ALL GREEK TO ME

“In Ireland, where I grew up, our myths and legends always had heroes coming back from Greece with mystical, profound knowledge. So, Greece was this exotic, romantic location to me. In college I majored in Greek and Roman Studies, an amazingly deep and broad subject. You do history, philosophy, literature, art, all these things in the one discipline, and that’s how I found archaeology. The fact that you can touch things that a human made several thousand years ago, the connection with this ancient humanity — even now it blows my mind.”

RITUAL PAYS

“My major field work is from Pylos, a Bronze Age palace. Tombs there span the rise and fall of the palace, and you can see how the dead were treated differently over time. Pylans initially used tombs to compete for status. As in 19th-century America and England, the wealthier a family was, the bigger the tomb. But once hierarchy was firmly established, people at Pylos shifted their investments to other areas.

“My findings are different from what you see at Mycenae, the most famous Greek Bronze Age palace. There, people continued to invest huge amounts of money into the dead — it didn’t taper off. “Greece is a highly developed, distinct subfield in archaeology and rarely included in discussions comparing cultures. But these books are being referenced in work coming out of the Andes, Mexico, and Myanmar. It’s exciting to bring Greek archaeology into global, anthropological discussions.”

METHODS MATTER

“Archaeology is inherently an interdisciplinary science — for a regular project I need pottery specialists, metallurgists, and chemists. But to answer nuanced questions, you need more. In one study of glass beads from Pylos’ tombs, I worked with a chemical engineer and nuclear physicist. By identifying the beads’ elemental makeup, we could see Pylians were importing glass from Egypt and Mesopotamia much earlier than previously thought.

“Over the last decade I’ve led an archaeological survey and field school on the Greek island of Kea. Loads of archaeologists do surveys but nobody has gone back and tested survey data. We’re comparing our survey to one from the 1980s. Are more things hidden or exposed? Do the differences change our view of the past? It’s part of the larger scientific reproducibility debate.”

STUDENTS ON SITE

“Around 90 students have gone through the field school, and I also mentor undergraduate researchers at UNCG. Undergraduate research is a total game changer. Students learn how to argue, to defend their positions, and they develop identities as scholars. The experience allows them to find their own gifts and strengths and positions them for postgraduate success.

“They get to know their own curiosity and passion, which is what drives research. We call it research, because we have posh words for things, but it’s curiosity and passion.”

Interview by Sengathist Shigei • learn more > murphy.uncg.edu