

Interview with Dr. Alessandro Sebastiani Professor of Classics at the University at Buffalo and IEMA Board Member

Dr. Sebastiani is a recent addition to the Classics Department at the University at Buffalo, and to the board for the Institute for European and Mediterranean Archaeology. After completing his PhD at the University of Siena, Italy in 2008, he has held many positions that give him unique insight into the importance of research and collaboration within the field of archaeology. His current research project in Monteverdi focuses on the interconnectivity of economies and societies through three periods, and brings together a team of researchers of different levels of experience and from across two continents.

You are relatively new to the Classics department at the University at Buffalo and IEMA, what were you doing before arriving here?

Before joining the University at Buffalo, I had been working for several institutions, mainly in America and the UK. While writing my Ph.D., I was hired by the Penn Museum in Philadelphia, where I focused on the publications of the excavations at Butrint, a UNESCO world Heritage Site in Albania. After that I moved to the UK, to the Butrint Foundation, where I served as an Archaeological Consultant. In 2012 I started my Marie Curie Fellowship at the Department of Archaeology at the University of Sheffield. The Intra-European Fellowship gave me the opportunity to work on my research project in Tuscany and to develop a number of skillsets that are still useful nowadays. After Sheffield, I served as Visiting Professor at Charles University in Prague (Czech Republic) and as a senior archaeologist for the Crowded Desert Project in Qatar.

How have you benefitted so far from the support of an organization like IEMA? Do you find the cooperation between the Classics and Anthropology departments valuable?

IEMA represents a unique opportunity for the scholarly community of the Departments of Classics and Anthropology to work together and to organize an annual conference with young post-doctoral fellows. I personally think that the cooperation between the two departments is not only valuable but necessary and inevitable; the classical and anthropological approaches to archaeology and the reconstruction of the past may be sometimes different but we work towards the same task: understanding ancient communities and, in my specific case, economies and landscapes. We can only obtain a better task if we collaborate and compare our results.

What contributions do you hope to make as a board member of IEMA?

I like to think that my main contribution could be a constant and steady support for the younger scholars who approach IEMA through the post-doctoral position that we advertise every year. At the same time, I had the possibility of working for several institutions, both in the old and new world, and hopefully I can bring those networks into IEMA, to start new fruitful collaborations for the Institute.

Where do you see IEMA going in the future?

As the world of humanities is facing new challenges nowadays, IEMA has to continue on the path that has been constructed in the last several years. We need to support the young generations of scholars who have the energy and passion to continuously renovate the discipline while keeping the highest standard of research. We do this at every moment and I guess this should be the direction, or at least, the star leading our path into the next decade. Archaeology and humanities in general also need a stronger digital approach with an ideal eye towards cultural heritage studies and management. The future of IEMA will include more and more these subjects.

What is your current research project or the current focus of your work?

In the last two years, I have been focusing my research on the wider territory of the Ombrone river valley (south Tuscany) in the Roman and medieval times. Before starting my recent project with Michelle Hobart and Todd Fenton, I was working on the coastal area of south Tuscany, within the Regional Park of Maremma. That project involved the excavations of three major Roman sites, but I wanted to expand the research to include the hinterland of the *ager Rusellanus*. So the Impero Project started in 2017 and now is a successful archaeological project,

involving different American and European institutions, international undergraduate and graduate students and a number of professional archaeologists. Almost 30 people gather together at Monteverdi, where we analyze, study and understand the interconnectivity of economies and societies among three crucial periods: the Etruscan, Roman and Medieval ages. The project has been generously funded by some external grants, as well as a recent UB research grant. The latter focuses on the 3D reconstruction of the material culture and settlements currently under excavations, as well as on the extensive use of augmented reality to disseminate the results of our research to the wider possible audience. Since 2018, the project also represents an opportunity to study abroad and gain first-hand experience on the archaeological discipline. Last year we had 8 students joining the excavations, while this year we received an outstanding number of applications and we were able to accept and select 12 students. We have decided to keep the number of participants relatively low, in order to guarantee the best teaching and learning environment for the students.

What advice do you have for students looking towards careers in this field?

How can students use organizations like IEMA to their advantage?

My usual suggestion for students looking to pursue a career in the humanities is to stay focused and, at the same time, desirous of learning. There are so many projects and new ideas in our field that it is fundamental to read and appreciate scholarships and to find the best way to use this knowledge to develop new directions of the research. They also have to pay attention to the larger debates and to both archaeological and historical backgrounds in the specific regions they want to operate for their careers. New ideas are stronger when there is a solid, consistent background of the previous theories and models.

Students at UB have the fantastic opportunity to use IEMA to boost their knowledge and to absorb new debates in Classics and Anthropology. Every year, a brilliant post-doctoral fellow is selected to guarantee an organized, international conference on a specific cutting-edge topic. The conference represents a moment of discussion and interaction that each student should take advantage of. Graduate students also have the possibility to attend a conference-related seminal course during the spring semester and they can deepen the specific subject and theories. Obviously, we are also open to suggestions from the student community, so as to find new ways to support them during their studies and their future careers.