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Forgive the editorial license. The following excerpts piece together a one-year adventure for Emily Holt '02, Fulbright Scholar and Archaeology PhD candidate at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. Describing her experience in her phone calls, e-mails, the seemingly never-ending Word Doc of her lively letters home, and her Fulbright application essay, Emily unearths details about ancient life on the island of Sardinia and discovers life as a Bennie abroad. Emily spent the last year excavating Middle Bronze Age sites on Siddi Plateau, Central Sardinia. She's only scratched the surface on this 3- year project. The dig continues; the crew's analyzing artifacts. Here's what we know, so far. - Heidi L. Everett



“If you ever find yourself wondering why you’re spending your Fulbright year huddled in an unheated casetta in a town of 650 people on an island that Italy mostly tries to ignore, read *The Golden Marshalltown*. You come away believing that freezing in the middle of nowhere is part of belonging to a privileged group of people called archaeologists.”

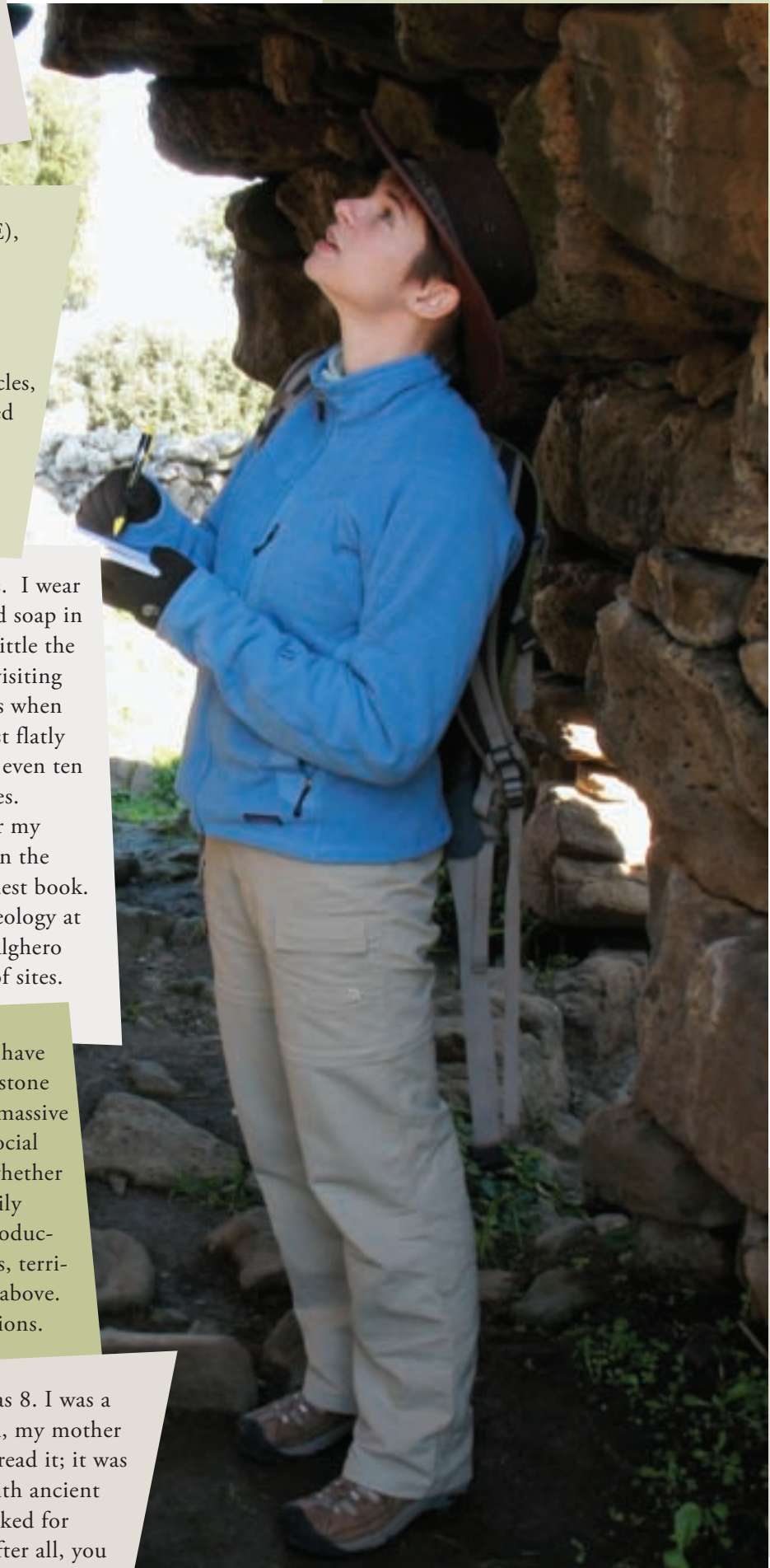
“Archaeologists get paid to brave the elements while having serious fun and answering some of the most important questions humans ask about themselves and their past. How is it possible that no one has shut this racket down? I can only assume it’s because no one reads our articles, so they don’t realize what we’re getting away with.

During the Bronze Age (c. 2300-1000 BCE), native Italian peoples built more than ten thousand stone towers on the island of Sardinia. These towers, called nuraghi, are iconic, appearing in the coats of arms of Sardinia’s cities, on the sides of public vehicles, and even on packages of Sardinian-produced potato chips. In spite of their ubiquity, the nuraghi remain a mysterious feature of Sardinia’s prehistory.

I always get a few stares as I wait for the bus. I wear rumpled clothes that were washed with hand soap in a sink. In spite of my smiles, I must look a little the worse for wear. People ask if I am a tourist visiting Sardinia for the beaches. They seem dubious when I say I am here for the archaeology, and most flatly deny that anyone would walk the four, five, even ten kilometers I sometimes go to see ancient sites. Curiosity always wins out, and I’m asked for my story. Sometimes over a cup of cappuccino in the hotel bar; sometimes leaning over a hotel guest book. I tell and retell my adventure. I study archaeology at a university in the United States. I flew to Alghero with a guidebook, a phrasebook, and a list of sites.

Nuraghi are huge, castle-like structures that have many interconnected towers surrounded by stone villages and defensive walls. They represent massive amounts of labor and a fairly high level of social organization. Archaeologists are uncertain whether Middle Bronze Age nuraghi were single-family dwellings, the houses of chiefs, centers of production, religious buildings, defensive structures, territory markers, or a combination of all of the above. Archaeological study can answer these questions.

I’ve wanted to be an archaeologist since I was 8. I was a voracious reader. One day when I was bored, my mother handed me a random book and suggested I read it; it was Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology*. I fell in love with ancient cultures. When it was time for college, I looked for schools that had a classic language major. After all, you can’t read ancient texts without those languages. Saint Ben’s provided that major and made me a well-prepared thinker.



Fulbright Research Scholar Emily Holt '02 studying the Middle Bronze Age nuraghi towers in Sardinia



All the other Fulbrighters are living in big cities: Rome, Florence, Milan, Pisa, Naples, Palermo, and Bologna. Sometimes I'm tempted to envy the museums, amusements, and nightlife that they have access to. But last night and this morning made me remember why I wouldn't trade them even for the colosseum, the Uffizi, and the leaning tower.

My nuraghic towers aren't as pretty as the tourist attractions. They haven't been cleaned out and restored. I was sucked in by Sardinia's coolness factor . . . big towers and mysterious people. At one time, there could have been 10,000 towers. How did this society cluster as groups and why? Did they establish their own demise by the way they used their environment? What happened to these people of the Middle Bronze Age?

Yesterday I went to the post office early to monopolize the woman who works there before anyone else was up. I wanted to open a bank account. This is quite common for the post office to serve a variety of economic functions. I took my passport, codice fiscale, permesso di soggiorno, and copies of my birth certificate (just in case!) and arrived at 8:30 when the post office opens. Don't underestimate the ability of people with financial interests at stake to rise early! The post office does two things that are important in a town with an aging population like Villanovaforru. It distributes pensions, and once a month it delivers a fifty euro government aid to pensioners. This happened to be the day aid was being distributed. I arrived to find a long line of older women. I'm the only non-local and the only one who doesn't speak good Italian. I stood there and tried to look like a nuraghe until someone talked to me. The first question I got was if I was the daughter of Pietro. I said I didn't think so, which may have had more connotations than I meant it to.

Mauro -- my Sardinian colleague, esteemed partner on the dig and director of the Museo Genna Maria Laboratory -- and I discuss our plans. We need to survey Siddi Plateau and write the application for our excavation permesso. The application must include what we hope to find, our excavation methods, funding sources, and the secure location where we plan to house our finds. I also need to research in the reading room of the lab, where the journals of Sardinian archaeology are kept.



I have pets for the first time in years. The hotel I live at has a platoon of cats to whom they give the leftover pasta (did you know cats eat pasta? Maybe it's only Italian cats.). You can tell a cat's rank by how clean it is. Head cats are much cleaner and glossier than the minion cats. Primo Head Cat is a fit, grey tom cat who isn't afraid of me. Sort-Of Head Cat is also fit and grey, but I don't know if it's male or female because it won't have anything to do with me. Kind-Of Minion Cat is a small, fairly clean ginger cat who lets me pet her, but only if Primo Head Cat isn't looking. Total Minion Cat is a tiny Siamese and tabby mix whom I thought was a kitten this summer but who hasn't grown any. She's usually filthy, probably malnourished, and runs if I look at her. I would feed her tasty scraps to fatten her up, but she won't come near me. Finally, there's Lone Cat. Lone Cat is black and white and is off doing whatever it is he does. I don't think he likes getting bossed around.



Sardinia doesn't have a slavish insistence on consistency. Americans have trouble with things being inconsistent with their expectations. That's why a Big Mac is a Big Mac in Florida and New York. At the hotel where I'm living, consistency is not a priority. Take the mixed salad I get with every meal. The first week, a mixed salad contained lettuce, red cabbage, and tomatoes. Then, for a few days it contained lettuce, watercress, and tomatoes. Then, it contained lettuce and red cabbage. The mixed salad is now chopped fennel and tomatoes. I have no idea what it will be next or when it will change. No one complains the salad isn't the same.

The giving of stones seems to be a thing. A taxi driver in Naples once gave me a piece of Mt. Vesuvius as a good luck charm. My friend Gianni gave me another and told me to keep the stone in my purse for good luck. In the grand tradition of stone-giving, I'm going to carry one of the pieces of worked flint that Dad gave me to the minimarket next time in case someone offers to help carry my groceries again. I hope I have enough flint to go around.

Went to the bar today to buy a bus ticket (occasionally you can buy a ticket where the bus stops, but I wouldn't count on it).



My casetta becomes more like home every day. Primo Head Cat (whom I address in his native Italian as Capo Gatto) has decided to be my cat. He sits on my doorstep and tries to get in – he even tried to leap through the tiny window in the door when I left it open. It’s nice to have a good friend already.

Drove around Siddi Plateau with Mauro and then met with the mayor of Siddi. Mauro did a lot of talking. I did a lot of smiling and looking eager. Mauro always introduces me as “Emily Holt, an accomplished American archaeologist who has won one of the most prestigious scholarships in her country.” He had me explain our project while he translated. Simple communication I can do. Convincing the mayor of a village to give us a chunk of his yearly budget for the next three years requires a political skill I can’t hope to achieve in Italian. So I said little, smiled much and did a good job of being cute and young. This is a perk of archaeological work in Italy. Italian students tend to finish their bachelor’s degrees a year or two later than students do in America, so when Mauro tells people I have two master’s degrees, they are surprised. When Mauro told the mayor of Siddi that I was working on my doctorate, the mayor responded: “but she’s so young!”

“Do you like Sardinia?” I am always asked. I struggle to summarize my experiences: The conductor who had me rushing from one side of the train to the other to see all the ruins we passed while traveling through the Valley of the Nuraghi. The mother and two daughters in Torralba who stopped their car by the side of the road to see where I was going and congratulated me on my perseverance when I said I was walking to Nuraghe Santu Antine. The young businessman who spent a day visiting the sites around Arzachena with me. Everywhere I go, I meet friendliness, encouragement, and help. “I love Sardinia” I always say.

Mauro and I left the mayor’s office with a truly generous offer. The Comune of Siddi will pay for two diggers and a skilled draftsman to work for us for three months each year for three years. This will cost the commune somewhere between fifty and sixty thousand euros, a real gift coming out of a fairly small budget.



There’s Italian that will get you an ‘A’ in class. Then there are the times you realize what you don’t know. The family who runs the hotel experienced a tragedy. Their son-in-law, the husband of their oldest daughter and the father of their seven-year-old granddaughter, died of lymphoma. My Italian isn’t equipped for this. I’ve looked up how to say “I’m so very sorry,” “this is a great tragedy.” But in general, my vocabulary fails me. Responding to a tragedy is difficult in your native language, but at the moment, I’m feeling particularly inadequate.

We found absolutely nothing in April on our first dig despite long, hot days in the trenches. These are the things we archaeologists like to talk about over beer . . . It was so hot . . . We had so much rain . . . Our site collapsed on one side . . . I got malaria . . . Hardships are part of the fun.

Piano piano is my favorite Italian phrase because it’s so reassuring. It means that it doesn’t matter if I can’t speak Italian or pay my hotel bill yet. Everything happens *piano piano*, and no one really worries. The corresponding phrase that makes my skin crawl is *speriamo bene* or “we hope for the best.” “Speriamo bene,” said the man at the bank as he pressed the button to send one fourth of my stipend to a bank in Cincinnati. No, not “speriamo bene,” I thought. You do not “speriamo bene” about \$1,500. That money better arrive.

While clearing the second site in May, our draftsmen found pottery and worked obsidian. We knew we were going to find more, and we did. More than 15,000 pieces of pottery, stone tools, carved bones that may have been used for weaving or fruit knives, clothing fasteners made of bone, and animal bones were uncovered. The promise we saw was real.



The best thing I’ve discovered living abroad is that the answer to all questions is “yes.” Saying “no” is like choosing the end of a choose-your-own-adventure novel. *Yes* means the adventure continues. For example: “Do you want to help with an archaeological rescue project?” Mauro asked one summer. “Yes,” and I spent two days helping extract neolithic statue-menhirs from the field wall they had been built into. “Do you want to come to a dinner party tonight?” Veronica asked the day I met her. “Yes,” and I nervously made my way into a roomful of new people, where the magic of beer quickly improved my Italian and my social life. *Yes* has taken me to dinners, seminars, new cities, openings of museum exhibitions, and coffee dates with strangers who became friends. *Yes* also taught me that I actually do like seafood.

At the last official function with all the Fulbrighters, I listen to everyone’s presentations and ideas. I’m impressed by how relevant our studies are to each other: how art reflects politics, how politics influence economics, how economics organize social interactions, and how all of these experiences are mediated through language and our common biology as a species. Not for the last time, I’m sure, I’m glad to be an archaeologist. Being an archaeologist is a license and an obligation to care about everything. Although we may specialize, we can’t ignore the multiple complex systems that are interlaced with the one we find most compelling. Being an archaeologist means not having to choose what you want to be when you grow up – you get to do it all.