

# Olivier Lecomte

## *In memoriam*



**To the memory of a great researcher and beloved friend: Olivier Lecomte**  
(Saint-Raphael, 23-06-1949 / Paris, 15-01-2019)

Our dear friend and colleague Olivier Lecomte died in Paris, at the age of 69, during the night of January 14 to 15, 2019. As an archaeologist, he was a specialist in pre-Islamic periods (Hellenistic, Parthian and Sasanian). He led the French-Turkmen Archaeological Mission (MAFTur) between 1994 and 2013 but was also in charge of considerable number of missions in the Near East, Central Asia and the United Arab Emirates. During the last years of his career, from 2009 to 2015, he administered the direction of the Archaeological Investigation Centre of Indus-Baluchistan, Central Asia and Orient (UMR 9993, CNRS).

After his studies of the Georgian, Chinese, and Russian languages in the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO), he began his studies in Oriental Archaeology at Sorbonne University (Paris I), and defended his doctoral dissertation in 1983. During his studies, since 1975, he also participated in several archaeological fields in Tureng Tepe and Susa (Iran). In 1981 he was designated a resident scientist in Tehran by the french Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but the unstable international affairs at that moment led to his transfer to Baghdad, where he stayed the next five years, and joined several archaeological missions led by french teams (Larsa, Kheit Quassim, Khirbet ed-Diniye, Haradum).

He became a researcher of the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) in 1985 and soon, he became interested in the Arabian peninsula. This led him to coordinate and lead archaeological excavations in the site of ed-Dur (1987-1994) and other works in the island of Ghallah, in the emirate of Umm-al-Qaiwayn.

He was invited by UNESCO to carry out a heritage assessment in Central Asia; and since 1993, through some aquitances made there, he was invited to take part in the missions in Kazakhstan (these included the Örnekk site led by Rémy Boucharlat); and

later on, by his own initiative, he led the excavations in Geoktchik depe and Ulug depe<sup>2</sup>, Turkmenistan. This is how he would focus his research on the occupational diversity of space and the study of nomadic-sedentary interactions from the beginning of the Early Iron Age until the arrival of Islam (I millennium BC until the 7th century AD). His work in the archaeological field was rewarded with numerous academic awards: the Hirayama award (2006), the Garnier Foundation (2006), the Foundation Prince Louis de Polignac (2009) and the great archaeology award of the Foundation Simone and Cino del Duca (2012).

He was the co-author and editor of a significant publication of Iran's archaeological sites, and other important essays about the Larsa site, in the south of Irak, and was fundamental in a publication regarding the rescue archaeology in Irak. The work involved in Turkmenistan would lead to numerous reports and essays (in French, English, Russian, Turkmen and other languages), in which the results of his field works and his reflections about them drew upon his great culture to summarize important moments in the historical evolution of Central Asia.

In a more personal approach, I would like to add that Olivier loved life, as his nature was of a modern explorer who liked to discover "New Worlds" and once explored, he enjoyed to share his new discoveries with simplicity. I met him more than 20 years ago. He was a tall, polyglot gentleman with a beige hat, a long and distinctive moustache, a long coat, a cane in the hand and lightweight cotton trousers whose folds were tilted with rhythmic grace to the trot of his musical walk. He seemed like an English lord, impressing with some very well displayed coquetry. A true character, like a Sir Mortimer Wheeler, how I imagined coming out of a history book...

He was an illustrated scientist whose great passion reflects itself in the elegance of his historical and archaeological writings. Very critical with his own studies, he was conscious of the hypothetical-deductive limits of his own work. As an archaeologist he constantly shared the results of his most intimate researches, new ideas and unpublished data. In 2001, I was among the first team that accompanied him to Ulug depe site in Turkmenistan. We acquired notable knowledge from him, of his vast knowledge of Sovietic literature, his field experience, his methodological approach, his very benevolent management and very particular horizontal leadership. He was very loved by the workers in the field and by other archaeologists from Central Asia and Russia. His human side always prevailed and there were several he supported without restraint.

He was, without a doubt, a loyal friend and a spiritual father to others and to me. Always there to support materially, morally and scientifically every near and far acquaintance. Olivier Lecomte, with a leftist soul and ethic for conviction and courage, was a great man, unique and exceptional for his nobleness and aspirations. His great sensibility went hand in hand with an extreme generosity and modesty. He didn't want others to be like him, but rather better. He was a passionate scholar, probably overly modest. His career shows a work that is inscribed now and forever in the history of Oriental and Central Asian archaeology.

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<sup>2</sup> In the first years (2002-2004) and due to Olivier's health, a triumvirate was established consisting of himself, Rémy Boucharlat and Henri-Paul Francfort. The co-direction on the Turkmen side was entrusted first to Yegen Atagariev (Institute of History) and then to Muhammed Mamedov (Turkmen Directorate for the Protection, Study and Conservation of Historical-Cultural Heritage).

A few months from his death, his colleagues and friends keep the memory of a man with a strong personality, but generous, who was appreciated by his sense of humour and great curiosity for literature, architecture, art and music. He enjoyed playing wind instruments, specially the bagpipes, but he also liked to play the quena, the andean flute, to the sound of the “bailecitos”, among others... At this moment, dear Olivier, let me tell you this last Indo-American story, which resembles your human and sensitive soul. A story that persuades us that death is a lie, that your name will eternally live in our hearts:

*“The woman and the man dreamed that God was dreaming about them. God was singing and claking his maracas as he dreamed his dream in a cloud of tobacco smoke, feeling happy but shaken by doubt and mystery. The Makiritare Indians know that if God dreams about eating, he gives fertility and food. If God dreams about life, he is born and gives birth. In their dream about God’s dream, the woman and the man were inside a great shining egg, singing and dancing and kicking up a fuss because they were crazy to be born. In God’s dream happiness was stronger than doubt and mystery. So dreaming, God created them with a song: — I break this egg and the woman is born and the man is born. And together they will live and die. But they will be born again. They will be born and die again and be born again. They will never stop being born, because death is a lie.”* (“The Creation”, in E. Galeano, *Genesis*, 2010, Nation Books)

*Julio Bendezu-Sarmiento*