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Boozer Shows How Archaeologists Do Their Work

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

From the time of the Indiana Jones movies, archaeology as a profession has had a mythical aura, but we recently had the chance to interview an excellent archaeologist who puts a human face on the profession. Her name is Anna Lucille Boozer, and she was raised in Williamsburg, Virginia. She has a bachelor's in arts, in philosophy, and in the history of math and science from St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, as well as two masters' degrees in anthropology and a doctorate in that subject from Columbia University. Today she is an associate professor of history in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College/CUNY.

Boozer works on a topic that may seem disjunctive in geographical terms: the Roman period in Egypt. "It relates to my deep interest in philosophy and anthropology," she says. "I wanted to ask a lot of questions that are really pertinent today, questions about racism, sexuality, people's identities, childhood, things like that. It's very difficult to answer questions like these about the distant past, when you don't have a lot of evidence at your fingertips."

The advantage for her is that more evidence related to the social history of the ancient world has been preserved from the Roman period in Egypt than from any comparable period and place. "The relative wealth of evidence enables me to ask some very complicated and really interesting questions and to answer them with more confidence. Sometimes even more than in the present day, because you can delve into the 'leavings' that people wouldn't let you have access to now."

One of Boozer's important findings was the profound differences between urban and rural life in Roman Egypt. "Cities seem to be much more Roman-Mediterranean, so a lot of people spoke Greek. Greek culture was very strong in those places, and households tended to be smaller than they were in the countryside. In the countryside, you had a lot of extended family living together in larger houses; you had workshops more closely associated with the houses; and this seemed to be



Dr. Boozer at her office.

Photo by Gulinoz Javodova

much more strongly Egyptian in some areas than in the towns."

One of the major sources of evidence that archaeologists like Boozer have to work with is the garbage these ancient civilizations left behind. "In one of those basketfuls of trash was a little plaster figure of the goddess of childhood fertility and protecting mothers. She was originally part of a wall niche that was used in domestic worship. She was very charming and cute, and it is an emblematic artifact associated with houses."

But what kind of importance do these discarded items have? "We found a number of other small figurines made out of mud, probably children's toys, which were ephemeral things. They give you really evocative feelings about what life was like in household settings. These are the people who would be more like us in the ancient world, and they were a large majority whom we very rarely encounter in history. So

those are things that I really like about garbage," says Boozer.

Despite the wealth of evidence that Boozer has found, one of the major threats that archaeology faces these days is the destruction of ancient sites due to political instability and wars. "This has been a problem, and we do have concerns where I work, because ISIS has threatened the region. The Egyptian government hasn't allowed us to excavate in recent years, because there is a concern for our protection. We do appreciate that they are looking out for us, but it's difficult not working there," says she.

Another problem is looting, of which there is a long history in Egypt, raising the question of how much has been lost and will never be recovered. Boozer comments: "We have had methodological changes, so people have become much more precise in their collection of archaeological data and in what is considered good practice." Yet, certain technological advances have helped archeologists

and their findings. According to Boozer, "Even technology like the digital camera, which is a fairly mundane thing to us now, has completely changed archeology. We can take many more photographs and check how the work is being done."

With respect to wall paintings, too, technology is coming to the rescue. "When we have paintings on walls, we can use something called photogrammetry and reconstruct what those interior spaces looked like with great accuracy by plotting the actual locations of the photographs and stitching them together again."

The same can be said about drones. "Drones are the new thing in archeology. They enable us to get a really good look at our sites, sites that haven't been mapped or studied before, but also, while we're excavating, to take photographs of what we're working on as we're doing the work. All these things have really helped us have much stronger interpretations of the material. Things such as 3-D printing are wonderful in terms of presentation to other people. In terms of teaching and outreach to the public, being able to make a 3-D print of a priceless object that you don't want to pass around and risk breaking is a wonderful way to make archeology a lot more accessible to everybody."

All of this gives us a much more accurate vision of how archaeologists really work. "When we get out to where I work in Egypt, I point out that this is my 'office,' and it's wonderful. You see these beautiful escarpments, the people we work with are great, the food is wonderful. I love the current culture in Egypt. It's a great place to be, and I wouldn't trade it for anything. It's a really nice lifestyle for the right person who likes to be dirty and also obsessive at the same time."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/238764268> He can be contacted via Aldemaro.Romero@baruch.cuny.edu