

Provide a critical reflection of your role and responsibilities within a wider archaeological project considering the requirements for professional and ethical judgement, and your relationships with other team members and other stakeholders

## Introduction

The project I will be focussing on for this assignment is the recent excavation by University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) at Leicester Cathedral, as this is the project I have had most involvement with during my 18 months with the unit. This excavation took place to facilitate the construction of a new Heritage Learning Centre attached to the Cathedral, with the building due to have a double basement going down to a depth of c. 7.5m below ground level (Morris, 2022a). The excavation was taking place within the burial grounds, which were in use until 1856, and assessment by the Cathedral's archaeologist anticipated around 300-400 burials within this area, however the number lifted eventually totalled 1,237, making this a much more intensive excavation than expected (Morris, 2022a, Morris, 2022b). This project is still ongoing and is currently about to enter the analysis stage.

## Fieldwork stage

My first experience with this project was also my first experience as a professional archaeologist. Following a brief induction to the company, allocation of PPE, and a short site visit on my first day, I was on site the next morning. After going over the risk assessment documentation, I was provided with a couple of laminated documents with the procedures for recording excavated skeletons and coffins on them, given a run-down of the status of the work in progress and shown the area I'd be working in. And then I was simply pointed towards the barely visible part of a skull and told to work on uncovering whatever remained of the associated skeleton. This approach of being pointed to an area to uncover whatever might be there was also the general approach for the remainder of my time on site, though this was mostly out of necessity due to the unpredictable nature of the site, which required a very reactive process to manage it efficiently.

I wasn't given any further instruction beyond being pointed in the right direction though, or provided with close supervision to guide me in how I should approach the work, and was simply told to ask one of the nearby archaeologists if I had any questions. Having just finished my degree at the University of Leicester, during which I'd attended two field schools supervised by ULAS, the site director was a familiar face, and so I worked on the assumption that his awareness of the training I'd received during that time must mean I knew enough to be able to tackle this without much oversight. It was quite nerve-wracking and a little overwhelming at first. The site director was always on site though and so a system of passive observation and perhaps feedback from other on-site supervisors seems likely to have been taking place. I had however joined the dig after the point at which it had become clear that there were far more burials than expected, which had created immense time pressure on the work, and this was also likely a factor in the lack of proper 'training' offered. Luckily, I wasn't afraid of bothering people to ask advice and I also took the time to observe how others were handling the task, but I imagine this approach could have led to difficulties had I been less diligent or confident in asking for assistance.

Judging how certain elements of the remains needed to be excavated without damaging or dislodging them also required a significant amount of care, along with an understanding of the skeletal form, which prior to joining the excavation I only had a superficial knowledge of. At times during my initial week or so on site I was concerned about what I perceived as my slower speed in excavating remains, as we were expected to uncover, record, and lift one skeleton a day at a minimum. But I was conscious of the fact that these were human remains and from an ethical standpoint it seemed better for me to complete the task properly than quickly. At no point though was I ever actually pushed to speed up my work, and I gradually managed to improve my efficiency naturally without compromising the care taken in the work.

On the one hand this approach to my 'supervision' allowed for me to use my initiative to work out the best way of doing things without feeling like I was being constantly watched. However, it also meant though that any mistakes I may have been making were less likely to be picked up on and may not become apparent until deeper into the post-excavation phase of the project. By which time any repeated blunders may be harder to resolve, and therefore possibly limit the potential of my work to contribute to the project's outcomes.

## The post-excavation stage

I spent approximately two months as a fieldworker on the Cathedral excavation before transferring to another site, however a few months later I managed to secure a place on the post-excavation team. By this time the Cathedral excavation was beginning to draw to a close, but a few weeks into my new role the site had one more surprise in store, the discovery of a 'plague pit' (Morris, 2022b). The remains from this pit became the priority for processing, and this coincided with a period where two other large sites had finished and there were a high number of fieldworkers in the lab needing something to do. Despite still only having limited experience with finds processing work I was given the task of organising the cleaning of the approximately 200 skeletons which had been lifted from the pit. This meant quickly formulating a system of organisation to be able to keep track of up to ten skeletons being processed at once, each needing multiple finds trays, with people working elbow to elbow, and there being limited drying space. The potential for mix-ups was therefore quite high and required constant observation of proceedings, with multiple forms of paperwork needed to keep things in order.

The fact that I was the newest employee of the unit however led to issues with certain members of the field team cleaning the skeletons, as they were less than happy with being corrected on their mistakes by someone who'd been in archaeology for far less time than them. I regarded my responsibility as being to the remains being processed and the integrity of the project to make sure the work was done to the appropriate standard though, and occasionally struggled to hide my frustration at requests for accurate labelling or more care for the remains going ignored. Thankfully I was in regular communication with other members of the post-excavation team, including my supervisor and line manager, who were swift to back me up, with senior members of staff making sure to reiterate to the fieldworkers what level of work was expected of them when necessary. In the end, thanks to the record keeping procedures implemented, all of the remains were processed, with their component parts fully accounted for and then re-boxed for further analysis, making it a successful endeavour. My line manager did later admit though that I had perhaps been thrown in at the deep end with a task of this scale coming so soon after starting in the lab, and suggested I should have been provided with further support during it. However, the lab felt stretched to its limits during this period, and I'm not sure what additional support would have actually been possible with the small lab team we have.

Following this, my next significant task on the project came when the budgets for the later stages of the post-ex process needed finalising and I was required to do an individual count of all of the finds from the site. For this I was liaising with my line manager in the lab along with the site director, sometimes in tandem, sometimes separately, each with different needs. This information was needed quite urgently, and I was made aware of the importance of the accuracy of it for the proper calculation of the finances. Certain finds types also had higher priorities than others and requests for this information were often given at short notice. This meant there were frequent discussions taking place with my colleagues to figure out which of our regular volunteers was available to assist with the work, without affecting other people's schedules and requirements for assistance. During this time I was also in constant communication with my line manager over how much of the remaining Cathedral finds processing, both cleaning and marking, could be completed by me personally within the existing budget constraints and what needed to be done by volunteers and our student interns. As it turned out the budget for me to process anything ran out quite quickly and so negotiations with my colleague who coordinates the student interns were then required to figure out how much of the remaining work could be slotted into their schedule. The combination of strict deadlines and constantly trying to juggle whatever spare hands we had available made this section of the work quite chaotic at times, and more advanced notice on a number of aspects of it would have assisted greatly. As it was there were a lot of impromptu meetings, and spur of the moment decisions, which led to stress and the risk of things being missed, especially in the flurry of messages between parties seeking last minute clarifications and amendments to figures at the deadline.

The most recent task undertaken for the project related to the conservation of the metalwork from the excavation, most notably the delicate coffin furniture. Initially I was asked to photograph this coffin furniture in order to provide the conservator with an understanding of the material we would be sending and allow her to work out costings. I sought advice from my supervisor as to the most appropriate way of approach this, but in the end I was mostly left to make my own decisions on how to prepare the pieces for this. The same was true when I was asked to find and order storage boxes for its transportation and archiving, with both my supervisor and line manager leaving the decision on the most suitable option entirely up to me. Being given the responsibility of spending hundreds of pounds of the unit's money felt like it should maybe come with a little more oversight, but thankfully it seemed to work out okay.

A gap of a few weeks then occurred between this preparatory work and the finds finally being sent away. When it did come time to send everything though the signal for it all to be packed and organised for transportation came at very short notice, with a deadline that it wasn't actually possible to meet. In part this was due to the constantly shifting priorities between the other projects that were being worked on, such that despite the knowledge that it needed doing at some point, the spare time to prepare the packaging wasn't allocated. There was also an apparent misjudgement from my line manager of the time that would be required to accomplish the task, leading to the short deadline being chosen without consultation with myself or my supervisor. Again, although I sought advice initially on what method I should use to safely package things up it was largely left up to me, but thankfully careful consultation of 'First Aid for Finds' (Watkinson, 1998) and simply taking as long as was necessary to complete the task meant that although this was again a bit nerve-racking, the chosen method was given the conservator's seal of approval upon receipt.

## Conclusion

Overall, my various responsibilities on this project have had an overarching commonality in that the supervisory element has been quite limited. The question with this is whether that is a matter of a lack of oversight or simply that the people supervising me have enough trust in my work that they feel like it would be unnecessary micro-managing to get more involved, and therefore their time is better used on other things. The freedom afforded in the post-excavation work in particular often seems like a balance between trust and just not having enough staff for there to be multiple people working on the same thing at once. As a practical learner I do often enjoy being thrown in at the deep end and left to figure things out, but the uncertainty can bring a certain amount of stress with it. I am also guilty of trying to soldier on through things to avoid bothering people, and probably could have gained more assistance at times if I'd simply asked. The highest stress incidents related to this project however have tended to be the result of sudden deadlines being thrust upon me, and these have often required working outside of my contracted hours to complete in time. A slightly more organised level of planning in terms of knowing what is still required for tasks would certainly have helped with this, and efforts are currently being made in the lab to adjust a number of workflows to make things less chaotic in this respect, so hopefully in the future things will run a little smoother.

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