

NEWSGRAM

News in brief from the Conservation Center

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The Interface Between Field Archaeology and Conservation

A Cross-Disciplinary Conference in the UAE Hosted by the Conservation Center and the NYU Abu Dhabi Institute

A distinguished group of faculty, researchers and museum professionals gathered in Abu Dhabi from February 7 – 9, 2011 to discuss present and future issues in conservation and field archaeology. For participating students, horizons broadened and provocative questions reinforced a commitment to advocate for material culture.

Hosted by the nascent New York University Abu Dhabi Institute (NYUADI) at the Intercontinental Hotel on the shore of the Arabian Gulf, a workshop on “The Interface Between Field Archaeology and Conservation” was convened by Dr. Hannelore Roemich, Acting Chairman, and Dr. Norbert S. Baer, Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Conservation. Despite complications of winter weather in America and Europe, and a shifting political climate in North Africa, the three-day event drew an intrepid and international crowd of conservators, archaeologists, scientists, and museum administrators. Five students from the Conservation Center, including the current and former Leon Levy Visiting Fellows

in Archaeological Conservation, also participated in discussions, representing a new generation in cultural preservation.

Setting the tone of the meeting, Dr. Philip Kennedy, Faculty Director of NYUADI, expressed hope for the continued development of field archaeology in the United Arab Emirates, as well as the formation of new collaborations with the local scholarly community. Students were keen to learn about ongoing trends in preservation training in the Gulf region, such as ICCROM’s [ATHAR Programme](#) to translate seminal conservation texts for the Arabic-speaking community. Of particular interest was the groundbreaking training program recently established in Erbil, Iraq. The Program Director, Jessica Johnson, described the unique training and dormitory facilities of the Collections Conservation and Management Program of the [Iraq Cultural Heritage Project](#). The intensive curriculum equips working Iraqi conservators with knowledge of fundamental examination techniques, standards of documentation, and valuable bench skills. Conservation Center students, accustomed to the confines of urban life, found themselves envying Erbil’s full-scale backyard mock excavation pit, and uplifted by the success of the initiative.

Having benefited by their experiences on excavations in Cyprus, Sri Lanka, and Turkey, NYU students were eager to hear about active sites in the Gulf region. For instance, maritime excavations, including both



Sanchita Balachandran delivers the public lecture at the Al Mamoura Auditorium, Abu Dhabi



Al Jahili Fort, Al Ain



A demonstration on how mudbricks are made for a conservation project at Bin Hadi House in Hili Oasis, Al Ain



Hannelore Roemich welcomes guests to the conference in Abu Dhabi

coastal and underwater sites, pose a unique set of challenges. Dr. Lucy Blue, of the University of Southampton, described these areas as valuable real estate, particularly with urban developers whose waterfront plans pose a potential threat to site preservation. However, her optimistic approach, demonstrating that these sites are not only urban resources but also cultural resources, has already led to preliminary collaboration with developers. IFA graduate Paul Yule provided a stimulating case study of his work researching early sites of copper production in Oman and Yemen. Students

the visit to Al-Jahili Fort, Hili Archaeological Park, and several stunning oases provided stimulating fodder for discussion. In considering specific issues in the preservation of mudbrick structures, students were re-confronted with larger questions such as: How do we responsibly present severely deteriorated structures to the public? What are our preservation priorities when forced to allocate limited resources to a crowd of sites in need of care? What assumptions are at work when an area is designated “a site” or “a cultural landscape”? What qualifies as archaeology?



Mark Beech; Sami El-Masri, Deputy Director-General, ADACH; Philip Kennedy, and Harriet Beaubien '86 during the roundtable discussion

were especially impressed by the highly thoughtful work presented by local scholars of the [Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage \(ADACH\)](#): Mark Beech probed the complicated issues of developing nuanced mapping techniques, Peter Sheehan vividly described the challenges encountered as “the archaeology of conservation and the conservation of archaeology,” and Hossam Mahdy roused everyone with several provocative questions such as, Who is the boss; the archaeologist or the conservator? How does vernacular heritage fit into our concept of what archaeology is?

But the topic of regional archaeology was by no means limited to the conference room. On the second day, participants embarked on an excursion to Al-Ain, home to several significant and ongoing excavation sites. Made possible by a group of generous representatives from ADACH,

From the philosophical, the conference also attended to the technical. Johannes Kutterer intrigued students—always looking for ways in which technology can help conservators do their job better—with the power of orthophotography, a documentation technique which eliminates pictorial distortion and allows accurate measurements to be taken from *in situ* photographs.

Bringing things closer to home, IFA-CC graduate Kent Severson '85 explained the curriculum for his intensive, week-long Archaeological Field School, given every spring for the last seven years at the Conservation Center for students about to engage in field conservation work, often for their first time. An especially fitting complement to his talk on the training of new conservators, Sanchita Balachandran '03 gave a public lecture in which she presented a fascinating

account of “The Life and Afterlife of Indian Images: How Early Twentieth Century Archaeology and Conservation Transformed Ancient Indian Bronze Icons.” Holding rapt a packed hall of over 100 attendees, many of them local residents, she was an encouraging and inspiring voice, speaking of the promise of new opportunities, far and wide, after graduate school.

The conference closed with a lively roundtable discussion of the future of archaeological conservation, its challenges, and how we can get closer to the implementation of ideal practices. Taking up the question of “who is the boss?” raised by Dr. Mahdy during his talk, all heartily agreed that open and early communication among all parties involved is of utmost importance in field work. One student’s suggestion to introduce “diplomacy training” into Archaeological Field School was met with affirming nods.

A salubrious and dynamic setting, stimulating conversation, as well as countless hours of planning by conference organizers all contributed to a truly memorable and fruitful event. Galvanized by the several conference talks, some students decided to prolong their stay abroad for a quick visit to the neighboring emirates of Dubai and Sharjah. At conference end, all participants were exchanging contact information and expressing hope for further collaboration in the near future. The authors are grateful to the conference organizers and all the participants for such a high-energy and unique conference, the opportunity to explore how academic questions become important practical questions in the field, and especially, for such a rich experience of the Gulf’s archaeological resources. •

— Jessica Pace, Julia Sybalsky and Cybele Tom

Jessica and Julia are third-year students, Cybele is a second-year student, all with an interest in archaeological objects conservation



Peter Sheehan discusses conservation issues at Qattara Community Arts Center, Al Ain



Margo Delidow, Norbert Baer, Hannelore Roemich, and Kevin Martin, the Conservation Center team at the NYU Abu Dhabi campus



Camels!

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