

UW-Madison: Today's middle school students study yesterday's people of Aztalan

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CONTACT: Sissel Schroeder, sissel.schroeder@wisc.edu and Kelly Tyrrell, kelly.tyrrell@wisc.edu, 608-262-9772

TODAY'S MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS STUDY YESTERDAY'S PEOPLE OF AZTALAN

LAKE MILLS, Wis. – Gavin Ketterman was really excited about the animal bones. But he was also really excited about the tools.

That's because at age 12, he is thinking hard about what he wants to be when he grows up, which means he really enjoyed his field trip to Aztalan State Park with the rest of his 6th grade peers at Fort Atkinson Middle School on a recent May morning.

"I got to find out about what kind of grades you're supposed to get to be an archaeologist, because I kind of want to be one," he said.

What he and 200 of his classmates experienced on this school trip to Aztalan, a prehistoric Native American site located in nearby Lake Mills, was a walk through some of the most critical elements of an archaeological excavation. Four stations set up throughout the park allowed them to learn more about how archaeology is conducted there, from the very people who do it.

That's because every few summers, Aztalan State Park becomes an active archaeological site when University of Wisconsin-Madison Professor of Anthropology Sissel Schroeder leads an undergraduate field school there, with the goal of better understanding those who lived at Aztalan nearly 1,000 years ago.

In 2015, Schroeder and her colleagues were awarded a Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment Project Grant to help involve the public in the archaeological exploration of Aztalan. It has also given Schroeder's students the chance to communicate with the public about the science of archaeology and the history of the site.

The project has also funded the development of a statewide, K-12 science and social studies curriculum by project assistant and graduate student Linda Orié. Designed around archaeology, it is being piloted in partnership with Fort Atkinson Middle School. Orié formerly taught middle school science in the Menominee Nation and is herself a member of the Oneida Nation.

The Fort Atkinson visit in late May was part of a series of lessons the students received this year around Aztalan and its people, the practice of archaeological excavation, and the history of the site located not far from home. It provided a hands-on experience to complement their multiple in-class visits from Orié and recent former lab manager Sarah Taylor, who completed Schroeder's field school in 2016.

"It's a treat to be the fun thing they get to do," says Orié. "It's a novelty and that's so important for the kids. It's a breath of fresh air for the curriculum."

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