excavation project. Beginning in 2013, work has expanded to a number of different sites and churches, with the ones in the Summer of 2025 seeing the continued excavation at the St. Nicholas site (and its closing), as well as the Papdomb site. The goal of this project is not only to train and provide experience for archaeologists, but to simultaneously uncover and provide information about the culture, history, and social, religious changes that this area has experienced. As archaeologists, we must be aware of the contexts we are working from, the individuals both deceased and alive who may be impacted from our work, and how our work may give back to the community. For Archaeotek, this means utilizing the information and data gleaned from excavation and analysis to better understand and inform others of the tumultuous history and the proud Hungarian Szekeler culture which resides within Odorheiu.

At the field school, my days were never boring. After a breakfast of eggs, fresh fruit, oatmeal, toast with blackberry jam, a warm cup of coffee, and some pats for the hotel cat, the excavation team boarded the bus to the excavation sites. While I was mostly at the St. Nicholas site located in the city centre, many (including myself), eventually found themselves at Papdomb, or “Priest Hill”, where excavations had been requested due to modern graves from the current cemetery disturbing older ones. Despite their distance, both sites shared a fairly burial dense context where burials can often be found truncated and layered on top of one another. Certainly, there was never a dull moment for students and staff alike.

It was at St. Nicholas that I experienced my first dig. Despite bringing a trowel that was two sizes too big, I was graciously lent one of a more sensible size and could join the excavation effort. Throughout the process, the staff led and answered all sorts of questions, guiding new and more seasoned students through the process of tarping, excavation, detailing, mapping, taking depth, pulling, and filling out paperwork. Between the rain, giant snails, run-away frogs, and new burials being uncovered each day, excavation was both tiring and immensely rewarding. Going from only experiencing excavations from lecture slides, to being in the trenches and working with a trowel and bamboo pick in hand was such a life changing experience. It was such a privilege and valuable opportunity to be able to apply knowledge from the classroom to the field where everyday you could learn something new and hone your skills in excavating artifacts and human remains.

Out of the field, there were also plenty of activities that made up my time in Romania. From lectures on the area’s history, to screenings of Hungarian legends animations for children, and roundtable discussions on the field of Bioarchaeology and Forensic Anthropology, evenings

were filled with not just great dinners and tasty desserts, but also knowledge and opportunity. On evenings without lectures and weekends, the nearby town center offered plenty of cafes, bakeries, and shops to fill an afternoon with crafts, books, cakes, and gelatos. For those willing to make the trip, there were also organized getaways to medieval Saxon fortified churches, Dracula's Bran Castle and Fagaras Castle, as well as the Praid Salt Mines, and a Renaissance fair among others.

beyond excavation and weekend fun, this program also gave me the unique opportunity to work up close with an artifact found at one of the burial sites. Found in Trench 6, Grave 42, at the St Nicholas site, a headdress of beads, precious stones, and copper wiring was uncovered with the burial of a young girl. Given that this headdress was extremely well preserved with much of the original beading in its original position, I was tasked with creating a 1:1 scale digital drawing to better capture details present and to preserve the headdress for analysis given its delicate nature and possible fragmentation during excavation and pulling. Upon completion, I was also able to present this project at the final colloquium, sharing my results and process with fellow students, the staff, and Zsolt Nyaradi, the expert archaeologist from the Haasz Rezso Muzeum in Odorheiu Secuiesc.

In the four weeks I spent in Romania, everyday was a new learning experience filled with opportunity to see and engage with something new. From history to Munsell soil tests, I was able to gain experience and knowledge on all aspects of archaeology. This program truly drove home the importance of engaging with archaeology as an interdisciplinary field, one that brings together anthropology, chemistry, geology, and even art to create a better understanding of our past and to give this knowledge back to communities.

I am forever grateful towards the Archaeological Institute of America for allowing me the chance to participate in the incredible program. Without the Jane C. Waldbaum Archaeological Field School Scholarship, none of this would have been possible, and I am so thankful for the award which helped cover both tuition and travel costs. Attending this program has greatly cemented my own goals and pathways within the field as I continue to pursue my own professional career.

Thank you,
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