

The Diverse Roles of an Archeological Conservator

Most people I meet think my work as an archeological conservator simply involves reassembling broken pottery or stabilizing materials post excavation in a museum. While these are a few aspects of archeological conservation, they really are only a very small part of my work. A conservator's involvement can vary widely from archeological excavation to excavation. The role a conservator plays depends on the site conditions and the condition of the artifacts and their intended use by archeologists, researchers, and native communities. I have chosen three excavations I have been involved with in Israel, Egypt, and Honduras to highlight the diverse roles a conservator can play on excavations.

Advanced planning is part of each excavation whether it is overseas in remote areas or minutes from a metropolis. No matter the type, scope, or length of work an excavation involves, all digs require consultations between the conservator and archeologist to ensure goals can be met and any specialized equipment or supplies are

purchased. Additionally, advanced planning streamlines work in the field and ensures the appropriate care of our cultural heritage during and after excavation.

Tel Zeitah, Israel

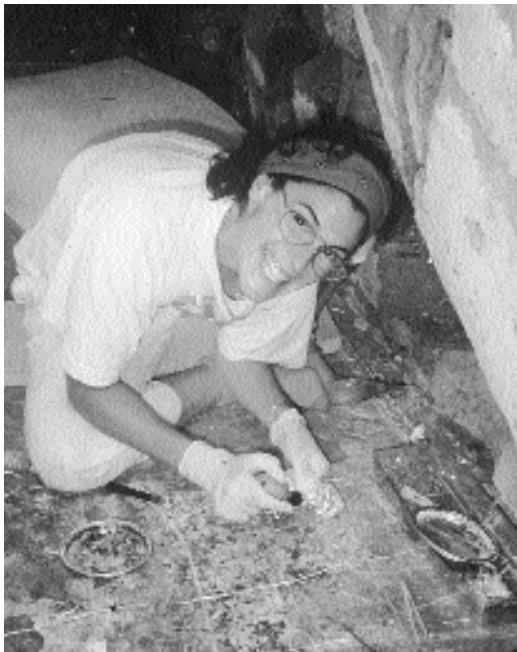
The work at Tel Zeitah, Israel, may be what many people consider a typical involvement of a conservator in an excavation. In a continuing project such as this, the conservator's role is to establish and refine a working field laboratory for a multi-year seasonal excavation. Establishment of a working field laboratory involves the advanced planning mentioned above. The conservator can determine necessary analytical equipment by research on nearby sites to determine typical burial conditions in the area. For example, at Tel Zeitah the salinity of the soil was a concern because the site is adjacent to agricultural fields. Ceramics and metals were expected; when excavated from saline soils these materials will deteriorate without treatment. With knowledge of soil conditions and expected artifacts, a conservator can plan and budget for appropriate materials used to safeguard the long-term preservation of the archeological record.

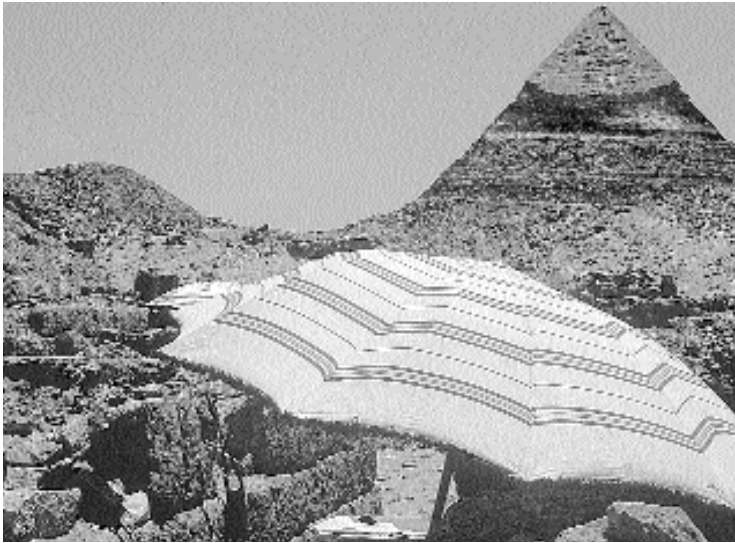
Once on site, the conservator sets up the lab and reviews previous season's finds, documentation, treatments, analyses, and storage and then begins on artifact backlogs and newly excavated finds. In conjunction with lab work, the conservator is often called into the field to lift fragile artifacts or identify materials prior to excavation.

In addition to artifact treatment, the conservator works with other staff, including the ceramic specialists, registrar, photographer, computer specialist, botanist, and faunal analyst as well as volunteers and students to aid in their work and research. They can also establish protocols for the current and future seasons.

Once the season ends, it is the responsibility of the conservator to ensure that the artifacts are stored properly and to document all work conducted on artifacts in the form of treatment records and a final report for future records.

The author excavating the burial dais in Copán, Honduras.





The "Conservation Lab" at Giza.

Howard University Giza Cemetery Project, Giza Plateau, Egypt

The second project to be highlighted was conducted at the Western Cemetery of the Giza plateau in Egypt. This one-season project's main purpose was to record and check an area previously excavated in the early 1900s. Because few artifacts were expected, a minimal conservation lab was set up on site. However, as the season progressed, numerous tomb shafts overlooked in the early 1900s were located and excavated yielding human remains and re-used painted limestone blocks. The conservator aided and advised in the excavation of the human remains while working closely with the physical anthropologist to clean the bones for examination. Organic material associated with one body was preserved. This material was examined *in situ* and post excavation, and it was lifted both separately and with some areas consolidated with a polymer to allow for further examination and research if authorized by Egyptian authorities. As with most excavations overseas, removal of samples for analysis is strictly controlled by government agencies and in the case of Giza no samples can be taken from the plateau for analysis even within Cairo. These unexpected finds highlight the need for foreknowledge of potential artifacts because a good microscope and a few chemicals can allow for preliminary analyses and identifications to be made on site.

Structure 10L-26 Tomb Excavation, Copán, Honduras

The final example represents comprehensive involvement by conservators, and is illustrative of the wide-ranging benefits a conservator can pro-

vide. The main aim of the work conducted by the author in Copán, Honduras, in 1996 and 1997, based on work begun by conservators and archeologists in 1990, was to excavate, analyze, and house materials from the burial dais from a late classic royal Maya tomb. This project is illustrative of the collaboration between conservators, archeologists, and numerous other professionals in order to address ethical considerations, deal with safety issues during excavation, and synthesize past documentation and research.

While it is uncommon for a conservator to completely excavate a deposit, it is within the realm of our expertise. The Copán project encompassed not only establishing excavation protocols and procedures but also completing analyses on excavated materials, properly storing excavated materials, and ensuring the health and safety of co-workers in a hazardous area working with hazardous material. A careful and collaborative approach was used to ensure the maximum information was gained and recorded before, during, and after excavation. Excavated materials were stored using appropriate storage materials for both the artifacts themselves and the tropical climate, while maintaining accessibility for researchers and native communities. In combination with this, the conservator also redesigned, cleaned, and painted the storage space for excavated materials including designing, creating specifications, and overseeing the fabrication and installation of metal storage units. Additionally, the conservator planned, designed, transported, and installed a new exhibit in the local museum, and instructed conservation and archeology students in field conservation theory and techniques.

Catherine E. Magee is Loan Conservator, Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

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Photos courtesy the author.