Research Outcomes

With the generous support from the Archaeological Institute of America’s Jane C. Waldbaum Scholarship fund, from June 1 and July 5, 2016, I participated in an archaeological field school at the 14th-century Carthusian monastery in Bourgfontaine, just outside of Villers-Cotterêts, in northern France. The excavation, led by Dr. Sheila Bonde through Brown University’s Monastic Archaeology Research Project (MonArch), began its initial survey of Bourgfontaine in 2006 with excavations beginning in 2013. The goals of the 2016 season were: to find further evidence of the overall architectural plan of the monastery’s great cloister in relation to the monastic cells and the abbey church, and; begin excavation of the interior and surrounding garden wall of one of the monastic cells. Further evidence for the monastery’s water-management system (i.e. above-ground cistern and lavatories), which previous excavations had revealed, was also anticipated as part of the excavation of the monastic cell. In addition to the excavation goals, the project served as an intensive archaeological field school and gave me a unique opportunity to train in excavation, surveying, mapping, field photography, section and artifact drawing, as well as registrar procedures and analysis. Having received my B.A. and M.A. in history and working with mostly textual sources, and now embarking on my doctoral program in medieval art and architectural history, I felt that archaeological training was critical for being able to examine building materials, phases, and construction techniques as well as examining related material culture using archaeological methodologies. I was excited to finally “get my hands dirty” and jump-start my graduate work in medieval history!

From the beginning, it was clear that my time at Bourgfontaine was going to be an intensive learning experience and a unique research opportunity. Up until MonArch’s first survey in 2006, the site had never been fully studied albeit evidence from MonArch’s 2014 excavation revealing the monastery’s abbey church was, in fact, a royal chapel. The site has the potential to reveal a great deal of information about the design and use of Carthusian monasteries during the Middle Ages. Guided by radar analysis of the site, our team began by partially
exposing the exterior of the eastern and western walls of the northeast cloister arcade, revealing evidence for additional structures leading off of the cloister-wall foundations to what could be the refectory or chapter house.

In this first phase of the dig, we learned the basics of working on an archaeological site, from the proper handling and use of tools, and safety procedures, to the analysis of the radar interpretation results and the decision-making process for deciding where to begin the dig. After all four exterior walls of a monastic cell situated off of the cloister arcade were revealed, we excavated a northeastern section of the interior of the cell to provide evidence establishing a circulation level. Additionally, we excavated down to the foundation-level of the walls and found important evidence for its construction in the 14th century and phases of its successive destruction beginning in the 18th century. Important evidence of the design and scale of the monastic cell was also revealed, including the foundation walls for a smaller cloister arcade within the cell’s boundary walls and boundary walls for the cell’s garden, allowing for the calculation of the other cells surrounding the great cloister. It was also during the first two weeks of excavation that the team began to uncover what would become a complete medieval burial located in the cloister garden was excavated—the presence of which was suggested by archival and visual representations of the monastery from the 18th century.

It was at this stage in the excavation that I stepped into the role of registrar for the dig and began coordinating cleaning, cataloging, description, and, if necessary, drawing of the excavated material. With guidance and special training from the project directors Dr. Sheila Bonde and Dr. Clark Maines, I received days of one-on-one training on classifying and dating medieval ceramics, tile, and stained glass. For me, working with the material and looking at it in the context of its excavation was the most rewarding part of my overall experience at Bourgfontaine. In addition to the cloister and cell wall and interior of the cell, two burn pits were excavated along the western edge of the cloister arcade wall, revealing further evidence for the destruction of the monastery in the 17th century, including roof tiles, ceramics, and floor tiles. While a majority of the excavated material from the cloister arcade walls this season were indicative of these destruction phases of the monastery, several clues to the monastery’s rich decorative
features were also discovered, including archaeologically complete floor tiles with decorative and historiated motifs, and stained glass.

While the weather did not provide ideal conditions for excavation—rainy days made up almost 75% of our today time on-site—the team pulled together to work early mornings or late into the evening when conditions improved. Overall, the values of patience (not excavating in poor conditions or concentrating on other tasks, such as surveying skills or artifact cleaning), keeping long-term goals (considering archaeological evidence from previous years together with what may be possible in future excavations), and contextualization of a variety of factors, including geological and historical, made a deep impression on me and will influence my approach to conducting future research.

The architectural history of medieval monasteries, like that at Bourgfontaine, is central to my interest in exploring how monastic architecture was designed and shaped by spiritual aims and ritual practices. With the AIA’s Jane C. Waldbaum Scholarship fund, I was able to participate in this opportunity by applying the scholarship to the cost of flying to France as well as some of my accommodation expenses. The experience of working as part of an excavation team as well as the invaluable skills of archaeological research methodology, excavation, and analysis under the guidance of my dissertation advisor, has profoundly shaped the analytical and methodological approaches of my future research—Thank you!
Excavation of the interior of the monastic cell (a), north cell wall (b), and the north extension of the cell’s cloister arcade (c).

As Bourgfontaine is under private ownership, additional images from the site will follow after they are approved.
Image 2: Artifact washing, identification, and registration station in the monastery’s 16th century guest chapel.
Image 3 & 4: Interior of the abbey church and the private chapel (looking west) Excavations in 2014 of the eastern end of the abbey in 2014 revealed the remains of a royal chapel.
Image 4: The team prepares to mark the lines of the season’s first trench while standing over the previous season’s excavation of the monastery’s great cloister arcade.

Image 6: Looking north into the abbey church from the monastery’s cloister arcade.