In mid-June 2016, I was given the very fortunate opportunity of participating in an archaeological excavation held in Boiotia, Greece. I had heard of this opportunity through a friend that mentioned that Dr. Seung Jung Kim from the Department of Art History at UTSG would be bringing a few students to an excavation of a temple to Poseidon at Onchestos. After submitting an application, I was contacted with the news that my application was successful and that I would be able to participate in this excavation. Once funding was procured, the challenging and rewarding journey began.

After arriving in Athens with my fellow students, we were brought to the hotel in Thiva, where all other participating members of the excavation from Columbia University were staying. These members were almost entirely comprised of Ph.D. candidates from whom I would learn a lot through conversations on our travels and at the excavation site. Everyone I met was extremely warm, friendly, and welcoming.

The demanding schedule that all were expected to follow meant that from Monday to Friday breakfast was served at 5:30 AM sharp, with departure for the dig sites at 6:00 AM sharp. We were separated into pairs and would remain digging in pairs for the duration of the trip. Each pair was given a large four by four meter square to slowly and carefully excavate. The borders were clearly marked by yellow string attached to painted nails so that we were responsible for our particular section. The initial layers of grass and topsoil would be taken more quickly by the workers that were available. Once this top layer was removed, the more slow and delicate work
was begun by the students. The digging would commence until 1:30 PM, at which point we began to clean up the trenches and prepare for departure back to the hotel. Lunch was served upon our arrival, followed by a much-needed break of approximately two hours. While we were given two short breaks during the duration of the digging, this longer break was a welcome respite due to the hot, dry weather of the area. At 4:30 PM, everyone would meet again to begin the daily, detailed write-ups of the events of the day and complete the final copies of the very neat archaeological drawings to scale. Each trench would require its own write-up and drawing. After these were completed, dinner was served at the hotel followed by some free time. This free time was usually taken up by rest as we would need to get up at 5:00AM the following morning to do it all again. However, this was left to the discretion of each individual.

The undergraduate students were trained by the Ph.D. candidates in different digging techniques with each of the tools provided for the entire first week of the excavation. These tools included small, one-handed pickaxes, archaeological trowels of varying shapes and sizes, and various brushes to clear the dust. This was quite challenging at first as one must exert enough energy and force to break through the harder soils while simultaneously being extremely careful about not exerting so much force that any artifacts are damaged.
would be broken or damaged in the process. While this was extremely slow in the beginning, as time went on, we acquired the skills to do this much more efficiently. In addition to these digging techniques, we would have to document all soil changes using the Munsell Colour Chart. This chart provided several different colour variations of soils to compare the soils in your trench to, as well as the varying compactness of the soils. Every detail counts in an excavation!

It was especially exciting when an artifact was excavated in your square, partially because these are oftentimes so few and far apart, but also because of the knowledge that someone had made or touched something over 2,000 years before and you now also had the opportunity to see and touch it. When an artifact was found, the exact location in relation to the fixed-point of the trench was taken immediately along with the measurements of the artifact itself. The depth of this artifact was also measured in relation to the sea-level using a tool called a theodolite with its corresponding telescopic measuring stick. This was all promptly written down in your field notebook and its location drawn into the preliminary drawing of the trench for that day. Pictures of the artifact would be taken with a scale placed strategically so that a rough measurement could also be seen in the picture itself. Once an artifact was sufficiently dug out of the surface, it was removed and bagged before being brought to a conservator in the town. This removal allowed for the diggers to keep excavating to greater depths.
Provided there were no interruptions caused by the weather – such as by rain storms or extreme heat – the weekends would be left open for the students to take day or weekend trips to other cities such as Athens, Delphi, and Chalcis. These trips were optional, but very worth it! We were able to visit many, many museums, try the different local foods, visit the beautiful Greek beaches and swim in the crystal-clear Aegean Sea. Thiva itself had a wonderful museum and restaurants that were walking-distance from the hotel, so one didn’t have to go very far to do these things if he or she didn’t want to take a day trip to other cities. After this five week venture, I highly recommend that other students actively seek out such opportunities wherever and whenever they are able!

I would like to take this time to express my gratitude towards Dr. Kim for allowing me to take part in this wonderful and fulfilling experience, to Dr. Chrubasik for aiding me in finding the funding for this trip, as well as to the Department of Historical Studies and to the Dean of the University of Toronto Mississauga for jointly funding me in this. While it was very hard and demanding work, it was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life, and I hope that other students will have the opportunity to take part in such trips in the future.