

DIARY OF A MOTHER IN ARCHAEOLOGY

BY MATILDA SIEBRECHT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATILDA SIEBRECHT



Matilda and her children



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Full disclosure: I am writing the final draft of this article dangerously close to the deadline. Considering the theme of this issue, you may be able to hazard a guess as to why that might be. In my defense, I had planned to finish last week, but since becoming a mother, planning is a luxury that I find regularly slips through my fingers. My working day generally ends around 3pm, which is when my two daughters arrive back home after having been picked up from kindergarten by my husband. Once everyone has been read to, fed, washed, and put to bed (all still collaborative efforts in the parental team), I then have a few extra hours in which I could continue with any additional tasks that I was unable to complete during the day. (Assuming of course that I don't accidentally fall asleep to the repeating chimes of a tiny lullaby and the snuffling snores of a perpetually blocked nose.) With such a schedule, it is perfectly possible to complete a project well in advance of the deadline. However, two weeks ago, both girls fell prey to the latest mixture of illnesses brewing at the kindergarten. This consequently led to a week of constant attention for two very sad little girls. Daily naps that only worked if clinging to a parent. Disrupted nights spent rocking and soothing, or else teetering on the mattress edge to avoid squashing the spreadeagled little figure who had finally fallen asleep. And, as you can probably imagine, significantly restricted hours of freedom within which to work. Consequently, all of my carefully laid plans with staggered deadlines and delay windows came crashing down and it took me an extra two weeks to rebuild them again.

All of this is not intended as an excuse for why I submitted this draft so late to the editor. Nor is it meant as a horror story - a warning against having children if you ever want to continue efficiently in your working life.

Instead, I simply want to share an example of how motherhood has affected my working life and how I have had to deal with the challenges that it presents. Because, as I have come to realise over the last few years, any kind of representation of working mothers to the wider world can only be beneficial. When I first went back to work after having my eldest daughter, I didn't want to draw attention to the fact that my home life had become a lot busier. After all, women have been doing this forever, so why should I share my personal struggles when millions of others have experienced the very same thing? What difference could it make, either to me or to the world? It was not until I ran an online workshop with my daughter strapped to my front on camera, and experienced a wave of support, encouragement, and respect from the participants, that I realised the importance of transparency. So many people commented their joy at seeing someone focusing not just on their job, but also on their child. Others applauded me for providing such a wholesome example of a working mum. Several younger female participants messaged me privately afterwards, saying that they found my active form of motherhood extremely inspiring, and it made them hopeful that they too would be able to juggle a career and a family. All this feedback was completely unexpected. I had never intended to make any kind of statement by having my daughter physically on me during the event - she was only eight months old at the time and still breastfeeding, and as I had to travel to a particular location for two days and my husband couldn't come with me to watch her during the live streaming, having her on me was the only option. But the response caused me to think about the importance of such moments, especially in relation to the field of archaeology.



I am not trying to argue that other jobs or fields of research don't also include highly passionate individuals, but I feel that archaeology in particular attracts a certain kind of person who doesn't always see what they do as, "just a job".

Let's be honest; nobody gets into archaeology for the money, nor the power. Although Hollywood stereotypes and conspiracy theorists would claim otherwise, all of us who push through the short-term contracts, highly competitive funding applications, long hours, and of course the physical labour, do so because we are intensely passionate about what we do. I am not trying to argue that other jobs or fields of research don't also include highly passionate individuals, but I feel that archaeology in particular attracts a certain kind of person who doesn't always see what they do as, "just a job". Because of that, it then becomes increasingly difficult to prioritise other aspects of life, and so introducing children into the mix can create some very complicated emotions, especially as a mother who has so much physical attachment to a new baby. I have chatted with several female colleagues on this very subject - snatched conversations during coffee breaks at conferences where we have five minutes to catch up on everything that has happened since last year's edition - sharing the guilt that inevitably crops up as an archaeologist and mum.

Don't get me wrong, we love our children, but we also love our job and there are only so many compromises that can be made if we want to be able to continue to do our jobs to the best of our ability. But the more I spoke to colleagues who were experiencing the same issues I was, the more I realised that (a) I was not alone, and (b) enjoying my job and wanting to combine my love of archaeology with my love for my children did not affect my care as a mother.

On that note, I wanted to take this opportunity to share some of my experiences in different aspects of my work as an archaeologist. From conferences to fieldwork to meetings to research trips, I have managed to gather a range of different perspectives, and I hope through sharing those events with you, I might be able to offer some comfort, inspiration, or relief to any other archaeology mothers reading this.

1. Conferences

I have already mentioned the first event where I realised that my action of bringing my daughter with me to a working a was running - "Digging Archaeology Through Social Media" - had an important impact on those participating. Since then, I have participated in several online conferences while cuddling a baby, and I also attended the 2023 conference for the European Association of Archaeologists with my youngest daughter, who was five months old at the time. I was somewhat limited in the number of activities I could join with her. For example, I was able to attend the opening reception to a certain point, but going out to dinner with colleagues proved difficult as she would generally be too tired to contentedly sit and watch, but too distracted by loud conversations and background music to sleep. Despite this, I was still able to engage in many extremely useful and constructive conversations and discussions during other social events in the conference program and so was able to network with as much success as if I hadn't had a baby strapped to my front.

In terms of my own presentation, careful naptime planning ensured that she was alert and sitting up in my arms, but satisfied with listening to me talk without interruption, so long as I engaged in constant movement during the talk. Admittedly, based on the comments I received afterwards, I am not sure how many people were paying full attention to the talk as opposed to inwardly cooing over the wide-eyed baby in my arms, but nevertheless it went without a hitch. For the rest of the talks, I was able to either sway gently at the back of the lecture room while she slept in the carrier, or else would sit in the corridor outside with her gurgling happily in my lap and watch the talks online, then move back into the room for the Q&A sessions. This is another reason why I am an avid supporter of hybrid conferences. Even if a baby is happy, they can often be quite loud in their approval and so providing the opportunity for participants to attend in person but still watch talks online in a space where others cannot be disturbed, is essential for attending with a small child in tow.



2. Meetings

Online meetings with a baby in attendance is generally easy to arrange, so long as you have easy access to a mute button so that any gurgles and squeaks do not interrupt the flow of conversation from other participants. However, on several occasions I have needed to attend a meeting in person. In all these cases, I have been overwhelmed by the amount of support and understanding offered by my colleagues. Many times, especially as a young mother, you assume that you are only seen as an inconvenience. However, I have been very pleasantly surprised to learn that, although of course such opinions do still run free in our society, this is very much not the norm. Travelling alone with a baby has revealed how considerate other people can be, and asking colleagues whether it is okay to bring my baby to meetings and other team events has been met so far with nothing but complete and unyielding support. Even those colleagues without children have overcome their fear and anxiety at having them around, especially when they realise that they are not expected to have to actively interact with the child, just tolerate its presence.

Sometimes, the timing meant that my husband was able to join me in my travels, which made it a lot easier because he could then go off for a walk with the baby, and either bring my daughters to me at regular intervals for a quick feed, or else bottle-feed them himself with pumped milk supplemented with formula. Of course, the older they got, the easier this became, as their physical dependence on me as a mother was reduced. But at least when they were both still breastfeeding, sometimes the best option was for us all to travel together as a family.

3. Research trips

Travelling as a family was the only option for one particular research trip that I undertook during the third year of my PhD. I was going to be conducting fieldwork in the Canadian Arctic (more on that later) and before travelling up to the field would have the opportunity to conduct analysis on some of the collections at the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa. At the time of the trip, my daughter was going to be one year old, and while organising, I was unsure whether she would still be breastfeeding, how dependent she would be on me, and what her temperament would be like generally. (As any parents reading this will know, the change in personality between a newborn and a one-year-old can sometimes be extreme!) While conducting analysis on the museum collections, I would have to be fully focused on my work for several hours, as I was limited in my access time and so had to make the most of every moment. Consequently, we decided that my husband would join me, also in the field so that I would not be as restricted in my research activities. Without this teamwork, I would absolutely not have been able to conduct my research to the level that I was able.



4. Fieldwork

My final experience that I want to share is the one that prompts the most astonished reactions from those who learn about it: Taking my one-year-old baby with me on a fieldwork trip to Igloolik, Nunavut, Arctic Canada.

Firstly, I should clarify that this fieldwork trip was not excavation. While I know of many other mothers who have taken their babies and children with them on excavation seasons, the logistics of childcare on a remote island in the Foxe Basin would have been difficult, and to be honest, I do not think I would have been confident enough to attempt it when they were so small. In 2023, my colleagues and I would instead be based in the town of Igloolik, with several day trips out into the bay, but mainly staying in the town to conduct interviews and workshops. My main goal was to host a sewing workshop, where local Inuit seamstresses would come and interact with some replica Paleo-Inuit needles that I had made, and we would discuss their thoughts in light of their experience of regularly working with sealskins and caribou skins. (For more information on this particular project, feel free to email me and I will send you the scientific article we wrote on the research: "Unstitching the Past"). In this particular instance, having a baby with me actually proved to be extremely beneficial, as it created a more comfortable atmosphere amongst the participants. Inuit culture prioritises family as one of the most important aspects of life, and my daughter already experienced the affection of locals who were more than happy to take her away to play while I chatted with elders. One family who had strong connections to my supervisor even lent me an Amauti - the traditional child-carrying parkas that have been used for thousands of years by Inuit parents - which my daughter absolutely loved. Consequently, at the start of the workshop, I was not just viewed as a southern, white researcher, but also as a mother, and a connection between myself and the participants was made much quicker than if I had been there alone.



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My daughters are now both old enough to be without me for extended periods of time, so juggling motherhood and life as a working archaeologist is much easier. In 2024, I attended the European Association of Archaeologists conference in Rome by myself, and it was the first time in a long time that I had attended an event alone. On the one hand, the sense of freedom that I experienced in being able to decide where and when to go without having to account for nappy changes, nap time, or hangry tantrums, was a joy to experience. On the other hand, I had a quick video call with my daughters during a coffee break and afterwards had to hide behind a tree and cry because the emotion of seeing them and the consequent guilt as they cried while saying goodbye was too much to handle. But as I mentioned before, I love my job in archaeology, and so there are certain compromises that must be made, and certain emotions that will inevitably be felt, as I try to combine my love for my job with my love for my children.

I also want to make it clear that those experiences I have shared here are my own. Nobody has the same experience with motherhood, as every child is different, and every family relationship is consequently unique. I am also aware that not everyone will have the luxury of children who are relaxed enough to allow themselves to be shunted to different countries and around conferences with relatively little complaint. For some temperaments, this would not be possible. Nevertheless, I hope that the experiences shared here have provided some insight into the possibilities that are available to you as a working mother in archaeology. Do not let anyone tell you that juggling a career in archaeology and a family is not manageable. It is not easy, and it is important to be well aware of the logistical and emotional challenges that you will undoubtedly face, but it can be done.

My final words of wisdom, if such they are, is to not be afraid to rely on the help of others. The old saying “it takes a village” is there for a reason. We are archaeologists - we know the importance of history and teamwork and social interactions from the last thousand years. Learn from that and use your support network to make your life easier: My husband travelling across the globe with me to ensure that our teamwork came with me on research trips. My colleagues making so many allowances to ensure that both I and my baby were comfortable during meetings and work trips. As I sit here writing these final lines, my parents are downstairs entertaining the children with increasingly loud activities. Which I think is my call to enter the fray.

By, Matilda Siebrecht