


Excavating Archaeology @ U-M: 1817–2017

This is the online extension of the exhibition presented at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology from October 2017 to May 2018. This show, curated by Carla M. Sinopoli and Terry G. Wilfong, explores the history of archaeology and museums at the University of Michigan for the past 200 years and looks forward to the coming century.

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Excavating Archaeology @ U-M: 1817-2017

Early Collections: 1850-1922



The new state of Michigan and its university were influenced by the same political currents shaping the nation—westward expansion, the displacement of Native peoples, war—as well as by intellectual debates influencing philosophy, politics, and emerging scientific understandings of the natural and cultural world.

In Ann Arbor, the University's first president, Henry Tappan, introduced a radical vision of a university that would focus on both teaching and research and be accessible to all citizens. The six men in the first class of U-M students came to a campus of four buildings and two professors in a rural town in a new state on the American frontier. Despite these modest beginnings, the University's ambitious founders were determined to produce educated and well-rounded citizens with "thorough knowledge of various branches of literature, science and the arts." To do this, the University needed books for its library and collections of authentic objects for its Cabinet of Natural History.

Image: Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, record HSI4923

A grounding in the Classics was still considered essential for the educated citizen and in the 1850s, Latin professor Henry Frieze began to acquire original objects and high-quality reproductions of

Early

1817

1850

1870

1875

1889

1892

1903

Formation

Postwar

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The exhibition website recreates the unique look of the “Excavating Archaeology” show, designed by Emily Pierattini and Scott Meier; it relies on carefully chosen objects, archival documents and images, and other illustrative materials to trace the growth of the University’s archaeology museums and the development of archaeology as a discipline.

The central element of the site is an interactive timeline that serves as the main navigation tool, dividing the exhibition material into three periods. The Early Collections period (19th–early 20th century) focused on acquisition of original objects belonging to various epochs and cultures. A highlight of the show is the story of the so-called “Michigan Relics” — artifacts known as the “Soper Fraud” collection that were the subject of public controversy in the 1890s–1920s.

The Institutionalization period (1920s–1940s) saw the foundation of two new archaeology museums — the Museum of Anthropological Archaeology (1922), and the Kelsey Museum of

Archaeology (1928). Both museums undertook large-scale field projects, such as the Philippine Expedition and excavations at Karanis in Egypt. This website displays a selection of the tens of thousands of artifacts brought to Michigan from these expeditions during the first half of the 20th century.

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Objects: 1922-1945

Related Pages

- Philippine Expedition
- Excavations at Karanis
- The Ceramic Repository

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During the Postwar period (1945–present), the archaeologists at the University of Michigan have expanded their research to new geographic areas and academic disciplines; the areas of their projects are diverse, ranging from the early human cultures of the Paleolithic to the states and empires that emerged in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the New World. The website showcases four of the current field projects, two sponsored by the Kelsey Museum, and two by the Museum of Anthropological Archaeology.

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Archaeology @ U-M Today: Kelsey Edition



Lisa Nevett's multidisciplinary field project at Olynthos in northern Greece focuses on the household and urban archaeology of a small Classical (mainly late fifth- to mid-fourth-century BC) city. Excavations at Olynthos from 1928 to 1938 made it an important site for the study of domestic contexts in Classical archaeology. With her colleagues Dr. Bettina Tsigarida and Dr. Zosia Archibald, Nevett is using new approaches and methodologies to better understand the social history of Greek households, and the physical, cultural, and economic frameworks into which they were integrated. Modern technology plays an important part in the project. For example, geophysical surveys using magnetometry (the technique of measuring and mapping patterns of magnetism in the soil) and electrical resistivity surveys (in which electrical resistance meters are used to detect and map underground archaeological features and patterns) have allowed archaeological investigation of subsurface architectural remains across large areas of the site without the need for excavation.



Natalie Abell studies prehistoric ceramics from the Greek island of Kea, the westernmost Cycladic island in the Aegean Sea. On Kea, the Bronze Age settlement at Ayia Irini has yielded evidence for ceramic production and exchange that tells us much about the wider society and economy. Abell's research on the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1900-1700 BC) material from Kea shows an expansion of trade both locally and with the mainland, along with significant interaction with the emergent palaces of the Minoan civilization on the island of Crete. Minoan material culture became increasingly popular on Kea in this period, and Abell's work looks into the complex reasons for this change.



Timeline of archaeological milestones:

- 1945
- 1968
- 1977
- 1986
- 1991
- Today

The chronological narrative leads website visitors through the past, present, and future of archaeology at the University of Michigan. [Gallery views](#) and [lists of objects](#) serve as alternative ways of navigation and discovery.

Credits

Exhibition curators: Carla Sinopoli and Terry Wilfong
 Graphic artist: Emily Pierattini
 Editor: Leslie Schramer
 Artifact photographer: Randal Stegmeyer
 Website designer: Julia Falkovitch-Khain