

In Memoriam

Donald Whitcomb, 1944–2024

Donald Scott Whitcomb died on 8 February 2024 in Chicago, Illinois. He was 79. He is survived by his wife of 48 years, Janet (née Johnson), his two children, Felicia and John, and his brother David (wife Jan, daughters Melissa and Michelle).

Donald was born in New Jersey on 27 April 1944. After graduating in 1966 from Emory University with a BA in art history, he taught English in Bushire, Iran, for three years. On his return he gained an MA from the University of Georgia (Anthropology, 1971) and a PhD in Islamic archaeology from the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago in 1979. He served as Research Associate and Associate Professor (Islamic Archaeology) at the Oriental Institute (now the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures) and Middle East Center at the University of Chicago between 1981 and 2024, and as a (Research) Fellow at the American Center for Oriental Research (Amman, Jordan), the American Research Center in Egypt (Cairo), the Smithsonian Institution, the Field Museum of Natural History, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, carrying out field research, teaching, and curating museum exhibitions throughout the Near/Middle East. In 2018 he was honoured with the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Middle East Medievalists (a professional organization).

Donald was a pioneer in the field of Islamic archaeology, excavating sites throughout the region and creating an MA/PhD programme in Islamic Archaeology at the University of Chicago. He brought these skills and learning to Arabia and applied them, among other projects, to early surveys of Oman and of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia (Whitcomb 1975; 1978) as well as to studies of the Darb Zubaidah (e.g. 1996a), where he helped to move the field forward considerably. This research led him to some more synthetic papers on the archaeology of Arabia in the early Islamic period (e.g. Whitcomb 1996b; 2009). In the late 1980s he began excavations at Aqaba (Ayla) on the Red Sea coast of Jordan where, over a number of seasons, he uncovered important information on the development of an early Islamic settlement on the fringes of Arabia (e.g. Whitcomb 2010).

Outside Arabia Donald directed excavations in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Syria, and Iran. He also served as curator for a number of museum exhibitions, both in Chicago and in the Near/Middle East, highlighting the results of his excavations. He taught regularly in the Near Eastern Department of the University of Chicago, and published eight books.



References

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