

## Hands on the Past: A Tactile Approach to Archaeology

The study of ancient Mediterranean archaeology commonly takes a single instructional form, in which students gather to hear lectures and to see slides of innumerable artifacts, architectural elements, and ancient sites. While modern technology has updated the manner in which such lectures are given, and has improved our ability to highlight or adjust important visual references, the mode of instruction has remained focused on the instructor. As a result, the experience of the 21st century student is largely identical to that of his or her 18th century counterpart, as both groups are forced to depend on the passive reception of information in order to learn.

While lecture-based instruction has many virtues, it is a format that is ill-suited to convey the realities of working with objects in the field. Real-world archaeologists rely on a combination of contextual information, tactile examination, and rudimentary conservation in order to learn not only what an object is but also what function it served within a site as a whole. The object, in other words, becomes a gateway to a real-world mystery, and it is the thrill of unraveling that mystery that engages us with the field. It stands to reason, then, that the simulation of just such a thrill would best engage students with our discipline, and so I proposed an introductory archaeology course, centered on the thrill of object analysis, to do just that.

Modelled on the puzzle-based experiences of the Mysterious Package Company, I designed a course that introduces students to the enigmatic field of Mediterranean Archaeology. Throughout the semester, groups of students are placed in a simulated laboratory environment where I assign them a curated series of "mysterious" objects. Through the hands-on study of these objects, which consist of museum-quality replicas and artifacts from our departmental teaching collection as well as the collection of the McClung Museum at the University of

Tennessee Knoxville, each group learns to identify, document, and situate their objects within relevant historical contexts. Periodically throughout the semester, the groups then present the results of their findings to a scholarly audience (i.e. their class), during which they illustrate the ultimate contribution that each artifact makes to our modern understanding of ancient societies and cultural values. At the end of the semester, the students discover that their groups each received objects from discrete assemblages, and their final project requires them to unmask the nature and cultural value of their assemblages as a whole. At this stage, I give each group an excavation notebook containing a site plan, a stratigraphic drawing of their deposit, and a general site report, and I lead the students to decipher the value of contextual information to determine the meaning of their assemblages.

By presenting archaeological material as a historical mystery to solve, the course leads the students not only to engage creatively with the past but also to practice self-directed learning and critical thinking. As an added benefit, the students also gain first-hand knowledge of the effects of environmental damage and corrosion on artifacts, all of which leads them to a deeper appreciation of the richness and the limitations of the material data on which we base our understanding of ancient society. At the same time, students are made aware that a valuable component of the study of the ancient world is the ability to make its lessons relevant to modern society. Thus, I also ask my students to relay their findings to lay audiences through service-learning projects spear-headed by the Department of Classics, such as International Archaeology Day at the McClung Museum. As the students prepare activities that teach or explain their archaeological research to children and adults, they gain an appreciation for the depth of information that often underlies seemingly simple statements of historical fact.