The Joukowsky Institute’s class, ‘Archaeology’s Dirty Little Secrets’, is the first MOOC (massive open online course) to explore and communicate the study of archaeology. The class was selected as one of three Brown pilot courses for Coursera, the Stanford-based company that is one of the leaders in online education. It launched June 3, 2013, and currently has over 37,000 people enrolled, from every continent except Antarctica.

While many MOOCs reflect the work of a single professor, all archaeologists would agree that that is not the way we work. Archaeology is such a collaborative practice that we decided Archaeology’s Dirty Little Secrets should be a team effort. To that end, Andrew Dufton and Muge Durusu (two JIAAW graduate students) and I taught an undergraduate class that helped us think through the course and identify good content. Andrew and Muge worked heroically to pull together the media resources we needed for filming, and both are to be seen on camera throughout the class.

Many other faces can be seen there, however. Several Brown faculty and graduate students gave their time to the project. Contributions include demonstrations (filmed in the Haffenreffer Museum) of everything from animal bone analysis to making a cuneiform tablet. I also engage in ongoing conversations (each week with a different topic) about different Brown field projects: Laurel Bestock about Abydos, Stephen Houston about El Zotz, and Tom Leppard about Montserrat, while Andy Dufton and I chat about Petra. Brown graduates Michael and David Udris were our principal videographers.

Each week, students begin a new ‘Unit’ in which they are invited to watch video clips, to do some required reading, to take a short quiz, and then to do an archaeological exercise. The exercises are intended to give people the opportunity to do some hands on (but non-destructive!) archaeology, and to learn more about the archaeological resources in their area. For the more adventurous, there are additional resources, both readings and videos. If sufficient work is completed by the end of the eight-week class, individuals can receive a Statement of Accomplishment, but many students are likely just to do things for fun.

The course is still in its very early stages, but the level of enthusiasm and engagement in the Discussion Forums (with people posting and chatting from all over the world) is remarkable. There is clearly a wide range of backgrounds and experiences in the class, and we will have to see how things work out; MOOCs are a very new phenomenon on the academic landscape. At this point, however, the opportunity to reach over 37,000 students (talking to more people in one day than in a lifetime so far of teaching) is exhilarating — if somewhat overwhelming!

Sue Alcock
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Joukowsky Family Professor of Archaeology
Professor of Classics; Professor of Anthropology (by courtesy)
Professor of the History of Art and Architecture (by courtesy)

To learn more about the Joukowsky Institute, visit www.brown.edu/go/archaeology
Now Available: Cities and the Shaping of Memory in the Ancient Near East by Ömür Harmanşah

The Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World is delighted to announce the successful defense of two doctoral dissertations this Spring.

Alex R. Knedel
Small-World Networks and Mediterranean Dynamics in the Euboean Gulf: An Archaeology of Complexity in Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Greece

Knedel’s dissertation explores aspects of network theory to study social complexity in the Euboean Gulf from the Mycenaean Palatial period through the Protocorinthian Iron Age (1700-600 BCE). It provides definitions, synthesis, and interpretation of a variety of seemingly divergent social phenomena, including the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces and the eighth-century political revolution, the disappearance of Linear B and adaptation of the Greek alphabet from the Phoenician script, the transition from iron bronze to iron, as the dominant utilitarian metal, and a shift in maritime patterns.

Knedel argues that the networks in which the Euboean Gulf operated increasingly exhibit characteristics of “small worlds” and “the strength of weak ties,” where the addition of even a single connection into a wider system can result in the relatively rapid diffusion of political, cultural, and technological ideas. At the same time, these networks go through phases of higher and lower degrees of centrality and stability, resulting in occasional societal upheaval and restructuring (though not necessarily predictable) patterns in the dynamics of social complexity.

Dr. Knedel successfully defended his dissertation on Monday, April 15th.

Thomas P. Leppard
The Logics of Island Life: The Archaeology of Movement, Distance, and Settlement in the Neolithic Aegean and Ceramic Age Lesser Antilles

Leppard’s dissertation examines how colonizing populations of prehistoric food-producers adapted to small-island contexts. Taking the Neolithic colonization of the Cyclades (5,000-3,200 BC) and the colonization of the Ceramic Age Lesser Antilles (500 BC-AD 500) as case studies, this dissertation explores the diachronic social and spatial organization of human populations in both archipelagos through the lenses of settlement ecology, behavioral ecology, and island biogeography.

A central question is whether the combination of common technologies of food production and movement, combined with the inherent ecological challenges of small islands, made certain logics of organization self-selecting, or, whether processes of insular adaptation in both case studies were entirely context-specific. This and subsidiary questions are considered through bringing to bear an extant data various modes of geospatial analysis and modeling, including density and Proximal Point analysis, gravity and network modeling, and resource-catchment analysis.

Conclusions suggest that, despite evident differences, the unique demographic pressures exerted by the Neolithic mode of subsistence in small islands encouraged the adoption of similar strategies of coping and adaptation in both archipelagos, specifically, expansion and diversification in settlement systems, with accompanying developments in intra- and inter-site ranking, and social hierarchies.

Dr. Leppard successfully defended his dissertation on Monday, April 1st.
This March a group of scholars gathered at the Joukowsky Institute for a conference entitled, “Archaeologies of Greece: Big Questions, Next Directions.” This was part of the Institute’s series of annual “State of the Field” conferences, in which scholars in the archaeology of a particular country gather to discuss recent developments and current trends. The moment seemed ideal to focus on Greece, given this year’s remarkable concentration of faculty with Greek archaeological experience. It is also an important moment for Greek archaeology and its culture, more generally.

Greek archaeology has undergone major changes in the past few decades. Theory, method, publication, and heritage management have all advanced considerably through the initiatives of Greeks and foreigners alike, yet many basic issues in the field are likely to elicit a wide variety of responses. “Archaeologies of Greece” aimed to tease out some of these responses from an international group of speakers and attendees.

The conference began with a keynote address by Vassilis Aravantinos, drawing on his long and diverse experience as a scholar and an ephor to address the themes of the conference. The conference continued with a morning session that addressed currently vibrant and long-unresolved research questions, as well as problems specific to certain phases of the Greek past. While this could not be comprehensive, it aimed to be representative, with speakers talking about sub-disciplines ranging from Aegean Prehistory to Byzantine Archaeology. The afternoon’s session confronted disciplinary issues of relevance to all archaeologists working in Greece, from climate change to the study of animal bones to heritage to curation.

Each session was followed by an extended general discussion, which involved participants from Brown and other universities in the region, as well as visitors who traveled from New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and beyond. Altogether the conference was a great success and we look forward to many more such collaborative, discussion-driven “State of the Field” conferences in the future.