

# Alabama Archaeology Month 2020

## *Interviewing Women in Archaeology*



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### **Meghan Buchanan**

Assistant Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work at Auburn University

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## *Saluting Women in Archaeology*



### **Meghan Buchanan** **Assistant Professor of Anthropology** **at Auburn University**

#### **1) What is your educational background?**

BA in Anthropology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; MA from Southern Illinois University Carbondale; PhD from Indiana University.

#### **2) What is your current job?**

I teach classes in anthropology and archaeology, work with students on independent archaeology projects, and oversee the Archaeological Research Laboratory, the archaeological collections, and the NAGPRA project.

**3) What are your primary research interests?**

My research interests focus on the intersections of warfare, political collapse, and daily life, especially during the Mississippian Period in the Southeast. I directed a project at the Common Field site in Missouri and through the analysis of ceramic, faunal, architectural, and remotely sensed (gradiometer) data, I have argued that the people of Common Field engaged in new religious movements, that changing technologies reveal tensions between traditional learned practices and changing social worlds, and reduced mobility led to new food procurement strategies.

I've started a new project exploring political collapse, transformation, and resilience during the late pre-Contact/early proto-historic era in east-central Alabama, largely focused on reanalyzing some of the archaeological collections housed at Auburn University.

**4) What motivated you to become an archaeologist or how did you become an archaeologist?**

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**5) What is the most interesting archaeological site on which you've worked?**

I had the opportunity to work as a volunteer supervisor at a University of Illinois field school and we excavated at Cahokia, in the Grand Plaza across the street from Monks Mound. Working at Cahokia was amazing, and I would love to do it again someday.

**6) Who was your most influential mentor? How did they influence your work?**

Susan Alt was my PhD advisor and mentor. She taught me how to combine theory, method, and practice in thoughtful, innovative ways in order to push the discipline of archaeology in new directions.

**7) Do you work with volunteers? If so, how do interested people become volunteers?**

Occasionally I have volunteers work in the lab and the field. Right now, everything is extremely limited due to COVID. And even at the best times, lab hours are restricted based on teaching schedules. But anyone who is interested in volunteering is welcome to email me.

**8) What public archaeological site do you think best handles preservation and interpretation? why?**

Cahokia Mounds in Illinois does an excellent job of balancing preservation and interpretation. One of the things I appreciate about the museum is that as you walk to the front entrance, there are archaeological features painted on the entry pavement. Prior to building the interpretive center, excavations were conducted in that location; those painted features are in the exact spot the original features were located. At Cahokia, you get a good sense of the research that has been conducted at the site and what is known about Cahokians, but you also get to physically experience the city as you move among mounds, borrow pits, and reconstructed portions of the palisade and woodhenges.

**9) What is your favorite thing about being an archaeologist?**

Working with people to share what we can learn about the past and the present through material culture.

**10) What is your least favorite thing about being an archaeologist?**

Poison ivy, mosquitoes, snakes

**11) Who do you most admire in our field and why?**

I don't know that I can pick a single person!

**12) Do you have advice for people who want to pursue a career in archaeology?**

It's hard work, low pay, and archaeology jobs can be tough to find at times, but it can be incredibly rewarding work.

**13) How do you feel about the Hollywood and/or reality tv portrayal of archaeology?**

I don't mind the Hollywood "blockbuster" portrayals – Indiana Jones, The Mummy, etc. are all pretty clearly fiction and can be entertaining. The reality TV portrayals are more problematic, because they present highly skewed, frequently pseudoscientific, and destructive ideas and practices as if they are the non-fiction, mainstream version of archaeology. Shows like Diggers, Ancient Aliens, Oak Island promote unethical practices (site destruction), conspiracy theories, and deny people in the past any kind of agency or creativity.

**14) What is your least favorite question that you are frequently asked by non-archaeologists and why?**

"What is the coolest artifact you've ever found?" This question is my least favorite because for archaeologists, the interesting story is rarely about a single object; it's about the narratives that can be constructed through provenience, context, and the connections between artifacts, features, deposition, etc.

**15) What can the general public do to protect and preserve archaeological sites?**

Reach out to your local archaeological associations (pretty much every state has them, and membership is open), contact professionals at State Historic Preservation Offices, and cultivate good relationships with private landowners who have sites on their properties. Archaeologists only have so much power (as granted by state laws), so the public is the front line for convincing landowners to provide access to properties so that sites can be located and documented.

**16) What was the professional culture in archaeology like from a female perspective when you began your career?**

There were few female archaeologists at my undergrad institution. I also realized that in going into southeastern archaeology, most of the academic positions and management positions in contract archaeology were held by men. This is still the case, but things are slowly changing in the discipline.

**17) Do you think that your gender made it more difficult to become an archaeologist? If so, how?**

I've certainly been in positions where my authority has been challenged and the challenger turned to a male on the crew for answers. I have also noticed that there continue to be exclusionary groups within pockets of archaeology where only men get invited to participate in discussions, conference sessions, or publications.

**18) What barriers or challenges unique to women did you encounter?**

Working in the field can be difficult at times when there are not restroom facilities.

**19) What advantages unique to women did you enjoy?**

My best friends are archaeologists and we uplift and celebrate each other's' accomplishments. That may not be unique to women, but when academia can be cutthroat and competitive, it's comforting to know there's group of strong women out there who have my back.

**20) Does being a woman influence your interpretation of the archaeological sites that you excavate? If so, how?**

My decision to focus my research on daily experiences during period of turmoil is in part a response to some of the other trends in archaeology (especially when it comes to warfare) that have focused on elite men. I did not consciously set out to study women in the past, but in analyzing pottery and foodways, it's likely that women had a particularly large role in the production and use of pottery.

**21) Are there ongoing stories or interpretations in archaeology that you think would be different if they had been interpreted by women?**

The domestication of plants and animals, agricultural practices, and their connections to the comes to mind. Farming tends to be perceived as a masculine profession in the US and that kind of perspective has bled into interpretations of the past. Yet, we know (from historical documents, from oral histories, from ethnographic research), women in parts of the indigenous Americas were responsible for agricultural. How might interpretations concerning the rise of complex societies change once there is more research on the roles that women played in the creation of food systems?

**22) Have you ever found something in the archaeological record that was specifically female? If so what? How did it make you feel?**

I found corset boning and metal eyelets at an Historic site once. It made me very glad that I do not have to wear clothes like that!

