

NEWS RELEASE

Wilfrid Laurier University



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Students get down to nitty-gritty in Laurier's archeology program

Doriann McLean sets aside another piece of broken pottery she has scrubbed. Feeling her wrinkled fingertips and the grit under her nails, she smiles to herself.

Indiana Jones signed his archeological adventures with the crack of a bullwhip. But, like other Laurier students of the discipline, McLean finds a frayed toothbrush more useful.

It's part of the hands-on experience and thorough training in all aspects of archeology -- including the lab work and research -- that distinguishes Laurier's archeology program as one of the most extensive of its kind in Canada.

With the rare opportunity to work towards an undergraduate degree in archeology itself, students combine archeology courses with others in anthropology, classical studies, and Near Eastern studies. They cover general archeological theory and technique together with an examination of the history and cultures of earlier peoples.

The 40 students in the general and honors program take a range of courses from statistics and the Hebrew language to the study of human bones and the application of scientific disciplines; they study the technology of prehistoric peoples, classical architecture, and important excavation sites around the world; they learn to record, preserve, reconstruct, and analyse artifacts.

"A lot of students begin archeology studies drawn by the romance and allure of exotic places and the mystery of ages past," said Prof. Gerald Schaus, co-ordinator of the program.

"But the same things true of marriage are true of archeology: it's learning the skills for handling the routine, everyday matters that builds the foundation for success."

Claudette Martin, who has chosen to specialize in Near Eastern archeology, said having faculty members who are active archeologists makes the difference. "The professors want us to do field and lab work. I don't think they want us to go out blind.

"Archeology is not just going out and digging a square," said the third-year student.

With faculty members returning to campus with artifacts from excavation sites as far away as Jordan, Greece, Italy, and Tunisia -- and as close to home as Cambridge and Orillia -- students are encouraged to roll up their own sleeves in the artifact collections and the three new laboratories on campus.

Using such everyday but unrelated things as kitty litter, masking tape, and binder twine, they piece together the puzzle of the past. They learn to draw the artifacts and then, through library research, help identify and analyse them.

"Everyone has this Indiana Jones perception of archeology," said Allison Bain, a fourth-year student specializing in prehistoric archeology. "It's something that gets very glorified in the media."

A participant in several digs in Ontario and another in Turkey, Bain said even the field-work is mistaken as glamorous.

"Test pitting -- that's hell, more than I care to think about," she said, explaining the backache of digging 30 x 30-centimetre holes every five metres over a potential site. "It's really boring but it's a good way of (determining the boundaries of a site)."

Students are encouraged and, at the honors level, required to participate in digs where they gain sweat-and-dust experience working shoulder to shoulder with faculty members.

Next summer, McLean will get her first experience in field-work at the site of a Huron Indian village near Orillia that has trained generations of students. Since Laurier professor Dean Knight began digging there 15 years ago, more than 60 long houses have been discovered.

Other students have joined Prof. Michele Daviau in the excavation of an ancient Ammonite city at Tell El Umeiri in Jordan.

Prof. Joann Freed is involved as a Roman pottery expert in a UNESCO project in Tunisia. There, archeologists are racing against time to excavate ancient Carthage as the modern city of Tunis encroaches.

Prof. Robert Fischer, a specialist in the study of ancient languages, has led study trips to archeological sites in Greece, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Israel, and Iraq.

Since 1983, Schaus has been involved in an excavation of the ancient citadel of Mytilene on the Greek island of Lesbos.

And Prof. Chris Simpson is involved as a small finds expert in the excavation of a villa dating to the second or third century BC near southern Italy's modern town of Gravina.

On their own initiative, students have also participated in digs in Hong Kong, Iraq, Libya, Turkey, England, the United Arab Emirates, and Belize.

Whether first lured to archeology by the exciting discovery of an arrowhead in a plowed field, or watching the thrill-packed trilogy of Indiana Jones movies, most graduates will continue studies on to a masters or doctoral level.

They have the opportunity to become curators, museum interpreters, professors, and archeologists.

Anne MacLaughlin, who graduated in 1981, found Laurier's program provided solid training for her position as a lab technician for New World archeology at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. There, she is responsible for restoring fragile and deteriorating artifacts.

"I enjoy the lab work. It's a challenge," said MacLaughlin. "If you have an article, if you can restore it or stabilize it, you have saved a life. It makes you a little immortal."

Marianne Stopp, a 1979 graduate, is pursuing a doctorate in archeology at Cambridge University. She has published on archeology in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Jeff Blakely, who graduated in 1981 from a masters program at Laurier with a major in archeology, has gone on to become a contract archeologist. He has published on stratigraphy (the study of layering) and ceramics at Caesarea Maritima, and the Persian period at Tell El-Hesi, both in Israel.

Even with all the wrinkled fingertips and dirt and sweat ahead, today's students are committed to their studies and certain about the value of archeology.

McLean has already heard in lectures how the discovery of ancient tools made from volcanic glass led to the refinement of medical instruments used in modern eye surgery.

More importantly, archeology has revealed the earlier and unknown cultures of man, for many of which there was no written record. "Archeology helps you to appreciate other cultures," said Bain. "It gives you a sense of depth and understanding."

And like her classmates, Bain is learning that getting her nails dirty in the labs and then spending long hours in the library are what bring those rewards. "Research -- that's where the results begin to show."