Despotiko excavation – Report by Iro Tagkalou, MA Classical Archaeology student, Birkbeck College

Despotiko excavation is the ideal experience for one seeking to learn through adventure. The day starts on the way to the island by a 15-minute trip with the local boat (photo 1). Arriving at Despotiko, which is an uninhabited island, the team needs to adapt in a primitive workplace. Even if I wasn’t an archaeologist, I would consider this as a valuable experience preparing me to adjust to every working environment.

The view of Apollo’s sanctuary is a powerful experience (photo 2). Working for the Despotiko excavation I obtained a very good understanding of how an archaic sanctuary worked. Physically close to the site, I had the privilege to realise the actual size of the temple and its dynamics.

My role was to work within the pottery team. Some of my daily responsibilities were cleaning pottery sherds, putting them into groups and finally organise their safe transfer from the site to the museum. Α plethora of decorated and undecorated sherds were unearthed, giving us the opportunity to put them together and what is more, synthesize very interesting depictions dated in the archaic and classical periods. By organising the ceramics found in the auxiliary buildings, we were able to understand their various types and uses in the best possible way.

During the time I spent there, the restoration team moved part of the architrave from the workshop to the temple and afterwards the architrave was put on top of the columns. Although I had studied before about how the Greeks transferred the marbles, I could never imagine that I would be a witness of a very similar procedure (photo 3, 4 and 5).

One of the most important advantages of this excavation is that we had to work with people from various backgrounds. The excavation team is composed by students and scholars, sculptors, architects, adventurers from all over the world. To work within a team is not always very easy, however, this excavation taught us how to understand each other and how to learn from each other.

My participation to this excavation helped me to develop adaptability and confidence. I had the opportunity to use my own initiative and combine creatively work and study.

My advice to the future participants is to take advantage of the site and make the most of it by studying about it and being ready to absorb like a sponge all the new information the day brings. The day finishes on the boat, on the way back to Antiparos; it’s around 3.30 pm and the rest of the day is yours to enjoy, to learn, to make friends.

Given that this excavation takes place abroad and requires certain expenses, the provided funding made it easier for me to be part of this unique experience.