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**CELEBRATE
POLAND'S
INDEPENDENCE**

A glimpse into the day of an archaeologist in the field

by Magdalena Srienc

It's barely dawn as the echoes from the mosque sound throughout the village with the first call to prayer. Five seconds later a second mosque follows with an offbeat and off-key prayer. Then the largest mosque, closest to base camp, thunders across the sleeping town. I groggily look across my room through my black mosquito net to my closest neighbor and she turns sleepily to the other side on the hard mattress. I close my eyes for what feels like a second and suddenly my alarm sounds at 6am to wake up for the upcoming day in the field. I reach over to the table and lift up the mosquito net, and as I do the thin layer of sand from the sandstorm during the night gently falls to the ground. I open the plastic Ziploc bag with my phone and turn off my alarm before it wakes up my five other roommates and swing my feet to my shoes but not before checking them for scorpions. It's a new day at the Early Makuria Project base camp in El-Zuma, Sudan.



Days in the field begin early and end late. Intense is generally speaking an understatement. Different culture, different cuisine and a battle with the elements is just a part of working in the desert. Most drastic are the fluctuating temperatures and the constant layering or delayering of clothing to adapt to the changing degrees. Mornings are cold, especially if there had been a sandstorm the night before, and transition to a heatwave lasting from 11:00am until 3:00pm with temperatures well over 100 degrees.

There are no windows in the entire basecamp complex, only rusty metal shutters that block out the worst sand-filled winds. But mornings are always blissfully calm. The first person to arrive in the morning for breakfast wipes the table down with wet towel to preserve at least a partial sand-free area, but three weeks in the field and everyone has already become accustomed to the sand dust that persistently and involuntarily finds its way into every crevasse and surface. The grainy feeling on all utensils, inside the fibers of your clothes, and occasionally the crunchy reminder in the food - there is no escaping the desert.

Traveling to site is more of an ordeal. The three other field archaeologists tasked with going on site pack the excavation gear swiftly under the seats in the eleven-person van. Most importantly, the water jug is filled to the brim with plastic water bottles. We four archaeologists squeeze into the three seats in the back of the van, and the van drives throughout the village and picks up workers that squeeze into the van somehow managing to find spaces that I didn't even know I were there.

Its noon, two more hours before finishing on site for the day and the heat is becoming uncomfortable. I begin imagining a nice cool shower with a fresh change of clothes or maybe a nice cold beverage. I can't help but think "what am I doing here? why did I agree to come here again?"

Just as my exasperated thoughts enter my mind, one of the workers shouts my name. There is something unusual in the tumulus shaft. Have they discovered the grave? Or was it completely looted? Could it be something interesting? I grab my trowel and a brush and make my way down into the shaft. I carefully knee next to the spot and slowly being brushing the sand away. The white enamel from the mandibular dentition (teeth) slowly appears. My heart thunders. Yes! It's a grave! My partner, in the neighboring tumulus calls out that they found ceramic vessels in another grave. Now that's more like it! Suddenly the discomfort from the heat disappears. Thirst? What thirst? New focus is heightened on the task ahead. And the next thing I know, the inspector is telling me that its time to go back to base camp, the work day is over. All I can think is, "just when it was getting good". The rest will just have to wait for tomorrow.

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