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ANTHROPOLOGY ON THE PLAINS

“The purpose of anthropology is to make the world safe for human differences.” – Ruth Benedict

Editor:

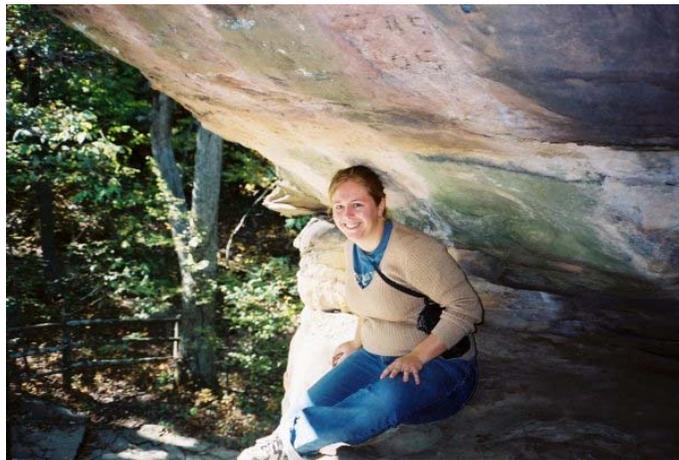
Brettlyn Currier

Contributors:

Kaylee Burgan and
Hadden Bennet



For our inaugural edition of the Auburn Anthropology newsletter, we wanted to focus on our two newest professors, Dr. Meghan Buchanan and Dr. Christopher Berk. We sat down and interviewed the two, and here is what they had to say:



Welcome Dr. Meghan Buchanan!

The Anthropology Department is excited to welcome Dr. Meghan Buchanan as a new Archaeology professor, starting Fall 2016.

Brettlyn Currier and Kaylee Burgan: Why did you become an archaeologist?

MB: My grandmother was an elementary school teacher, and she was always fascinated with the past, so she'd teach her fourth grade classes about Ancient Egypt, about Native American societies that lived in the midwest, and she would just take me to museums all the time. We took a summer vacation once, we drove from Illinois down to Florida and then back up the East Coast. We cut over, and we just stopped at sites all along the way. She's really the reason why I got into archaeology. Instilling that love of the past in me, and when it came time to go to undergrad, I

thought, *You know, I'm just going to do something that I really love, and I really love learning about the past.*

KB: So, why Mississippian culture, specifically?

MB: Well, you know when I started undergrad, I kinda went back and forth for a long time. I always thought doing archaeology that I'd wind up working somewhere really exotic, like I'd get to spend my summer in the jungles in Mezoamerica or I'd get to go to the Mediterranean, and I ended up doing my field school near East St. Louis, Illinois, at a Mississippian-period site. And I just kinda fell in love with it, mostly because I don't think I'd ever realized that there were complex societies in North America. That wasn't something that was taught in elementary school or high school where I grew up. So learning that there was this massive city three hours away from where I grew up was kinda mind-blowing for me, that that was a part of history that was just missing from all of our textbooks. So having that first field experience working at a Mississippian site just kinda stuck for me from there on out.

[We discuss the Cahokia Mounds a bit]

BC: So along the same lines, why are you interested in warfare?

MB: When I did my field school, we took a tour of other sites in the region, mostly historic sites, but we ended our tour in the town of St. Genevieve. And we drove our cars up this little bluff edge, and a guy name Terry Norris, who used to be with the Army Corps of Engineers, he was leading the tour. And he points to this mound in the middle of this field and tells us: "This is the Common Field Site." He told us how in the 1980s he was out there after a big flood had stripped the plow zone from the site, and he saw burnt posts sticking up out of the ground and whole vessels. Just a really amazing, catastrophic assemblage. And so that stuck with me. I went to Southern Illinois University, Carbondale and did a Master's at the Kincaid Mound Site, where I analyzed faunal remains. And then it came time, and I decided I wanted to do a PhD after finishing my Master's. Again, sort of going back to what I thought in undergrad, I wanted to do something that I loved and that really stuck with me. And visiting this site all the way back in 2002 had really stuck with me, so I went back and looked more into the site and realized that this was a site that had probably been attacked as a result of warfare. So that then led to my research on the connections between warfare and daily practices, which has been a topic that hasn't really been studied in archaeology. There's a lot of research on archaeology and warfare, but not really how it impacts the daily lives of the vast majority of people who lived in past societies.

KB: What are you most looking forward to when you come to Auburn?

MB: I'm really looking forward to getting the opportunity to teach again. That's something that I really loved doing as a graduate student. I had the opportunity to design and teach two of my own classes. I spent a lot of time as a teaching assistant. I've taught in field contexts, and in my current position, I teach a little bit, because of students that I work with and volunteers. But I haven't really had the opportunity to teach any classes in a long time. So I'm really looking forward to the opportunity to be working with students, introducing people to archaeology and anthropology, but also being able to offer some seminar classes where we get to sit down and have some deeper conversations about topics in archaeology: how they relate to the past, but also how they relate to the present.

BC: If you were to design your own courses here, what would you like them to reflect or be about?

MB: I'd like to be able to teach a curation class. I've taught one before...I think there's some great opportunities here for teaching a lab-based class where students get lots and lots of hands-on experience with what happens to artifacts after they come out of the field, after they've been washed and analyzed, and they go into repositories. So, I'd like to be able to teach that kind of class. I'm looking forward to doing just a general North American archaeology class. I'd also like to do some seminars on archaeology and warfare, possibly a class on archaeology and material culture, an archaeological method and theory class. Maybe theory isn't the most exciting thing, but when you get a good grasp on it, it really opens up the ways in which you interpret archeological data. I'd like to find out what kinds of classes you guys would be interested in.

KB: If I gave you an elephant where would you hide it?

MB: Some place really remote, like the mountains. The Rocky Mountains. My first inclination would be to chop it up with stone tools that I have made and then look at the use-wear on the tools.



Welcome back, Dr. Christopher Berk!

Kaylee Burgan: Why Anthropology? What drew you to it?

Christopher Berk: That's a pretty big question. I would say the story my mom likes to tell about it, whether it's apocryphal or not is another question, but, you know, entering college, many years ago, I knew I was interested in social sciences, one way, shape, or form. I hadn't quite settled on which one as of yet, so I took a lot of intro classes my first year at college. I took the Cultural Anthropology intro class and didn't really click too much; I took intro to Sociology, Economics, and Psychology. But then starting my second year I took Ethnographic Film, with a professor who ended up being my undergraduate advisor. So it was in that class that things kind of clicked a little bit. I sort of was thinking about how this discipline might seem to be speaking to things the way that I tend to think about them, getting at issues about how we were similar and how we were different; trying to understand humanity in a general sense. I just found it really, really fascinating. And it seemed to be a good discipline to try to address all the questions that I had sort of been asking myself for years.

KB: What's your subfield?

CB: I'm a cultural anthropologist. My doctorate is in Sociocultural Anthropology, but I do have a four-field training.

KB: Where did you attend for undergrad?

CB: I did my undergraduate at a small Liberal Arts School in Upstate New York called Union College. It's right near Albany, only about 2,000 students.

KB: What about grad school?

CB: I did my graduate school at the University of Michigan.

KB: So you're from the northern region?

CB: Yeah, I grew up in Massachusetts, did my undergraduate in New York, and then my PhD in Michigan.

KB: Was it a big change for you, coming down south to Auburn?

CB: You know, it was a very interesting change, I will say. It was one that I was excited about and I'm very happy that I did. I'm very happy that I was given the opportunity to come down to Auburn. You know, as a Cultural Anthropologist, you very much need to put your money where your mouth is sometimes, and really try to be open to different experiences and different cultures. What you learn in most experiences and unfamiliar settings is: people are people. Everywhere you go, there are differences, but their rarely as different as you tend to imagine they would be. Down

here, you hear all the things about the North; up North, you hear all the things about the South. And the truth is always somewhere in the middle. But I've really enjoyed my time; I'm really excited to have a second year down here. I've enjoyed getting to know a lot of the students, getting to know this part of the country, the weather doesn't hurt.

[We chatted about his wife, the weather, etc.]

KB: Tell us a little bit about your research.

CB: I do research in Tasmania, Australia, so I work with Tasmanian Aboriginal communities. Historically, they're kind of one of the iconic cases of extinction, in ideology more than fact. Within Anthropology, they're reviewed as one of the most primitive cultures ever documented...A lot of the work I've done involves cultural revitalization. How this community of people have worked over the last 30 or 40 years to bring back a lot of practices that basically didn't exist or fell into disuse for a better part of the century, whether its basketry or canoe making, language is a major element. So I've done a lot of work with museums, curators, historical research into the practices themselves and the objects themselves. I've really enjoyed that work, but I haven't been back there for a while; I'm hoping to get back sometime, sooner rather than later. It's an amazing part of the world.

KB: So what drew you to that particular place?

CB: There are two ways to answer that question. One is I went abroad my senior year for an anthropological field school to Tasmania, which was the first one that Union had done. I was there for three months in 2004, performing my own individual research into some of these topics, and I just met some amazing people and formed relationships that have remained to this day. Long answer: this entire case study, this entire object of study, this entire topic really gets at what I think are really the strengths of Anthropology as a discipline. We're dealing with humans, we're dealing with culture, we're dealing with stuff that's really messy. And one thing as humans that we try to do is make things clear cut in terms of black and white, in terms of having clear answers to things. But what Anthropology really embraces is the messiness, kind of the grey area and the nuances, trying to understand just how complicated things can be. What the Tasmanians really emphasize is ideas of difference, how we consolidate differences, how we understand difference, both in terms of popular ideology but also reality. There's ways in which we, as Western societies, idealize and romanticize indigenous peoples, we often put them into what's often referred to as a "savage slot", the idea of the "noble savage". But this freezes them in time; they're not able to change, which every culture in the world has always changed and will always change. So what this case really foregrounded was just how much change they have

undergone, but also how they have remained connected to their ancestral roots, in spite of, and often as a result of, what's called disjuncture. So it's sort of like a delicate interplay between change and continuity, how they kind of weave together with one another. And Anthropology is the discipline that really understands and embraces that messiness.

Meet the 2016 Graduating Seniors

1. What is the most important thing you have learned from studying Anthropology?

2. During your years at Auburn, what has been your proudest moment/ accomplishment?

3. What are your plans for after graduation?

You're studying W-H-A-T? Yep, that's what these graduating seniors have heard for the past four or so years whenever anyone asked what they were studying. I'm sure after a while they began to encourage the question in hopes of spreading their current anthropological obsessions. Today, we look upon them as they shake Aubie's paw and walk across the stage blurring the lines between being a kooky undergraduate student to the rest of their lives. We are so proud of what our graduating seniors have accomplished not just this past year, but their times at Auburn as a whole. Not only have they successfully survived college, but they have challenged themselves as individuals and as students, and have thus grown tremendously in the process. We asked some of our graduating seniors what they thought about their Auburn Experience. Here's what they had to say.

Brettlyn Currier



1. I think the most important thing I learned from studying anthropology is that people are people, and that's a beautiful thing. Everyone is so different and unique, and we should value every single person for that reason.
2. My proudest moments at Auburn have been those times that I've really felt the Auburn family at play, like seeing others succeed and feeling successful myself.
3. I'll be working on my Master's in Sociology, focused in Criminology. From there, I'd like to get a doctorate in Forensic Sciences and see where I end up!

Kevin Koziol Jr.



1. I think the most important thing I learned from studying anthropology is to not to take everything at face value.
2. My proudest moment during my years here has to be undertaking my own IRB approved research researching the Birmingham punk subculture. Nothing else can compare to seeing a research project through to the end.
3. My current plans after graduation are to find a job and hopefully come back to Auburn to attend the sociology master's program.

Tatum Manning



1. The most important thing I have learned from studying Anthropology is there is no particular "right way" to live. Anthropology is about understanding there are many truths to this world, and it is okay to go out and find your own.
2. During my time at Auburn, my most accomplished feeling came from completing the Archaeological Field School. That summer gave me a path and showed me what I wanted to do after I graduate.
3. I will go work as a field technician at archaeological dig sites around the US. I hope to gain some experience and save some money so I can narrow my focus and begin my Master's education in some field of archaeology.

Max Zinner



1. As someone who has been extremely involved in the issue of diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus I believe that my anthropology background has helped frame the discussion and allowed me to contribute to positive changes on Auburn's campus.
2. One candidate would be how my work for Spectrum: Auburn's Gay-Straight Alliance over the past three years has led to the group winning an involvement award. Another would be receiving A's in physical anthropology and theory.
3. In the fall I will begin work on an MA in history right here at Auburn with an assistantship in the multicultural center.

Kyndal Kruse



1. Anthropology has taught me more about myself than I ever knew. I thought I knew who I was as a person before coming to college. Anthro taught me its always possible to grow, to see, and to understand new ideas and perspectives.
2. My proudest moment was when I got accepted to go to archaeology field school at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. It was the adventure of a lifetime.
3. I actually just found out I received an assistantship to Southern Mississippi, which is an opportunity I can't turn down. So I'll be headed there in the fall to complete my MA in Bioarchaeology!