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The Combined Prehistoric Expedition Foundation: a Model for Private Support of Archaeological Research

In the early 2000s, as the Combined Prehistoric Expedition (CPE) entered its fifth decade, the original directors of the CPE (Dr. Fred Wendorf of Southern Methodist University and Dr. Romuald Schild of the Polish Academy of Sciences) began to make arrangements to continue the legacy of the CPE. These arrangements included not only appointing successors to lead the CPE itself, but also creating a new means for financial support for archaeological research in the Neolithic and Paleolithic of North Africa. Together with a group of like-minded supporters, Dr. Wendorf and Dr. Schild created a small 503(c)(3) charitable fund-raising organization, the Combined Prehistoric Expedition Foundation (CPEF).

In some ways, the formation of the CPEF was part of a larger trend. In 2006, the *Wall Street Journal* noted “new players” in the world of archaeology: private individuals and foundations. Noting dwindling support from universities and government funds, the *Journal* recognized a “growing number of bankers, entrepreneurs, and philanthropists who are playing a crucial role in archaeology” by providing funding “to study and preserve the relics of ancient civilizations from Latin American to Italy and Turkey, giving life to projects that would otherwise die.” (Knecht 2006).

The CPEF can be viewed as a model of how a small private fundraising organization can succeed in supporting important archeological goals. In the years since its founding, the CPEF provided funding for:

- The excavation of the megaliths from Nabta Playa, and their movement, permanent installation, and public display at the Nubian Museum in Aswan. This project saved one of the world's earliest known archaeo-astronomical devices from almost certain looting or other destruction (Fig. 1-2). In addition, the CPEF provided grants to a number of graduate students to work at the site as part of their on academic studies
- The excavation of Neolithic cemeteries at Gebel Ramlah (Egypt), by Dr. Jacek Kabaciński. This project resulted in the discovery of large numbers of burial sites for adults, newborn children and infants, which were unprecedented in scope and complexity. Along with the excavations of the cemeteries, a settlement context was intensively studied, providing evidence of a long-lasting and intensive human presence along the shores of the Gebel Ramlah paleo-lake in the Neolithic (Fig. 3-5).
- Archaeo-botanical research at Wadi Kubbaniya in Egypt, directed by Dr. Kimball Banks and Dr. Maria Gatto. This project analyzed one of the most complete archaeological and paleoenvironmental records for the Late Paleolithic period in Northeast Africa, and documented the response of human groups to environmental change, providing a deeper understanding of the transition between hunter-gatherer strategies and food production.
- The purchase of equipment which allowed the CPE to continue its work in particularly harsh and inaccessible areas of the Sahara Desert. Foundation grants bought new vehicles for the CPE that replaced older, unreliable trucks and cars (Fig. 6), helped purchase tents, beds and necessary living equipment for the camp, and provided the funds to purchase solar energy cells which brought a modicum of electricity to the campsite. The use of solar energy not only provided some much needed light to the lab and dinner tent, but also allowed researchers to use computers to process, analyze, and catalogue artifacts rather than having to manually record the results of each field season.

Crucial to the success of the CPEF was an active Board of Directors. The Board was characterized by individuals with a sophisticated interest in archaeology, an appreciation of the urgency of protecting archaeological sites from looting and other destruction, and a generous spirit. In addition to Dr. Wendorf and Dr. Schild, members of the CPEF Board of Directors included:



Fig. 1. Nabta Playa. Neolithic calendar circle *in situ* (photo: M. Jórdeczka)



Fig. 2. Calendar circle and stelae after installation at the Nubian Museum in Aswan (photo: M. Jórdeczka)



Fig. 3. Gebel Ramlah. View from the south (photo: A. Czekaj-Zastawny)



Fig. 4. Gebel Ramlah. Cemetery for neonates. Excavation tent on the site (photo: A. Czekaj-Zastawny)



Fig. 5. Gebel Ramlah. Cemetery for neonates. Burial no. 20 (photo: A. Czekał-Zastawny)



Fig. 6. Vehicles provided by the CPEF (photo: M. Jórdeczka)

- Elizabeth Alexander (Secretary/Treasurer)
- Dr. Kimball Banks
- Anna Christine Bednar
- Christopher Burrow
- Edward O. Boshell, Jr.
- Dr. Marlan W. Downey
- Dr. Jacek Kabaciński
- Richard E. Lombardi
- Clifford Miercort
- John Mockovciak III
- Scott Wendorf (Chairman, 2011-2016)

Although most of the Board members were not professional archaeologists, many became directly and personally involved in excavation, artifact analysis, and report drafting and review – in many cases choosing to spend considerable time on-site in North Africa, thousands of miles from their homes. This was of course in addition to “typical” charitable organization activities such as fund raising, letter writing, and tax compliance/administrative tasks.

For multi-institutional, multi-national projects whose lifetimes are measured in decades, an independent private foundation can provide a consistent and steady focal point for fundraising and planning. The CPEF was able to fill critical funding gaps in times of changing institutional research priorities, governmental permissions challenges, and uncertain academic career trajectories. At the same time, the Foundation’s small size and relatively tight focus allowed it to be flexible and efficient – able to make grant decisions quickly as new opportunities arose.

A fund-raising organization also benefits from strong institutional relationships, both formal and informal. In the case of the CPEF, a key relationship was with the Institute for the Study of Earth and Man (ISEM) at Southern Methodist University. ISEM was itself started in 1966 with the purpose of supporting interdisciplinary research in earth science and archaeology. Dr. Wendorf was one of the original board members of ISEM, and was associated with ISEM his entire career. As Dr. Wendorf retired from active involvement with the CPEF, the President of ISEM, Dr. Louis Jacobs, signed on as an *ex officio* board member of the CPEF, and provided much-needed guidance during this challenging transition.

Private foundations will continue to be an increasingly important source of funding for archaeological research. The lesson of the Combined Prehistoric

Expedition Foundation is that a small circle of supporters can form and maintain a modestly-sized, independent, focused fundraising organization to make a significant contribution to archaeological research, publication, and preservation.

REFERENCES

- KNECHT BRUCE, G. 2006. The Rich Dig Deep: Archaeology's New Players; As traditional funds for excavations fall short, wealthy benefactors are bolstering the hunt for antiquities. *The Wall Street Journal*, Sat., May 13, 2006.