

Robert K. Ritner
(May 5, 1953–July 25, 2021)



Robert Kriech Ritner, Jr. was born in Houston on May 5, 1953, to Robert Kriech Ritner (1923–2006) and Margaret Ritner, née Shelton (1929–2013). He became fascinated by ancient Egypt and magic at an early age through their depictions in popular culture, but his parents encouraged him to study a practical subject. He therefore studied psychology at Rice University in Houston and received his BA in 1975. Participation in high school debates and college acting classes, however, helped him develop his signature dramatic lecture and presentation style.

Robert then pursued his interest in Egyptology at the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago, where he received his PhD in 1987. Robert's dissertation examined ancient Egyptian magic and was published as *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 54, Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1993), which was profoundly influential in Egyptology and beyond. The book has gone through several editions, and continues to be an Oriental Institute Publications "best seller." As a student, Robert was invited to work on the Chicago Demotic Dictionary, to which he contributed many entries.

As a recent graduate, Robert served as a lecturer at the University of Chicago until he was hired as the inaugural Marilyn M. Simpson Assistant Professor in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Yale University from 1991 to 1996. Robert was recruited back to the University of Chicago in 1996, where he rejoined the NELC Department and the Oriental Institute as associate professor. Robert's return to Chicago also allowed him to be with his partner Neil Jordan Krakauer (1952–2000), with whom he lived on the north side of Chicago. Robert was granted tenure at the University of Chicago in 2001 and was promoted to full professor in 2004. He also served as visiting professor in Philadelphia in 2003 and in Paris in 2009. He was extremely

proud to be appointed the inaugural Rowe Professor of Egyptology in September 2019 at the celebration of the centennial of the founding of the Oriental Institute.

Robert's research primarily focused on texts related to Egyptian religion, magic, and medicine, especially of the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, but he also developed a research interest in Libyans and the Libyan Period in Egypt that resulted in several articles and a translation of the primary textual sources entitled *The Libyan Anarchy: Inscriptions from Egypt's Third Intermediate Period* (SBL Writings from the Ancient World 21, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009). Following in the footsteps of his mentor Klaus Baer, Robert continued work on the Egyptian papyri that Mormon church founder Joseph Smith acquired in 1835, and he eventually published a full translation and study, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition* (Salt Lake City: Smith Pettit Foundation, 2011), which had an enormous impact on a wide audience. Robert contributed over one hundred articles to journals and books and served as editor for the festschrift of his teacher and colleague, *Essays for the Library of Seshat: Studies Presented to Janet H. Johnson on the Occasion of Her 70th Birthday* (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 70, Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2016).

Robert took great pleasure in working with the Chicago House Epigraphic Survey team in Luxor helping to analyze a group of blocks in the Luxor Temple block yard inscribed with a version of the famous Bentresh stela in the Louvre. He also served as an academic advisor for the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago for its Egypt installation and for two exhibits from the British Museum, "Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth," and "Eternal Egypt." Robert was also a supporter of ARCE, and he served on the Board of the organization from 2017 to 2021.

Robert was a skilled lecturer, who imbued his presentations with passion and authority. He loved having an audience, and his audiences sensed it. The tours that he led to Egypt for thirty years regularly sold out, and his public lectures were always well attended, both in person and virtually on YouTube. Robert's university classes on Egyptian religion and magic were also extremely popular. Some students found in him a beloved mentor, while others found him strict and even terrifying. Robert evidently did not object to the latter characterization, for he kept an urn on his desk labeled "Ashes of Former Students." Throughout his life, Robert retained an appreciation and affection for the Egyptomania that had originally stimulated his interest in Egyptology. He avidly collected memorabilia and passionately discussed it, and every Halloween he and his soft-coated Wheaton terrier Sheshonq displayed wearable examples.

Robert suffered from a series of health problems later in his life. He reluctantly went public about his long battle with kidney failure, but not about his subsequent diagnosis of leukemia. He passed away early in the morning on July 25, 2021. He is survived by his younger brother Richard Mark Ritner, his sister-in-law Jody, and his nieces Michelle, Nicole, and Alyssa.

Brian P. Muhs, Chicago

With contributions by Lorelei H. Corcoran, Janet H. Johnson, W. Raymond Johnson, and Foy D. Scalf