

J.J. Coulton, 1940–2020

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John James (Jim) Coulton died in Edinburgh, Scotland, on 1 August 2020 after an extended bout with cancer. A classical archaeologist and well-known expert on Greek architecture, Coulton had specific interests in principles of architectural design, especially of stoas and temples, and on the nature and development of the ancient city. Throughout his career he was active in field archaeology, both excavations and surveys, participating in projects in Greece, Turkey, Iran, Jordan, and Libya. He brought his exacting methods and penetrating eye to every team he joined or directed, and to the drawings and reconstructions he made and published.

Jim Coulton was born in Pentney, U.K., a small village in Norfolk with ancient Roman roots, located a few miles southeast of King's Lynn. He was the third of four children born to Gordon Francis Coulton and Annie Goldie (née Denny). After completing his schooling at Winchester College, where he had won a scholarship, Coulton studied classics at St. John's College, Cambridge. Staying on at Cambridge, he completed his doctorate in classical archaeology under the supervision of William Hugh Plommer, an authority on the architecture of the classical world with wide-ranging architectural interests. Coulton's own graduate research resulted in the landmark publication *The Architectural Development of the Greek Stoa*, which appeared in 1976 as part of the distinguished Oxford Monographs on Classical Archaeology series; he would eventually serve as a member of the series' editorial board. His approach to the stoa would in many ways come to define his thorough, yet cautious approach to archaeological research in general: "Thus a variety of factors, technical, aesthetic, functional and climatic, apparently worked together to give rise to the popularity of the stoa among the Greeks. The factors . . . are not necessarily the only ones, although they seem the most important ones."¹ Despite its age, the book remains the best starting place for the subject, covering the stoa's wide distribution through space and time.

After Cambridge, Coulton held a series of academic positions, first at the Australian National University, Canberra (1964–1968), as a Lecturer in Classics, followed by a brief stint at the University of Manchester (1968–1969), and then at the University of Edinburgh as a member of the Department of Archaeology for a decade. In 1979, he was appointed Reader in Classical Archaeology at Oxford University and a Fellow of Merton College; in both positions, he succeeded John Boardman, who had been made Lincoln Professor of Classical Archaeology in 1978 following the retirement of Martin Robertson. Coulton remained at Oxford until his retirement as Emeritus Fellow of Merton in 2004. His retirement was marked by a colloquium held at Oxford that focused on the architecture and archaeology of the Cyclades. The papers,

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¹ Coulton 1976, 25.

published in 2005, highlighted “important recent finds and thinking” and were given by former students and distinguished colleagues, among them Bonna Wescoat, Manolis Korres, and Vassilis Lambrinoudakis. Opening tributes by R.R.R. Smith (former pupil and Lincoln Professor) and Irene Lemos (Coulton’s successor) detailed Coulton’s wider involvement with classical archaeology, his contributions to the academic community at Oxford, and a list of publications to date.²

Apart from Merton, where Coulton acted as “moral tutor” to classical archaeology students, his other homes at Oxford were the Ashmolean Museum, where he kept an office on the second floor at the top of a daunting flight of stairs, and the Institute of Archaeology, where he served as director from 1990 to 1993. In his role as director, he was instrumental in bringing classical archaeology students into the life of the institute, encouraging them to interact over morning coffee with such luminaries as Mervyn Popham and Barry Cunliffe. He was a regular presence at the Greek Archaeology Group held weekly at the institute, ran the Architectural History Seminar for several years, and was vital to the creation of a new undergraduate degree in classical archaeology and ancient history that provided a new path to the study of our field. Other accolades included: Corresponding Member of the German Archaeological Institute (1982), visiting professor at the University of Canberra (1984), Geddes-Harrower Professor at the University of Aberdeen (1988–1989), and invited participant in the meetings of the Committee for the Conservation of the Acropolis Monuments.

Coulton brought a no-nonsense attitude to problem solving and loved untying a tight knot. He was a devoted teacher and would await his tutorial students armed with a stack of slides for discussion, having carefully read their papers beforehand (not standard practice at Oxford where students were often asked to read their papers aloud). Tutorials with him often lasted much longer than the standard hour as he and his students together became immersed in the material. He could easily lose himself in problem-solving, sometimes also losing track of everything else around him. In one of the architecture seminars that he ran in the 1990s, he was presenting on the Arsenal of Philo, and in answering a question he got so caught up in measurements that when he suddenly looked up, he



Jim Coulton at Aphrodisias, August 2015 (courtesy R.R.R. Smith).

found everyone smiling at his enthusiasm and total absorption, which resulted in a somewhat sheepish grin. He was also imminently practical. Once, in tutorial, when giving me (Lancaster) advice on reorganizing a (precomputer, handwritten) paper, I gave the excuse that I had not had time to rewrite it before the tutorial. He responded by whipping out some scissors and cutting my paper into sections, reordering it, and then taping it back together saying “There, that’s better. Feel free to use scissors in the future.” Similarly, after presenting a tutorial essay on the topic of archaic Greek grave stelae, he told me (Smith) that my carefully crafted (American-style) essay demonstrated that I had spent insufficient time looking at the examples, and that I should spend the remainder of the term in the library looking at pictures and ignoring other people’s writings.

His down-to-earth attitude was exemplified also in his reaction to a teaching experience he had at Cambridge when he took over for Anthony Snodgrass for one term. The two Oxbridge universities had

²Yeroulanou and Stamatopoulou 2005, xi–xxii.

notoriously different approaches to archaeology, with Oxford tending to lean more toward the positivistic end of the spectrum and Cambridge toward the more theoretical. When asked about the difference between his Oxford and Cambridge students, he replied that when he taught about fortifications at Oxford, the students asked him about military strategies, whereas at Cambridge they asked him about the symbolic meaning of the walls. He was quite accepting of both approaches, but clearly Oxford had become home territory. As with great teachers, he always asked the right questions regardless of the subject matter or approach. He would play devil's advocate and push his students to question and to reflect more deeply about their work. To quote R.R.R. Smith, "As a teacher and supervisor, Jim was direct and interrogative. He liked to hear the facts of the case in hand but also what might be their explanation. For both ideas and facts, the favoured treatment was a radical Socratic scepticism."³

Coulton's research was two-pronged. He was an active participant in fieldwork and contributed enormously to the understanding of built structures both through his interpretations and readings of the remains and through his architectural drawings. He was also engaged in the broader issue of the creation process of Greek architecture. His book *Greek Architects at Work: Problems of Structure and Design*, published in 1977 (reprinted in 1988) has been a mainstay of those entering the study of ancient Greek architecture in particular, but its influence goes beyond its subject matter. His approach in the book was quite new and innovative at the time. He looked at architecture from the point of view of the architect, asking himself about process and how different phases in the creation of architecture were accomplished. That his approach was original and groundbreaking is clear from the reception it received from some of the old guard, such as Robert Scranton, James McCready, and his own supervisor at Cambridge. All commended him for the innovative attempt but expressed some skepticism. Nevertheless, the book is still in print more than 40 years later, and its accessible prose and clear illustrations have inspired generations of young scholars to think beyond the purely visible and mine a variety of types of sources to ask new questions. This is not to say that he neglected the evidence from the building itself: he had a keen eye for details and that was the strength of his work.

Field archaeology was central to Coulton's career at every stage, and he believed strongly in the ethical responsibility of archaeologists to publish their results. In Greece, he participated in excavations under the auspices of the British School at Athens, including Perachora, for which he published the stoa and the West Court, and Lefkandi, where he helped excavate the Protogeometric Toumba building and made the much-published reconstruction drawing of it. A more recent excavation in Euboea, the Late Archaic fort at Phylla-Vrachos, was speedily published with his coauthors.⁴ Under the direction of Alexander Cambitoglou, of the University of Sydney, Coulton made a careful study of the structures, organization, and plan of the early settlement of Zagora on the island of Andros. It was also at Zagora in the late 1960s that he met his Scottish-Greek wife, Mary Burness, a student of archaeology and specialist in modern Greek who would eventually instruct many Oxford students in the language. A deep knowledge of the site brought him back as a consultant to the recent Zagora Archaeological Project, under the auspices of the Australian Archaeological Institute at Athens. According to codirector Lesley Beaumont of the University of Sydney, "Jim was invaluable to us in helping us to better understand the results of the earlier excavations, and indeed the site and wider landscape itself. Even in 2013, he could walk the track to Zagora faster than most of us."⁵

Coulton's contribution to the archaeology of Turkey has been significant. He was a long-serving member of the Council of the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara and an editor of their monograph series. In 1975, he went to Oinoanda at the invitation of the survey director, Alan Hall, and returned to work there several times. The site, located in the remote Lycian highlands, had already attracted the attention of students of ancient philosophy, among them Martin F. Smith and Diskin Clay, due to the existence of an Epicurean inscription composed by one Diogenes, "an Oinoandan notable who probably lived in the first half of the 2nd century AD,"⁶ arranged on the back wall of one of the city's stoas. Coulton was brought in to study the building's architecture, and in the meantime became interested in the region and its other cities, especially the little-known nearby city of Balboura.

⁴Sapouna-Sakellarakis et al. 2002.

⁵L. Beaumont, pers. comm. 1 October 2020.

⁶Coulton 1998, 227.

³Yeroulanou and Stamatopoulou 2005, xi.

The Balboursa Survey, conducted between 1985 and 1993, was an exemplary project that incorporated both intensive and extensive methods, and explored urban and rural topography “without access to large-scale mapping.”⁷ In the first season of exploration, he famously mapped the remains on the steep Balboursa acropolis and lower city with incredible accuracy using the old-fashioned pace and compass method. Given its place and time, the project was pioneering in its inclusion of environmental analysis, pollen coring, and ethnography. The survey and research teams included Oxford students, several of whom were entrusted with material to publish, a Turkish anthropologist to study modern life, pottery specialists (among them David French, Pamela Armstrong, and Paul Roberts), Malcolm Wagstaff, a specialist in Mediterranean geography, and the Dutch Ottomanist Machiel Kiel. Although living and health conditions were not always ideal on the survey, the town of Altınyayla was welcoming, and the inspiring mentorship of “Jim bey” in the field, coupled with his careful attention to local customs and etiquette, was legendary. The long-awaited final publication occasioned a book launch and reception in London and represented in two volumes the culmination of several decades of work in this tough mountainous landscape.⁸ In his later years, Coulton joined the Aphrodisias Excavations to research the temple of Aphrodite and its adaptation into a church in late antiquity. In typical fashion, he presented a seminar each summer to the students on-site and served as a constant mentor to members of the staff.

⁷ Coulton 1998, 232.

⁸ Coulton 2012.

Jim Coulton is survived by his wife, Mary, his daughter, Joanna, and his son, Richard. A rare scholar who bridged the Greek-Turkish divide, he will be remembered for his modesty, generosity, and honesty.

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