

# Richard W. Redding

(June 21, 1947–May 22, 2023)



On Monday, May 22, 2023, Dr. Richard W. Redding, dear friend, mentor, colleague, and fellow team member, passed away a month before he turned 76. News of Richard’s passing spread quickly through Egypt where Richard worked and taught young Egyptian archaeologists for more than thirty years. By the end of that day, postings began to appear on Facebook all over Egypt, America, and Europe from both senior colleagues in archaeology and former students who are now Inspectors in Egypt’s Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MoTA).

Richard was an archaeologist who analyzed animal bone, but that does not encompass the depth and breadth of his research. He always put his results in a wider context of the societies and economies of ancient cultures. That came from his training at the University of Michigan anthropology department.

Richard started drilling down on animal bones as a child. (Later, in a lab, he would literally drill and smash bone to see how it broke and splintered long before turning up under an archaeologist’s trowel.) He would wander the woods, notice bones, and bring them home. His mother was less than delighted. As an undergraduate at the University of Michigan (U of M), Richard first majored in chemistry. One day in the basement of U of M’s Museum of Anthropology, he pulled open a drawer full of animal bones and exclaimed: “Wow, this is it!” Knowing Richard, this makes total sense.

After seeing those bones in a drawer and realizing someone valued bones as much as he did—for science no less—Richard switched his major to anthropological archaeology, biological sciences, and geology. He would go on to excavate and survey in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Kenya, Tanzania, Armenia, Georgia, China, Israel, Mexico, Wyoming, Michigan, and of course, Egypt. I know Richard’s early career most vividly from his stories, how he had to spend a night next to a sheep in Kurdistan, how he found, in one layer around a deep, very ancient pit, a frog frozen in death position as the creature reached out in desperation toward a shrinking pond.

Richard earned his doctorate in Anthropology and Biology in 1981 at U of M with a thesis on ancient subsistence herding of sheep and goats in Southwest Asia. Richard went on to teach at Hamilton College, Wellesley College, and Oakland University. From 1986 to 1991, he served as Curator and Director of Science at the Cranbrook Institute of Science. In 1993, he was appointed a research scientist in the Museum of Anthropology at U of M. There, he served as Associate Curator of Zooarchaeology from 1995 through 2011. As he did at Giza, Richard built a comparative collection of animal bone for the Museum of Anthropology's zooarchaeology lab by purchasing and donating numerous bone specimens of Old World domesticates. He taught classes through the U of M Anthropology Department and trained numerous undergraduate and graduate students in zooarchaeological methods. From 2008–2010 he served as Associate Director of the Museum. In 2012, he became a Research Scientist at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.

I first met Richard in 1982 when he came through the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) Cairo office as a team member of The Fayum Archaeological Project (FAP), directed by Robert Wenke and Mary Ellen Lane. Richard personified the New Archaeology I had been reading about in my undergraduate courses. This entertained the idea that universal laws could explain human adaptation and major transitions, such as the origins of agriculture, states, and cities. Practitioners applied scientific methods to test hypotheses by excavating human settlements and by retrieving and analyzing every scrap of material culture, including ancient plant remains and animal bone. Grounded in a Michigan archaeological perspective, Richard firmly believed in a real, empirical world and a hard, natural science approach. He would challenge team members to articulate their paradigms, even if they didn't share his. If they replied, "I don't have a paradigm" (or model), he would say, "Yes you do, you just haven't articulated it." Richard framed his excavations, surveys, and analysis in big questions about the origin of food production and the evolution of complex societies.

In 1984 Richard directed the NSF-funded Kom el-Hisn Project with Robert Wenke who was then Director of the ARCE Cairo office. They excavated at Kom el-Hisn in 1984, 1986, and 1988. On the heels of that project, in 1991, Richard came to work with the AERA team at the "Lost City of the Pyramids" (the Heit el-Ghurab site of 4th Dynasty settlement at the Giza Pyramids).

The first thing that impressed me was how Richard could fix things. It started with a malfunctioning dumpy level. Richard fixed it on site with his Swiss Army knife. Richard went on to fix shower heads, water tanks, toilets, creaky doors, and interpersonal team relations. Wilma Wetterstrom, Richard's cohort in graduate school, and colleague in the Fayyum Project, recalled "He analyzed the fauna, of course. He was also the guy who was handy with everything. He started the generator in the morning so that we would have light to get ready before heading out to the field and to pump water up to the tank on the roof where the sun heated the water. He ran the generator in the evening for light. Always the adult in the room, I never once saw Richard get angry, uptight or stressed out—not once."

Richard became a regular AERA team member, Chief Research Officer, board member, and eventually Chair and Secretary. Every season he would help with tasks like assigning and managing rooms for team members coming and going through the AERA Center at Giza. In the absence of lab director, Claire Malleson, he ran AERA's field lab in an official MoTA storeroom.

Slowly, over thirty-two years, right up to our most recent fieldwork in March 2023, Richard continued to amass big data—literally millions of identifications of exactly-provenanced animal bones—data that reveals striking patterns of status and diet in this city of pyramid builders: administrators in large houses enjoying prime beef of young male cattle, conscripts in barracks consuming more sheep and goat, dietary combinations like expensive Nile perch and prime beef versus catfish and goat. When we exposed a large enclosure with rounded corners formed by a fieldstone wall that loops in a paper-clip pattern, Richard could spot it as an "OK [Old Kingdom] Corral," where pyramid builders stored protein on hoof.

Although Richard was not trained as an Egyptologist, he addressed Egyptological questions. With his work at Kom el-Hisn and HeG, he helped us understand how central authorities fed the workers' town by drawing from the provinces, how they distributed meat according to rank and status. I hope that one day someone will pick up on a question Richard thought about to the very end—the possible relationship between the gestation, birthing, and growth patterns of cattle and the biennial "cattle count," a census for taxation, so important to Egyptolo-

gists who study Old Kingdom chronology. Did the Old Kingdom state count cattle every two years because of some natural cycle?

Richard was a favorite teacher in a comprehensive program of field schools that AERA developed on behalf of ARCE for young archaeologists working for the MoTA. Every student spent time with Richard, seeing the difference between human and animal bone and learning the basic identification of cattle, sheep and goat, or the varieties of fish and birds that people raised and consumed in the pyramid city. Most important, Richard taught the “why” of studying animal bone—that is, what information bones convey. Richard embodied AERA’s field school motto: “We are not looking for things, we are looking for information.” For students who stayed with animal bone, Richard had them practice on samples critical to the questions driving research. This was no “make work.” With gentle guidance and patience, he inspired students to think critically. When he erased his notes and sketches on his white board, he rewrote his favorite maxim (by Thomas Henry Huxley): “The great tragedy of science” is “the slaying of a beautiful theory by an ugly fact.” The last time he wrote this, his students wrote below, in Arabic: “Thank you very much for teaching us this useful science, from our hearts we thank you!”

Thanks to Richard, there is now a cadre of Egyptian zooarchaeologists, and a special program of zooarchaeology at the MoTA Training Center in Saqqara headed by his former student, Mohamed Hussein. Willeke Wendrich, President of the International Association of Egyptologists, said it best: “His work in Giza really put the importance of zooarchaeology for Egyptology on the map.”

Asked in a recent interview what inspires him, Richard answered, “Discovery.” When asked, “what can’t you live without?” he answered, “Field work.” When he had to leave our last field season early (in March 2023) to tend to health issues, he wrote “I am sorry” on that white board in the lab for truncating his teaching for three students. He looked forward to picking up in the fall where they left off.

Richard leaves a great legacy that is hard to match. He leaves what may be the world’s largest corpus of archaeological faunal data compressed into the briefest of archeological periods (the fifty or so years of pharaohs Khafre and Menkaure). He leaves an invaluable reference collection in Giza and for over thirty-two years other projects borrowed that collection to use at other sites. AERA will make good use of Richard’s reference collection by continuing his research and teaching.

The many expressions of appreciation for Richard’s life, work, and legacy say it best: Richard was “an irreplaceable, generous spirit;” “a positive, enthusiastic, and dedicated professional, a force of nature;” “a wonderfully positive and supportive person and a great scientist.” Richard lived with “kindness and dedication to his work and his trainees.” “AERA will not be the same without him, we were like a family in all these years.”

I will miss Richard at breakfast and morning meetings during the field seasons. I will miss Richard on the site, offering his seasoned appraisals of what we are finding, with parallels from around the Near East. I will miss sharing a glass of wine with Richard on Thursday evenings, the eve of a one-day weekend. (I always learned something of enology, as well as zoology, for Richard was a wine connoisseur. He introduced me to Malbec.) Most of all, with his students, I will miss Richard’s avuncular presence in his corner of the AERA field lab behind tables arrayed with cattle skulls, sheep jaws, and tibia fragments.

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Giza