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Subterranean Zanzibar: Foragers, Ritual, and Caves on the Swahili Coast

Course ID: ARCH 345J

June 01-July 01 2026

Academic Credits: 8 Semester Credit Units

FIELD SCHOOL DIRECTOR

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FIELD CREW CHIEF

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OVERVIEW

Mobile foragers and cave-dwelling groups were integral to the broader cultural mosaic of the Swahili world. This field school researches the hinterlands surrounding stone towns, focusing specifically on the habitable caves of Zanzibar Island that preserve evidence of deep and repeated human occupation.

The project is designed to investigate how these cave-using populations engaged with the rise of coastal urbanism, the circuits of Indian Ocean trade, and the challenges and opportunities of dynamic island ecologies. Caves on Zanzibar have yielded archaeological traces spanning thousands of years, providing a unique archive for examining long-term human-environment interaction. Through systematic excavation, the field school will explore subsistence strategies, material culture, and shifting social identities that unfolded in these subterranean spaces. By studying how cave communities interacted with urban centers - whether as suppliers of resources, custodians of ritual practices, or groups negotiating autonomy at the edges of mercantile power - the project promises to expand our understanding of Swahili society beyond the city walls. In doing so, it will challenge assumptions about what counts as central or peripheral in the making of coastal history.

A central component of the field school is its dual emphasis on archaeological and ethnographic practice. Alongside excavation and laboratory work (including artifact processing, zooarchaeological analysis, and documentation) students will engage with contemporary Zanzibari residents who continue to use these caves for ritual, tourism, resource extraction, and refuge. This community-based dimension fosters collaborative, ethical research that recognizes living heritage as integral to archaeological inquiry. Students will gain critical training in both scientific and qualitative methods, learning not only excavation techniques but also how to collect and interpret ethnographic data in culturally sensitive ways. By embedding field methods within a broader critique of received anthropological narratives - particularly those surrounding urbanism, power, and the politics of the past in East Africa – the field school will provide participants with a unique, holistic learning experience. Ultimately, this is the first project of its kind in Zanzibar and represents an innovative opportunity to rethink Swahili history from the margins and from beneath, situating caves and their communities at the center of new debates about coastal complexity.

ACADEMIC CREDIT UNITS & TRANSCRIPTS

Credit Units: Attending students will be awarded 8 semester credit units through our academic partner, Connecticut College. Connecticut College is a highly ranked liberal arts institution with a deep commitment to undergraduate education. Students will receive a letter grade for attending this field school (see assessment, below). Students are encouraged to discuss the transferability of credit units with faculty and registrars at their home institution prior to attending this field school.

Transcripts: An official copy of transcripts will be mailed to the permanent address listed by students on their online application. One more transcript may be sent to the student's home institution at no cost. Additional transcripts may be ordered at any time through the National Student Clearinghouse.

PREREQUISITES

None

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The pedagogical objectives of this field school are to provide students with rigorous training in archaeological and ethnographic field methods while fostering critical engagement with the social and historical contexts of the Swahili coast. Students will learn to think like anthropologically grounded archaeologists by balancing the technical aspects of excavation and artifact analysis with broader interpretive questions about urbanism, trade, power, and cultural identity. A key aim is to help students appreciate how multiple kinds of evidence (archaeological, environmental, and ethnographic) can be brought into dialogue to reconstruct complex human pasts and their resonance in the present.

These objectives will be achieved through a carefully structured combination of field excavation, laboratory processing, and community-based research. Students will rotate through excavation units at Zanzibar's cave sites, where they will learn stratigraphic excavation techniques, recording methods, and artifact recovery strategies. In the field lab, they will process, catalog, and analyze finds, with special emphasis on zooarchaeological methods for studying animal bones and shell remains – the instructor's specialization. Students will also participate in environmental sampling and mapping exercises, giving them a holistic understanding of how archaeological data is generated, preserved, and interpreted.

Beyond excavation, the field school emphasizes collaborative ethnographic practice. Students will engage directly with Zanzibari communities who use the caves today for ritual, tourism, resource extraction, and refuge. Through guided interviews, participant observation, and heritage documentation, students will gain experience in qualitative data collection and learn the ethical responsibilities of anthropological fieldwork. By combining excavation with ethnography, the program not only equips students with diverse methodological skills but also challenges them to reflect critically on the politics of heritage and the narratives archaeologists construct about the past. In doing so, the field school prepares participants for advanced study and careers in archaeology, anthropology, and heritage, while instilling a deeper appreciation for the living and historical landscapes of Zanzibar.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Learning Objectives

The primary goal of this field school is to provide students with rigorous, hands-on training in archaeological and ethnographic methods while fostering critical reflection on the history, politics, and heritage of the Swahili coast. Specifically, the program aims to:

- Teach students excavation and laboratory methods in archaeology, with a focus on stratigraphic recovery, artifact processing, and zooarchaeological analysis.
- Introduce students to ethnographic field methods, including participant observation, interviewing, and heritage documentation.
- Encourage critical thinking about anthropological concepts such as urbanism, mobility, trade, ritual, and cultural interaction.
- Expose students to the ethics and politics of fieldwork, especially in postcolonial contexts where archaeological practice intersects with local heritage and community priorities while reckoning with the legacy of decades (if not centuries) of predatory archaeological practice.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the field school, students will be able to:

Archaeological Skills & Methods

- Demonstrate proficiency in excavation techniques, including the use of tools, recording stratigraphy, and maintaining field notes.
- Process, catalog, and analyze material finds (ceramics, faunal remains, shells) and explain their relevance to questions of subsistence, environment, and cultural identity.
- Apply basic zooarchaeological techniques to identify and interpret animal remains, gaining insight into long-term human-environment interaction.
- Conduct environmental sampling and basic spatial documentation (e.g., mapping, context recording).

Ethnographic Competencies

- Carry out participant observation and structured interviews in culturally sensitive ways.
- Record and interpret qualitative data from community engagements, with attention to heritage, ritual, and contemporary uses of cave spaces.
- Reflect critically on positionality, ethics, and collaboration in anthropological fieldwork.

Transferable Skills

- Work effectively in diverse teams, adapting to field conditions and collaborative problem-solving.
- Communicate complex ideas clearly in both oral discussion and written form, including the ability to synthesize field notes into coherent interpretations.
- Demonstrate cultural competency and cross-cultural awareness, applicable to careers in heritage management, museums, non-profits, education, and international work.
- Translate field experience into professional language suitable for résumés, cover letters, and interviews (e.g., research design, data collection and analysis, project management, intercultural communication).

TECHNICAL AND FIELD SKILLS

Students participating in this field school will gain hands-on experience in archaeological and ethnographic methods, including:

- **Archaeological excavation techniques**: establishing excavation units, using field tools, maintaining stratigraphic control, and systematic recovery of artifacts and ecofacts.
- **Site recording and documentation**: completing context sheets, taking scaled drawings and field sketches, photographing features and artifacts, and maintaining field journals.
- **Artifact processing and analysis**: cleaning, cataloging, labeling, and curating finds, with a focus on ceramic typology, shell artifacts, and faunal remains.
- **Zooarchaeology and archaeomalacology**: identifying animal bones and shellfish remains, recording metrics, and interpreting data on diet, subsistence, and trade.
- **Environmental sampling**: collecting flotation and soil samples for paleoenvironmental reconstruction, and basic field sorting of botanical and faunal remains.
- **Spatial documentation**: using tape-and-compass, line levels, and grid systems to lay out excavation units and map site features.
- **Ethnographic methods**: conducting participant observation, structured and semi-structured interviews, and heritage documentation in collaboration with Zanzibari community members.
- **Data management**: organizing field data, maintaining excavation logs, and linking qualitative and quantitative observations for later analysis.

DURABLE SKILLS

Beyond technical training, students will also acquire transferable competencies and life skills that can be applied to academic, professional, and everyday settings:

- **Teamwork and collaboration**: working in diverse, multicultural teams under trying field conditions, sharing responsibilities, and supporting group goals.

- **Problem-solving and adaptability**: responding to the unpredictability of fieldwork (e.g., weather, logistics, unexpected discoveries) with resilience and creativity.
- **Critical thinking and analysis**: developing research questions, identifying patterns in field data, and connecting observations to larger interpretive frameworks.
- **Cross-cultural communication and awareness**: learning to engage respectfully and effectively with local communities, cultivating sensitivity to different worldviews and practices.
- **Ethical awareness**: reflecting on issues of heritage ownership, representation, and the responsibilities of conducting research in postcolonial contexts.
- **Leadership and responsibility**: managing tasks independently while contributing to collective outcomes, mentoring peers, and taking initiative in field and lab settings.
- **Professional communication**: presenting observations clearly in oral discussions and written reports; developing skills to translate field experience into résumé-ready language.
- **Time management and discipline**: meeting daily field and lab schedules, balancing multiple tasks, and maintaining productivity under challenging conditions.

ASSESSMENT

Field School Grading Rubric (100%)

1. Field Participation & Teamwork – 40%

Students are expected to take an active role in all aspects of fieldwork, demonstrating consistent effort, responsibility, and collaboration.

- **Excellent (A / 90–100%)**: Fully engaged every day; consistently reliable, punctual, and proactive; demonstrates care in excavation, recording, and lab work; contributes positively to group morale; adapts well to challenges.
- **Good (B / 80–89%)**: Regularly engaged and dependable; usually punctual and prepared; contributes effectively to excavation and lab work; generally positive and cooperative.
- **Satisfactory (C / 70–79%)**: Participates but inconsistently; sometimes late, unprepared, or inattentive; work effort is uneven; minimal contributions to team collaboration.
- **Unsatisfactory (D/F / <70%)**: Frequently absent, late, or disengaged; unreliable in field or lab tasks; negative impact on group effort.

2. Assigned Readings & Discussion – 20%

Students will complete assigned readings and come prepared to discuss them during evening sessions, connecting them to field experiences.

- **Excellent**: Demonstrates thorough understanding of readings; actively contributes to discussion with thoughtful insights and connections to fieldwork.
- **Good**: Shows solid comprehension; participates in discussions; occasionally connects readings to field experiences.
- **Satisfactory**: Limited engagement; basic understanding evident but little connection to fieldwork; rarely contributes to discussion.
- **Unsatisfactory**: Readings not completed or show no evidence of comprehension; absent or silent in discussions.

3. Lecture Engagement & Materials – 20%

Lectures (on Swahili history, excavation methods, zooarchaeology, ethnography, etc.) will be integrated into the daily rhythm of the program. Students are expected to attend, take notes, and demonstrate comprehension in follow-up exercises.

- **Excellent**: Attends all lectures, takes detailed notes, asks questions, and demonstrates strong grasp of key concepts in subsequent conversations or assignments.
- **Good**: Attends most lectures, notes are adequate, shows general understanding of concepts.
- **Satisfactory**: Attendance irregular, notes minimal; shows only partial understanding of concepts.
- **Unsatisfactory**: Absent or disengaged; no evidence of comprehension of lecture material.

4. Field Journal & Reflection – 20%

Students will maintain a hand-written field journal that records daily activities, observations, and reflections on both archaeological and ethnographic experiences. Journals will be collected periodically.

- **Excellent**: Consistently detailed entries; records daily work, observations, and thoughtful reflections; clear evidence of intellectual engagement and personal growth.
- **Good**: Regular entries with adequate detail; shows effort to record activities and reflections.
- **Satisfactory**: Inconsistent entries or minimal detail; reflections superficial or incomplete.
- **Unsatisfactory**: Journal incomplete, missing, or shows little effort.

Notes on Assessment

- Grades reflect **student investment, effort, and engagement** in field-based learning.
- No student will be assessed on their "potential" as a future archaeologist or scholar.
- Participation, preparation, and steady contribution to the group are valued above speed or mastery.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Example Field School Schedule (35 Days)

Week 1: Orientation, Permits, and Foundations (Days 1–7)

- **Day 1 (Arrival & Orientation)**
    - Introductions; IFR Code of Conduct; harassment & discrimination policies
    - Overview of local cultural practices, attire guidelines, and etiquette
    - Safety briefing: fauna, flora, and fieldwork risks
    - Evening lecture: "The Swahili Coast and Zanzibar: An Introduction" (Akshay Sarathi)
    - **Assigned Reading (before arrival/for discussion):** Johnson, T. H. (2007). *Cultural relativism: Interpretations of a concept*. Anthropological Quarterly, 80(3), 791-802.
- **Days 2–3 (Permits & Preparation)**
    - Visit local museums, Department of Antiquities, and heritage institutions (students learn about permitting processes)
    - Guided walking tour of Stone Town (focus on Swahili urbanism and architecture)
    - Evening lecture: "The Cultural Heritage of Zanzibar" (Abdallah Khamis Ali, Head of Antiquities, Zanzibar)
    - **Assigned Reading:** Baumanová, M. (2018). *Pillar tombs and the City: Creating a sense of shared identity in Swahili urban space*. Archaeologies, 14(3), 377-411.
- **Days 4–5 (Ethnographic Orientation)**

- Introduction to community-based research methods
- Practice field journaling and participant observation exercises
- Evening lecture: “Ethnography, Ethics, and Community Engagement” (Akshay Sarathi)
- **Assigned Reading:** Roque, A., et al. (2024). *Community-based participant-observation (CBPO): A participatory method for ethnographic research.* Field Methods, 36(1), 80-90.

- **Days 6–7 (Methods Training)**
  - Excavation and lab training: stratigraphy, recording sheets, artifact handling, and flotation sampling
  - Lecture: “Field Archaeology of Caves” (Akshay Sarathi)
  - Evening session: Review and discussion of field journals
  - **Assigned Reading:** Pastoors, A., & Weniger, G. C. (2011). *Cave art in context: methods for the analysis of the spatial organization of cave sites.* Journal of Archaeological Research, 19(4), 377-400.

Weeks 2–4: Excavation, Lab Work, and Ethnography (Days 8–28)

- **Daily Schedule (Monday–Saturday)**
  - **Morning (7:00–1:00):** Excavation at Zanzibar cave sites (rotation through excavation units, flotation, and mapping).
  - **Afternoon (3–5:30):** Laboratory processing (washing, sorting, cataloging artifacts, zooarchaeological identifications).
  - **Evening (7:30–9:00):** Lectures, seminars, and reading discussions over dinner.
- **Lecture Topics:**
  - Week 2:
    - Traditional coconut rope-making (Demonstration and lecture by community members)
    - Sailing Jambiani’s waters (Lecture by Hassan, expert *ngalawa* sailor)
    - **Assigned Reading:** Bojakowski, P. T., Sarathi, A., Berrocal, R. P., Ali, A. K., Othman, H., & Othman, B. (2024). Mtepe: Documentation and Analysis of a Sewn-Boat Reconstruction from Zanzibar, Tanzania. *African Archaeological Review*, *41*(1), 139–159. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-024-09577-6
  - Week 3:
    - Zanzibar’s Limestone Caves: Conflict and Intersection (Akshay Sarathi)
    - Intangible Cultural Heritage Preservation in Zanzibar (Member of the Department of Museums and Antiquities)
    - **Assigned Reading:** Ali, B. S., Castro, J. J., Omi, S., & Nazimi, K. (2024). *Exploration and Characterization of Dynamic Properties for Cultural Heritage Conservation: A Case Study for Historical Stone Masonry Buildings in Zanzibar. Buildings,* 14(4), 981.
  - Week 4:
    - Shellfish gathering at Jambiani (Demonstration and lecture by community members)
    - Fishing at Jambiani (Demonstration and lecture by community members)
    - **Assigned Reading:** Faulkner, P. et al. (2019). L*ong-term trends in terrestrial and marine invertebrate exploitation on the eastern African coast: Insights from*

Kuumbi Cave, Zanzibar. The Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology, *14*(4), 479-514.

- **Assigned Readings (correlated with lectures):**
- **Ethnographic Component (integrated throughout):**
    - Weekly site visits to Zanzibari caves in use today (ritual, tourism, extraction).
    - Guided interviews with community members under the supervision of the project director.
    - Reflection and discussion in evening sessions.

Week 5: Consolidation and Synthesis (Days 29–35)

- **Days 29–31:**
    - Final excavation and lab work; wrap-up of units; preliminary analysis of finds.
    - Student presentations of preliminary observations.
    - Lecture: "Archaeology, Heritage, and the Public in Zanzibar." (Member of the Department of Museums and Antiquities)
    - **Assigned Reading:** Musavengane, R. (2019). *Understanding tourism consciousness through habitus: Perspectives of 'poor'black South Africans. Critical African Studies*, *11*(3), 322-347.
- **Days 32–34:**
    - Data synthesis workshops: linking excavation results with ethnographic insights.
    - Writing sessions: drafting sections of final field journals and reports.
    - Evening lecture: "The Swahili Coast in Comparative Perspective." (Akshay Sarathi)
    - **Assigned Reading:** Caplan, P. (2007). '*But the coast, of course, is quite different': academic and local ideas about the East African littoral.* Journal of Eastern African Studies, 1(2), 305-320.
- **Day 35 (Closing & Departure):**
    - Final field journal submissions.
    - Group discussion and reflection on field school learning outcomes.
    - Closing dinner with community partners.

Notes

- Students will be engaged in **formal learning for a minimum of 8 hours/day, 6 days/week** through excavation, lab, lectures, site visits and field trips, and reading discussion.
- Days off (typically Fridays) will be encouraged for rest, but optional cultural enrichment activities will be suggested, such as visits to spice plantations, dhow workshops, or the Jozani Forest Reserve.
- The schedule is subject to change due to permitting, weather, or on-site conditions. Adaptability is emphasized as a key skill of field research.

REQUIRED READINGS

PDF files of all mandatory readings will be provided to enrolled students. Program participants are expected to be prepared to engage in discussions led by facilitators, all of whom will be looking for

compelling evidence that students have read and thought about the assigned readings prior to the scheduled day on which they are first discussed.

See list of assigned readings above

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Kusimba, Chapurukha M. *Swahili worlds in globalism*. Cambridge University Press, 2023.

Middleton, John. *The world of the Swahili: An African mercantile civilization*. Yale University Press, 1992.

ACADEMIC EQUIPMENT

Standard Archaeology Pointing Trowel (Marshalltown or Tasuki)

https://marshalltown.com/pro-1654-archaeology-pointing-trowels?variantItemId=16944

https://tasuki-japan.com/products/tasuki-trowel-1piece-1set