This past winter, I spent five weeks working with Professor of Anthropology Scott MacEachern and his team at an archaeological excavation in northern Cameroon. The focus of the 2011 field season was the two walled structures known as DGB-1 and DGB-2 located on the northwestern slopes of the Mandara mountains (DGB stands for “Diy-gid-biy,” or “the place/ruin of chiefly residence” in the local Mafa language). The structures, comprised of dry-stone walls, terraces, courtyards, staircases and platforms, date to the Iron Age. One of the objectives of the 2010-2011 field season was to evaluate the evidence for prehistoric human activities between the DGB-1 and DGB-2 sites in order to gain insights on the nature of relations between DGB-1 and DGB-2.

During the field season, I participated in the excavation of test pits between the two sites and survey work of the surrounding area aimed at finding new sites, though my primary focus was drawing the sites and the artifacts recovered from them. When I tell people that I worked as an illustrator at an archaeological excavation, I generally am met with puzzlement and a polite, “That sounds lovely, but why wouldn’t a camera do?” It’s a good question, one I also initially asked. In fact, illustration achieves a number of things photography cannot in the field of on-site archaeology.

The bulk of the work I produced was a series of pen and ink drawings of the architectural features of the DGB-1 and DGB-2 sites. The structures themselves were covered in creepers, obscured in places by large trees, and reduced to rubble in others. In the chaos of collapsed walls and tangled vegetation, washed out by the extremely bright sun, small architectural details were lost in photographs of the complex. In my drawings, however, I could de-emphasize irrelevant features, eliminate the weeds covering the façade, and draw attention to the most important elements instead. Though beautiful photographs of the site exist, the artists who took them could not omit—in camera—a tree blocking a crucial part of the façade or downplay the distracting amounts of broken rock.

The process provided a fascinating opportunity for me to learn about the excavation through art. I was able to intimately know the DGB culture’s distinct method of building by drawing their walls and the way each rock fit together. I came to appreciate its ideology as reflected in the artifacts, both ceramic and iron, that I drew. The project also deepened my own artistic practice, which could have previously been called “art for art’s sake” and was not motivated by any practical purpose. The problem-solving nature of the drawing I did for the project, however, forced me to think consciously about the tools at an artist’s disposal. How does one use line, shading and composition to emphasize one part of the picture at the expense of another or to create convincing architectural space? The process of producing the excavation illustrations is one that will stay with me and inform my fine art for years to come.

The illustrations I produced at the excavation will accompany Professor MacEachern’s forthcoming articles and monograph on the subject.
Faculty Mentor: Scott MacEachern
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