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Gannon University



Piecing
Together
Jordan's Past

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by Maggie M. Irvine '05

Gannon University students Ross Miceli and Drew Saxton spent their summer waist-deep in dirt—but not the common sort of dirt. They dug through layers of ash, soil, and rubble to uncover artifacts from over 1,500 years of continuous occupation of Khirbet Iskander, located south of Amman (the capital city of Jordan) and east of the Dead Sea.

From May to June 2004, Gannon History and Theology professor, Suzanne Richard '71, Ph.D. and five others from Gannon participated in the archaeological dig. Through nine seasons of *The Expedition to Khirbet Iskander and Its Environs*, Richard has been excavating the only site known to be urban following the general upheaval throughout the region around 2350 BCE (Before Common Era). Gannon faculty, staff, students, and alumni who participated in the study-abroad experience included Dr. Delayne Shah of the School of Education—dig artist, student Drew Saxton—dig surveyor/architect, student Ross Miceli—photographer/

computer facilitator, and Susan Pennock '04—assistant pottery registrar. They oversaw a staff including 15 Americans from other universities, five Jordanian university students, and several local Jordanian laborers.

Touching History

The students received more than the three-credit field work requirement to complete their minor in archaeology; they participated in a real hands-on experience, making connections between classroom theories and actual fieldwork.

“The dig was the beginning of something for me,” said Ross, a junior Liberal Studies major who decided to go on the dig because of his interest in travel, language, world cultures, and world religions. “It offered me a hands-on method of learning archaeology, a chance to do some world traveling,” he added.





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As a Liberal Studies major, Ross appreciated the various avenues of academic experience the dig offered him. “Going on the dig really tied everything together for me,” he said. “It included photography, art, architecture, language,

history, religion, culture, and travel. The Middle East is really where it all began.”

Visiting the Middle East has been one of Drew’s passions for as long as he can remember. Drew, a senior Psychology major, had taken several of Dr. Richard’s archaeology classes and realized that all he needed to wrap up a minor in archaeology was the required field experience. Participating in the dig seemed like a perfect fit between a lifelong dream and an academic opportunity.

Drew was in charge of drawing vertical profiles and architectural top plans

for each designated square on the excavation site. His drawings recorded and activities during the dig.

The crew worked six days a week on location from 5 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and then returned to their villa for lunch and siesta. Beginning at 4 p.m. the crew reassembled to clean the artifacts, take more photos, and pack each piece safely for the trip home to Gannon’s Archaeology Lab. Beyond the work, this was also a study-abroad opportunity that allowed the students to experience life and culture in the Middle East.

Unexpected Welcome

Drew and Ross both admitted that they and their families were a little worried for their safety on the trip to the Middle East in fear of terrorism.

“Going to a country that is so vastly different—Jordan is over 90 percent Muslim—and being next door to Iraq made us a little nervous. When we left, it was only three or four weeks after the first kidnappings began to happen in Iraq,” Drew said.

To their surprise, the Jordanians were very pro-American, and the crew established good friendships with the local communities. The study-abroad opportunity allowed the students to experience life in the Middle Eastern town of Madaba, which included being among the people in the community while worshiping and shopping for food, practicing Arabic, and learning local customs and traditions.

On weekends, the students were able to travel to locations such as Petra, Jerash, Mt. Nebo, Machareus, Amman, and the Dead Sea. They also had the opportunity to spend the sixth and final week touring Egypt and visiting the Pyramids.

Six weeks, several hundred photographs, a million memories, and over 772 pounds of excavation materials later, the crew returned to the United States and to Gannon with a lot to do, and thousands of pieces to put back together.

Piecing the Puzzle Together

Since the start of classes in late August, Drew and intern Veronica Ostrosky have spent countless hours in the Gannon University Institute for Archaeological Research in the A.J. Palumbo Academic Center restoring and cataloging the excavated pieces, as well as entering Drew’s architectural drawings from the site into the lab’s computer system.

Veronica, a senior History and Secondary Education major, was unable to attend the dig; however, she is fulfilling the field experience required for the



Susan Pennock '04 organizes pieces after a long day of digging.

Ross Miceli reviews and organizes slides from the excavation site.

Archaeology minor by cataloging and organizing artifacts that were brought back from the dig.

“The actual dig is only one part of an entire process,” Veronica said. “Every single piece needs to be drawn, labeled, and catalogued afterwards for further studies, and I am glad to have the opportunity to be a part of that step of the process.”

Drew was able to obtain a work/study position spending approximately ten hours per week on restoration processes in the lab. With the help of Veronica, Drew, and others, Dr. Richard has been able to finalize a publication about the dig and its findings entitled *Archaeological Expedition to Khirbet Iskander and its Environs, Volume One: Final Report on the Early Bronze IV Area C Gateway*.

“I like to introduce students to the wonders of research and, in particular, to involve them in my own research by working on the publications of the dig,” Dr. Richard said. “Archaeology is such an interdisciplinary field that it’s relatively easy to integrate research and teaching.”

Dr. Richard’s archaeology classes each have a lab component, where students learn how to study, record, restore, analyze, and draw the pieces that were brought back from Jordan. “The dig provides the material remains of extinct peoples of a different culture from another time. Students find the remains to be fascinating—the actual

cooking vessels the people used, the 5,000 year old finger prints in the clay, the tools and weapons, cultic paraphernalia, and the stuff of every day life,” Richard said.

Veronica was able to take some of the pottery samples from Khirbet Iskander to North East High School during her student teaching practicum in the spring of 2004. She taught her students about the process of archaeology and how it relates to different aspects of history and culture. “Many of the students told me it was their favorite lesson,” Veronica said. “It really provided them with an entirely different perspective than the average history lesson.”

The archaeology minor is an experience that Veronica suggests that all students consider, regardless of their major. “It complements the liberal studies course load really well,” she said. “Even though Dr. Richard’s specialty is in the Middle East, the program still provides the core ideas that can later be applied to anywhere in the world.” Dr. Richard is currently working on expanding the program to include classes that will look at ancient civilizations from a global perspective as well as studies of other specific areas, such as Mesoamerica.

One piece at a time, the students and faculty of Gannon’s archaeology program will continue to put the pieces of the artifacts together, rebuilding the ancient world and culture of Jordan—here on campus in Gannon’s Institute for Archeological Research.

