

Early Days

CAROLINE STEELE



Photo by Caroline Steele.

Susan is a gifted scholar and this volume is one of many accolades she has and will receive for her valuable contributions to the fields of archaeology and social/historical conscience. I would like to take a moment and recognize that in addition to being a gifted scholar and teacher, she also is a steadfast and enduring friend. So often when reviewing a lifetime of achievements, it is easy to forget the early days. Having known Susan for over forty years, I would like to mention a few events that punctuate the beginnings of her career.

Susan and I met in Alabama at a Piggly Wiggly grocery store in the summer of 1978. At the time, we both were graduate students sharing an interest in ancient Mesopotamia and honing our archaeological skills. She was always aiming to work in the Middle East, but throughout her college and graduate career she also worked in the US on various

projects in Michigan and Utah as well as Alabama. And although she had already worked at the site of Susa in Iran, that summer she, along with a number of her fellow University of Michigan graduate students, was working for Christopher Peeples on the Lubbub Archaeological site, investigating a Mississippian period settlement on the Tombigbee River in Alabama.

That fall she returned to Iran to work at Tall-i Malyan however, after the second local cinema was blown up, the project director William Sumner decided it was time to leave the country; she returned to Ann Arbor and days later the US embassy staff in Iran was taken hostage. This experience was a bit reminiscent of another aborted field experience she had as an undergraduate. At that time, she went to work on an excavation in Cyprus and soon after arriving, the Turks invaded the country; the team had to be evacuated to Lebanon by the Royal Navy.

In 1979, while she was in Ann Arbor and working on her dissertation, Susan and I went to our first Society of American Archaeology (SAA's) meeting in Philadelphia. Neither of us presented papers, so we found time to discover an excellent ice cream cone establishment and the Commissary, home of fabulous strawberry tarts. We did make it to what was at the time a noted plenary session, where Lewis Binford and Ian Hodder had some sharp words to say to each other. That was probably one of the last times Susan went to academic meetings and did not present a paper.

During 1979–1980, on a break year from graduate school, she went to Morocco to work with Charles Redman at the site of Qsar as-Seghir. I was working in Amsterdam and during her journey from Morocco to Sheffield, she stopped for a week and remained for six. Sharing my freezing garret and wrapped up in old velvet curtains to stay warm, we would melt stroopwafels on a kerosene heater for dinner. She then went on to Sheffield and spent several months analyzing the botanical material from Qsar as-Seghir while working with Robin Dennell.

She completed her University of Michigan degree in 1983 with a dissertation on the Royal Cemetery of Ur that included an important re-evaluation of the internal chronology of the cemetery. She then, like almost every recently completed PhD student, spent a year or so applying for jobs. At the same time, she also held a Mesopotamian Research Fellowship from the American Schools of Oriental Research. While on the fellowship, she visited the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania Museum to examine collections of material from the Royal Cemetery; both collections included some ear-rings from Queen Pu'abi's grave – hmmm wonder if she tried them on?

In the spring of 1985, after having worked several times on ancient sites in Iran, she finally got to Mesopotamia as a member of Nicholas Postgate's team at the site of Abu Salabikh, Iraq. That season Nicholas and Susan agreed that any and all work on the Uruk mound would be her responsibility. That fall she arrived to begin her first tenure track teaching position at Binghamton University, taking the position that had occurred when Charles Redman left to go teach elsewhere. Upon completing her first semester of teaching, she returned in the spring of 1986 to Abu Salabikh. There she spent the first half of the season

continuing to conduct exploratory work on the Uruk Mound. This work provided the preliminary data from which she could plan a course of excavation. It was a good proposal and she received grants from the National Geographic Society, Werner Grenn, and the NSF. She used these grants to begin her career directing excavations. The funding for the Uruk mound excavation was tight and with no money in the budget to hire a cook, cooking chores were shared among the nine crew members. The Iran/Iraq war was going on at the time and there were extensive shortages all over Iraq. Before the crew went down to the site, some staff members of the American Embassy in Baghdad invited the crew to dinner and presented them with food and other items that they thought would be useful for the excavation. And then, at an isolated ED/Uruk period site in southern Iraq, we managed to successfully use all the cornflakes, instant potatoes, and ketchup in combinations with food we got locally, to successfully produce a carefully nuanced culinary practice. The aluminum foil was handy for C14-samples, but as hot as it was, we did not manage to use all of the many sticks of deodorant.

In 1990 she successfully shepherded the first of the many students she has mentored and advised to the completion of their PhD. She then went back to Iraq to direct another season at the Abu Salabikh Uruk Mound, this time with enough money for a cook. Also, it was in 1990 that she was awarded a von Humboldt scholarship and came to Germany for the first time. Having no knowledge of spoken German, she took an intensive German course before going on to Berlin. Her arrival at the Freie Universität marked the beginning of a long and successful association with the institution. This is just a brief recounting of some early experiences in a remarkable career. I hope and expect her work and friendship to continue for many years to come.