

Keith DeVries

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CURATOR
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SECTION
BY GARETH
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KEITH DEVRIES, ASSOCIATE Curator Emeritus in the Mediterranean Section, passed away at the age of 69 on July 16, 2006, after a long struggle with cancer.

I got to know Keith while working in central Turkey at Gordion—the long-deserted capital of the Iron Age kingdom of Phrygia—and, more recently, here in the Museum’s

Gordion Archives. Although he was a private man with an unobtrusive nature, he was always very cordial, and I am glad to say that he became a good friend. What struck me most about Keith was his individualism, his formidable intellect and erudition, his good sense and kindness, his conscientious approach to everything I saw him do, and his wacky sense of humor.

It was a pleasure and a privilege to work alongside him. His studies were punctuated by loud exclamations of developing surprise (“oh! OH!”), of delight, when a tricky problem had been solved (“YES!”), or of dismay, when some disappointment crashed home (“OH NO!”). Impish chuckling heralded the announcement of some ridiculous discovery. His masterly disquisitions were often accompanied by gesticulation—arms crooked, with both hands at head height, fists clenched or fingers splayed, and shaken to emphasize key points—a theatrical aspect that found many outlets, not least, his great love of The Stage.

His scholarship stood upon a great podium of knowledge, painstakingly constructed with highly critical evaluation. Keith had the courage and honesty to change his mind in accordance with new developments and to admit when there was something he did not know. His openness was also manifest in the respect he accorded to others, especially less-senior thinkers. Nevertheless he had little time for woolly thinking or the sloppy application of faddish ideas. The towers of papers and slides littering his desk were the tools of a well-ordered mind with a sound job in hand. The dividends are of lasting value,



Keith DeVries studying pottery in the sherd yard at Gordion.

both in his well-written and lucid publications and in the scholarly matrix of understanding and ideas that he established—particularly at Gordion—for others to share. But his passing has left a great void at Gordion.

I will remember the day Keith told me he had only a few months to live. In a calm tone he said “we all have to die sometime,” and then expressed how grateful he was to have won several extra years following an earlier and apparently hopeless illness (during which, in a coma, he believed he wandered the steppe lands around Gordion).

Tragically he was struck down whilst engaged in a collaborative study that fascinated him perhaps more than any other—the radical revision of the Gordion Iron Age chronology. He had long been alive to the issues involved and his particular contribution, aside from coordinating the general effort, is a brilliant and provocative revision of artifact typologies and interpretations of the textual sources that should ripple forcefully throughout Anatolian Iron Age archaeology. It is to this work that he devoted his dwindling energies in his final year, almost to the day he died.

The last word here should be given to his long-time Turkish friend and the manager of the Gordion excavation house, Muammer Bektöre. ‘Mumu,’ an excellent judge of character, categorically stated that of all the many people he had known, Keith undeniably had the cleanest of hearts. Mumu himself survived Keith by only a few weeks, tragically cut down by a heart attack in Izmir at the age of 62. Let us hope that—in some way—these two friends are enjoying each other’s company once again. 🏠

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