

HOW A RESEARCH PROJECT HAPPENS (MY PERSPECTIVE)

June 29, 2012 ArchaeoAD Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2012 archaeologist, Botswana, daggetta (at) msu (dot) edu, David Meece, dissertation advisor, excavation equipment, fieldwork, Graduate School, http, National Science Foundation, Paul Norman, Research, researcher

I depart Friday (June 29th) to begin my dissertation fieldwork in northeastern Botswana – at last! I will be running my own archaeological fieldwork project for the first time and it has been a long road to prepare for this. From deciding where I want to work, what I want to work on, to formulating actual research questions, to applying for funding, it often seems like I’ve done nothing for the past several years but work towards this goal. I was thrilled to receive a Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant from the National Science Foundation to support my project, and I thought that securing funding was the last major step in the process. Boy was I wrong! Even though I wrote extensively in my funding proposal about how I would get the project done, the last several months has been all about finalizing those logistics – how will I get around in Botswana? Who will join my crew and how will I hire them? What will we eat? How in the world will I get all the necessary excavation equipment overseas? Eight years into my graduate program, and I am still working out how research “gets done.”

I still wouldn’t have the answer to many of these questions if it weren’t for the many colleagues, faculty and friends whom I’ve had the wonderful luck to meet and know over the course of my graduate career. The best decision I made about my PhD work was simply to go to Botswana in 2008, at the point when I decided to look into switching from European to African archaeology. I didn’t know a soul on the African continent, I was alone, and I didn’t have a clue as to how to proceed towards finding a dissertation topic, but I went anyway. If I hadn’t, I would not have ever been able to develop a successful research plan. I didn’t go completely unarmed, however – my dissertation advisor has worked in Botswana for decades and he gave me a starting point for whom to contact, as well as a name to drop.

I didn't fly home in 2008 with a well-developed project, only some ideas, a sense of how things got done on the ground there, and several people I could now contact for advice and ideas. This, however, is actually a pretty good start, because it was the start of a network. I'd initially been terrified and clueless as to how to "network", but I tried it anyway – I just kept talking to people. Showing up at museums and conferences, listening to presentations, sending emails, asking questions. Persistence pays off in this regard: it gets less scary, and eventually people start remembering who you are (especially if you make some presentations of your own). I've continued to build this network since then. Every conference I go to, every paper I read, every journal I browse, I meet ideas and people, and I learn how they got it done. Most of all, I've been learning that there is no formula for "getting it done" – there are a myriad of opportunities, coincidences, and partnerships that can lead to a fieldwork project. There is no perfect research, only decisions made to take one fork in the road or another. There is no perfect researcher either, only people willing to take responsibility for those decisions and see them through, to make sense out of what often appears to be a chaos of dirt, rocks, numbers, messy paperwork and a grumpy crew.

So I guess this post isn't so much about archaeology per se, as it is about how to be an archaeologist (or at least my perspective on the subject). Maybe next year, when I am living in the lab trying to sort through all the artifacts from this year's inaugural field season, I can write more about prehistory itself. I am pretty sure, however, that every archaeologist goes through some form of what I've described here, and hence it's worth mentioning.

If you're interested to read more about what my project actually entails, I invite you to visit my Petridish website at <http://www.petridish.org/projects/prehistoric-kalahari-desert-settlements>. It's a fund-raising website, but don't feel like you need to contribute. I've got a description of what I'll be doing in Botswana and I will keep updating the site as long as they let me. (I also like to get the word out about Petridish because it's a great way to connect science projects with interested members of the public!)

Feel free to email me at daggetta@msu.edu if you've got questions about what I do or want more resources on archaeology! I will, as I mentioned, actually be in the field and therefore will not have regular access to internet for the next several months, but I will do my best.

Thanks for reading!

– Adrienne