

In Memoriam Dr. Bert de Vries

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By

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with thanks to

Eng. Dana El-Farraj, Eng. Mais Haddad,

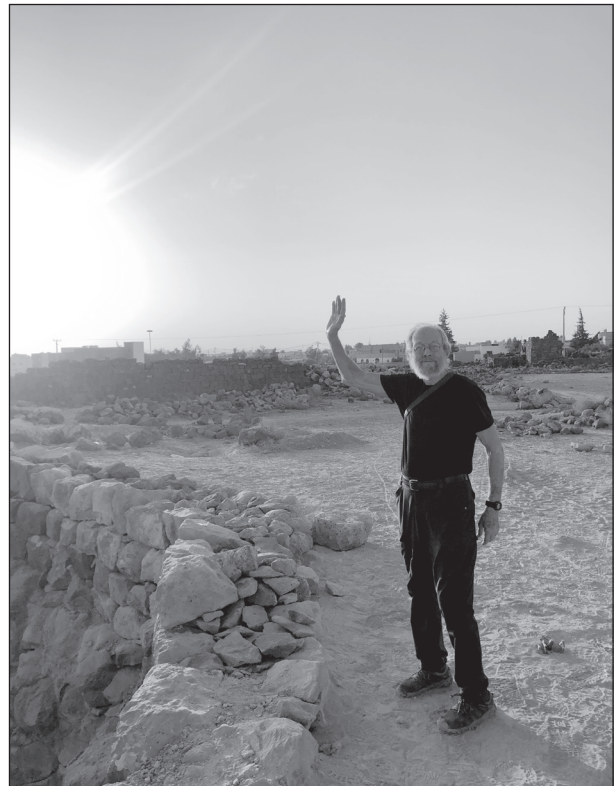
Eng. Jehad Juleiman and Samar Srour

The name Dr. Bert de Vries is the definition of Archaeologist. His version is characterized by boundless curiosity, meticulous rigor, and inexorable love for the human narrative revealed layer by layer in the course of the endeavor. A simple pot sherd transported him to an indisputable moment of human experience. As an architect surveyor his drawings gave that experience a place—a place in Jordan. For half of a century Jordan has been the beneficiary of Dr. de Vries as a model practitioner in an evolving field. His legacy honors the craft and the country in equal measure.

Bert was born in Zierikzee, Zeeland, the Netherlands. As a child, he and his family were internally displaced by the escalation of WWII. They eventually emigrated to Canada in 1952. His childhood memories gave voice to the punctuated narrative of displacement. His telling bore no hint of self-pity, only determination peppered with disdain for discrimination.

That determination carried him to Calvin College in the United States where he eventually earned degrees in Physics and Engineering, followed by a bachelor's degree in Divinity from Calvin Theological Seminary. Captivated by History, he earned his PhD from Brandeis University in Mediterranean Studies. He joined the faculty of Calvin College in 1967 where he taught history and archaeology until 2018.

Jordan instantly captivated Bert when he arrived for his first field season as an architect surveyor at the Tall Ḥisbān excavation directed by Dr. Siegfried Horn in 1968. He returned to Ḥisbān for field seasons in 1971 and 1973 with Dr. Horn and in 1974, 1976 and 1978 under the direction of Dr. Larry Gerrity.



Bert waves goodbye.

Jordanian culture had the same effect on Bert's wife Sally who accompanied him on early Ḥisbān digs, and who became something of an expert in the textiles of the region (under the tutelage of Mrs. Widad Kawar). The two of them never stayed away long and even carted their four small children with them to 'Ammān when they helped to establish an NGO to support Palestinian refugees from 1972-74, between excavations. It was during that time that Bert's commitment, not just to the scientific practice of archaeology, but to the deep value of the humanities in education was actualized. His

ability to connect his personal narrative with that of another suffering population removed by time, place, language and culture translated knowledge into a surrogate, a suave, a pattern, a prophylactic. Bert's commitment to peace was conceived.

Before that Bert Fell in Love

An avid hiker, between seasons at Ḥisbān he had begun to explore Jordan's universe of material culture that the archeologist in him felt compelled to record. Those who know him can picture him striding up a barely perceptible incline in the desert with intense purpose describing what must lay beneath the surface to anyone who had tagged along, and who would surely have been scratching their heads because they saw only dirt where Bert saw Nabataeans, Romans, Byzantines, Umayyads, Abassids, Mamluks...

Then there Was Umm al-Jimāl

Imagine how he must have felt that day in the late spring of 1971, after a bone-rattling ride in a four-by-four along unpaved tracks in the desert for more than two hours, when the jagged outline of the ruins of the black basalt city of ancient Umm al-Jimāl rose above the skyline before him. He felt like he had discovered it! On that day he fell for Umm al-Jimāl, the site which would become Sally's and his second home for the next fifty years.

In truth, he had not discovered it. Umm al-Jimāl had been there in various states of construction, occupation and inhabitation for more than 2000 years. Indeed, the Masaeid people, were living inside the site when he arrived. It was they who solidified his enchantment with the place as they welcomed him as an honored guest from the moment he stepped out of the old Land Rover.

He was also not the first archaeologist to document the site. As far as we know, Howard Butler had that honor in 1905. Butler's drawings offered a starting point from which Bert drew up his own plan to discover the story of the people who had lived in Umm al-Jimāl over time. Dr. Tom Parker recalls participating in excavations

there in 1977, 1980 and 1984. Periodic field seasons followed all the way until the 2019 field season when Dr. DeVries co-directed with his successors Dr. Darrell Rohl, who took his place at Calvin University, and Dr. Elizabeth Osinga, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on the ceramics of Umm al-Jimāl with Bert's support¹.

Over his last two decades in archaeology in Jordan Bert began to craft his theory of Community Archaeology which both engages local communities in their own cultural narrative, but more importantly relies upon local expertise which has traditionally been overlooked, or worse hidden, as a result of accepted power dynamics. A lifelong student, Bert was keenly aware of post-colonial/post-Orientalism self-consciousness. He also actively opposed jingoistic behavior. But mostly he was an observer whose innate humility allowed him to see expertise where it had not been expected. Published in a chapter in the Oxford Handbook for Archaeology, edited by Dr. Bethany Walker in 2021, and in the One World Archaeology journal, edited by Dr. Arwa Badran and Dr. Shada Abu Khafaja, his perspective on Community Archaeology is what Dr. DeVries will likely be best remembered.

The Umm al-Jimāl Archaeological Project (UJAP), a working group made up of foreign and local scholars and practitioners, was that theory in practice. Led by Bert they collectively developed a comprehensive set of interpretive and educational materials based on the site narrative from the Nabataean through the Ottoman and modern periods. That story, grounded in the archaeological record, is told simply and beautifully in the Umm al-Jimāl Interpretive and Hospitality Center conceived by Bert and designed by Eng. Ammar Khammash and Eng. Shatha al Haj, with the narrative theme of How Did They Live? How Do We Know? He also spearheaded the creation of Hand by Hand Heritage Umm al-Jimāl, a local company formed to reinforce Umm al-Jimāl's sense of place and to share it with the world.

That simple, profoundly personal story

1. As may be typical in the field, Bert chafed at the constant necessity to raise funds to support fieldwork. On the other hand, his enthusiasm was infectious and he was intensely grateful to all of those who supported the work in Umm al-Jimāl through grants, including but not limited to: Calvin University, ACOR, USAID,

SCHEP, UNESCO, The Gerda Henkel Stiftung, the University of Bergen, GIZ, VNG, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the PAX Fund, the Mary and Tom Gallagher Foundation. Bert and Sally also personally established a fund at ACOR to support fellows doing research in Jordan, which lives on.

of human life became the basis for Bert's dream of UNESCO World Heritage status for Umm al-Jimāl. More than any monument, the continuity of the human experience across time, imperial occupation, religious practice, environmental change and conflict is the outstanding value of Umm al-Jimāl, of Jordan, of life on earth.

Dr. Bert de Vries was a leader with distinction in archaeology in Jordan. He served as the director for the American Center of Research (ACOR) from 1988 to 1991, and as an ACOR Board member for countless years thereafter. He developed close relationships with his colleagues like Dr. Tom Parker, Dr. James Sauer, Dr. David McCreery and Dr. Barbara Porter. He was always grateful for the permission to do the work granted and facilitated by the Department of Antiquities. He collaborated very closely with the Ministry of Tourism and Departments of Antiquities in 'Ammān and in al-Mafraq, working collegially with Directors Adnan Hadidi, Ghazi Bisha, Monther Jamhawi, Yazeed Elayan, Ismael Milhelm, Emad Obeidat and formed fast friendships with ministers like Ambassador Lina Annab, and General Secretary Issah Gammoh, as well as H.E Mayor Hassan Fahed al-Ruheiba of Umm al-Jimāl. He was proud to contribute to the beginnings of the Friends of Archaeology of Jordan and he and Sally actively supported the development of the al-Hussein Society for the Physically Challenged in 'Ammān. Bert and Sally's relationships in Jordan ran the gamut from shopkeepers to royalty, but titles paled next to their friendships. At the 2019 opening of the Umm al-Jimāl Interpretive and Hospitality Center presided over by HRH Princess Dana Firas, Dr. de Vries was presented with the prestigious King Abdullah Medal of Excellence by his dear friend HRH Prince Raad bin Zeid.

Ever humble and embarrassed by such recognition, Dr. de Vries placed greater value on his interaction with colleagues like Dr. Khalid Bashira, and Dr. Hanadi Taher with whom he could debate and from whom he could learn. He saw his greatest accomplishment in the success of each of his students like Paul Christians and Jeff DeKock whom he viewed as colleagues on the same journey. Foreign or Jordanian, He loved to expose them to the romance in the

history and culture of Jordan. If he was ever proud it was to have facilitated the careers of young scholars, particularly those like his true protegee Muaffaq Hazza from Umm al-Jimāl whose expertise will serve as an insurance policy for the preservation of Bert's beloved site.

This narrative only glances across the surface of the accomplishments of Dr. de Vries through his years of teaching and activism. Put simply, his mission was peace through common understanding. He saw archaeology, history, and the humanities generally, as the requisite tools. Jordan was his proof of concept. He persists through the local and international community of experts, friends, his wife Sally, and his children and grandchildren all of whom he inspired to carry on his legacy in Umm al-Jimāl, in Jordan, and wherever they are in the world.

It seems appropriate to close with an excerpt of Bert's own musings, jotted down just seven days before he died, as he pondered future writing topics. He wrote under the topic "Be of Good Cheer!" funerary inscriptions at Umm al-Jimāl:

"What happens when loved ones die unexpectedly. My mother always had her eyes on heaven, but Hieronymus Bosh, inured by the Black Death, gave us the most horridly graphic pictures of hell. I've written about tombstones at Umm al-Jimāl and its ancient environs. One of the key elements discussed is the stock phrase "Be of Good Cheer! No one on Earth is immortal" – an address of the survivors to their deceased son, daughter, mother or father. A reversal is an address of the deceased to the living passerby at Umm Qays: "As you are, I was, as I am, you will be; so live your life before it is too late!" ...these epitaphs speak to me...we live to serve, not to escape."

... Dr. Bert de Vries

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