An Appreciation of an Archaeological Life: Creighton Gabel, 1931–2004

Creighton Gabel, Editor of the Journal of Field Archaeology *from 1986 to 1995 and co-founder of the Department of Archaeology at Boston University, died February 22, 2004, in Vero Beach, Florida, after an extended battle with cancer. He was 72.*

In his thirty-three-year career at Boston University, Creighton Gabel participated in the creation of two academic departments; served as acting director of a research center, chairman of one department, and acting chairman of another; and edited for nine years an international journal, all while building an international reputation as an Africanist. At the same time, he won the admiration and affection of colleagues and students for his command of archaeological scholarship, his kind and modest demeanor, and his gentle humor.

His life-long interest in archaeology, according to Creighton, had its beginnings in the Field Museum of Chicago. During childhood visits to his maternal grandparents who lived in the metropolis, his grandmother would take him on the elevated train to the museum, where he was captivated by Egyptian mummies, the dioramas of cavemen, and other displays of relics of the past. These memories never left him, and eventually helped to frame his studies in college. Creighton's full name, we might note here, was Walter Creighton Gabel after Walter Creighton, his mother's father in Chicago.

The Gabel family home was in Muskegon, Michigan, where Creighton was born on April 5, 1931, and where he grew up. The city is on Muskegon Lake, which connects to Lake Michigan, and so provided the opportunity for nautical interests to flourish. Creighton was among several youths who became sailing buffs by the time they were in junior high school, and sailing remained a part of his life as long as he was able to put to sea. After graduation from high school Creighton attended Muskegon Junior College for a year before transferring to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in order to study archaeology. Since there was no archaeology department at the university, the dean's office first placed him in the Classics Department where he studied classical archaeology for a year, but because his interest was more in prehistory, as a junior he changed his major to anthropology. When he entered the anthropology program the chairman of the department, and later his advisor, was Leslie A. White, who was then promoting the concept of a "science of culture." Creighton commented wryly (Gabel 1995: 30) that "White might be considered the godfather of the New Archeology" because Lewis Binford, a Michigan graduate student later in the 1950s, had taken some inspiration from White's search for cultural "laws" to advocate a "science of archaeology."

His archaeological training at Michigan came from James B. "Jimmy" Griffin, Albert C. Spaulding, and Emerson F. Greenman, but his course of study covered the full range of the "four-field" approach to anthropology prevailing at the time: ethnography and ethnology, linguistics, physical anthropology, and archaeology. There were no laboratory courses, but there was a memorable field school directed by Greenman at a site on the north end of Lake Huron, where Creighton had his first archaeological field experience in summer 1953. His wife, Jane, was a fellow student. A year earlier, Creighton had married Jane Whitfield, who had been his classmate since high school in Muskegon, and who was then completing her B.A. in English Literature at the University of Michigan. They would remain close companions in America, Europe, and Africa over the entire fifty-one years of their marriage.

Creighton stayed on at Ann Arbor for an M.A., which he completed in one year, but had decided to go elsewhere for the Ph.D., in part because he wanted to pursue Old

Figure 1. Creighton Gabel (left), Louis Leakey, and *Zinjanthropus* in Evanston, Illinois, 1959.

World prehistory (not available then at Michigan), and in part because he wanted, as he put it (Gabel 1995: 30), "to pursue archaeology as an independent subject, rather than within the context of a traditional anthropology curriculum" (not available any place in the United States at that time). He chose the University of Edinburgh, where he studied under Stuart Piggott, who held the Abercromby Chair of Prehistoric Archaeology. He gathered more field experience as a member of the excavation team at West Kennett Long Barrow (a megalithic tomb site), and completed his studies in just two years, before leaving Edinburgh to accept an instructorship in anthropology at Northwestern University in 1956. During that first year of teaching, loaded with courses in all fields of anthropology, and teaching an extra evening course once a week in Chicago, he carried out final revisions on his dissertation and his Ph.D. in Prehistoric Archaeology was conferred in 1957.

Creighton remembered his years at Northwestern with fondness, but also felt isolated as the only archaeologist on campus. He began seeking out archaeological colleagues at the University of Chicago and elsewhere, and in 1958 Creighton, Robert Braidwood, and Joseph Caldwell organized a weekly symposium on comparative prehistory that attracted as participants such distinguished archaeologists as Jimmy Griffin, F. Clark Howell, Arthur Jelinek, Gordon Willey, Walter W. Taylor, and Robert McC. Adams, among others. The symposium was held at the Field Museum, a particularly fitting and nostalgic venue for Creighton whose childhood visits there had led him into archaeology.

An important turning point in Creighton's career occurred in 1959 when Melville J. Herskovits, Director of the African Studies Program at Northwestern and who had been urging him to take up African archaeology, provided funds for Creighton to attend the Pan-African Congress on Prehistory held that year in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo). The stars of the Congress were Louis and Mary Leakey, who showed the audience the skull of *Zinjanthropus,* their recent discovery at Olduvai Gorge (FIG. 1). After the Congress Creighton visited South African hominid sites with Philip Tobias and other sites in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), where he was introduced to the Rhodes-Livingstone Museum, Victoria Falls, and the Zambezi River by Brian Fagan, who was then the new Keeper of Prehistory at the museum. The visit resulted in plans for Creighton to return to Northern Rhodesia for research in the Kafue River area. In 1960–1961, Creighton spent much of the year excavating a 4000–5000-year-old settlement near the Kafue that was especially rich in organic remains (Gabel 1962, 1963a, 1963b, 1965). Africa thereafter remained the focus of his

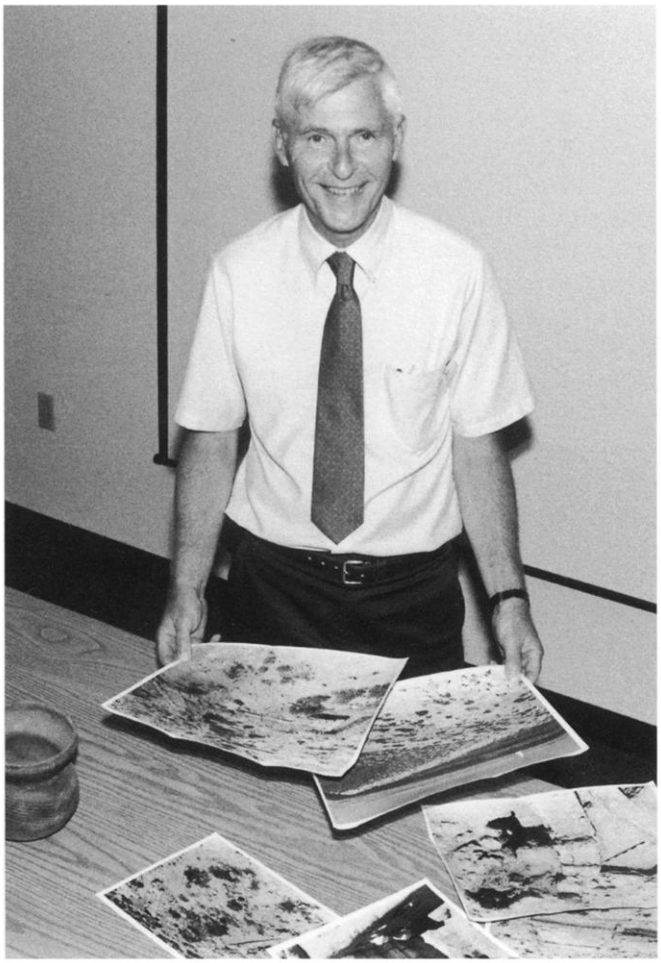

Figure 2. Creighton Gabel in 1989 looking at photographs of African archaeological sites where he directed excavations. Photograph by Michael Hamilton.

field research (FIG. 2), which included: in 1964, a survey of the upper Kafue basin near the border of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Gabel 1967); in 1966–1967, survey and excavation of several Late Stone Age rock shelters on Lake Victoria in Kenya (Gabel 1969a, 1969b); and in 1973, the archaeological survey of Liberia, which up to that time had never been the object of professional archaeological investigations (Gabel 1974).

In the meantime, in 1963, Creighton had been hired at Boston University both in the African Studies Center and as an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. He was soon promoted to Professor of Anthropology (1969), and played a role in the formation of a separate Department of Anthropology, which he then chaired (1970–1972) until his departure for the eight-month archaeological survey of Liberia noted above.

I met Creighton in the fall of 1973 not long after my arrival at Boston University as Professor of Classics and the Founding Editor of the *Journal of Field Archaeology,* the first volume of which would appear in 1974. We recognized early in our acquaintance that we shared similar views about archaeology, especially regarding its nature as a blend of science, social science, and the humanities, and so began developing a broader base for archaeology at the university. Our first efforts resulted in an archaeological field school at an early historical-period glass factory at Temple, New Hampshire, sponsored jointly in summer 1974, by the departments of Anthropology and Classics, followed in the academic year by an interdepartmental Introduction to Archaeology course taught jointly by Creighton and myself at first, and in later years by colleagues from both departments. Over the next several years, while I chaired the Department of Classical Studies and Creighton was Acting Director of the African Studies Center (1973–1975) and then Chairman of Anthropology (1976–1979) for the second time, we formed a working group of the archaeologists on campus and developed an archaeological curriculum which formed the basis of an interdepartmental Archaeological Studies Program instituted by the College, with the approval of the University, in January 1979. The Program offered the B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in Archaeological Studies, and the faculty were drawn from Anthropology, Classical Studies, Art History, and Religion.

The Program, however, had no real faculty lines in the budget—those remained in their home departments—and there was only a small budget for administration of the Program with no central base for archaeology students or faculty. Survival of the Program obviously would depend on the magnanimity of several departments (in addition to the College and University administrations), and programmatic growth under such conditions seemed unlikely. Creighton and I sounded out our fellow archaeologists on campus, and discussed the possibilities with others off campus. We were also concerned that archaeology in colleges across the United States was still restricted in its scope by its role as a sub-discipline of anthropology or classics, and was often so fragmented among several departments that a coherent archaeological curriculum was impossible in most places. We believed that archaeology should be recognized as an academic discipline in the American university, and decided to try to create a Department of Archaeology, holistic in its interests regarding time and place, at our home institution. The (small) archaeology faculty agreed with us, and in 1981 joined the proposal to create a Department of Archaeology and so place archaeology on a disciplinary level with other academic programs in the College. The issue was debated in one of the largest Col-

lege faculty meetings in a decade, and the proposal was overwhelmingly approved by the College faculty: the Department of Archaeology became official in July of 1982, the first of its kind in the United States. The only outspoken opposition came from three senior cultural anthropologists, who were committed to the "four-field" approach, and Creighton recalled years later that one of them never spoke to him again "if he could help it." On the other hand, the other members of the Anthropology Department had been supportive or neutral on the issue, and relations between Anthropology and Archaeology soon after the vote became amicable again. There were no disputes with any other department over the creation of the Department of Archaeology.

Creighton became Director of Graduate Studies in Archaeology, a post he held from the time of the creation of the Program until 1995. He enjoyed working closely with undergraduate as well as graduate students. As an advisor and as a teacher they found him helpful, knowledgeable, and sensitive, but also someone who expected the students to live up to their capabilities and responsibilities. He was spoken of by the graduate students with special respect and affection. When I was away on sabbatical in 1983–1984, Creighton served as Acting Chairman; as always, he maintained his calm, unruffled manner and sensitivity towards others, while being as firm and decisive as the occasion required.

He returned to the field in Africa during the summers of 1979 through 1981, but this time north of the Sahara. He directed the Boston University Archaeological Field School at Marea, a Late Antique city on the edge of the western desert in northern Egypt (Gabel and Petruso 1983). He commented later that the experience "almost made me wish that I had continued in those Classics courses thirty years earlier" (Gabel 1995: 33). Creighton's scholarship over the last two decades of his career included reviews of numerous important books on European, Asian, and African prehistory, and a number of synthetic works on African prehistory, which were characterized by comprehensiveness, clarity, and brilliant insight (e.g., Gabel 1975, 1983).

In the early years of the Program and the Department we did rather more team-teaching than has been the case in recent years, so I had the opportunity many times to see him in the role of teacher. I remember one semester when Creighton and I team-taught a seminar in world prehistory with just two (excellent) students. We prepared as diligently as the students, who could be counted on for penetrating questions, which we fielded as best we could. My own thought then was that Creighton was a delight: gentle, good-humored, and easy in his sharing of knowledge. In another semester the two of us were joined by Ed Wilmsen and Richard "Scotty" MacNeish, who both taught part-time in the Department for a few of its early years, in a methods and theory course with more than a dozen students. It was perhaps the liveliest joint teaching team I ever experienced. Scotty, who described himself in those days as a "systems theory" archaeologist, was never at a loss for words on any subject. Ed, who had during his tenure as editor turned *American Antiquity* into a periodical focused on theory, especially that of the New Archaeology, was smooth and incisive, generally at odds with Scotty. I was not only not a processualist, I was from the humanities, but with a tendency to promote the value of scientific contributions (hard science, not the philosophy of science), so my comments were sure to arouse one or another to debate. Creighton, in his own words a "culture-historian," would remain dispassionate, calmly presenting reasoned views on whatever the topic might be when there was a lull in our sometimes over-animated exchanges, and summing up contrasting arguments in polite and generous terms. The students got into the action as well, of course, and I think they enjoyed it and profited from the varying views. I certainly did: and I regret that it is no longer possible to re-assemble that team for another seminar.

Creighton succeeded me as Editor of the *Journal of Field Archaeology* in 1986, a post he held until 1995. I thought of him as an ideal editor: concerned for language as he was concerned for substance in narrative and significance of research, and able to keep the *Journal* on time as well as full of high-quality articles. Al B. Wesolowsky, Managing Editor of the *JFA* for (now) four successive Editors, had the following to say about Creighton as Editor.

Creighton was as unflappable as any man I've known. I'd come to him with what was clearly a serious problem in book production, expecting him to share my eminently justified sense of doom. He would listen to my jeremiad, nod his head, then make a sensible suggestion or even dismiss the problem with a quip.

In one incident, we had replaced a scale on an author's drawing with a simpler version. Since this was back in the days of X-acto knives and paste-ups, I had produced two scales in case one was spoiled during the positioning process. I affixed the slip of paper bearing both scales off the bottom of the image area, cut off one, positioned it, and forgot about the spare. Naturally, no one noticed that extra scale during page composition or final proofing and it appeared in the printed book. I showed it to Creighton, explaining what had happened. He just said "Well, it's the same size as the other one, so no one's going to get confused."

On another occasion, I had written a book review for a scholarly journal and had just received the comments of that editor

on my text. Before I even read them through, and for no particular reason, I became incensed, livid, even, over what I thought was the sheer temerity of the markup. I valued Creighton's opinion so showed him the text.

"These suggestions are political," I asserted. "Politically motivated!"

Creighton had the sense to read over the text before replying.

"Al, I don't regard a correction to the name of the publisher as 'political.' Do you?"

My indignation deflated, I went over the material with a cooler head, agreeing that several phrases were improved by the editing, and that I had been unclear in other paragraphs. As it happened, the review was considerably improved by that editor's suggestions.

When we first began working together, I thought he just was not aware of the gravity of whatever situation I had brought to his attention. Eventually I realized that in his long career he had seen it all, and had come to recognize these "crises" as knaves and imposters, of little moment. During our association, I think I learned to recognize, if not the knaves and imposters, then at least the jackanapes that bedevil the unwary in our professional lives. Creighton possessed a calming influence that was conducive to rational thinking—a good quality in any editor.

The Department of Archaeology prospered and grew over the years as more and more students sought us out, and by the time Creighton became our first Professor Emeritus in 1996, we had grown to a full-time faculty of 13, teaching more than 1700 students a year, with more than a hundred undergraduate majors and over fifty graduate students. Creighton was a major participant in the growth of the Department and in the continuing evolution of the curriculum, and he found pleasure in the role he played in archaeology at Boston University. In an evocative and elegantly written essay on his career in archaeology published in *Context* in 1995, Creighton commented on his great personal satisfaction in participating in the creation and early development of the Department of Archaeology at Boston University, and "enjoying the company of students and colleagues who all share the same basic interest in trying to document the long and variegated course of human history" (Gabel 1995: 34).

Creighton Gabel was an excellent teacher, an internationally respected scholar, and an honest and good man. He earned the admiration, respect, and affection both of his colleagues and students. We shall miss him.

Creighton Gabel leaves his wife, Jane, of Vero Beach, Florida, and East Weymouth, Massachusetts; three children, James of Waltham, Massachusetts, Anne of Nobleboro, Maine, and Molly Ben-Menachem of Bernardsville, New Jersey; four grandchildren, Andrew, Beth, and Virginia Estes, and Jonathon Ben-Menachem; and two great grandchildren, Kathryn and Zachary.

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Founding Editor

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