

BEING A POST-DOC

July 29, 2011 Kayt Armstrong Archaeological Prospection, Day of Archaeology 2011, Digital Archaeology, Iron Age, Italy, Prehistory, Science, Survey Academia, Anthropology, Archaeological sub-disciplines, Archaeology, Bournemouth University, Calabria, chemical make-up, Community Archaeology, electricity, geophysical processing routines, geophysics, girlwithtrowel archaeology university research post-doc PhD geophysics laboratory soils science chemistry, Italy, Jorvik museum, Langstone harbour, Lecturer, Museology, Nagma Safer, Prehistory, researcher, The Netherlands, York

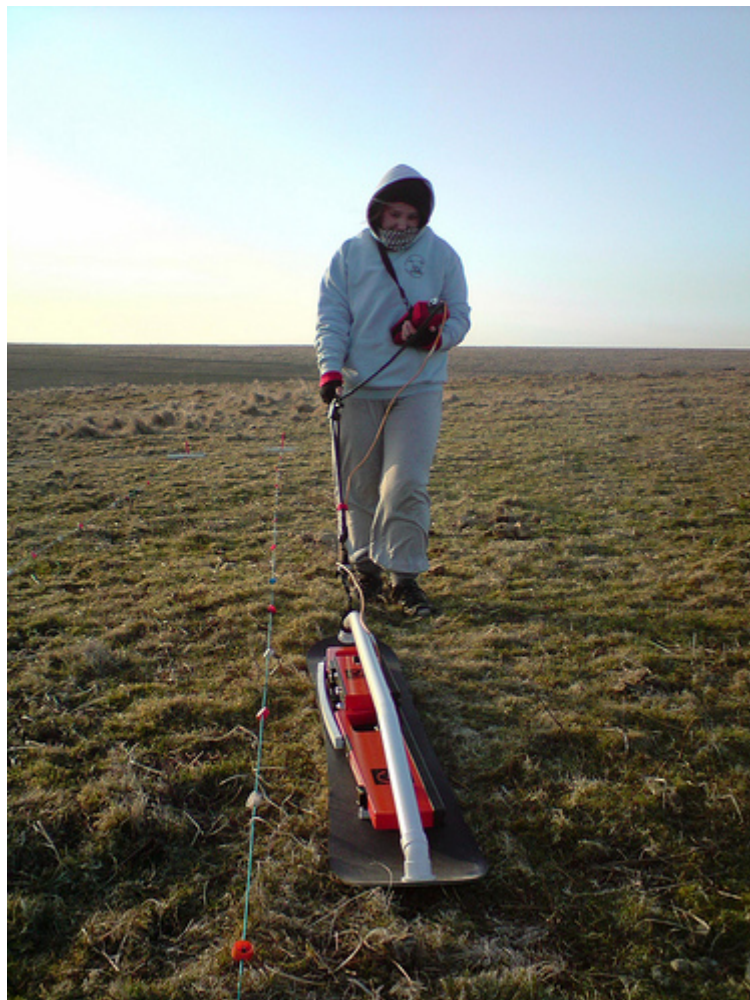
Today, technically I'm not at work, but I'll still be doing some archaeology! In March I started a post-doc (a research position design for someone fresh from their doctoral thesis) in the Netherlands. It was all very sudden- once I accepted the job I had about 5 weeks to up sticks and move to another country that I'd only visited once, and could only manage the absolute basics linguistically. The role is part time- four days a week, which is great because on my day off I can do some work on my own research- a PhD doesn't stop when you graduate! I need to write papers based on my research, and get them published. This will be good for me; publishing lots is key to getting (and keeping) academic jobs- and ultimately I want to be a lecturer. It's also very important for the subject. We've got an obligation, whether we work in commercial or 'university' or community archaeology, to get our results published and into the public domain.



Me doing borehole geophysics in Calabria

So, for the morning I'll be sitting in my (very Dutch) little container-flat here in Groningen, working on some reports hanging over from [my PhD](#), and drafting a paper that synthesises my results. I studied the application of geophysical survey to peatland sites. Geophysics is the use of techniques like ground-penetrating-radar, or electrical surveys that map how resistant to electricity the soil is, to discover and understand archaeological sites. It's quite tricky to do in peat, because things are very wet- the contrasts we look for that suggest archaeology are very slight, but very important, because wet sites preserve all sorts of finds and information that are lost on dry sites. Places like [Flag Fen](#), and the [Sweet Track](#) are good examples, as are some of the [Viking finds from York](#), or the [Saxon Logboat](#) found in Langstone harbour. Incidentally, I went to Jorvik museum when I was a kid, and I think it is one of the very early things that got me interested in archaeology.

The recent '[bunnyhugger](#)' debate about the role of archaeology in planning process really caught my attention precisely because of this type of archaeology- [I did some of my PhD research at Flag Fen](#), and I was very concerned to hear that planning restrictions might be 'got rid of'. Even when I'm not 'at work' I'm engaged with archaeology, following stories like this one, and in some cases, sticking my oar in. Archaeology is woven into a lot of my daily life- I [blog](#) about my research (and the rest of my life), [tweet](#) about what I am up to (including rants about software... ahem), and post pictures of my own fieldwork and projects I get to visit on [Flickr](#). Once I've got through the work I have planned, if I have time, I'll probably post on my own blog about the Day of Archaeology, and I'll be following things on twitter on my phone even once I leave the house in the afternoon!



Doing EM survey on Dartmoor during my PhD

In the afternoon I am going to be taking some time for myself. Normally on my 'day off' I'd spend the day working on my own research at home or at my desk at work, but I've just got back from [three weeks in the field](#) and need some free time! We worked pretty much non-stop, and on our one full day off we went caving, so I didn't exactly get to relax! It's a shame 'day of archaeology' wasn't a week ago- then you'd have had a much more glamorous picture of me in southern Italy, teaching geophysics to student volunteers and conducting surveys on a really exciting project about [Rural Life in Protohistoric Italy](#). Last Friday I was learning about Caesium Vapour magnetometers and doing lots of interesting soil science with a colleague from Mainz university. It's not always like that though- for every week in the field I spend four in the office, processing data, reading the literature and writing reports and papers, or in the lab, doing tests on soil and other materials, all aimed at understanding the data we collected while in the field. It is pretty neat at times; during my PhD I got to boil soil in acid to reduce it to its constituent elements and then burn them off in a plasma torch to look at the chemical make-up. Later this year I am hoping to learn how to make thin-sections of soils to look at the micromorphology- this is the microscopic structures within the soil or archaeological deposit that can tell us things like exactly how it was deposited- for example, if the soil was ploughed, or if this was a house floor or one from a byre for animals. I love to learn new things, and one of the amazing things about working in archaeology is that there are so many sub-specialisms, there is always new stuff to learn. There is always someone who can teach me about something new. I'm very lucky as well to be working in a university, with a big variety of research projects, and where there are frequent seminars and lectures for everyone to attend about cutting edge work.



Doing some (rather wet) soil science at Bournemouth University for my PhD

I've seen some of the plans people are making about their entries. I'm afraid this one is going to be a bit dull by comparison- I don't have any videos of exciting fieldwork, or amazing 3D models to showcase for you. I thought about not taking part as I wasn't doing anything 'exciting'- technically I'm not even working today, but then I thought; people need to know about that side of archaeology too. It's not always fieldwork on massively fruitful sites in exotic places. Sometimes it is lots and lots of arguing with software that seems to have it personally in for you. Sometimes it is writing endless paragraphs that are essentially all the same except for minor details describing your geophysical processing routines for umpteen different sites. Sometimes it's wading through obscure literature and hitting dead ends. Sometimes it is gloriously messy. But it is ALWAYS deeply fascinating and very cool to be part of. I hope I've given you some idea of the variety of work I do, and what it is like to be a researcher at the start of their academic career. If you want to know why I do all of this, I've posted about a couple of times recently, so rather than take up space on this site, you can go and read about it [here](#).