

Education: Digging for Credit

Time Magazine

Monday, Sept. 03, 1973

Above them towers the stone wall that Herod the Great erected around the Temple Mount of ancient Jerusalem. More than 50 ft. below the top of the southern facade, a group of American girls hacks away with picks at the gray, lifeless earth. When they fill their two-handled rubber baskets, they pass them on to a chain of perspiring, bare-chested male students who carry the rubble to the surface.

For eight weeks this summer, 82 juniors and seniors from three campuses of Ambassador College, headquartered in Pasadena, Calif., dug into soil undisturbed for 20 centuries. For their labor they earned board, lodging and four credit points toward a B.A. degree.

Ambassador College's archaeology program is by no means unique. More than 40 American colleges and universities now have similar "field schools." This summer alone, several thousand U.S. and foreign students dug for credit or fun or both on locations ranging from Yayahuala, Mexico, to the village of Rockcliffe in southwest Scotland.

The popularity of the programs reflects a growing interest in archaeology on the part of the students, who seem to counter the creed of the "now" generation in their fascination with the past. Some of the compulsion for archaeology, suggests Bryn Mawr Graduate Student Erik Nielson, is that "you can only learn so much from books. There comes a point when you have to kneel over a trench and handle an object that's fresh from the ground." Despite the long hours, backbreaking and often boring labor, an increasing number of students have been doing just that. Some of the more interesting summer digs:

JERUSALEM: Since 1968 more than 400 students have taken part in Ambassador College's archaeological program in Jerusalem. This year the school could accept only 40% of those who applied. Unlike excavations elsewhere, the Jerusalem project continues throughout the year. It is conducted by Hebrew University under one of the world's greatest authorities on biblical archaeology, Benjamin Mazar. The point of the expedition is to uncover Herodian Jerusalem near the Temple Mount and try to get down to the foundations of the city at the time of King David (circa 1010 B.C. to 970 B.C.).

The originator of the program, Theology Department Chairman Ernest Martin, considers the Jerusalem dig one of the largest and most exciting archaeological active work sites in the world. "Here the Old and New Testaments come alive for the students," he says. Out of respect for orthodox Arab customs and feelings, the students kept their hair short and their clothes modest, and they bedded down in separate male and female quarters at the Shepherd Hotel in Jerusalem.

SCOTLAND: The village of Rockcliffe in Kirkcudbrightshire (pronounced Cur-coo-bree-sheer) in southwest Scotland lies at the end of the Moors Road and overlooks the silvery waters of the Solway Firth. Just outside the village on a high, rocky peak, a group of young archaeological students, under the direction of Lloyd R. Laing of the University of Liverpool, spent five weeks trying to find the palace of King Urian of Rheged, as part of their course for a degree in ancient and medieval history and archaeology. The site, which is a citadel with ramparts, dates back to the early Christian period or the Dark Ages, and was inhabited from the late 5th to the early 7th centuries A.D.

Laing's students dug six days a week, starting at 9:30 in the morning and continuing in shifts until 8 in the evening. They lived in a nearby campsite and prepared their own food. While they unearthed interesting artifacts, the archaeologists were unsuccessful in locating the palace, which Laing believes to be a wooden structure like King Arthur's of roughly the same period, found recently at South Cadbury (Camelot).

ITALY: South of Siena in the tiny village of Murlo, Professor Kyle M. Phillips Jr. of Bryn Mawr and his students have dug, cleaned, studied and catalogued during the past eight summers more than 3,000 pieces of Etruscan pottery, terra cotta, bronze and other materials brought

up from the ruins of a huge (4,500 sq. yds.) temple-like building that the archaeologist calls "the sanctuary."

A site like Murlo, Phillips says, is both a professional excavation that can yield important finds and a school for producing new archaeologists. At Murlo he has had students from Bryn Mawr, Haverford, the University of Pennsylvania, Swarthmore, Princeton and Harvard—and even a Groton senior who used the summer to find out that he did not want to be an archaeologist.

Like most of the excavations in Italy, Murlo was strictly an eight-week summer affair. At the site, each student-archaeologist, known by the impressive title of "trench master," supervised a number of local workmen who were hired to dig for the season. "The worst thing is the heat," says Trench Mistress Jenifer Neils, a 22-year-old Princeton graduate student in classical archaeology. "But when you find something it doesn't matter how hot it is."