Laboratory Research in the Archaeological Collections at Bowdoin College  
Zoe Eddy, 2010

This summer, under the direction of Dr. Scott MacEachern and Dr. Susan Kaplan, I worked with artifacts from the Bowdoin archaeology collection. I have worked predominantly with Dr. MacEachern’s objects from his fieldwork in Africa. In this report, I will include a description of my responsibilities, the skills I have gained from the work, and, finally, how this research relates to my own academic plans. Also, I will include a brief description of my time spent on an excavation on Haskell Island in Harpswell, Maine.

As an archaeology department research fellow, I was responsible for cataloguing Dr. MacEachern’s “small finds” from his work in Africa. These artifacts include (but are not limited to) lithics, clay “beads”, “bracelets”, and anthropomorphic figurines, metal pieces, ochre residue, charcoal, worked wood and leather, and stone beads. My responsibilities included documenting these pieces visually: I used both a bench stand camera and a digital imaging microscope to photograph these artifacts. I then used Adobe Photoshop to optimize the images. Finally, I entered the objects’ data into the Bowdoin archaeology database. This photography and data entry served two purposes. Firstly, it created a digital image of the items in the collection-- this is an essential step towards the complete documentation of archaeological artifacts. Secondly, the visual database offers an easily accessible collection for scholars to reference; Dr. MacEachern will use my work as a tool as he analyzes the excavation site.

This summer work has provided me with a great deal of hands-on laboratory experience. Firstly, I have learned the intricacies of photographing images in order to best demonstrate their physical idiosyncrasies. For instance, after identifying the notable parts of an artifact (such as a dent on a clay ball that might indicate beadwork), I had to strategize how to best display those certain characteristics. Secondly, I have also learned how to differentiate between and identify various materials and object types. Working through a collection like this was an inestimable boon in relation to my own development as an archaeologist.

Through my work with Dr. MacEachern’s collection, I also had the opportunity to excavate at the Baker Site on Haskell Island in Harpswell, Maine. Under the direction of Dr. Leslie Shaw and Dr. Nate Hamilton, I, along with other archaeology students, joined a team of professionals, and continued the excavation of the Baker Site. I have a fair amount of lab experience, but this was my first foray into archaeological fieldwork. As a worker, I prepared and broke down excavation units, excavated pits, screened material, and helped to identify, catalogue and sort the pieces found while on the dig. It was an invaluable experience that enhanced both my laboratory work and my own archaeological education.

This summer research supplements perfectly my own academic ambitions and goals. Currently, I am applying to graduate school for a doctorate in historical archaeology. Accordingly, the time spent under the direction of Bowdoin and USM archaeologists has advanced my education greatly. Firstly, from this experience I have gained and refined technical skills that will be essential to my success as both a graduate student and an archaeologist. Moreover, working in both the laboratory setting and in the field has allowed me to view the archaeological discipline from various perspectives. (For instance, because I worked in the field, I now have a much greater appreciation for the hundreds of flaked stones I have encountered in the African collection. Prior to fieldwork, they seemed somewhat monotonous to me. My work excavating, however, demonstrated how integral to the site each and every artifact is.) Finally, this research has encouraged me to pursue archaeology on the graduate level. In conclusion, this experience has more than supported my education in archaeology. It has motivated me to pursue a lifetime of, to speak childishly, playing in the dirt.

Faculty Mentors: Scott MacEachern and Susan Kaplan
Funded by the Faculty Research Grant Fellowship