

***In memoriam* Gordon Hillman (1943-2018): an extraordinary researcher and an exceptional man. A personal memory**

In memoriam Gordon Hillman (1943-2018): un investigador extraordinario y un hombre excepcional. Un recuerdo personal

Leonor Peña-Chocarro^a

On the 1st July 2018, the world community of archaeobotanists lost one of its most influential figures, Gordon Hillman (Fig. 1). He was an authority on the interpretation of plant remains from archaeological contexts in terms of past human activities, widely acknowledged for his enormous contribution to the study of the transition from hunter-gatherer to farming economies and the origins of agriculture in the Near East, a key figure in the development of systems for reconstructing ancient subsistence, and recognized for his outstanding work on traditional farming in Turkey. But Gordon was above all an extraordinary human being, with an enormous capacity to connect to people, and a generous and gifted teacher.

Gordon was born in Hailsham, East Sussex, in 1943 to a family of plant lovers. His father ran a nursery where Gordon developed his interest in the botanical world. After working at the Botany Department of the Natural History Museum in London, he gained a degree in agricultural botany at Reading University (1969). Afterwards, he spent a year as an archaeobotany postgraduate student at the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum in Mainz (Germany) under the influential Maria Hopf, a pioneer of archaeobotany with interests in the Iberian peninsula. This was followed by several years in Turkey, at the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, where he undertook studies of traditional farming in areas where mechanization had not yet arrived. His engagement with local farmers allowed him to carry out a thorough study of agricultural practices which provided him with an outstanding knowledge of ancient cereals, many forgotten, and their crop processing sequences. His analyses have been crucial for interpreting plant remains, and are

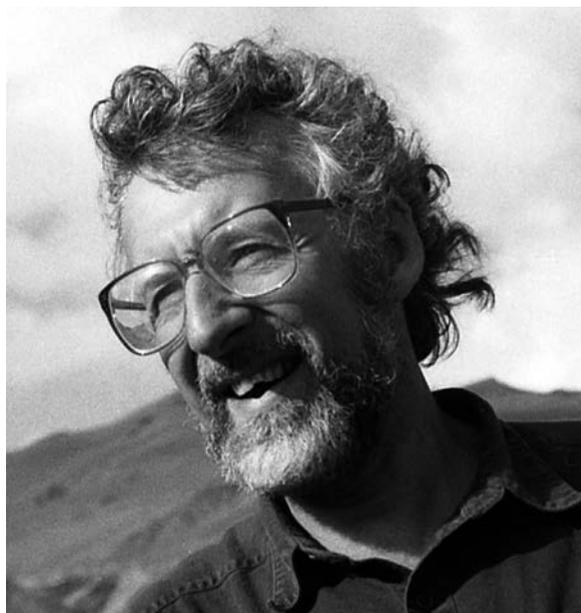


Fig. 1. Gordon Hillman in Turkey around year 2000, a picture taken by his daughter Thilaka Hillman.

worldwide used by many archaeobotanists working on crop-processing activities.

In 1981, he arrived at the Institute of Archaeology (UCL) in London where he initiated lecturing in archaeobotany, contributing to the training of many archaeobotanists across the world. His archaeobotanical analyses of renowned sites such as Abu Hureyra (Syria), Wadi Kubbaniya (Egypt) or Jeitun (Turkmenistan) are today central in any approach to past subsistence.

^a GI Arqueobiología, Instituto de Historia. Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC). Calle Albasanz 26-28. 28037 Madrid. Spain. Correo e.: leonor.chocarro@csic.es <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7807-8778>
Recibido 29-X-2018; aceptado 30-XII-2018.

I first met Gordon in 1988 at the Institute of Archaeology where he interviewed me for a Master's Degree in Bioarchaeology, which that year included the archaeobotany option. I had just finished my degree in Prehistory and Archaeology in Madrid, I had no notion about the existence of archaeobotany and my English was so poor, but I had a dream in my pocket that Gordon made possible. I vividly remember the support, enthusiasm and warmth that he showed during that interview. I was admitted for the degree and this was one of the events that shaped my life and career.

Afterwards, he encouraged me to continue in academia, and under his supervision I did my PhD at UCL on early agriculture in the Iberian peninsula, based on the study of plant remains from Neolithic and Bronze Age sites. His teaching was inspiring and his superb practical lessons on seed identification have marked several generations of archaeobotanists, forging dynamic relations with many people across the world. In those years, my dearest friend, the late Lydia Zapata¹, arrived at the Institute of Archaeology, and both of us, supported and encouraged by Gordon, started to set up the bases of archaeobotanical research in Spain, joining the few colleagues already working there. With Gordon's flotation machine plans we built our own devices and traveled across Spain floating thousands of litres of sediment. We brought back samples to London and with the help of Gordon identified seeds and fruits that outlined the first agricultural practices in the western Mediterranean. Lydia and I followed his lectures and practical lessons (I still keep all the drawings and notes I took and these are still used by the members of my lab in Madrid), and spent weeks and months looking at his reference collection. During the 6 long

years I spent at the Institute of Archaeology he was always available for doubts and questions or just for a chat in difficult moments. He touched the lives of many students.

Being Gordon's students was certainly a gift, and an invaluable opportunity to open our eyes to the uncharted territories of human-plant interactions. I still remember a field trip to Butser Ancient farm during the summer where we (the students) were supposed to survive as hunter gatherers for several days: boiled nettles made a good dinner and breakfast included raw garlic to avoid being bitten by insects. Another time we made a fantastic trip in the middle of nowhere to harvest *Typha* starchy rhizomes with flint tools...

Gordon also transmitted us a tremendous enthusiasm for studying past subsistence and a passionate interest for an agricultural past that was rapidly vanishing. He encouraged us to record past agricultural practices associated to the cultivation of almost forgotten crops in Spain, and some years later in Morocco.

Our current knowledge about the role of plants in past subsistence in the Iberian peninsula has been greatly influenced by Gordon's teaching and stimulating guidance. He supervised our first research on Neolithic agriculture and under his inspiration and supervision we documented the traditional cultivation of einkorn, emmer and spelt, and other crops. But Gordon and his encyclopedic knowledge not only motivated Lydia and me, but also our students and many of our colleagues. His work and inspiration will remain a linchpin for all archaeobotanists and scholars interested in the interactions between people and plants.

Whole-hearted thanks, Gordon, you are dearly missed.

¹ Lydia Zapata would have also signed every single word of this text.