

## TIMOTHY WILLIAM POTTER, MA., Ph.D., FSA: 1944-2000

Tim Potter's sudden and untimely death on January 11, 2000, at the age of 55, came as a great shock to his many friends and colleagues, and deprived Roman archaeology of a highly respected scholar, and this journal of a much-valued advisor.

Tim grew up in the town of March, in the Cambridgeshire Fenlands of eastern England, where his father was a secondary-school headmaster. His interest in archaeology developed early. At the age of only 14, he and his brother Christopher conducted an excavation on a small Roman site at Grandford, near their home. It was typical of Tim that he saw it as his duty to publish this juvenile excavation, albeit many years later, and that the standard of recording made it possible for him to do so.<sup>1</sup> His interest in the Roman Fenlands endured. He selected the site of Stonea near March for a major British Museum project in the 1980s, and the publication of that work in 1996 has contributed significantly to our understanding of the region in antiquity.<sup>2</sup> At the time of his death he was working on a general book about the Fenlands in Roman times.

His academic career started as a Senior Scholar at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he read Archaeology & Anthropology. After graduation in 1966, he embarked on his Ph.D. research in Italy, as a Scholar of Classical Studies of the British School at Rome.<sup>3</sup> His field-survey work in the Ager Faliscus, South Etruria, was a pioneering example of the landscape studies which have become a standard and essential element in modern archaeology.<sup>4</sup> Tim's association with the British School at Rome was a lifelong one, and from 1991-96 he served as the Chair of its Faculty of Archaeology, History and Letters. His fascination with the history, culture and language of Italy was profound, and he made a lasting contribution to the study of that country in the Roman period.<sup>5</sup>

With a family tradition of teaching, Tim expected to follow a university career. His first step on that path was as a Visiting Professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1969-70. It was an experience he still spoke of with some awe and bewilderment 25 years later. Though still young himself, he had no experience of the colourful lifestyle of some of the students, and was sometimes called upon to advise on problems whose nature and very existence were quite new to him. He, and the students, survived, and after three years spent first as a Fellow of the Macnamara Foundation, working on the Italian Iron Age, and then as a Knott Fellow at the University of Newcastle, where he completed the publication of his excavations at Narce<sup>6</sup> — a remarkable 1500-year story of how the settlement developed from a collection of Bronze Age huts to a wealthy town at the time of the Roman conquest, he moved on to his first permanent post, as a Lecturer at the University of Lancaster.

In his five years at Lancaster (1973-78), Tim set up the Department of Archaeology, and took on an active programme of fieldwork and excavation in NW England, resulting in several publications.<sup>7</sup> It was also at that time that he became involved in the excavation of the centre of the Roman town of Iol Caesarea (Cherchel) in Algeria. The final report on the Cherchel excavations of 1977-81 was published by him and his Algerian collaborator, Naçera Benseddik, in 1993, an undertaking that required remarkable tenacity and determination because of the changing political situation in Algeria.<sup>8</sup>

In 1978, Tim made a significant career change, coming to the British Museum as an Assistant Keeper in the Department of Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities. He brought with him his absolutely instinctive dedication to education, and an innovative approach to problems and projects which was at first always coming up against the constraints of the traditional British Civil Service atmosphere of the museum, full of ancient and arcane rules and regulations that had little to do with the intellectual processes of curatorship. Nevertheless, at that time the Museum provided a tranquil environment for scholarly research and a great deal of freedom for curators to plan and pursue their special interests. The incomparable resources provided by the collections themselves, the proximity of so many other scholars in all the departments, and the British Library located under the same roof provided an academic atmosphere to bring out the best in everyone.

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1 T. W. Potter, *A Romano-British village at Grandford, March, Cambs.* (British Museum Occasional Paper 35, 1982).

2 R. P. J. Jackson and T. W. Potter, *Excavations at Stonea, Cambridgeshire, 1980-85* (London 1996), reviewed in this issue by J. Taylor (above p. 648).

3 He alone in the annals of Rome Scholars managed the feat of getting his small Fiat airborne across a rock-covered roundabout that unexpectedly appeared in his path in the Villa Borghese gardens.

4 T. W. Potter, *The changing landscape of South Etruria* (London 1979).

5 Summarised up to 1987 in T. W. Potter, *Roman Italy* (London 1987).

6 T. W. Potter, *A Faliscan town in South Etruria. Excavations at Narce, 1966-1971* (London 1976). Tim could sometimes be deliberately pompous in word (but never in deed), promptly deflating himself with a joke told against himself. At the Narce excavations he liked to saunter out from his caravan 3 or 4 hours after his team had started digging (at dawn), in silk dressing gown, cigarette in one hand and a bottle of iced beer in the other, to check on progress, before repairing into the nearby village for a friendly barman's version of his full English breakfast.

7 Principally *Romans in North-West England: excavations at Watercrock, Ravenglass and Bowness-on-Solway* (Kendal 1979).

8 T. W. Potter and N. Benseddik, *Fouilles du Forum de Cherchel, 1977-81* (Algiers 1993).

There have been fundamental changes, good and bad, since the late 1970s, but Tim, as he became more and more dedicated to his curatorial career, was always able to exploit them to the best advantage of scholarship. In 1989, he became Deputy Keeper of the Department, and in 1995 was appointed Keeper.

The later 1990s were a time of turmoil for the British Museum and particularly for the Prehistoric and Romano-British Department. The ambitious Great Court building project necessitated the physical demolition of the department's offices and main storerooms, but the ultimate destination, the British Museum Study Centre, had not even been begun, so collections and staff had to move into inadequate temporary accommodation. At the same time, resources had become available for the long-desired new and enlarged departmental galleries, to be housed in the fine series of rooms on the east side of the upper floor, part of the original Smirke architecture of the museum. The staff were therefore simultaneously planning a major new permanent exhibition and beginning the checking, packing and organisation for a comprehensive relocation. The support, encouragement and understanding of the Keeper was essential at such a stressful time.

The new galleries devoted to Roman Britain, the European Iron Age and the Late Bronze Age opened on time in the summer of 1997. Tim was justifiably proud of them, and they will stand now as a visible token of his commitment to the Museum and its dual rôle as a resource for both the academic world and the general public. He was anxious to move on to the next stage, the extension of the department's galleries to include earlier prehistory. But before this could take place, the Study Centre project had to go ahead, and the work on this took up much of his time during his Keepership, as did the ever-increasing burden of administration. Though Tim will not see the Study Centre and its innovative new facilities, nor the galleries dedicated to the Palaeolithic, Neolithic and Early Bronze Age collections, he has already made his contribution to them.

As a senior British Museum curator, Tim Potter was naturally sought after as a member of many archaeological committees and working groups. He was delighted by his election as President of the Royal Archaeological Institute in 1999, seeing this honour as a connection with Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, the 19th-c. Keeper whom he admired greatly. His link with the British School at Rome remained close, and he was also active in the Roman Society, the Society for Libyan Studies, and others. He was particularly anxious to strengthen the ties between the Museum and the universities, and generously took on extra tasks as an external examiner even when his museum duties were at their heaviest. All the curators in the department were involved in some teaching, lecturing and examining from time to time, and he encouraged this, regarding it as a proper function for a curator in a national museum.

He was also firm in his belief that excavation and other types of fieldwork were crucial activities for all archaeologists, even those whose main focus was the study of artefacts already stored in museums. His own record of fieldwork was impressive; during his career he was responsible for at least 25 excavations and related projects in Britain, Italy, and Algeria. He had a real knack for selecting sites and areas that were not only interesting in themselves but formed the basis for illuminating wider themes. The Stonea excavation is one example, while his research at the Mola di Monte Gelato in S Etruria is another, a site in the area he had already surveyed in detail as a graduate student, and which itself casts light on the questions of late-antique to Mediaeval continuity in Italy.<sup>9</sup>

Tim Potter had no publication backlog, a matter for special praise considering his heavy management responsibilities. His determination to complete his fieldwork properly by publishing a final report was adamant. A bibliography of some 15 books and monographs and around 100 papers will ensure that future generations remain aware of his contribution to the archaeology of the Roman empire, especially of Italy and Britain. He wrote quickly and easily, and was adept at varying his style and approach appropriately for popular or more specialist audiences. He was comfortable working with collaborators, and meticulous about the full and proper acknowledgement of their contribution. The format of the archaeological report, with its numerous chapters and sections by different specialists, sometimes provides an opportunity for the leader of the project to take too much of the credit, but Tim would always make sure that the name of every significant contributor appeared on the title page. He had no hesitation in placing the name of a principal collaborator before his own: Johns and Potter 1983 and Jackson and Potter 1996 are cases in point.<sup>10</sup>

Tim was an enthusiast. Even after some four decades of working in archaeology, he could still bubble over with excitement about a new discovery or a new idea. He loved to initiate new projects and passionately believed in getting a good story out of the earth, and telling it well. His lectures were memorable for his sheer exuberance. He was kind to colleagues throughout the profession and ever generous in his praise of them, and always an enthusiastic supporter of younger scholars and students embarking on research. He took as much pride in others' achievements as in his own, because he always remained at heart an educator as well as a scholar. He will be greatly missed.

Catherine Johns, with contributions by Graeme Barker

9 T. W. Potter and A. C. King, *Excavations at the Mola di Monte Gelato* (London 1997), with review in *JRA* 12 (1999) 798-805 by E. Fentress.

10 C. Johns and T.W. Potter, *The Thetford treasure, Roman jewellery and silver* (London 1983); Jackson and Potter (supra n.2).