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Report on the Museum of Ontario Archaeology CEL and the Vindolanda Field School

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Museum of Ontario Archaeology and Vindolanda

To complete my CEL requirements, I participated in a semester long internship with the Curator at the Museum of Ontario Archaeology here in London Ontario, and a five week long archaeological excavation in Britain. During both of these experiences, I got to build upon my research abilities by doing preliminary research and artifact selection for a Google Institute Project page, as well as through learning about the significances of Roman Britain. While in both placements I was allowed a hands-on approach to interacting with history, the time that I spent working with the Museum of Ontario Archaeology was much more research based than Vindolanda. In turn, Vindolanda was a more physically involved placement as it was an active excavation involving heavy wheelbarrow loads of material and careful removal of fragile artifacts. SASAH played a large role in preparing me for in-depth research of local and international histories, as well as how to disseminate the information I had gathered in ways that were accessible to diverse audiences. And while SASAH did not directly prepare me for the physical aspect that was involved in an archaeological excavation, the program did help prepare me for the adjustment to different ways of excavation that were different from what I had previously practiced.

The first internship that I completed was with the Museum of Ontario Archaeology (MOA). In my time at the MOA, I was lucky enough to create a blog post about the history of the Maple Sugar Harvest in indigenous communities, as well as begin research and artifact selection to contribute to the MOA's Google Institute page. The former allowed me a very small

glimpse into the different ways that someone who works in a museum is able to contribute to the seemingly small ways that a community or a single custom from a community are understood by a broader audience. While the later emphasized both the much larger projects that museums undertake – that an exhibit is a lot more to complete than just putting small blurbs and artifacts in a room – but also the ways that museums are adapting to the digital age to continue being relevant and reach larger and more diverse groups than ever before.

In both the blog post and the Google Institute Project, I used and developed many skills. Predominantly, these were of time management, research, collaboration, and my ability to seek assistance. With working on the two different projects, I still had to keep up with my other academic commitments, as well as smaller tasks around the museum that I was asked to take part in. Doing this meant that I had to get a lot better, very fast, at figuring out what were commitments that I was able to set aside to deal with later, what things had to be taken care of immediately, what things I didn't have to do alone, and what things I could not do on site (cutting down on travel time that cut into productivity time). My research skills also grew as I learned more about how to take information that was not directly related to the subject matter and thinking more critically on how it does pertain to the subject on question, while not making claims or connections that are unfounded or misrepresentative. Seeking assistance and collaborating are areas that I have constantly fallen short in, but with my lack of experience in the history of indigenous groups and creating any kind of presentable for a museum to this scale at all, I was in unfamiliar waters. Luckily, this process of learning was made easier by the fantastic mentorship of Marie, who was more than happy to offer insight, and made sure to check in with me to see if I was on the right track, and how better to tackle the subject matter.

I was able to apply different knowledge that I gained from SASAH, to the extent that I used the interdisciplinary research skills that SASAH allowed me through the varied assignments and classes that I was able to take through the first three years of my degree. I was also able to use some of the rhetoric skills that I built through one of those classes, in writing the Maple Sugar Harvest Blog Post, combined with the feedback that Marie, Madison, and Heather gave about the importance of how ordering the information when presenting it to a public audience. Such as putting the indigenous information regarding the topic before the European information, thus adding emphasis on the topic of the article itself. While I said that I was able to build my time management skills by having so little time to be physically on site for the internship placement (only 2 hours a week, split into two 1-hour sessions), this was something that SASAH and university as a whole did not fully prepare me for. It is one thing to be juggling multiple assignments, but in university, and for the most part in SASAH, the results of those endeavours reflect solely on the student, and after the semester is over there is no more connection to or use for the project. When working with an institution that has the important role of shaping people's ideas of a historic and contemporary community, the work that one does has a lot larger of an impact than a one-off bad essay, as it is representative now of the institution, and potentially the culture you were trying to represent.

I am very happy that I was able to strengthen the relationships with one of the researchers from Sustainable Archaeology, Heather Hatch, whom I had worked with the previous summer through a student position with the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport. She helped me to better navigate the different specifically the hard drives and organization systems that the MOA uses to organize their own files, which Marie also helped with in her mentoring. One of which was showing me how to use PastPerfect, which is a software that a majority of museums and

institutions use to curate their collections and will be very beneficial knowledge to me should I choose to continue pursuing a career in the museum field.

I found a great deal of value in doing my internship with the MOA. Specifically on a personal level, it was having worked with that institution and some of the people before, which enabled me to see a much larger picture of what the museum housed, the significance that the items and information had to the greater London and Ontario communities, and how they keep track of all of their items, not just physically the item itself but also the information that goes along with the item. In a general sense, the internship allowed me to gain a better insight to the significant role that a museum has on the interpretation and shaping of a culture, as well as the importance of that role in its choice of imagery, wording, and materials to make sure that what they present is not only an accurate image, but one that is representative of the culture that it is being made from/for.

The second internship that I completed was through Western's Classical Studies Department as well as SASAH. For five weeks during the summer of 2019, 8 students accompanied by 2 professors and our TA went to the north of England to primarily take part in an archaeological excavation at a Roman military fort along Hadrian's Wall. During the five weeks at Vindolanda, the work that we did was primarily a cross between; research projects to teach the other students about the ways that Roman Forts fit into the larger imperial landscape of Roman Britain, excavation at the archaeological site, and post-excavation work including cleaning and identification of the mammal bones and sherds of pottery. That, however, is still not a full overview of the type of work that we did, or even scratch the surface on the types of people that we worked with during our time there.

The first week that we were in the UK was spent primarily getting a better understanding of the larger cultural context of Vindolanda and Roman Britain. During this time was when we did and presented the main parts of our research, as the students were responsible for doing the teaching at the different sites. The student presentations focused on the different buildings and areas in a typical military fort, as well as the religious cults that were popular for auxiliary forces on the frontier. The skills that I developed doing the research projects (as well as the subsequent blog posts that we were required to write about our time), was more of how to disseminate what can be complicated and dense information in a way that is accessible while also getting the religious and political overtones across that differ from ours.

Vindolanda and its team encompass two museums along the Hadrian's Wall network of forts, that being the Roman Army Museum, the Vindolanda Museum itself, and the active excavation area at the military fort. Each year from April to September is the excavation season that is then split into several two-week sessions. During those two-week sessions, about 30 volunteers from all over the world descend upon the site to aid in the excavation and artifact processing. Excavating in the trenches was where our students spent much of the time during the four weeks that we took part in the dig, but for one day each we spent time working on the artifact processing. Artifact processing was originally how I found my love for excavation years ago, but it was on a much more complex level here as it was more than just cleaning the pieces, but now identifying the bone and pot fragments as well, and entering them in to the database. For someone who has done archaeological work before, I went into the site assuming that I would not learn much new information beyond different regional practices that we may not use in North America. I was in for a surprise. While the archaeological theories are the same between the two continents, when put into practice they were done differently.

Through this, I had to learn how to be adaptable quickly, and to an extent I had to learn a bit of humility in accepting help in feedback in my excavation methods because there were gaps in my knowledge of the different ways the theories can be applied, while still achieving the same ends. An example of this would be how I learned originally how to excavate using only a trowel to avoid unnecessary damage to the site, features, or possible artifacts. At Vindolanda, we used tools ranging from mattocks, spades, shovels and water pumps to clear out the excavated material (and water build up), but while still having a mind to not do any undue damage. The shovels were used for cleaning up of loose material, the trowels for detail work around artifacts and finding the extent of different features. Spades were the main tool that were used to remove sizeable cubes of dirt to maximize the amount of material that was being processed in the wheelbarrows, but also minimizing the amounts of cuts that were made into the dirt itself so that hypothetically, any artifacts were contained in the cube safely to be found by processors.

The adapting and willingness to learn from the people around me is something that being a SASAH student helped me a lot with, as being a SASAH student involves having the ability to look at the world around me and even the work I am doing in a different way. While the SASAH program is more a research-based curriculum, the internship component does encourage us to take the learned theory and apply it in a practical way. Granted, the practical way that I was applying it at Vindolanda involved a lot more physical exertion than I think any of the students were expecting. Personally, I think the physical aspect of the internship was key to my appreciation of it, as it fought back against the idea that an arts and humanities degree would only ever lead to a desk job filled with research. Instead, the research was being done every second of the day that we dug, while carrying heavy wheelbarrow loads up a hill, and sorting through wet mud and dense clay to the point where our hands were caked in the material.

The largest impact that taking part in the Vindolanda field school had on me, was the way that it helped me think more critically about how archaeology and heritage work fits into my future. The volunteers that helped in the excavations were not only from all over the world, but also from all walks of life. I dug alongside a History professor from Australia, an author from New Zealand, a financial advisor from New York, and an electrician from Toronto. All these people became close friends in the short time that we spent together, and they all had the same piece of advice – do what you are passionate about, but it doesn't have to become your career. While I love archaeology, I had known for a while that it was not going to be a feasible career option for me because of the amount of time that I would have to spend away from home with the way Ontario archaeological firms work. The people at Vindolanda also recognized this but, found a way that they can fit archaeology into their lives; not make archaeology their lives while still pursuing other areas of income and fulfillment.

The Vindolanda field school was a highly rewarding experience. Having only excavated in Ontario previously, this was a fantastic opportunity to not only learn about the methods that other cultures use for excavation and preservation, but also the ways that the broader community in the UK interacts with their heritage. The experts from local museums and universities that lectured us as well were beyond helpful and encouraging in sharing the ways that they work with historical collections that may have not been preserved to today's standards, and how their own personal history and interests are constantly being brought into their work. The ways that they constantly were talking to the public and thinking critically about the ways in which they could get the community to tie everything they were seeing back to the site itself was truly inspiring for me personally as I got to see areas where my research interests were represented in such a tangible way.

It was through my conversations with them and the different site supervisors that I developed a clearer idea of the kinds of research to be in my post-graduate studies. Marta and Sammi were two of the site supervisors that were also pursuing their own PhD's in the heritage fields. They were probably the two most important mentors that I had, as they were the ones responsible for overseeing my work during my time in the trenches and with post-excavation processing. While some areas of mentoring involved teaching me how to identify different animal bones for cataloguing or how to make 3D models of the site and different artifacts for later publication and educational material. They also helped me to gain a better understanding of how archaeological knowledge can be transferred into other areas of historical and heritage work. One case being how the building methods of timber supports over a fort trench corresponds with Dutch methods of hydrology, thereby being a lasting and physical example of the migration of culture that Roman expansion allowed for, while also presently being a way in which multiple experts from different fields can work together to give a more complex and complete understanding of the past peoples.

SASAH on its own already does a fairly good job of getting students to create work on their own and present in to a public audience by having several of the courses create exhibitions in the Satellite Space and TAP. But I think that a way that SASAH could better prepare their students for this type of outward facing work, is to have a more moderated relationship between students and London based organizations through the coursework, but not quite as heavily involved as an internship. Instead this would act as a way to bridge the gap between academia and the workforce. The students would do work in partnership with the organization, that has real meaning and impact for the chosen institution, not necessarily something that was made specifically for the students and is more made for them than the people they are trying to

help/work with. This would also help in giving back to the London community, one of the things that SASAH and Western are very encouraging of for their students. SASAH did and didn't prepare me for this. It did in the fact that through the SASAH program I have taken part in another internship at the Museum for Ontario Archaeology where there I was working much more closely with how to present complicated information to the public through my blog post and preparation for the Google Institute project.

The potential that both Vindolanda and the Museum of Ontario Archaeology has had on my future career and education, is both in the practical sense of getting a better idea of what my options would be should I continue on the path of going into the museum field for my career, but it also gave me a lot to think about in terms of my future in education. What has always drawn me to museum work was the importance of telling a person's story with them, not for them. The MOA and the women that I have worked with have also thought deeply on this idea and were very encouraging in ways that I would be able to further work along this thought (even in suggesting I work towards a PhD since I enjoy the research that I have been doing with them), and this has in turn encouraged me to look further into the field of Public History, to work more on how history impacts the world around, and how different stories are being told in this current social and political climate of reassessing how we now identify and think of ourselves, which in turn causes us to reassess how we interpret past peoples and communities.

In preparing for my final presentation wherein I was supposed to display the deliverables from my two CEL, it was hard to think of ways to show the research I had completed for the Museum of Ontario Archaeology beyond an image of the blog post, and examples of what the Google Arts and Culture Institute page was capable of once an institution had gathered enough information and time to make a preliminary posting. For the Google Institute examples, I used

images showing the 3D virtual tour function that the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh has, as well as a selection of their “stories” – what Google calls their displays and exhibitions that the institutions can upload. The research was done through looking in the archives of the museum itself, as well as online and in books borrowed from the Western library, and therefore did not really lend themselves to photographs.

The opposite held true when preparing the Vindolanda section of my presentation, as Vindolanda, Hadrian’s Wall, The Lake District, Edinburgh, and the innumerable other places we visited while there had breathtaking views at every turn. The problem here was the number of things that I got to take part in and trimming down to a digestible number of talking points that an audience could take in easily. There was also the consideration of how much could be explained about archaeological practices here in Canada as I learned them, and the practices in England that differed through sheer necessity due to the nature and the scope of the excavation. The concern was the audience that I was presenting to and realizing that the deliverable for this project was not to provide an in-depth analysis of stratigraphy or even the differences between sorting excavated material by hand versus using a standing sifter.

To solve the problems of how to present two very different internships in one presentation, I made the focus more on how different institutions are currently tackling changing ideologies around museum culture, the role of museums in the current socio-political climate, and the ways the museums are attempting to work more with the public rather than with solely the academic realms. Both CEL experiences gave me a great deal of insight as to how these issues are being dealt with, from implementing more usage of 3D scans and Virtual Reality to redesigning how a gallery looks altogether by having a large window facing out onto the archaeological site that the artifacts come from or represent the culture of. This meant that the

photos used – especially in regard to Vindolanda – were of the different methods that the museums had to lead the perspective of the visitor to make more connections either between the past and contemporary issues; such as with the Maple Harvest Blog post that I wrote, looking at how we know things about past cultures and how that knowledge is often times not based on the culture itself, but on a lack of information; or with the Corbridge Museum having pieces that look at the differences in museum conservation practices from the first antiquarians to now that impacts the knowledge that we think we have, as well as how to go about showing and conserving these for future generations and institutions.

SASAH teaches its students to imagine the world complexly, and that it something that all the institutions that I visited or worked with were trying to do as well. It seemed to me that several the CEL projects that the students this year participated in were also attempting to do the same thing. There was Alex Busch’s project with ANOVA to create a dog friendly shelter to enable even more women a chance to leave dangerous situations without leaving behind what might have been their only sense of comfort. There was Amelia Eqbal’s North Meets South Exchange wherein groups of youth were taken up to Northern Ontario as well as to Toronto’s Bay Street district to heavily show the difference ways of existence that communities within the same province employ, and the challenges that are met when legislation does not meet those challenges. Legislation, community services, and cultural institutions are all in a state of constant change, but one that will always lag behind the fast-paced changes of the people that each entity is attempting to serve.

SASAH works hard for its students to learn not only how the world is changing, how to think critically about the changes that are taking place, what the historical precedents are to these changes, and most importantly how to think complexly about the people that are in need and the

people that need to help. From the very first class in the SASAH program we have been taught to break down the larger picture to find the individual human aspect to any problem, group, commemoration, or really anything. That is what museums are working towards to find a new connection with an audience that it is growing bored of seeing the same old story of white nationalism being fed to them through every aspect of their lives. That is why the topics of reconciliation, repatriation, and representation are so often hit upon in discussions about museum collections and museum culture. Humans create representations of humans, and my CEL projects, as well as the ones that Amelia Eqbal and Alex Busch completed, showed how the representations of humans are constantly changing and the work that goes into it from three different perspectives. There is the perspective of museums that do this work through active research and exhibitions to give the authorship of underrepresented communities back to those community members so as to right historical wrongs and half truths. There is the perspective of the modern communities helping the less fortunate and the abused by finding new ways to give them support in liminal times of crisis through finding out what those people actually need and what stops them from being able to accept help. And finally there is the perspective of the legislators and activist communities who are working to identify that problems that communities face and how a bureaucratic government can work to lend support to those communities, while actively learning from that communities youth members who are striving to help their friends and families by shaping their corner of the world into a better one.

A section of my presentation was a phenomenal video that was made during my time at Vindolanda by Discover our Land: Discover Northumberland. The video was unaltered in my usage of it, and its purpose was solely to give the audience a sense of Vindolanda, the staff members that I got to work with, and the beauty that is Vindolanda.