

BACKDIRT

ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE COTSEN INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AT UCLA
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Archaeology and Pandemics



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Willeke Wendrich
Director of the Institute

Randi Danforth
Publications Director, CloA Press

Hans Barnard
Editor, *Backdirt*

Isabel Schneider
Assistant Editor, *Backdirt*

Peg Goldstein
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Doug Brotherton
Design

FRONT COVER: Empty corridors of the Cotsen Institute with directions for one-way traffic and a hand sanitizer dispenser in place. (Photograph by Vanessa Muros)

BACK COVER: Symbols of life in 2020: face masks and meetings through Zoom. (Screenshot by Matei Tichindelean)

ABOVE: Sonia Zarrillo, postdoctoral fellow at the Cotsen Institute, presents a lecture for the Andean Working Group: “New Approaches to Tracing Cacao’s Dispersal from the Amazon Basin,” January 23, 2020.

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How I Survive Life in Quarantine

Hans Barnard¹

Archaeologists do not usually study a changing society firsthand but rather much later infer what happened from its scant material remains. The year 2020, however, provided us a unique, albeit unwelcome, opportunity to do the former. Below are some of my own experiences and observations, based on an incomplete dataset and biased by my personal perspective.

The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically disturbed daily life, including the work of those in disciplines such as archaeology that heavily depend on collaborative fieldwork, usually with colleagues from multiple countries and often in places that require international travel for many of the collaborators. At the same time, Covid-19 has provided significant learning opportunities. It has enabled the medical sciences to learn more about the human body—for instance, that preadolescent children seem to have biochemically slightly different lungs and blood vessels than adults—and about how a novel coronavirus, not previously encountered by the human immune system, can affect organs other than the lungs, such as our heart or brain. It has also allowed us to learn more about how viruses spread across the globe and viable ways to slow such a spread.

More importantly, especially for those in the social sciences and the humanities, the pandemic has shown how vulnerable our increasingly internationally

1. Associate researcher and core faculty member at the Cotsen Institute, associate adjunct professor at the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures.



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interconnected society has become. Almost all of us, including leaders of many businesses and institutions, were confused and anxious as transportation (especially by air) ground to a halt, while most bars, restaurants, and other workplaces (including UCLA) closed their doors, either voluntarily or when mandated to do so by the authorities. At the time of writing, it remains to be seen what the long-term economic and psychosocial impacts of these sudden changes turn out to be. It is quite likely that our society will emerge from this quite different, but it is obviously impossible to predict exactly how. We can only hope that it will be a (slightly) better world.

Most noteworthy, however, is our collective inability to adjust to an inevitable new situation and respond in a dispassionate, evidence-based fashion to a primeval threat. We were all shocked and disappointed to learn that all our modern knowledge and understanding, partly reflected in the myriad of hard- and software surrounding us, appeared powerless as we faced what seemed like a shadow of the past, comparable to a medieval Black Death epidemic or an ancient battle decided by an infectious disease rather than strategic brilliance or military might. Instead of sheltering in place, epidemiologically the most sensible response, many traveled significant distances to reach people or surroundings more comfortable. Some did so in chartered airplanes, many more by car or even on foot. Others tried to ignore the events or denied them access to their minds. These instinc-



tive responses, although understandable, contributed to the worldwide spread of the virus. The immediate threat posed by the resulting pandemic managed to put us in our place in a way that the ongoing mass extinction of many plant and animal species and even looming climate change seem unable to do.

Comments heard since the pandemic began often include references to a new normal and often implicitly or explicitly incorporate an expectation of return to an old normal in due course. Born in 1959, I am not yet old enough to be considered at high risk when infected by Covid-19. I do, however, remember times without smart phones, and even without cell phones, as well as times without personal computers and the internet, and thus also without Facebook, Twitter, Google, and even email. A time in which fruits and vegetables were available only during certain times of year, when they were said to be in season, and inter-continental travel was a once-in-a-lifetime event for all but the very few. This was all considered normal at the time, as normal as a world without cars, airplanes, and antibiotics was when my grandparents were young. I would be the last to advocate trying to revert to a previous era, if such were even possible, but what we consider normal is far from a static reality. Instead it is in constant flux. Any new normal will get old sooner rather than later, but an old normal must be considered lost forever. Pushed by a microscopic agent, barely alive, we experienced about six years' worth of changes in just six months and understandably struggled to come to grips with that.

AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

When UCLA leadership urged us in mid-March 2020 to leave campus for an indefinite period of time, I was severely upset. I packed my laptop and some books and tools, cursorily cleaned my desk and refrigerator, and went home in a depressed mental state. The first few days I could only lie on the couch and read



Figure 1. Top: View of our living room just before a remote piano lesson, with the kitchen table, laptop, and external microphone put in place. Bottom: View of our bedroom, now also housing a temporary film studio.

a book. I canceled all my appointments, including my upcoming piano lesson and my trip to Chicago to see the Lyric Opera perform *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Richard Wagner's operatic magnum opus in four installments. I filed my unused tickets for April 20–25, 2020 with those of performances that I was lucky enough to have attended in the past.

After a few days I picked myself up, arranged for my weekly piano lessons to resume,² obviously now remotely (Figure 1, top), and created a temporary office in our guest room (Figure 2, left). One of my first activities to ease myself into a working mood was to create about a dozen virtual backgrounds for Zoom. My favorites became an image of Royce Hall,

2. Hans Barnard, "Robert Schumann: Träumerei (from: Kinderszenen Op. 15)," www.youtube.com/watch?v=MeWfJGqsz4k (accessed September 13, 2020).

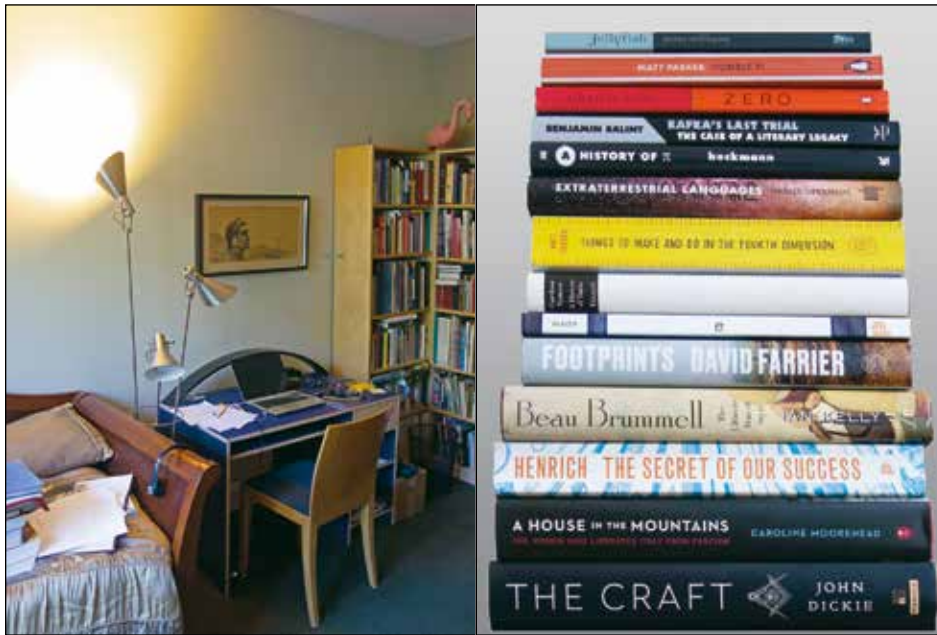


Figure 2. Left: View of our guest room, now my temporary office. Right: The fourteen books that I read for pleasure between March and September 2020.



Figure 3. Two of my favorite virtual backgrounds for Zoom meetings. Note the number of engines on the aircraft at the top.

to be used for UCLA business, and a picture taken at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris just before my last flight to date (Figure 3). This image can serve as a paradigm for our changing world as it likely represents my last flight in a four-engine airplane. The collapse of the aviation industry during the Covid-19 pandemic

has resulted in most carriers retiring their Boeing 747 (the jumbo jet) and Airbus 380 (the double-decker) aircraft from passenger service. Fortunately Willeke, my spouse, and I had decided to pay for an upgrade onto the upper deck, which was all business class, so at least I have good memories of what was destined to become a historic event.

In addition, I started a collection of the more interesting graphs and memes on the developing events to bring the mood of the times back into memory, maybe as the basis for a future article once the copyrights have expired. These range from cartoons mocking the hoarding of toilet paper and photographs of mass graves in New York being filled with Covid-19 victims, to graphs showing the spread of the virus across rooms and the world, and a touching remote performance by the Ballet de l'Opéra national de Paris.³

Since the end of 1994, I have not slept in the same bed for more than three consecutive months and have often moved between continents to find the next place to lay my head. When in Los Angeles, I used to spend seven days a week on campus, not out of necessity but simply because I like to be there. I was therefore surprised to notice how I seamlessly adapted to a life in quarantine and that I remain perfectly at ease after not leaving home for more than six months. To me it feels remarkably like being in the field: limited geographical movement, social contacts, and entertainment. I do, of course, realize that I am in a very privileged position. Fortunately we have a comfortable and spacious home, quiet and with a fast internet connection, and with no children, pets, or plants to take care of. If any-

3. Chun-wing Lam, "Confinement 2020—Remerciements du Ballet de l'Opéra de Paris," www.youtube.com/watch?v=hllbH71TFZE (accessed September 13, 2020).

LIFE IN QUARANTINE

thing, time seems to be going faster than ever before. Another analogy would be living in a spaceship; or rather a space station, as space ships currently exist only in our imagination. It is certainly more comfortable than that, if only because of gravity. This does not mean that I want to make light of the situation. I fully appreciate that I have been lucky and that these times are very stressful for many others, including students who are deprived of not only vital fieldwork and research opportunities but also income.

In the small world of our home, we spend most of our time behind our computer screens, much as always (Figure 1, bottom). Having ordered almost everything through Amazon for years, it was a small adjustment to have our groceries also delivered. Classes, meetings, and lessons proceeded almost as normal, albeit now remotely (Figure 4). As we had experience with this as well—we had our first online

What we consider normal is far from a static reality.

meeting for our volume *The Archaeology of Mobility* in 2006—this was not too much of a transition either. New of course was that social events were now also conducted through Zoom or Skype, occurring in the comfort of our own home but necessarily remaining two dimensional. At the same time, we are now in frequent contact with many people we did not often see in the past.

One of the unexpected advantages of staying at home was that I was again able to read for pleasure (Figure 2, right), something that had become increasingly difficult over time. I have always enjoyed cooking, for more than one reason, and as our world increasingly got smaller, I decided to capture pictures



Figure 4. My new normal as displayed in a Zoom environment. Note the archaeologically themed virtual background at the bottom.

Figure 5. Two of our meals during quarantine. All forty can be viewed at www.barnard.nl/Dinner_2020/.



Figure 6. Time to relax with a Negroni (left) or a game of Beat Saber (right).

of forty of our meals in quarantine,⁴ as a record for posterity (Figure 5).⁵ Dinners were, of course, preceded by a cocktail (Figure 6, left), while the calories were burned off using our newly purchased virtual reality system (Figure 6, right). In addition to studying the urban wildlife in the treetops surrounding our home (mostly squirrels and hummingbirds), I also closely followed the construction of a new luxury

4. The English word quarantine is derived from Italian quarantena (“40 days”), referring to how long those arriving by ship in fourteenth-century Venice had to wait before going ashore to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

5. Hans Barnard, “La Cena en los Tiempos de la Corona,” www.barnard.nl/Dinner_2020/ (accessed September 13, 2020).

condominium building going up in Century City (Figure 7), hopefully in time to catch the Metro Purple Line (or rather its Wilshire/Western to Westwood/VA Hospital extension, scheduled to be finished around the same time).

Born out of a fear of flying, another of my guilty pleasures is an interest in aviation, and as a result from time to time checking on the aircraft overhead through Flightradar24.com. On several consecutive days in May 2020, I noticed a Beechcraft King Air

It would be a shame to let this opportunity go to waste.

flying patterns above Los Angeles (Figure 8). First I thought this was a surveillance project associated with the riots that tarnished some of the justified and mostly peaceful demonstrations urging an end to police violence that erupted around the world after the killing of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis on May 26, 2020. The feasibility of such was proven by the successful Eye in the Sky program developed as early as 2004 by Ross McNutt for the American military in Iraq. Research, mostly by a friend knowledgeable about aviation, showed that this instead was a federal project to release sterile male Mediterranean fruit flies (*Ceratitis capitata*) to reduce damage done by this invasive species. The target for Los Angeles Country was to drop about 50,000 flies per square kilometer (about 125,000 per square mile) every week during the summer months. Like learning about jellyfish or the history of Freemasonry (Figure 2, right), such unexpected and irrelevant trivia helped alleviate some of my anger and anxiety.

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE

At the outbreak of the First World War, in July 1914, the general consensus was that it would all be over by Christmas. About four years and 40 million deaths later, the world was a little wiser and certainly much sadder. It was also a different place in many ways. We do not now know how or when the Covid-19 pandemic will end or what the world will look like at the time. In the course of 2020, several countries in the



Figure 7. The luxury condominium building Century Plaza goes up near the intersection of Constellation Boulevard and Avenue of the Stars. Left: My view on July 4, 2020, with a celebratory five-story Stars and Stripes and the working platforms and third crane still in place. Right: Two months later, the concrete skeleton of the top floors is finished and the working platforms and third crane have been removed.

Middle East amended the Muslim call to prayer—the well-known *azan* that daily sounds from minarets at regular intervals—to include the words “pray at home” (“*al salatu fi buyutikum*”) instead of “come to prayer” (“*hayya alla al salah*”). This is likely to revert in due course, but other changes may become permanent, especially those that were mostly the result of the acceleration and consolidation of already ongoing trends.

For instance, remote classes, meetings, lectures, and conferences are likely to remain frequent and popular. Not only because we have become used to them and found them more acceptable than expected but also because they eliminate the need for lengthy commutes, saving precious time and fossil fuels. Online shopping and the home delivery of everything from furniture to groceries can likewise be expected to remain more common than before.⁶ Many restaurants, shops, and malls that had to close during the pandemic may never reopen. The increased popularity of home cooking may not only save households money—especially the brewing of coffee at home—but may also

6. “Covid-19 Seems to Have Changed Lifestyles for Good,” *The Economist*, August 8, 2020, p. 75, www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/08/08/covid-19-seems-to-have-changed-lifestyles-for-good (accessed October 7, 2020).

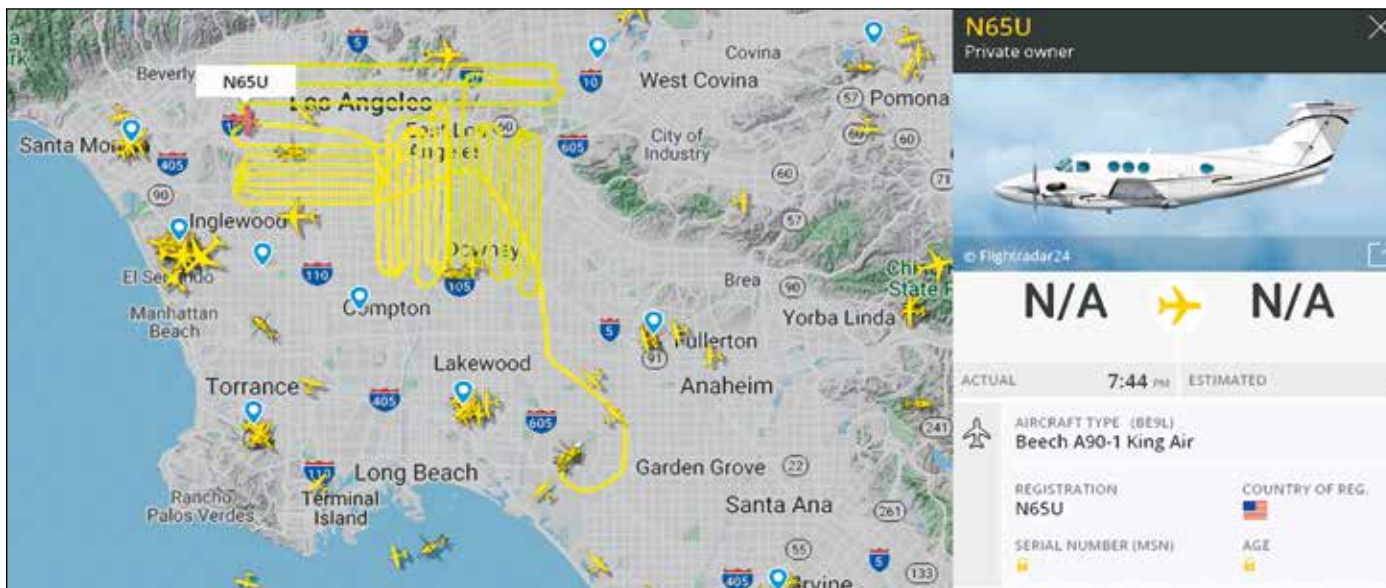


Figure 8. A Beechcraft King Air, registration number N65U, owned by Dynamic Aviation, flies a pattern above Los Angeles. (Image courtesy of Flightradar24, www.flightradar24.com.)

result in a reduction of (plastic) waste and an overall healthier population. The balance between this and the inevitable economic damage can only be assessed in the distant future (Nicola et al. 2020). Even more remote in time is the possibility of 2020 leaving a more or less subtle horizon in the archaeological and geological records, similar to the thin layer of iridium marking the K–Pg (or K–T) transition between the Cretaceous and the Paleogene periods around 66 million years ago (Farrier 2020). The collapse of the travel industry may make the most significant contribution to this, especially if its recovery takes years rather than months (Lecocq et al. 2020; Venter et al. 2020).

Archaeology as a profession and a scholarly discipline is also likely to be permanently altered. It is obvious that the discussions about its colonial history and the underrepresentation of certain groups among its practitioners will and should not subside. Fieldwork may become prohibitively expensive, at least temporarily, depending on developments in the travel industry and any quarantine measures that may remain required by local or national governments. This will be amplified by the economic hardship to be expected and the priorities identified by institutional and individual donors. We must also prepare for being unable to eliminate the virus causing Covid-19 and for other pathogens making the leap from animals to humans, forcing us to remain more vigilant than

before to protect our health and that of those that we work with, including students, colleagues, and local communities (Allegrante et al. 2020; Killeen and Kiware 2020).

In the process of rethinking our fieldwork strategies, we should give priority to an open scientific community, meaningful partnerships with all stakeholders, and the protection of local communities as well as the global environment. This will require difficult discussions with colleagues, administrators, publishers, and donors in a search for new arrangements and preferably consensus, a discussion that has already started (Barton 2020; Chirikure 2020; Ogundiran 2020; Scerri et al. 2020). Now that improvement of our discipline appears more urgent and achievable than ever before, it would be a shame to let this opportunity go to waste.

Willeke and I have canceled all our travel plans until the end of 2020 and already several projects scheduled for 2021, although we left a window open to work in northern Italy in the summer.⁷ Some of the liberated time I used to coauthor two articles—now submitted for publication in *Current Anthropology* and *Quaternary International*—to finish an edited volume aimed to make archaeology more relevant and germane to the general public, and to assist in the creation of the issue of *Backdirt* in hand, including this contribution. The latter is meant as an archaeology of my personal daily life in a new normal; it is idiosyncratic because it is a narrative with an open ending. The past six months seem to have flown by. How will those that follow unfurl?

7. Hans Barnard, “Il Nostro Messaggio di Speranza,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=in7hCrqMbtI (accessed September 13, 2020).

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COTSEN INSTITUTE OF
ARCHAEOLOGY

Cotsen Institute of Archaeology
University of California, Los Angeles
405 Hilgard Avenue
Box 951510,
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1510
www.ioa.ucla.edu

