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**‘Rock and Role’: A critical reflection of roles and responsibilities in my
archaeological career**

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Introduction - ‘Another One Bites the Dust’¹

Once in a life everybody wants to be an archaeologist; it is one of those adventurous childhood fantasies with hidden treasures and traps to find, riddles to solve, using little brushes on skeletons or discovering sunken ships with their cargo; and some of us made that dream come true. However the reality could not be more different from what we dreamt of. Even though hidden treasures can be found, wellies and boots can be trapped in a mud puddle, little Roman curse tablets and stamped Samians can be read, skeletons can be excavated and the secrets of the sea can be revealed by diving deep, it all comes with responsibilities, challenges, hard work and dedication (and a lot of dirt).

I graduated in Hungary in 2012 before starting my archaeological career in the UK in 2014. Since then I have learnt that a commercial archaeological site is demanding; it involves serious planning, logistics, dealing with tight if not impossible deadlines, long post-ex hours and it takes a great deal of teamwork of skilled and dedicated people both on site and in the offices. I gained lots of experience working on numerous different commercial projects, from evaluation trenching to excavating a scheduled monument of national importance. I was involved in post-excavation works such as finds handling, site data processing and assessment report writing; from the archaeological data creation (excavating and recording) to the archaeological data valuation (reports, assessments). It became very clear to me early that a well excavated and documented site can make the post-ex works easier and can add great results to the historical and archaeological heritage which surround us and belong to everyone. This recognition has driven me to do my job according to my best of abilities as a site assistant, a supervisor or a self-employed archaeologist.

In this paper I attempt to describe my roles and responsibilities considering the professional and ethical judgments I had to make during my career by using the *Code of Conduct* and *Policy Statement* written by CIfA (2021 and 2022).

Site Assistant Roles - ‘Dig a Pony’²

As a site assistant my responsibilities were mainly to manually excavate and record features, recover finds, follow the guidance provided by my supervisors or senior archaeologists according to my best abilities as it is stated in the Code of Conduct Principle 3 (CIfA 2022, 6). On my first job in British Archaeology I was introduced to a new excavation technique: the single context excavation (Northern Archaeological Associates Ltd., A1 Road scheme, Catterick/Cataractonium Scheduled Roman Monument). With the support of my supervisors, colleagues and some reading, I was trained to use this method successfully. I was able to observe, record the various archaeological features with detailed descriptions and sketch drawings where the archaeological stratigraphy was particularly complex. Regular feedback from supervisors and appraisals were very important

¹ The title is identical with the song by The Queen, ‘Another One Bites the Dust’.

² The title of the paragraph is inspired by the song ‘Dig a Pony’ by The Beatles.

because they helped me to improve my skills or made me more confident. I learnt how to work under pressure and manage my time to meet deadlines. As my experience grew, I was trusted with different tasks and was responsible for excavating and recording more difficult features or recovering delicate finds, which I tried to carry out with the highest standards possible (Network Archaeology Ltd., LEB16). I enjoyed cooperating with the other archaeologists, we looked out for each other and raised concerns regarding safety or welfare issues. I took part in site trainings provided by my employer such as learning to survey and using photogrammetry to record complex archaeological features or human remains (Network Archaeology Ltd.). Further presentations on find specific subjects or sampling methods also helped me to understand why certain techniques are important and their correct use can give great results (Oxford Archeology East). With all this kept in my mind I was able to progress and my skills became more developed. Working on evaluation trenching projects was perhaps my biggest challenge. It is really fast paced and there are many things which need to be taken into consideration to achieve great results.

Supervisor Roles - 'Boogie in the Mud'³

When I became a supervisor (Network Archaeology Ltd.) I tried to keep up my high standards and use my seven years of experience I have previously gained while excavating and taking part in training. With the role new responsibilities came. I had to learn and adapt to do my job according to the best practice and guidance. My supervisors have set great examples on how to prepare for a job or how to deal with unexpected situations. Before the site excavations could start, I had to get to know the Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) and the Risk Assessment Method Statement (RAMS) and other archaeology-related legislations. These guidelines were essential as the level of recording had to comply with the aims and objectives of the project (CIfA 2023, 6) and I had to make sure that these guidelines were followed. However the approach regarding the site excavation methodology could also be influenced by the features and artefacts unearthed and the nature of the archaeological data generated on site. Sometimes this demanded a change in the planned strategy and new methods, better suited to the needs of the excavation of special features had to be introduced (CIfA 2023, 6) (e.g. unexpected burials or carefully removing extensive colluvial layers with a machine as another horizon of archaeology was discovered beneath). There were situations when safety had to be put in the first place. Even though the WSI allowed sections to be excavated up to 1m depth, due to the ground conditions (e.g. saturated sandy natural) it was decided that the features had to be excavated to a smaller depth. Seeking guidance and consulting with the project officer, manager and specialists was crucial prior to making any changes in the excavation strategy. Planning the daily and weekly job were amongst my responsibilities too. I had to take into account the weather and ground conditions as it could affect the archaeology on site. Frozen or very wet, slippery areas were left untouched until their state has improved or the areas which were subject to flooding were prioritised while dry. Important features (skeletons or more complex archaeology)

³ Boogie in the Mud by Danny James.

were not started at the end of the working week, unless it was absolutely necessary due to time limitations. Communication was key, especially working with the site team and other supervisors, project officers. Me and my fellow supervisors tried to make sure that all the team members were competent to carry out their tasks, providing support or advice if needed, and investigating when someone raised concerns. Their welfare was very important, we followed the procedures of the health and safety regulations and risk assessment (hot weather, working near machines etc).

I also had the chance to work with archaeologists who were at the very beginning of their archaeological career. It was very important to show how an archaeological site is excavated and make them understand the basic principles of the archaeological excavation, finds handling, recording and stratigraphy so they will be competent to work under supervision (CIfA 2021, p. 11; CIfA 2022, p. 4). I also tried to teach them how 'old methods' such as hand planning can be useful, as surveying can be compromised when the GPS signal is not reliable or available (e.g. too deep urban excavations or sites with bad reception).

Excavating burials is one of my favourite tasks. I excavated many graves during my career, from a single inhumation in a kiln to a large Middle-Saxon cemetery; but there is one thing which always stays the same. The excavation of human remains has to be carried out with respect and dignity and with great care to try to avoid any damage on the bones (BABAO 2019) and grave goods if the grave was furnished. Even though I excavated many human remains, I keep my manual (White and Folkens 2005) at hand to make sure everything is done accordingly. Lifting the bones can be difficult if the condition of the remains is not good. As a supervisor I also had a chance to show others how to excavate, lift and bag skeletal remains. Lifting finds and intact pottery vessels can be challenging too. Sometimes it required cooperating with other specialists, the finds manager or I had to prepare for any delicate process by reading the current best practice.

While working in the office, I had a chance to learn more about the post-excavation processes. I was trusted with some find-related tasks such as washing, marking, cataloguing and packing. This was a great experience as I handled rare or unique artefacts and got to know more about different finds. This helped me on site, as I was able to recognise new types of finds when similar objects were unearthed. Other office duties included working with site records and I learnt that a small error on site which could be fixed in a couple of minutes, could result in hours of recovery in the office so when on site, my aim was to reduce the amount of these mistakes by 'catching them early'. I thoroughly checked and cross-referenced the site indices and context sheets, checked the finds bags and samples if they are labelled correctly and made sure that the survey data was complete. I took part in site phasing, creating matrices and writing assessment reports which I really enjoyed as I had the chance to work with large amounts of site data, specialist assessment and with the help of additional research I was able to turn the collected information into results.

Self-employment - ‘Old Dirt Road’⁴

In 2021, I took a step back from being a supervisor and became a self-employed archaeologist. Since then I have worked for several different archaeological units in England. As a senior, experienced field archaeologist, I am just as dedicated as I was when I started my career in archaeology. My aim is to provide and deliver a high standard, quality work using all my skills and experience even if it is ‘only’ about excavating features and recording. I like to be part of the site team and I am happy to help and give advice to the less experienced team members or share my thoughts with the supervisors, if I am asked. Before I go on a new site, I prepare and ask for the WSI to get to know the archaeology and the digging strategy and methodology best suited for the site.

Summary - ‘You got mud on your face’⁵

Archaeology is challenging. The weather, the ground conditions, and sometimes the water can make things difficult on site, while lost or incomplete records can make life more complicated in the office. However Archaeology is also rewarding. When finds come out from the ground and they are seen for the first time after hundreds or thousands years spent in the ground is incredible. When all the site records come together and something interesting and new can be presented, it is a great achievement. Archaeology is also teamwork; working together for new results, the sake of the heritage and for the future. It can be cold and it can be muddy sometimes, but I think it is not a big disgrace if I have mud on my face.

⁴ Song by John Lennon.

⁵ Lyrics from ‘We Will Rock You’ by Queen.

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