Sara Hallock, a master’s degree candidate in classics with a concentration in archaeology, had traveled widely throughout Europe in a previous career as an accountant for a large firm in New York City. But nothing prepared her for the cultural immersion she experienced last summer. Outside the former Yugoslavian capital of Belgrade, she joined 14 other University at Albany students led by Professor Michael Werner on an archaeological dig at a town and military garrison of the ancient Roman Empire.

Hallock and the other students rose each day at 5:30 a.m. Fortified by Turkish coffee, they left their farmhouse, where goats and chickens roamed, to begin their work in the field by 6 a.m. A cook brought a breakfast of homemade yogurt and open-faced sandwiches to the dig site at 9 a.m. After they finished eating, they went back to work under a scorching Balkan sun. Bone-tired, but elated by the artifacts they discovered dating from the 1st through 6th centuries A.D. — coins, amphorae, roof tiles, bricks, fragments of cooking pottery, a marble figurine — they returned to the farmhouse for the main meal and a late-afternoon nap, followed by a light dinner and an evening lecture by Werner or a review of the day’s work.

“It was a little bit of a culture shock, but it was really interesting to be working alongside people from the Balkans,” said Hallock, who spent three weeks at the site exploring Roman baths, which she previously knew only as the subject of a graduate research paper.

“The bathhouse was really cool, and we started digging up the mosaic tile floor,” said Hallock, who grew up in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. “We could trace the various renovations from different levels of fresco on the walls. Being there gave me a tremendous perspective on Roman culture. I had no experience in archaeology before I went, and I couldn’t picture it in my head by reading archaeological journals. I was really inspired by the trip. I’d love to go back.”

How Students Benefit

There are two principal benefits for our students working in a project like this. On the professional side, they are part of the inductive process that allows us to better understand Roman culture in particular and ancient, complex societies in general. At Viminacium, we are involved in a rare context, a truly significant site, for foreigners working in someone else’s country. The results of research in a single excavation season have the potential to rewrite chapters in Roman history. That adds an edge of excitement to the normal hot and dusty days on the excavation sites.

Second, this project places our students completely out of the tourist tracks, in a Serbian village, working alongside local archaeologists. There is no American compound here. We eat the same food, sleep at the same farmstead as our colleagues, and hear a completely different language around us. In a certain sense, this experience in applied archaeology breaks down the artificial barriers of the classroom and allows our students direct exposure to a culture different from their own, in both the ancient and modern worlds. Here we are on the front lines of international education.

— Michael Werner, Chair of Classics and Program Coordinator, Classics and Mediterranean Archaeology

Professor Michael Werner in front of a restored Serbian village house at the famous prehistoric site of Lepenski Vir on the Danube. Photo was taken during a student weekend excursion to an archaeological site in the Iron Gates Gorge.

By PAUL GRONDAHL

Photos: Courtesy of Michael Werner

DIGGING ON THE DANUBE

UAlbany students join local archaeologists at excavations of Roman imperial period burials. The site is probably an early Christian martyrium, or funerary chapel.
Hallock’s transformative experience is one of the benefits of the project set up by Werner, who is program coordinator of Classics and Mediterranean Archaeology at the University, where he’s been a faculty member since 1981. Werner has been involved in archaeological digs in the former Yugoslavia for 35 years, beginning as a graduate student at Stanford University. He had to suspend his work there in the early 1990s following political unrest, the breakup of the country and United Nations sanctions. After the brief research season in 1991, the situation was too volatile to continue. With the political situation now stabilized, Werner was invited to return with the University students last summer to participate in the dig in earnest after what amounted to a two-decade hiatus.

For the University students, both undergraduate and graduate, it was an opportunity, quite literally, to travel nearly 2,000 years back in time. They also got to work side-by-side with Serbian archaeologists in a collaborative effort to uncover and understand a venerable past in present-day Serbia and Montenegro.

“It’s very exciting that Michael is back doing work at Viminacium, and it’s wonderful for the University to have our students involved in his important archaeological research,” said Joan Wick-Pelletier, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

“Allowing them to roll up their sleeves and dig into the Roman Empire gives them invaluable experience in primary research and broadens their international perspective. It’s a tremendous opportunity.”

In one of the main research efforts, students used global positioning systems to trace an ancient Roman aqueduct from a well in the center of town to its spring-fed source in the mountains some 30 miles away. Others studied the Roman bath complex, which used a radiant heat flooring system with a fire burning in the depths that warmed the bathing pools. One group excavated a church and cemetery, while another worked on a dig at the north gate of the military garrison. So far, Werner and his student have amassed a digital photo archive of 4,000 images of the site, in addition to recovering scores of artifacts placed in storage for later analysis.

Werner’s eventual goal is to develop a two-way cultural exchange.
bringing University students to Viminacium and Serbian students to the University to benefit from advanced technology and research facilities in Albany. "They give us access to the real thing and we can share our technical expertise," Werner said.

The University is the only American college or university currently undertaking this type of collaborative archaeological research in Serbia and Montenegro. Through Werner’s contacts and the respect he has earned in the region — he is frequently invited to lecture at local universities and is something of a celebrity who is interviewed often on national television when he visits — the University has developed a formal partnership with The Archaeological Institute in Belgrade and the Serbian Academy of Arts & Sciences. His wife, Boba, the project field director and an archaeologist who comes from the former Yugoslavia, has assisted Werner throughout the project.

Known as Viminacium and situated near the modern-day city of Kostolac at the confluence of the Danube and Mlava rivers, in ancient times it was the capital of the Roman province of Upper Moesia. Because of the excellent water transportation network and its location as an outpost on the northern edge of the Roman Empire, Viminacium had strategic importance and was used as a military base for an entire Roman Army legion. About 5,500 soldiers were stationed there at its height in the third century A.D.

Viminacium was a prominent location on ancient Roman maps, from the early first century until the sixth century A.D. Roman soldiers at Viminacium fought off successive waves of invaders, including the Goths, Visigoths, Huns, Avars and others. Roman emperors, such as Marcus Aurelius, would travel there to set up field headquarters and lead Roman soldiers at the front as the first line of defense in repelling marauding enemies.

For the University students, digging down several feet into the soil and finding artifacts is not like wandering onto the set of “I, Claudius,” “Quo Vadis” or “Gladiator.” On the surface, though, the area is mostly prosaic farmland.

Todd Ryan’s Viminacium Journal

Todd Ryan is a 23-year-old UAlbany graduate student in classical archaeology who worked at the Viminacium excavation site near Belgrade last summer. These are excerpts from his field journal.

July 8, 2003, Viminacium dig near Belgrade

Today I completed an overall sketch of (a previously exposed burial) site. After seeing my sketch, Alex (an architect from the Serbian Institute for the Conservation and Preservation of Cultural Monuments) and I collaborated on ... church building is 23.8 meters from the road and is west of the road. This same road is heading east towards the castrum, or gate. It runs east to west and was probably one of many roads leading to the colonia (colony) and castrum (military base). It was good to see evidence in the ground of just how important this site was during the Roman period.

At the end of the day a piece of marble relief sculpture was found. I have already sketched it. It is of a bearded, long-haired figurine playing a pipe that I think is possibly a river deity or other water god. Possibly Danubius due to the close proximity to the Danube (River).

July 10, 2003

Today I devoted all my attention to the vaulted burial site, which is now called Burial No. 36. It is indeed a vaulted burial. After clearing it out I discovered that it is a corbelled vault made of brick with a small rubble and stone core. There is a decent amount of mortar on this burial. It is larger than all the other burials, which is necessary to bear the weight of the vault.

It is preserved up to 71 centimeters from the base to the current top. The north side is preserved far better than the south side. I have sketched it already and will complete this process tomorrow.

July 17, 2003

Last day of field work. I spent most of the morning finishing up Burial 36, which has at least two individuals interred within it. Once Alex drew the grave, we pulled all the bones and prepared them to be brought to the lab. After breakfast the G.P.R. (Ground Penetrating Radar) guys took a survey between the north end of the church and the north trench.

Hopefully, between the new trench and the G.P.R. survey, the next group will be able to figure out the function of the building.
The main industry these days for Kostolac’s population of about 20,000 people is a coal mining operation that generates fuel to burn at a steam plant. “I loved every second of my time there,” said Kate Brunn, a master’s degree candidate in classics with an emphasis in archaeology who worked on the Viminacium dig last summer. Brunn found some coins and two-handled storage jars called amphorae that held wine.

“It was extremely exciting to make a find,” said Brunn, who is from Sharon in Schoharie County. “I’ve had the opportunity to travel quite a bit, but nothing like this. I learned archaeology through firsthand experience. It made me want to stay in this field for my profession.”

Brunn earned a bachelor’s degree from the University in art history with a concentration in Greek and Roman civilization. She is applying for a position as a conservationist restoring ancient Roman mosaics. “I got to work in the conservation center at Viminacium and reconstructed pottery, which was fascinating,” Brunn said. “It was hard work, but when I got into the rhythm of it, I really lost all sense of time and felt I was back in the third century.”

That sense of thrilling discovery is evident in the daily journal entries students made of their field work. Todd Ryan wrote: “Today we began by cleaning one of the exposed burials. Of note was a nail we found as well as a bone hairpin... There are at least two distinct periods of use... This would explain the two types of burials (Christian east to west and pagan north to south) At the end of the day a piece of marble relief sculpture was found. I have already sketched it. It is of a bearded, longhaired figure playing a pipe that I think is possibly a river deity or other water god... Also of note is the amount of pottery and shells that I have been finding. The shells could be from a feast at the tomb. This was probably a very lavish burial.”

Over the summer, two groups of seven students from the University worked in the field for three-week sessions. Werner and his wife hope to bring 15 students in a single session this summer.

The task before Werner and the students is a daunting one. The archaeological site is a sprawling 200 acres, heavily studded with important features, including the town center, military garrison and mint where the Romans made coins. “The value of this site is that nothing has been built over it. We’re mostly digging in plowed fields,” Werner said. “But it’s so vast and there’s so much to do. There’s a wealth of artifacts and a backlog in analyzing the materials. The Serbs are glad to have our help and the government is extremely receptive. This site will still be yielding information for several generations to come.”

Paul Grondahl, M.A. ’84, is a staff writer at the Albany Times Union. His third book, a biography of Theodore Roosevelt, I Rose like a Rocket, will be published by Free Press in June.