

# Navigating Short-Term Disability in Classical Archaeology: Perspectives and Recommendations

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**Introduction:** In recent years, archaeologists have paid more attention to diversity in archaeology. Scholars such as Allyson Blanck, Becca Peixoto, and Debby Sneed have highlighted the lack of disabled persons on archaeological sites and advocate for specific recommendations to make the field more accessible to people with disabilities. Much of previous scholarship on the topic of incorporating people with disabilities into archaeology often does not distinguish between chronic and short-term disabilities. This project aims to understand the experiences of archaeologists with short-term disabilities, and also those who supported them during fieldwork. Drawing from previous research and the interviews conducted for this project, the final section of my poster will lay out several recommendations for making fieldwork, and archaeology more broadly, accessible to archaeologists experiencing short-term disabilities.

## Personal Motivation:

Inspired by the “Archaeo-Bodies” call for papers, I reflected on my previous experience managing a short-term disability on archaeological sites. For my first and second seasons (2022 and 2023), I excavated with a full-leg brace on my right knee. I had torn my ACL in my right knee during Spring 2022 and opted to excavate without an ACL during my first field season. My impaired mobility completely dictated my entire experience of excavation. I was anxious when I had emailed the official email of the project alerting them about my knee injury and received the words “You’ll be fine” back. I woke up earlier than my roommate to make sure that I had enough time to put on the knee brace. I spent much of my free time lying down and icing my knee, allowing my body to recover from excavations. On site, I especially had to figure out a way of squatting that did not make my knee throb and would often “push through the pain,” fearing that if I stopped to rest, I would be perceived as a less valuable excavation team member (and, therefore, not getting an invitation back). Whereas in 2023, even though I had already undergone ACL reconstruction surgery, I wore my brace out of caution, fearing that archaeological excavation would cause me to re-tear my ACL. Managing a short-disability on an archaeological site was difficult for me, physically and emotionally. With this project, I am therefore striving to highlight the experiences of other archaeologists who have managed short-term disabilities in the field and to provide recommendations for improving the experience of archaeologists with short-term disabilities on sites.

## Bibliography:

Clements, S., Fitzpatrick, A. and Hunt, A., 2023. Current barriers for disabled people in accessing archaeology. *The Archaeologist*, 118, pp.3-6.

Heath-Stout, Laura E. “The invisibly disabled archaeologist” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 27, no. 1 (2023): 17-32.

## Methodology

I interviewed seven archaeologists affiliated with US universities. All seven of the interviewees were classical archaeologists and had primarily participated in academic excavations in Italy and Greece. (In addition to excavating for several years in the Mediterranean, one of the interviewees also had five years of fieldwork experience on American archaeological sites.) Out of the seven interviewees, two managed short-term disabilities that impaired their mobility during excavations. One of the interviewees who managed a short-term disability during excavations was a trench supervisor at one academic project. This interviewee sustained an injury onsite during excavations that made them temporarily disabled. The other interviewee with a short-term disability was a trench supervisor on one project while simultaneously overseeing their own archaeological project. This interviewee knew about her disability prior to commencing the fieldwork of the season. The other five interviewees were archaeologists who supported an excavator with a short-term disability. Out of these five interviewees, two were in the position of project director or field director; two other interviewees were trench supervisors; and one interviewee was a volunteer.

In each interview, I asked a prepared set of questions. These questions include: how many years of fieldwork do you have, and where have you excavated? What has your experience been with managing a short-term disability? Has your entire field experience been impacted by a short-term disability, or for only a partial period? Is there any way to make moving through the ranks on an archaeological site more accessible to people experiencing short-term disabilities, or disabilities more generally? In addition to transcribing each interviewee’s answer, I also added follow up questions, tailoring the conversation depending on whether I was interviewing someone who had experienced short-term disability themselves, or someone who had to support a person with a short-term disability.

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Peixoto, Becca, Carla Klehm, and Kurt P. Eifling. “Rethinking research sites as wilderness activity sites: reframing health, safety, and wellness in archaeology” *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 9, no. 1 (2021): 1-9.

## General Patterns from the Interviews

### 1) Frustration in Inability to Excavate

Both interviewees who experienced onsite short-term disabilities expressed difficulty in documenting archaeological material that they had not excavated. Because one of the interviewees was unable to step inside the trench, she felt like her responsibilities shifted from that of a trench supervisor to a finds manager. The interviewee had to rely on the observations of the student volunteers for information about what they were seeing or experiencing. Moreover, not being able to physically excavate, or not being able to be onsite for several days of excavation, in turn, made both interviewees writing documentation about stratigraphic contexts difficult for the interviewees even with communication from the field and LiDAR scans available.

For one trench supervisor supporting an assistant trench supervisor with a short-term disability, he had to “pick up” more responsibilities of his assistant-trench supervisor. Because the assistant trench supervisor could not be physically onsite, the trench supervisor spent much more time overseeing excavation and less time with documentation. This meant that the trench supervisor interpreted much of the archaeological evidence offsite, an unideal situation for the trench supervisor.

### 2) Perspectives on Project Supplies and Liability

During my interview with the archaeologist who was injured on-site, the interviewee recounted her experience with not being able to access a brace to support her injured knee, as it took several days for project staff to acquire a knee brace for her to use. The interviewee first pointed out the trope of archaeologists having bad knees. Then, she suggested that archaeological projects should adequately prepare for knee injuries by having knee support sleeves and other kinds of basic braces in case of injury onsite.

In subsequent interviews, I asked the interviewees what they thought about purchasing knee support sleeves in advance of injury. Interviewees were generally supportive of this idea, with one interviewee pointing out that their project buys medical supplies to prepare for life-threatening situations, but injury medical supplies (such as tape and braces) is under prioritized.

Some interviewees were also asked about whether it would be beneficial to have a staff member trained in wrapping major joints (wrists, ankles, and knees). While these interviewees emphasized that it is important for staff members to be trained in first aid, they would be hesitant to dispatch a staff member to tape joints, since the staff member would essentially be treating an injury that they could not diagnose themselves.

In response to the question about training staff members in wrapping major joints, one interviewee discussed that there is a balance archaeological projects must strike between having the project’s research be attainable and providing the level of support needed for staff and volunteers. The interviewee pointed out that requiring additional traditions for staff members to undergo, especially with a limited timeframe and budget, could have the potential to make a research excavation, especially an excavation with undergraduate participation, completely unattainable. Rather, staff members have to be selective in what medical training they receive and volunteers should be selective in what they expect out of an excavation.

### 3) Variation in Activities Available for Archaeologists Unable to Excavate

Several interviewees commented that volunteers or staff with short-term disabilities were often moved out of the field and into lab work, either willingly or unwillingly. Lab work can often be dependent on the kinds and types of archaeological material needed to be processed and the amount of staff members available to supervise excavators unable to work in the field. Interviewees across multiple projects noted that assigning excavators unable to work in the field is done on an *ad hoc* basis. Interviewees did not indicate that there was a plan set in place at the beginning of the archaeological season to address this issue.

## Recommendations:

### Before the Season Begins:

1. Incorporate the purchase of braces for major joints (knees, wrists, and ankles) in anticipation of frequent injuries
2. Empower archaeologists managing short-term disabilities with knowledge of their archaeological and living environment before arrival.
  - If there is an archaeologist coming to the site with a short-term disability, senior staff should have a Zoom conversation with them prior to their arrival onsite. Discuss factors that could potentially impact site accessibility for an archaeologist with impaired mobility, especially the topography of the site and town and living arrangements (whether their living residence requires walking up stairs or has an elevator accessible).
  - If there is an excavator who has recovered from an injury from a previous setting, staff should have a conversation with the person prior to their arrival onsite. Staff and the excavator should discuss their current physical limitations and any challenges the excavator foresees. Just because an excavator is medically fully recovered does not always mean that their short-term disability does not still impact their movements or limitations.
3. Prepare a plan in the case of a non life-threatening injury. Take account of the staff members conducting work in the lab and consider the amount of archaeological material needed to be processed. In both instances, where an excavator with a short-term disability needs to stop fieldwork half-way through the season or an excavator acquires an injury and must stop fieldwork, the work the excavator does in the lab should not be completely random and should align with their own research interests.