

In memoriam Dr Gerd Weisgerber

Born on 24 January 1938 in Saarlouis, Saarland, Gerhard Weisgerber was to earn a lasting place in the annals of archaeology. Born into ordinary circumstances, when he finished school he became a miner. This did little to stimulate his active mind and he set about studying to be a teacher, finally becoming head teacher. Having a keen interest in archaeology, he began studies at the University of Saarbrücken nearby and wrote a doctoral thesis on local Roman history under Rolf Hachmann, an all-around prehistorian with broad interests and proven ability. In 1976 at the age of 38, Gerd landed a posting as the Vice-Director of the German Mining Museum in Bochum, where he was to spend the rest of his professional life. While there, he never lost his ties to the place of his birth, which he and his wife, Angelika, visited nearly every week.

Aside from these basic biographical details, the man himself is of greater interest. Gerd was charismatic and displayed a rare attentiveness when listening to others. Where some people bully their employees and colleagues into cooperation, he had far more subtle means at his disposal. Because of his natural openness, Gerd let down his defences in a most disarming way. Equally disarming was his wry, ironic sense of humour. Because of his benign fatherly (rather than parental) attitude, it was easy to get along with him; what was challenging to us, however, was his industriousness. His charisma also derived from a memory equipped with an astonishingly wide assortment of practical and arcane knowledge. All together, these aspects enabled him to establish a rapport with shy and laconic archaeological colleagues, as well as some of the most flamboyant and over-confident. Part of this ability to establish relationships was his generally upbeat and positive attitude. He could focus on any topic and be fully engaged within seconds. His astute judgement was such that when he was asked a question that was ‘left of field’ one could realistically expect some new insight, which made him a favourite among advisers. Given his psychological resilience and his agility when discussing problems in an interested but relaxed way, he was equal to such gifted intellectuals in Germany’s prehistoric field as the talented Hermann Müller-Karpe. Although he could have moved to different postings he remained in Bochum, but even without such ‘extras’ he became a world-class scholar.

When we first met in Cambridge in 1981, little did I know what an interesting academic path awaited me. Gerd encouraged me to work as a volunteer in the German Mining Museum with the metallic hoard artefacts salvaged from ‘Ibrī/Selme in Oman, the investigation of which he organized with the help of Paolo and Germana Costa in Muscat. He always had a thoughtful word to keep one going — part of his interpersonal skills. In the 1980s he supported my India archaeometallurgy project in numerous ways and offered his services for free. Prior to the initiation of our Samad project in the Sultanate of Oman in 1986, he spent a few quiet minutes telling me that we would have an excellent project, even if it might not yield the kind of credentials needed to launch me into German academic circles. Through his ability and optimism my postdoctoral mentor (or guru) instilled in me a near unflinching trust. One had the feeling that when the other ships were sinking, his would sail on calmly. I watched closely what he did and how he did it, and learned.

All this does not mean that we never argued, but in these situations he was neither overbearing nor threatening towards his interlocutor. At the end of one of these rare episodes, he calmly asked: with which colleague did I expect never to have a difference of opinion? The fascinating thing was that, even during critical situations he retained an emotional equilibrium. If someone did manage to cross him, sooner or later the breach was repaired. If things did not work out when they were supposed to, then this might well happen later — even years later.

Gerd was a fairly prolific, but not a polyglot, writer. His true talent lay in German wherein he unflinchingly found a clear, polished, or traditional turn of phrase to describe complicated situations succinctly. His lucid texts were essentially simple and elegant in their expression.

It was a rare pleasure to watch him excavate. Had he wished, he could have been a talented field excavator, for his circumspect way of viewing every problem was supreme. However, he was more a manager than a hands-on excavator.

As a sign of his stable and one might say, jovial family life, he brought Angelika and occasionally his children and friends with him on excavations, which lightened up the atmosphere. Fiercely loyal, Angelika often accompanied him in the field even in the simplest accommodation. Gerd disapproved of female participants on his teams and once wrote a card home to describe the situation in Oman: ‘We are an excavation team of 10 men, one of whom is my wife.’ Our excavation teams were harmonious, and rarely did someone leave dissatisfied with his or her experience. The leader and employee roles were rather fluid between us and changed over the years. Instead of getting tense with unattainable working goals, when things got difficult he would sometimes take a drive in the desert. He was quiet but could sometimes be ebullient — most annoyingly at the breakfast table.

His most admirable achievements lay in the field of mining archaeology, in a variety of venues. Not all of his numerous projects matured to publication, but the percentage of those that did far exceeds the average. Shortly after his arrival in Bochum, he began an interesting study of flint mining at Lousberg near Aachen. Although not a lithics specialist himself, this is a tribute to his ability to work successfully within fields outside his main interests. He was involved in important projects on the archaeology of Oman from 1977, in which he cooperated with the Department of Antiquities. Assisted by ‘Alī Aḥmad Bakhit al-Shānfari, the director at the time, Gerd’s study of the archaeology of Maṣīrah Island served as basis for al-Shānfari’s dissertation submitted to the University of Naples in 1987. He also carried out excavations in England, Germany, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Sinai, Siphnos, and Uzbekistan, which somehow kept pace with those in Oman. Although one often wished that Oman, a land he cherished, would remain his main interest, it was in fact a bright facet among many others.

Gerd died on 22 June 2010 in hospital in Recklinghausen — a profound loss to his family, many friends, and colleagues.

Paul Yule



Dr Gerd Weisgerber 1938–2010-