



EXTRA

FEATURES

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Digging It

Professor, students at ground level of archaeological find

Christofilis Maggidis knows he's found an archaeological gold mine—an ancient town, and likely something bigger, near the Mycenae, Greece, palace. But he and his students also know that they and their successors have to patiently scratch away at the surface—for decades and perhaps generations—before the world can see the full extent of their discovery.



Christofilis Maggidis (right) works with students at Dickinson's archaeology lab.

Since he was six years old, Maggidis has wanted to be an archaeologist. The associate professor of classical studies is living out his boyhood ambition as assistant to the director of the Dickinson College Excavation Project and Archeological Survey at Mycenae, where he guides students every summer through the meticulous process of unearthing clues to what everyday life was like when Homer's epic warriors and kings walked the earth more than 3,000 years ago.

Homer's *Iliad* describes events of Mycenaean life inside and outside the citadel, 70 percent of which has been excavated by archeologists since its discovery in the 1800s. Each year, Maggidis and his students find more evidence—including roads, walls, dams and pottery—of the daily lives of the commoners who lived in the valley below the citadel.

Maggidis knows he has found a town, and he is confident it can someday be classified as a city—a mathematical and archaeological equation that involves finding evidence of structures and features over a specified land mass. For now, it is called Lower Town, and it is home to what Maggidis describes in the January/February issue of *Archaeology* magazine as "the greatest opportunity of the last 150 years of excavations."

Back in his office at Dickinson's archaeology lab—the W.M. Keck Foundation Center for Human Origins and Ancient Cultures—Maggidis elaborates on his historic discovery.

"It's an issue of choice," Maggidis said. "Early excavators naturally tended to explore the palaces first. Archeology has evolved since then. We want to see how the everyday people lived."

Down in the valley

Maggidis began working at the Mycenaean citadel near Argos six years ago and still digs there. But his focus is on the valley below. Based on early-phase excavation and a 21st-century potpourri of high-tech tools, something big is there. Those tools include ground-penetrating radar, geophysical prospecting devices, remote sensors, magnetometers, electrical resistive and geo-acoustical equipment and, courtesy of the Greek Military Geographical Service, aerial photos. Data from the devices, coupled with Maggidis' experience and analysis, help the archaeologist and his students determine where to dig and how far down to go.

"We're doing something that hasn't been done at other citadels," Maggidis said, adding that modern-day circumstances, notably development, leave "little or no hope" of unearthing the cities surrounding the other palaces. That's not the case in Mycenae, where archaeologists have been able to buy land with private donations and matching contributions from the college.

"Everything is there," Maggidis said of Lower Town. "It's a unique opportunity. And it is tempting to rush in and just start digging."

But while most people would tear apart a package to see what's inside, Maggidis and other archaeologists know there is value in the wrapping paper and box.

"I hate to scrape off and destroy anything that's ancient," Maggidis said.

In this case, Maggidis won't toss aside valuable artifacts and layers of more recent periods of Greek history to get to the target zone—the places where the support staff of Agamemnon and other grand rulers lived.

The dirty dozen

According to Jarrett A. Lobell, author of the *Archaeology* magazine article, "A civilization like this, which controlled large areas of land, waged long and costly wars, created both land and sea transport systems to support long-distance trade, and amassed great quantities of luxury goods, could not do with only kings and warriors."

Maggidis, Lobell added, "thinks he knows where the rest of the people, until now absent from the archaeological record, might be."

The survey tools indicate the town spans 72 acres—by any measure a large urban area. Maggidis and his fellow researchers and students are feeding the survey data into computers to create a 3-D digital model of Lower Town.

This summer, a dozen undergraduates from Dickinson will travel to Greece and team up with 15 graduate students—many of them Dickinson alumni—and 10 specialists from around the globe to continue the survey and excavation.

Before the students get near Mycenaean soil, they spent hours probing Dickinson dirt.

Maggidis' lab assistant, Allison Cuneo '07, who will return to Greece this summer for her fourth season at Mycenae, said the lab work goes hand-in-trowel with a successful dig.

"Giving students the opportunity to learn excavation essentials by means of applied practice allows them to understand the purpose of certain excavation procedures and develop proper technique," she said. "This cuts down on the amount of time needed to train students when they first arrive on site because it is expected that they know how to record, take correct measurements, draw archaeological plans and identify common artifacts. Also, because our indoor dig is a simulated and controlled environment, the simulated excavation field allows students to make mistakes and learn from them without the fear of destroying important information."

For Maggidis, the most tantalizing information—the Mycenaean level—beckons. It lies under a foot-thick layer of red soil topped by Hellenistic and Archaic structures. This summer, Maggidis plans to dig trenches to the bedrock that is the Mycenaean level. Once there, the world will get a better glimpse of everyday life in Homer's Greece, and Maggidis will have unearthed another reason for why he became an archaeologist.

"Archaeology is one of the greatest bridges between the humanities and science," Maggidis said. "I am living my dream."