

Faculty Interview:

Interview with Professor Thomas F. Tartaron

Interviewed by Alexander King

To begin, what is your position within the Classical Studies Department?

PROF. TARTARON — I am an associate professor, which means I have tenure, and I am an Associate Professor of Classical Studies. I teach archaeology courses. Every once in a while I teach an Ancient History course. I don't teach any of the language courses because they don't need me to, so I handle with our other faculty, Brian Rose and Kim Bowes, the archaeology courses.

You're also the chair of the AAMW program.

Right, so we have a graduate program called Art and Archaeology of the Mediterranean World, which we call AAMW and I'm the chair of that. That is a graduate group which consists of faculty from a number of different departments: Classical Studies, Anthropology, Art History, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, and more. This is a graduate program only, mainly PhD. We also have some terminal MA students, but it's mainly PhDs.



What sorts of careers does the AAMW train you for?

Actually a lot. I would say by and large, people come into the program hoping to have an academic career, but several people move off into different directions, museum jobs being one of the main ones. We have several who are working museums in different parts of the world. Occasionally, there are more different tracks. People sort of go off into things like auction houses, using their art historical background, that kind of thing. There are many different things that people end up doing. Some of them end up teaching secondary school, but the majority end up in either a research shop, like a postdoc, or eventually in an academic position.

How long have you been at Penn, and what did you do before that?

I've been at Penn since 2006, and before that, I was an assistant professor of anthropology at Yale from 2000 to 2006, and prior to that I was at MIT as a postdoc and lecturer for 4 years.

What attracted you to Penn?

Penn's a great job. It's a great place to be. One of the things that was really attractive to me was the Penn Museum. It was a huge asset for Penn. So many colleagues, so many resources, so many collections down there I can use for teaching, and I can use for research. I was also attracted very much by the department, because the Classical Studies Department is one of the best such departments in the country. My colleagues are incredibly collegial, so it's a great group of people. They really understand what an archaeologist does, so it was a great fit for me.

What research area do you focus on?

I do archaeology, mainly of Greece, so I've worked in Greece since 1988 continuously. That's a long time. Over my career, I've worked in many parts of Greece on many different

projects. My main expertise is in what we would call late pre-history, especially Mycenaean Greece. People generally know about the Mycenaeans through Homer, who writes of a great race of people that participated in the Trojan War, something that happened long before his time. Most people would associate those people with the Mycenaeans. That's about 1500 to 1100 B.C. I work in that area by doing field archaeology and also research, but recently I've branched out into other things. For instance, I do ceramic petrography, which is a laboratory analysis of pottery. You make thin sections and compare the mineralogy with local geology, looking at things like sourcing and trade.

Using anthropology, I've also expanded my research to include the use of ethnography and ethnoarchaeology, so I've got a couple projects going where I'm interviewing older fishermen and women who live in coastal areas. I'm doing this in Greece and also in India. Those interviews are helping me to understand what these kinds of communities of fisherman and coastal people are like, because within Mycenaean archaeology, one of my main interests is harbors and maritime connections.

Before you started your work on maritime transport and commerce, had there been much research about Mycenaean trade networks, or not really?

It's a really dynamic and growing area of interest. Basically, in the past, say, 30, 40 years, the main interest has been trying to trace long distance trade, so the Mycenaeans' trading with the Egyptians, the people in Anatolia, the Hittites, and with people in the Levant, like in Ugarit. There's a lot of interest in that long distance trade. What really was missing was, first of all, any notion of where the actual harbors were, where the ships were, and also any sense of what local-scale maritime networks were like. Greece has the longest coastline in Europe, and so you're never far from the coast. Locally, there are lots of small scale networks of people involving trading, intermarriage, and all kinds of economic

and social networks. Those are really ignored. What I've been doing with my recent research has been, first, to try to establish ways of finding where these ancient harbors were. It's difficult because the coastline has changed so much over the last 3000+ years. Second, to try to come up with ways to understand these small scale interactions.

How does one reconstruct an ancient harbor? Are there telltale signs, does it require some specific technology, or is there a lot of inferential guess work?

Yes, it's difficult because as I said, the coastline has changed so much. What you really need is the help of geologists and geomorphologists, and people who study coastline change. It's a very specialized field. They can look at telltale signs in land forms, they can do underwater work, and they can also do things like coring where you pull up a long, cylindrical core of sediment, and by examining characteristics like microfauna, you can learn a lot about the coastal environments because they're sensitive to salinity and temperature, so you can look at features like whether the area was an open sea environment or a lagoonal environment or a lake, and then you can study that change over time.

In Greece, there are big problems like siltation of rivers, but the main problem is tectonics. Earthquakes are constantly moving the coastline up and down, and with these major geological changes, you can render a perfectly good harbor unusable, or you can create new harbors. I had a case where one area had a lovely sheltered harbor today, seemingly the location of a Bronze Age harbor, but it actually didn't exist in the Bronze Age. But in a different area, where there's a terrible location for a harbor now, it turned out to be the Bronze Age harbor. It was only through the technology methods I discussed that we were able to figure this out.

Compared to more mainland studies, is the material you focus on primarily geological in nature? You've discussed a lot about coring and topographical deviation over time. Do you also examine coastal villages or sites of previous occupation?

Yes, the thing that started one of my research projects was, during a search for harbors, we happened upon a major architectural settlement called Kalamianos. This was again a place that's not a harbor today. By studying that settlement, we initiated all these questions about what the function of this coastal site was, and we wanted to know, was there a harbor there? By going through all of this research, we discovered, yes, there was a great harbor there. This helps to explain what the site was doing there.

When designing a research project that involves a topic as broad and complex as trade, does the site come first, or does the topic come first, or is it kind of a combination of both?

Ideally, the research question comes first. That's what happened with us. We wanted to study maritime networks in this particular part of Greece, so we designed a project where we would search along the coastline, and we would create a GIS model about where the more likely locations would be, and then we'd just go out and look. This is how we actually found Kalamianos, along with another major site that we also investigated.

What do you consider your greatest finding or discovery at Kalamianos?

People sometimes ask me what's been my greatest discovery, and I think it's finding this site. The thing that's so remarkable about Kalamianos is that it's a Mycenaean site that is unique: the architecture is still standing above ground. The foundations are standing maybe up to a meter and a half tall, and you can see building foundations across the entire settlement, except for the part that's submerged underwater. All other Mycenaean sites are buried sites. This gave us an unusual opportunity, without having to excavate, to really be able to map out an entire town, which is unheard of. We can now talk about not just a site and not just a harbor, but a micro-region that's interacting with other sites around the Aegean Sea.

Was there anything surprising that you found at this site that questioned your previous understanding of trade in Mycenae?

Yes, probably the main thing that really surprised us was how monumental the architecture was. This led us to believe that this place was probably a colony founded by Mycenae itself. We think it's possibly Mycenae's main harbor on the Saronic Gulf. Mycenae likely came in and founded this harbor for economic and military reasons. We actually did the walk from our site to Mycenae, which took us 13 hours to complete. It was a rugged walk; however, one could easily do that in a couple of days.

In your ethnographical study, you're interviewing modern people about their relationship with harbors. Have you been able to extrapolate connections between modern day coastal villages and those that are around several thousand years ago?

Yes, that's a really good question, and that's the main challenge. Obviously, the modern people are not ancient people, and with a 3000 year separation, there are vast changes over time. What we are really trying to figure out is whether there are kinds of universal ways that people on coastlines interact with the sea and the way they form relationships with nearby settlements. That's the reason we want to interview the oldest people possible. Really, World War II is the frontier of change. People living before World War II in Greece, and in many other parts of the world, were using traditional techniques that were not vastly different from those of ancient times. After World War II, the infusion of technology really changed everything. Therefore, we want to find elderly people who have real memories of this.

We've been able to identify kinds of patterns, of people living in Greece, but also in India, about the ways that coastal people transmit knowledge from one generation to another, about the ways that people on coastlines are often marginalized by inland centers of power. Because of that, they develop worlds of their own. They develop distinct identities. These are the

kinds of things that one can see not only in the ancient world but also in the modern world.

We looked at those kinds of things, and every once in a while, you find a really startling parallel. One of these was a fishing technique. In India, there's a type of fishing where you take a little boat out and release a big net, which is connected by 2 ropes to the shore. Then, 5 or 6 men on each side of the rope slowly pull in the net. In Greece, there's the same thing in modern times called "gripos." The startling thing was I found a depiction of men doing exactly the same thing on 2 pieces of Greek painted pottery from the 12th century B.C. Every once in a while, you get one of these eureka moments, where you realize things may not have changed so much. Thus, there are certainly justifications for doing ethnographical work.

Speaking more broadly about Classical Studies, where do you see it heading in the next 50 years?

That's a big question. Obviously, humanities are kind of under attack with this emphasis on STEM and declining resources. But I do think that Classical Studies remain vibrant. A Classical Studies degree can lead in many different directions. For example, lots of Classical Studies grads go to law school. The major allows you to become really skilled at language and at communication. Such skills are not as well served in STEM areas, and yet, those are skills that everyone needs to get by, and to really excel in the modern world. It's all about communication.

To students interested in getting involved in archaeology or becoming archaeologists, any advice?

One thing is that it's very easy to do. I always like to say archaeology is for everyone. For students that are interested in going on a dig or having an archaeological experience, there are so many ways to do it. What they really need is a little bit of guidance from a professor to help them decide what would be the best entry for them, like a field school.

It's not just about "doing" archaeology, it's also a cultural experience. It can involve teamwork, group living, learning about new cultures, and experiencing modern countries like Greece or Italy. All of these things are great bonuses, so I think it's more than just learning "how to" do archaeology.