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Romania

Summer Dig

This summer I had the opportunity to participate in an archaeology dig in Romania. I can't remember a time when I was more dirty, sweaty, constantly sunburned or sore, it was the best experience of my life. I learned a lot about archaeology and was fortunate enough to learn about another culture in the process.

We were there to learn about archaeological method but also about Romania. I tried to prepare myself but I didn't know what to expect before I arrived. I knew it was Eastern European, I knew a little about their communist past and Roman heritage, I knew they had gymnasts, I knew they had vampires and I knew they were trying to enter the EU. As soon as I crossed the border it was like stepping into another world and my western preconceived notions about Eastern Europe melted away and I immediately fell in love with what was before me. Some of my first images of Romania were of cows grazing on a soccer field, giant golden haystacks (The haystacks were a striking division from the Hungarian countryside, which was already pretty exotic by my standards, that had nicely machine-rolled haystacks but immediately after the border they looked more like giant beehives), concrete communist buildings, wooden farming villas, shanty towns, women wearing babushkas working in the fields, children running to wave to the train and farmers loading horse drawn hay carts. It was very surreal, full of contradictions of old and new, rural and industrial, rich and poor, but mostly it was just beautiful, authentic, warm and welcoming.

The dig was a joint American-Romanian excavation, the Porolissum Forum Project. Porolissum was originally founded, in 106 AD, as a military outpost but grew into an important

commercial center which flourished well after the Roman withdrawal from Dacia in 271 AD. The 2006 season's goal was to find the dimensions of the forum.

The Porolissum Forum Project Field School was a hands-on learning experience. In four short weeks we learned how to excavate a site from beginning to end. We covered everything from how to set up a trench, how to document stratigraphical layers, how to document materials found, how to use a total station, procedure for closing a trench and many more things, all in this very intercultural setting. I think our first experience on site is a great example of this setting. Our director lead us to an over grown field, everything we were looking for was waiting for us underground, but first, before we could start we had to wait for one of the Romanian boys to cut down all the grass with a scythe.

We worked Monday through Friday 8:00-4:00 with an hour for lunch plus two mini "pausas." Weekends were used for field trips to other archaeology sites or to get a little taste of Romanian culture. Although we had a pretty set routine, it never felt routine, it was very exciting to get up to camp every morning. I always started the day wondering what we would learn by the end of it. We would usually find pottery, bones, or roof tiles, but if we were lucky a coin or pin might be waiting for us, or the walls we were after might be uncovered. It was thrilling every time something was uncovered or some new data could be deciphered. I was in awe at how much could be learned from a broken piece of pottery, cuts in the soil or just the soil content alone, even sterile soil tells you something. You could feel the connection with history. It was tangible. Somebody almost 2,000 years ago built the walls, dropped that coin, or walked on the floor that we tediously uncovered so that we wouldn't trowel right through it.

I felt like I got to experience a very authentic side to the country since we lived and worked in a rural area. The closest city was forty-five minutes away, Zalau, where we grocery shopped,

got our internet fix and a feel for Romanian city life. I learned the most about Romanian culture at camp because that is where I spent the most time and had the most interaction with Romanians. Aside from learning archaeology at camp, I learned a little Romanian, how to play cruce (a very addictive card game), it is almost impossible to turn down an invitation, MTV is popular even in rural Romania, the more outlandish the joke, the more they are trying to break the ice and make you feel comfortable, the fine rules of drinking țsuica (a Romanian moonshine made from plums which they are passionate about... more precisely passionate about sharing), and the fine art of spitting cherries, just to name a few. As for meals, one without bread just isn't worth the trouble, no matter how hot it is outside, soup is the introduction to lunch, and pork meat is considered a staple and any Romanian's favorite vegetable, desert or main course.

It was really an amazing academic, cultural and personal experience in an amazing country. Romanians are very interested in making sure visitors are having a good time and are almost worried that they are getting the wrong impression of their country. So the overwhelming question you would typically get from a Romanian seconds after meeting them would be "Do you like Romania?" and then immediately followed up "No. Really?" I couldn't convince them enough that Romania turned out to be the most fascinating, beautiful, warm, authentic place I have ever been to. I feel very fortunate to be able to follow my passion for archaeology and have it lead me to such an amazing place. After this experience I feel more motivated and confident in pursuing my passion and I am very grateful to Saint Mary's and CWIL for helping make this opportunity possible.