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Archaeology in a Pandemic Four Stories

Claire Balandier, Ian Cipin, Britt Hartenberger, and Moni Islam

Eitan Bar wears a mask in the field, COVID style, at Tel Tsaf. Photograph courtesy of Danny Rosenberg.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2022 has disrupted life in just about every way imaginable. In addition to experiencing the stresses of lockdown and witnessing the effects of the virus on our families, friends, and colleagues, many in the ASOR community have been hindered by the lack of access to collections, publications, and colleagues (although technology has certainly mitigated some of this). For most archaeologists, fieldwork plans came to a screeching halt in spring 2020; while some were able to resume fieldwork in summer 2020 or summer 2021 with smaller teams and new precautions, many have not traveled overseas in nearly two years. While the long-term impact of the pandemic on the discipline in general and ASOR in particular will not be known for years, it is important to share our individual stories and document how our research lives continue to be affected now. In this essay, four archaeologists—two who were able to participate in archaeological fieldwork in 2020–2021 and two who were not—write about their experiences of archaeology in a pandemic.

Excavating Paphos in Covid Times

Claire Balandier

The Mission Archéologique Française à Paphos was founded in 2008 under the auspices of the Department of Antiquities of

Cyprus and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Excavations on this UNESCO site, which are supported by the latter as well by the University of Avignon, aim to study the birth and development of the new harbor city and its impact on Cypriot society. The field research focuses on Fabrika Hill and aims to understand its role in the urban life of ancient Nea Paphos. This rocky hillock surrounded by the modern town was thought to constitute the northeastern limit of the ancient city. We have sought to trace the phases of its urban development from its foundation in the fourth century BCE through its reconstruction under Roman rule after several earthquakes.

Except for the theater, which was excavated by the University of Sydney, Fabrika Hill had never been properly excavated, despite the fact that it bore all the characteristics of an acropolis. Our fieldwork showed that the hill was occupied from the late fourth century BCE until the twentieth century CE, when Cypriots sheltered in the caves during the struggle for independence in the 1950s and in the summer of 1974. The exceptional group of underground quarries inventoried by Dr. J.-C. Bessac testifies that, like the theater, this district was established around 300 BCE. Excavations have uncovered the eastern rampart of the Hellenistic city wall, terra-cotta water channels, an underground aqueduct supplying a Roman cistern, and a Roman house. The evidence suggests that the hill took on real importance in the second century BCE when the town became the seat of the *strategos* and was protected by a city wall and supplied with water. It is also possible that the basins I hypothetically identified in front of the northwestern gate of the city and the main harbor to

the south were reshaped when the Ptolemaic fleet gathered in Paphos after it left the Aegean in 146 BCE.

The temple above the theater may have been built at that time. Since it was tentatively identified as that of Aphrodite Paphia by Prof. J. Młynarczyk in the 1980s, a collaboration was launched between the French Mission and the University of Warsaw to study this temple and its surroundings. Two seasons of fieldwork (2018–2019) yielded evidence for the arrangement and chronology of this sanctuary, which dates to the late Hellenistic and early Roman period. A preliminary exploration of two underground chambers strongly suggests they may have been part of the same sacred area as the temple. A reshaping of the courtyard of the temple and several burials showed that the site was occupied by a church and cemetery during the Byzantine and Medieval periods. We were looking forward to resuming our work in Spring 2020.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted our plans. Not only did Cyprus close its borders to “red” countries like Poland and France, which had a high level of virus infections, but we were “locked down” in our own countries as well. In July, the situation improved and Cyprus became accessible again. My university and the government of Cyprus allowed me—but not students—to travel to and work in Paphos.

Many airports were still closed but I found flights from Paris leaving on August 28. Two days before leaving, I learned that French citizens would not be able to enter Cyprus after midnight on August 27 because the health situation in France had deteriorated. I was able to change my tickets and travel one day earlier, but this meant that I had to take a bus from Marseille to the Nice airport followed by flights to Athens and Larnaca, where I finally landed at 10:30 pm. I left the airport around 11:00 pm, just one hour before the border was due to close to travelers from France! Waiting for the bus to Nicosia (there were no buses to Paphos before 7:00 am), I realized how lucky I was to be in Cyprus. The next day, with no further checkpoints between the districts, I could travel from Nicosia to Paphos. Once there, with no colleagues and no students, I thought that I would probably have to settle for a study season; fortunately, however, I was still able to work on the site with a few Cypriot workers. And, although the museum was closed to the public, I was able to access our storage containers. Working on top of Fabrika Hill under the early September sun was so nice after an academic semester online, locked down in my home in front of a screen. Even the sea turtles seemed to be looking for company during this odd season! Meanwhile, back in France, the health situation worsened and I was doubtful that our joint excavation planned for May 2021 would take place, even with the introduction of COVID-19 vaccinations.

After a terrible start to the New Year and a third pandemic wave, I and my Polish colleagues managed to get vaccinated in late spring and we were allowed to travel to and work in Cyprus. The



Figure 1. Writing in the dig diary on the Roman floor of an underground chamber (no. 5) at Fabrika Hill, Nea Paphos, Cyprus. Photograph by Claire Balandier.



Figure 2. Washing artifacts in late afternoon at Nea Paphos, Cyprus. Photograph by Claire Balandier.



Figure 3. Sifting with masks at Tel Tsaf, Israel. Photograph courtesy of Danny Rosenberg.

problem, however, was the students. In France the vaccination program had not yet been prescribed for young people; fortunately, with a negative test taken forty-eight hours before leaving France and another upon arrival at the Paphos airport, they were able to travel to Cyprus and work. In addition, a free vaccination center opened by the shopping mall opposite our excavation site and the students went every three days to take a test. Because of this, we were finally able to have a nice, almost normal, excavation season from late May through June 2021 (fig. 1). Our British friends also came back to work with us as volunteers on the archaeological site or to wash pottery (fig. 2). It was even possible to work on our artifacts in the museum workshop if we were alone and wearing a mask; however, we were able to remove our masks for excavation. The atmosphere in Kato Paphos was surreal: Very few shops were open and the streets were empty apart from workmen working on the improvement of the (closed) main avenue and the construction of the huge bridge unifying the archaeological sites. After working hours, no one could be seen on Saint Paul's Avenue other than archaeologists and cats!

The pandemic has also affected the organization of an international conference. The third symposium on Nea Paphos that was originally scheduled for the end of October 2020 in Athens at the Australian Institute and the École Française, in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus, was postponed initially to 2021 and then to the end of 2022. Let's hope that the pandemic will be behind us later this year so we can meet in person!

Coronavirus, Fieldwork, and Me

Ian Cipin

Right from when the pandemic first took hold, it was pretty clear that it was going to be a factor in my fieldwork plans. In March 2020 I traveled back to the UK from Israel where I am a PhD candidate at the University of Haifa on a long-planned visit for one week to see family. The severity of COVID-19 and

its effects were becoming increasingly apparent as my proposed departure date approached. Flights were beginning to be delayed and canceled, but still the full effects of what was to come were not obviously clear. What was starting to look increasingly likely was that I would have to quarantine upon my return to Israel and, in anticipation, I dutifully stocked my freezer. I had not foreseen that things would shut down completely within a few days of my arrival in London, but that's exactly what happened. And this was only March.

Since 2016 I have been excavating at Tel Tsaf—a late prehistoric (ca. 5200–4700 cal BCE) site located in the Middle Jordan Valley—with my advisor Danny Rosenberg of the Zinman Institute of Archaeology at the University of Haifa and co-director Florian Klimscha of the Eurasia Department of the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin and the Landesmuseum, Hannover. The site, first identified in a survey during the 1940s, was initially excavated between 1978 and 1980 by Ram Gophna and a subsequent project was undertaken between 2004 and 2007 by Yossi Garfinkel. The renewed project under the current codirectors commenced in 2013 with two main goals: to explore various aspects of the Neolithic-Chalcolithic transition in the Jordan Valley by analyzing the temporal and spatial attributes of social and economic variations among households in different parts of the tel; and to provide better data concerning the environmental conditions and the Jordan River during the late sixth and early fifth millennia cal BCE.

I was due to take part in the excavations at Tel Tsaf in Israel in July and gave little thought, one way or the other, as to what might happen. It seemed far away at that time, especially in light of the ever-increasing bad news all around. It's probably fair to say I had little expectation of excavating that year.

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, the summer was approaching. The situation in Israel had improved enough for the Tel Tsaf season to go ahead. However, with the borders still closed, I held out little hope of making it back in time. Once the decision was made to allow foreign students back into Israel, I scrambled to obtain all the correct permissions to arrange a flight. I arrived in Israel and finished my two-week quarantine the day before we were due to go to the field.

Although the full four weeks of the season were completed as planned and with no interruptions, it was far from normal. Typically, we are joined by colleagues from Europe and North America, including our codirector Florian Klimscha, who lives in Germany. Unfortunately, neither Florian



Figure 4. Nearing completion of the main excavation area at Tel Tsaf, Israel, in 2021. Photograph courtesy of Danny Rosenberg.

nor any other participants from abroad were able to travel to Israel for the dig. In terms of precautions, masks were worn at all times when in communal places, extra hand washing facilities were set up on site, and we refrained from going far from our kibbutz base (fig. 3). For the most part we lived in our own self-contained bubble, limiting contact with the outside world to shopping for provisions and weekends at home. Apart from a couple of team members being advised to get tested after they had been in contact with possible positive cases, the season passed without a hitch and all team members remained in good health. Personally, I was conscious that it was far from a “usual” season. On the one hand I felt lucky that I was able to make it into the field at all given how things had been in the prior months; on the other hand, having been starved for much human contact for months, I can’t deny that I felt some anxiety about mixing with others again.

Archaeologically speaking, the season was successful. The objective was to complete the excavation of the main area that was opened in 2016 by reaching natural deposits. Although this objective was not realized, and natural deposits were not reached over the entire square, it was because the archaeology proved

sufficiently interesting to warrant measured and cautious excavation rather than due to a lack of available team members owing to the pandemic.

Despite hopes that COVID-19 would be under control a year later, it clearly wasn’t. Once again, careful considerations would have to be made in deciding if and how fieldwork would take place in 2021. Despite team members from outside Israel still being unable to travel, the decision was made to run a small, two-week season to complete that which time had beaten us on the previous season. Since the excavation was not running as a field school this year, only a small core team of about ten people, all of whom were based in Israel, participated. Although the situation with regard to the virus was significantly better than twelve months earlier, the pandemic was far from over. Due diligence was still practiced and, once again, we largely kept ourselves within our self-contained bubble and the season was without incident as far as the virus was concerned. Archaeologically speaking, our objectives were met and natural deposits were fully revealed in the area (fig. 4).

For me, there are two issues to keep in mind when looking at the pros and cons of going into the field during a pandemic. Most of us have not experienced such an event in our lifetime and there is no template for how to deal with it, so being concerned should be seen as a good thing. If you keep your eye on a hazard, you will be able to mitigate against it. In this case, social distancing, masks, hand washing, and other such things that are now commonplace were the way forward, and I am pleased to say that, over the two seasons, we experienced no infections. I won’t deny that I felt both apprehensive and anxious at times, but I believe that such a cautious attitude was important to the success of the season. The reality of falling infection rates and successful vaccination programs in the country also made a difference. Would I have felt the same way earlier in the pandemic? I’m not sure.

Second, my experience of excavating during a pandemic during two field seasons has shown that, with careful thought and planning, it is possible to go into the field in a safe manner and have a successful archaeological outcome. Thanks to careful planning by codirector Danny Rosenberg and the hard work of our small team, we were able to meet the broad goals of both excavation seasons.

What was noticeably missing, however, was the company of and interaction with our colleagues from overseas who were unable to travel to Israel. Although there were no measures that



Figure 5. Payton Gagliardi adds materials to a box in the basement of Moore Hall at Western Michigan University. Photograph by Britt Hartenberger.



Figure 6. Marisol Martinez sorts through pottery at Western Michigan University. Photograph by Britt Hartenberger.

could be put into place to remedy this, I, for one, look forward to all remaining in good health so that we may be able to all excavate together once more.

Report from the (Basement) Trenches during Covid Times, 2021

Britt Hartenberger

As an archaeologist specializing in the eastern Mediterranean, I usually go to Turkey or Greece for fieldwork in the summer. My specialty is Bronze and Iron Age sites and I am interested in household studies and ancient urbanism through analyzing stone tools and pottery. The COVID-19 pandemic halted all my field research plans for 2019 and 2020. Instead of traveling, I did other types of research. The first, and more conventional, was to study existing data from my project in Turkey. The other was to

dive into the archaeological collections at my home institution to organize what we had accumulated over the course of thirty years.

For a number of years, I worked in the field in Turkey with the Ziyaret Tepe Archaeological Research Project. Although I do not have access to artifacts from the site, I do have access to an extensive online database of records as well as all the field notes, drawings, and photos. For the last two years, and especially in the summers, I have been working to publish a pottery typology from Ziyaret illustrated with descriptions and drawings of the pottery that we have in electronic form or in our archives in Ohio. The process of publishing final reports with existing data, without going back into the field, is standard archaeological practice, and I am pleased to say that this pottery volume is almost complete.

For the first half of summer 2021, however, I decided to do fieldwork of a different sort: digging through the archives and archaeological collections at my institution, Western Michigan University (WMU). Our university was engaged in cultural resource management archaeology for several decades in the 1970s and 1980s and ran field schools and various excavation projects in the 1980s and 1990s. All the materials from those projects—both paper and artifacts/ecofacts—have been stored in various locations in our building for years, and we had no list of which

projects or sites they came from. Faculty retirements, deaths, and the passage of time meant that there was no comprehensive list of what we had excavated and collected. I wanted to create an inventory so that some of the information we had could be used by others and not lost forever in the basement (literally!) of our building, Moore Hall.

We hired two undergraduate Anthropology majors to help with the inventory process, and I supervised their recording of all the files and boxes in May and June. We inventoried the entire basement storage area and found 460 boxes of artifacts and ecofacts from a variety of historic and prehistoric sites around Michigan (fig. 5). Some of the sites have been the subjects of MA theses or technical reports, but many were surveyed quickly as part of a federal highway or other building project and, although reported, were never formally published. We could tell that earlier collection managers had rebagged and reboxed items, but that process had never been completed. We replaced boxes, relabeled them, and sorted loose artifacts back into their correct boxes according to project. We found ethnographic collections mixed in with the archaeological ones, and we separated out those to be stored on the fourth floor of our building. At the end of our work, we had an Excel sheet listing each project represented in the basement, how many boxes it had, and where they were located in the basement down to the shelving unit.

My two students were a great help and I think they enjoyed this kind of alternative “fieldwork,” digging through the archives. We found several reconstructed pots with uncertain provenience, as well as some beautiful examples of Native American projectile points. From the historic sites, we found boxes labeled with descriptions like “old rusty bucket” (which turned out to be accurate). Some boxes contained collected objects from elsewhere in the US that had been donated to Western Michigan University, such as pottery collected in the Southwest US in the 1940s (fig. 6). Although some of this material has no provenience, we can still use it for teaching purposes. One of the more grisly finds was a freezer, luckily still running, with animal specimens from about twenty years ago when we had an active dermestid tank and a faunal specialist to reduce these to bones for our comparative collection. Other, less smelly, finds included technology from the past, such as 35mm slides, 5 ¼ inch floppy disks, punch cards, and sets of index cards documenting individual artifacts.

We then explored the fourth floor of Moore Hall and created a file map of all the paper records that we discovered there: original field notebooks, stratigraphic drawings, slides, reports on botanical and faunal remains, pottery recording sheets, preliminary reports, and topographic maps of the sites. We scanned some of the slides, organized the maps, and created a list of the sites with the most boxes and documentation. These sites are the ones that will most likely be of interest to scholars because there are still so many primary data for them. One of my remaining tasks is to summarize this information so that we can put it onto the Anthropology program’s website and advertise the existence of this material. The basic inventory of our finds will be incredibly useful should we receive requests from other scholars to study them.



Figure 7. Moni Islam processes finds as part of an archaeological field and lab internship with the Fairfax County Park Authority. Photograph courtesy of Moni Islam.

As luck would have it, in July, a graduate student from the University of Michigan contacted us and asked if he could examine some of the materials from one of Western Michigan University’s survey projects from the late 1970s. “Yes!” we responded. Now, as a result of several months’ work, we know exactly where to find them. I would like to thank Marisol Martinez and Payton Gagliardi very much for their assistance this summer.

Alternative Paths in Archaeology as a Result Of Covid

Moni Islam

The COVID-19 pandemic upended the world in myriad ways and has had an enormous impact on field archaeology as well. Field directors, professors, universities, and institutes had entire seasons of planning, research, study, excavation, and more fall apart in what seemed like an instant. For many, research as we knew it came to a halt. Even now, nearing two years after the pandemic began, its effects are still felt in the discipline.

Another group of people within the field were also affected by this stoppage of work: students and early career individuals. In some ways, members of this overlooked group have suffered the most damaging effects from the pandemic as it has transformed the direction of their careers, and, in some instances, ended



Figure 8. Moni Islam at Dhiban, Jordan, in summer 2019. Photograph courtesy of Moni Islam.

them before they could begin. Some PhD students have had their research paused, prospective graduate students have had to postpone their plans, undergraduates have not been able to obtain the necessary field and lab experience they would have in normal times, and so on. This has been especially true of archaeological excavations. Unlike archival, collections, and museum work, which has continued for some despite many obstacles, archaeological fieldwork has virtually come to a halt in many parts of the world, including the Middle East.

This had a major effect on my own plans and career progress. I graduated with a BA in Anthropology and Global Affairs from George Mason University in the summer of 2020. During my time at Mason, there were not many archaeological opportunities or courses available to me, as Mason did not have an actual archaeology department (as is the case in most American universities). Therefore, I had to seek out external opportunities related to archaeology. Due to my proximity to Washington, DC, I was able to hold internships and gain volunteer experience with the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History as well as the Fairfax County Park Authority (fig. 7).

In 2019, I was able to participate in my first, and thus far only, archaeological field school at Tell Dhiban in Jordan (fig. 8). Tell Dhiban is a site with over five thousand years of continuous occupation starting in the Early Bronze Age. It was the capital of the biblical Moabite kingdom, a Nabataean outpost, a Byzantine city, a conquest of the Islamic caliphates, and more. During the 2019 season, we primarily focused on excavating a Byzantine domestic building as well as two Mamluk houses. Site development was also a priority, with efforts focused on building visitor footpaths, backfilling old trenches, cleaning and conserving structures, and generally making the site more accessible for visitors.

I was fortunate enough to receive full funding for the field school and had the best experience of my life that summer in Jordan. It led to new ideas regarding what I wanted to study and, eventually, my decision to go to the United Kingdom for graduate school. Currently, I am in the midst of my Master's course of study at Durham University in England where I am undertaking the MA in archaeology focusing on Arabian archaeology and cultural heritage management. I am grateful for the Fulbright fellowship that is making my graduate work at Durham University possible.

If I had not participated in the dig at Tell Dhiban, my archaeology career may have never truly started and I'm not sure where I would be right now. At least half of the Dhiban excavation team was from the UK and talking to them and learning about their education and careers is what planted the seed for my decision to study in England. Additionally, the field school shifted my academic curiosities; previously, my interests lay in Mesopotamia, but after my experience in Jordan I decided to explore different options. This led to my current academic focus on Arabian archaeology, a relatively unexplored region compared to Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, and the Levant that holds just as much promise as those remarkable areas. My program at Durham will enable me to conduct research on pre-Islamic Arabia, my specific time period of interest.

In addition, Jordan opened my mind to issues related to cultural heritage. During the season, we visited many of the country's historical sites, including Petra, Jerash, Machaerus, and the Desert Castles. Seeing the variety of cultural sites and learning about them made me more interested in and concerned with the preservation and protection of sites around the world. The dangers that threaten cultural heritage today are numerous and real, including urbanization, looting, climate change, conflict, and terrorism. I believe it is crucial to aid local communities in protecting their unique heritage, and Durham's strength in cultural heritage management will enable me to explore that.

These changes in my interests and ways of thinking came directly from my experience in Jordan, demonstrating the great value of excavations and study abroad in general. These types of programs are life-changing, and sometimes career-changing. I am but one example of that.

In 2020, I was supposed to go back to Dhiban and this time get a bit of training as a supervisor during the study

season and dig season. The pandemic forced me to scrap those plans. I still look back on it wistfully as I am not sure whether or not I will have the opportunity to participate in this dig again. I planned to learn as much as I could from a practical and technical standpoint during that season, in contrast to my field school season, when I was experiencing everything as a novice. Since I wanted to be a field archaeologist and eventually direct an excavation, the canceled dig season was going to be a golden opportunity to find out if I seriously wanted to pursue those plans.

I continued looking for fieldwork opportunities in the Middle East, especially in Arabia, during the pandemic; unfortunately, however, there were few-to-no options available. I also applied for local archaeology jobs with little success. I believe that my lack of field experience may have made me less competitive. With the absence of fieldwork in 2020 and 2021, I started to shift away from the traditional field archaeologist career path and toward cultural heritage and museum work. As a result, I chose to enroll in the Master's program at Durham University that combines both my interests in traditional archaeology—research and fieldwork—and the nonfieldwork aspect: cultural heritage.

I sought out alternatives to fieldwork in the meantime. I was lucky to participate in summer research remotely for the Jezreel Expedition Publication Project from May 2021 to September 2021, funded by an ASOR Summer Stipend for Students. ASOR launched this Summer Stipend program in 2021 as a replacement for their normal dig scholarships in light of the pandemic's restrictions on fieldwork and travel. It was an innovative way to promote nonfieldwork components of archaeological research amidst the pandemic and a great professional experience. During the project, I honed my data-entry skills and engaged in original research of a mysterious painted cave at the site and the Palestinian history of Jezreel's spring. It was a valuable experience that allowed me to develop my research skills under Jennie Ebeling—the director of the project and the person who suggested that I share my story in this very publication. I would like to thank her for her mentorship and giving me the chance for my first academic publication. Although I lost the opportunity to gain more field experience because of the pandemic, I feel very fortunate to have found alternative opportunities and a desirable path forward in my career.



Claire Balandier, former member of the Ecole Biblique et Archéologique française at Jerusalem, is professor of ancient history at the University of Avignon (France) and Head of the French Archaeological Mission at Paphos under the auspices of the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs. A specialist in the defensive policies of ancient Greek cities, she has excavated in France, Greece, Russia, and conducted studies on fortifications in Albania (Apollonia), Vani (Georgia), and Amathus on Cyprus. In 2022, under the auspices of the École Française d'Athènes, she will begin a five-year program on the city wall of Nea Paphos in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus and the University of Cyprus.

Ian Cipin is a PhD candidate and adjunct researcher at the Zinman Institute of Archaeology, University of Haifa, Israel with a background as a senior archaeologist in commercial archaeology in the UK and was

formerly the Field Director of the Jezreel Expedition in Israel. He has excavated extensively in the United Kingdom, Romania, Turkey, and Israel at sites dating from prehistory to the modern era. His research interests are the later Neolithic to Early Bronze Age in the southern Levant with a focus on daily life practices and social organization from the perspective of the individual and smaller scale dynamics within societies. He also has an interest in the role the archaeological field school plays in providing a positive educational experience for students. His PhD focuses on food processing technologies in the late Chalcolithic period of the southern Levant from the perspective of ground stone tools.

Britt Hartenberger is a faculty specialist in anthropology in the Institute for Intercultural and Anthropological Studies, Western Michigan University. Her research interests include household studies, craft

specialization, and urbanism in the Bronze and Iron Age Middle East. She specializes in analyzing stone tools, ceramics, and microdebris. Dr. Hartenberger worked with the Titiş Höyük and Ziyaret Tepe projects in Turkey and most recently with the Olynthos project in Greece.

Moni Islam is a current student at Durham University pursuing an MA in Archaeology. He graduated with a BA in Anthropology and Global Affairs from George Mason University in 2020. He has excavated at Tell Dhiban in Jordan and several sites across Northern Virginia. He has also interned with the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, Fairfax County Park Authority, and participated in research for the Jezreel Expedition Publication Project. With the generous support of a Fulbright grant, he is focusing on pre-Islamic Arabia cultural heritage management at Durham University.