

Bringing Indigenous rights, leadership and knowledge into archaeology

The impact of Canada's colonial history continues to be felt today through outdated practices that are not inclusive of Indigenous populations. This includes the field of archaeology, where the people whose history is being unearthed are often left out of the process. **The Institute of Prairie and Indigenous Archaeology** at the **University of Alberta** is changing archaeology through practice, policy and pedagogy, enabling education and research to benefit from Indigenous ways of knowing and being.



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Field of research

Archaeology

Research project

Fostering Indigenous-engaged archaeology in Canada

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INSTITUTE OF PRAIRIE AND
INDIGENOUS ARCHAEOLOGY



Talk like an ...

Indigenous-engaged archaeologist

Archaeology — the study of human history and prehistory through the exploration of stories, perspectives, belongings and places

Indigenous Peoples — people whose ancestors have lived in an area since before colonialism and continue to maintain distinct cultural traits

Elders / Knowledge Holders — Indigenous People recognised by their community as custodians of cultural and traditional knowledge

Pedagogy — the method and practice of teaching

Canada's colonial era continues to haunt the nation through systemic inequalities that create differences in the opportunities, privileges and resources available to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. This includes academia, where models of research and teaching continue to perpetuate injustices and disregard Indigenous knowledge. While these systemic inequalities may not be immediately obvious, their effects can be profound.

The Institute of Prairie and Indigenous Archaeology (IPIA) is aiming to change this for the field of archaeology. Using a holistic approach, the IPIA team,

led by Director Dr Kisha Supernant, is ushering in a new comprehensive perspective on archaeology that puts Indigenous voices at the forefront. With many members of the IPIA team coming from Indigenous communities, the IPIA is Indigenous-led and embodies the values and ethos it aims to foster in the broader community and archaeological field.

Injustices in archaeology

The majority of archaeological remains on Canadian soil are from the Indigenous populations that

lived there for thousands of years before European colonists arrived. "In Canada, archaeology has often been carried out by non-Indigenous researchers, without involving the people whose histories are being explored," says Kisha. "This has caused harm and left Indigenous voices out of important conversations. Indigenous People are still here today, and their knowledge, rights and authority must be respected."

Governmental policies on archaeology continue to be outdated, often not recognising the rights of Indigenous



People to their own heritage. “At the moment, decisions about archaeological sites, artefacts and even sacred places are often made without proper involvement from Indigenous communities,” explains Kisha. “This needs to change. Indigenous Nations need to have a say in what work is done on their lands, how it is carried out, and what happens to the artefacts discovered.” Addressing these structural barriers involves concerted efforts from multiple directions – which is what the IPIA team is helping make happen.

Three interwoven braids

The IPIA team focuses on stimulating change in three connected areas: practice – how research is carried out; pedagogy – how archaeology is taught; and policy – how archaeology is governed. “Practice, pedagogy and policy are closely connected and all equally vital,” says Kisha. “For example, even if we teach students differently, it won’t make a lasting impact unless policies also support Indigenous leadership and rights.” The IPIA’s work is guided by heart-centred practice, a philosophy that recognises that collaborators bring their full selves to their work: body, mind, heart and spirit. “This creates a space where people care for each other, learn together and support each other,” says Kisha.

Beyond equality, archaeology itself benefits hugely from including Indigenous perspectives. “Indigenous ways of knowing are based on deep relationships with the land and generations of community knowledge,” explains Kisha. “History isn’t locked in the past – it connects to the present and future.” The patterns of thought taught by Western scientific education are not comprehensive;

including Indigenous communities in education and research reveals new ideas and approaches that otherwise might not be considered. “This leads to research that is more meaningful, respectful and insightful,” says Kisha. “Indigenous knowledge helps archaeology move beyond just collecting objects and towards understanding the deeper stories and relationships involved.”

Supporting Indigenous-led research

The IPIA prioritises building and maintaining strong relationships with Indigenous Nations. “We offer mentorship to researchers focusing on how to build relationships based on trust and mutual respect,” says Kisha. “We also help design research projects where Indigenous communities set the goals and decide which questions matter the most.” The IPIA also provides training and toolkits – for instance, on how to navigate regulatory systems and use digital archaeological programs. These empower Indigenous communities to lead or take part in archaeological work.

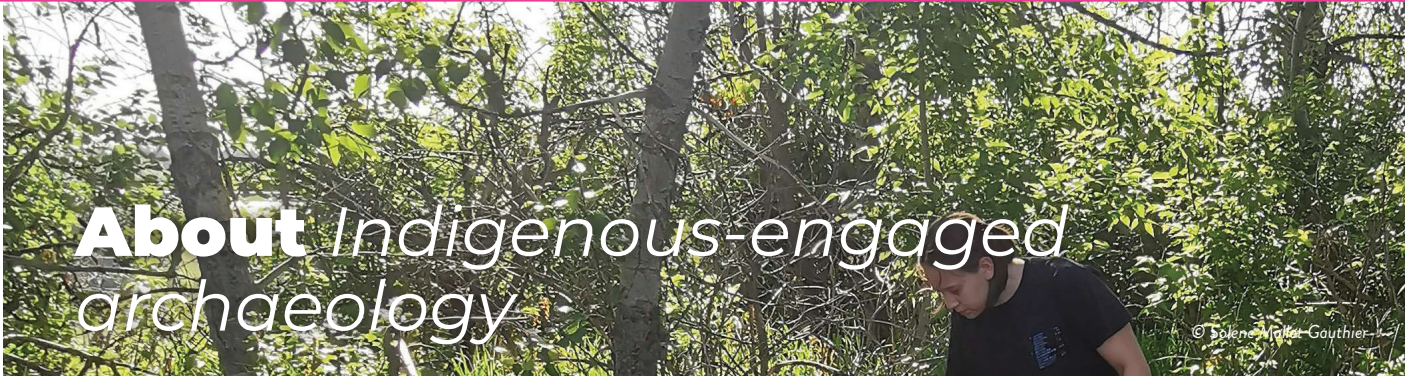
Moreover, the IPIA team is committed to teaching the next generation of archaeologists to appreciate the importance of Indigenous inclusion. “We are developing learning experiences where students do not just learn from books or lectures, but also directly from Indigenous communities,” explains Kisha. “For example, in our archaeological field schools, community members and Elders teach our students about the land and its history from Indigenous perspectives.” Students are also taught about the harms that archaeology has caused in the past and how these can be addressed through changed practices. Elders and Knowledge Holders are invited to speak

to students to shape their understanding of Indigenous rights and relationships.

Changing the face of archaeology in Canada

The IPIA centres Indigenous communities and their needs in every aspect of its work. “We are proud to be pushing for change across the field – encouraging archaeologists to work in ways that support Indigenous goals and uphold the highest standards of research,” says Kisha. “We are helping to set a new standard for what ethical, community-centred archaeology looks like.” For instance, the IPIA team is involved in supporting Indigenous communities in finding the unmarked graves of children who died at Canada’s Indian Residential Schools – a network of boarding schools designed to forcibly assimilate Indigenous children into colonial culture. This network was active for over 160 years, isolating children from their families and often subjecting them to abuse and neglect. Thousands died, and the search for human remains is ongoing. “This is sacred and emotional work, and we are grateful to be trusted with it,” says Kisha.

Looking forward, the IPIA is focusing on forging new relationships and strengthening existing ones to broaden the impact of its efforts. “We want to expand our work in cultural policy and teaching, so that Indigenous communities have the tools and support they need to take the lead in archaeology,” explains Kisha. “By continuing to braid together practice, policy and pedagogy, we aim to build a future for archaeology that is led by Indigenous knowledge and values.”



About *Indigenous-engaged archaeology*

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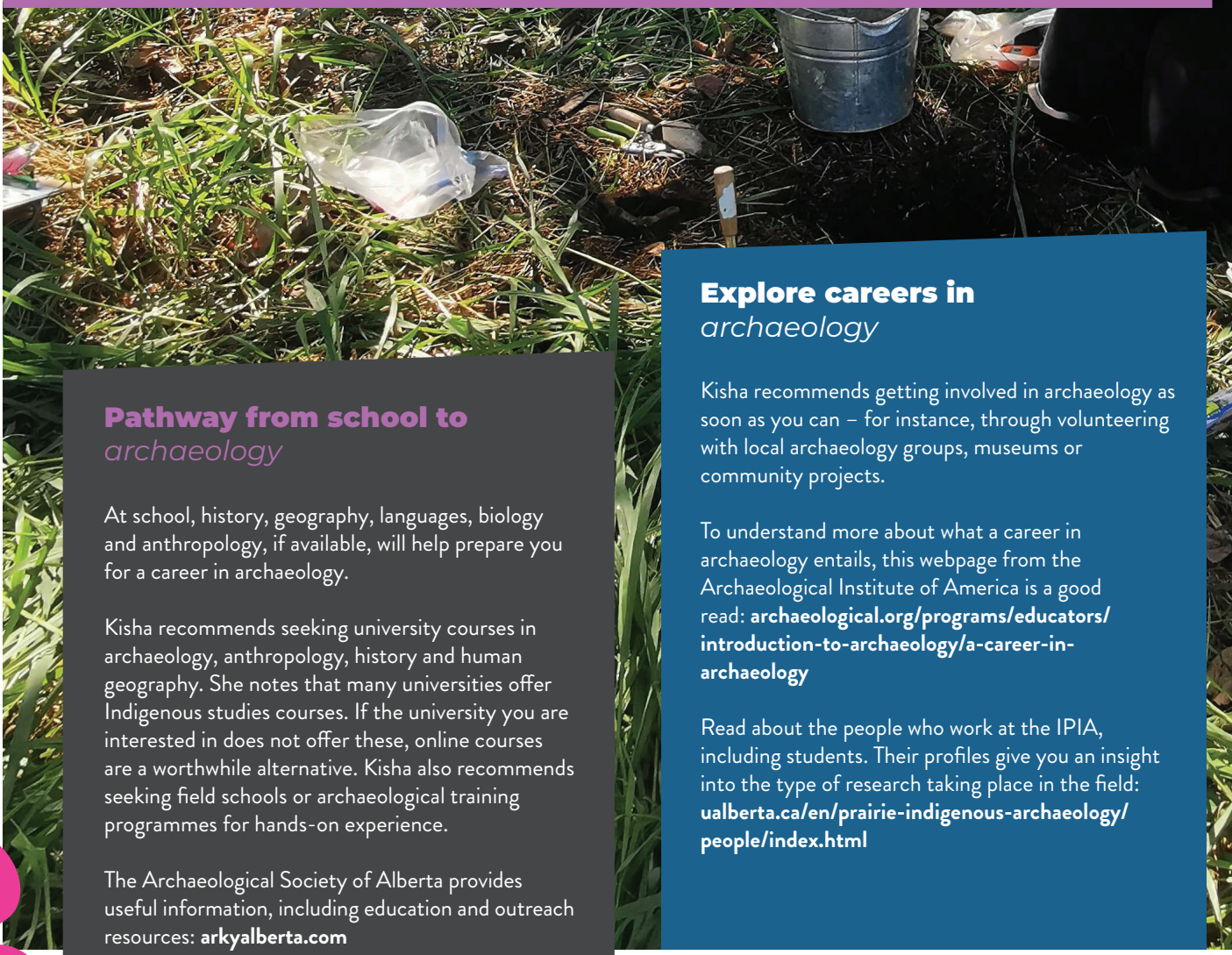
Archaeology is the study of human history and prehistory through the physical things left behind. This means that most archaeological careers include time in the field, surveying and excavating sites, and analysing the artefacts discovered. Indigenous-engaged archaeology involves being fully conscious and inclusive of the role of Indigenous People in archaeological research – which is the focus of IPIA's approach. "One of the most rewarding parts of our work is collaborating with Indigenous communities on research that matters to them," says Kisha. "Working on questions from the

community itself feels very meaningful, and how we approach these questions is significant. For example, it's important that the terms we use reflect our approach; we respectfully refer to 'belongings' rather than 'artefacts'."

The IPIA team's work on Métis archaeology in western Canada is informed by questions and priorities from the Métis community. The Métis are a mixed-race Indigenous People, holding both Indigenous and European ancestry. "Our work is changing the archaeological record and inspiring Métis communities to develop policies

that protect their own heritage," says Kisha.

Kisha believes that the next generation of archaeologists will find a field increasingly shaped by Indigenous participation and leadership. "Whether a researcher is Indigenous or not, if they are working on Indigenous land, they first need to build respectful relationships with the community," says Kisha. "These relationships allow for research that is both innovative and respectful, grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and committed to real-world impact."



Pathway from school to archaeology

At school, history, geography, languages, biology and anthropology, if available, will help prepare you for a career in archaeology.

Kisha recommends seeking university courses in archaeology, anthropology, history and human geography. She notes that many universities offer Indigenous studies courses. If the university you are interested in does not offer these, online courses are a worthwhile alternative. Kisha also recommends seeking field schools or archaeological training programmes for hands-on experience.

The Archaeological Society of Alberta provides useful information, including education and outreach resources: arkyalberta.com

Explore careers in archaeology

Kisha recommends getting involved in archaeology as soon as you can – for instance, through volunteering with local archaeology groups, museums or community projects.

To understand more about what a career in archaeology entails, this webpage from the Archaeological Institute of America is a good read: archaeological.org/programs/educators/introduction-to-archaeology/a-career-in-archaeology

Read about the people who work at the IPIA, including students. Their profiles give you an insight into the type of research taking place in the field: ualberta.ca/en/prairie-indigenous-archaeology/people/index.html



Dawn Wambold photographs an excavation unit at the Chimney Coulee site in Southwestern Saskatchewan. The IPIA has been conducting fieldwork and research at this important Métis site since 2013, and it still has lots of stories to share! © Robert Wambold



Meet Dawn

Dawn Wambold, PhD candidate, Institute of Prairie and Indigenous Archaeology

Field of research: Historical and Indigenous archaeology

Funders: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) – Canada Graduate Scholarship

Province of Alberta – Alberta Graduate Excellent Scholarship (Indigenous)

University of Alberta – President’s Doctoral Prize of Distinction

When I was a child, my parents had a subscription to *National Geographic* magazine; I would spend hours reading the articles about history and archaeology. My parents also had a large book called *The Adventure of Archaeology* that I read countless times.

I first studied engineering at university.

This was followed by a technical career in oil and gas, but my fascination with archaeology persisted. The books I read mostly focused on faraway, out of reach places. Then I attended public lectures hosted by the Archaeological Society of Alberta, which changed my perspective – my home province had a fascinating archaeological story as well.

I grew up without grandparents so never heard their stories. Diaries from my Irish and English ancestors helped me connect to them in their own words, but I didn’t have anything like that from my Métis side of the family. There was also a lack of Métis women’s stories in the historical record. I realised that by pursuing archaeology, I could help shed some light on this.

For my PhD, I’m exploring my ancestors’ connections to places in southern Alberta.

My work emphasises the Métis concepts of *keewokaywin* (the visiting way) and *wāhkōhtowin* (the state of being related with humans and non-humans, and the responsibilities and reciprocal obligations inherent within those relationships). This influences my attitude towards my work: I don’t consider myself to be analysing sites or artefacts. Instead, I am visiting places and belongings that were important to my ancestors to learn their stories.

With the support of Kisha and the IPIA team, I’m able to explore my passion for history and archaeology.

Everyone at the IPIA brings a unique set of skills and knowledge, and working with them has made me consider perspectives that make my own research more robust.

I’m proud to have published a book chapter.

It appears in a collection of essays about Indigenous connections to the landscape. When I received my hard copy of the book, the first thing I did was to visit my parents to share my excitement with them!

Another career achievement is the positive feedback that I get from my Métis community, which reassures me I’m on the right path. Elders and others have told me how important my work is. They’ve shared so many family stories with me, and I’m proud that they see me as someone that they trust with the shared history of our ancestors.

I want to continue investigating places important to my Métis ancestors.

This includes Chesterfield House, an eighteenth-century fur trade post. I am also the mother of a young archaeologist, so I aim to serve as a mentor to others, particularly Métis archaeologists seeking the stories of their ancestors.

Dawn’s top tip

When seeking a supervisor or mentor, try to see if they will be a good fit for your style of learning. If you can, speak to students they supervise to learn more about their perspectives. Make sure you choose someone with whom you will have a rewarding working relationship.