

In Memoriam

Prof. Juris Zarins, 1945–2023

If the great ancient sites of Saudi Arabia are relatively well-known today and the archaeology of that country a well-established discipline, this is in no small measure due to the key role played in the 1970s and 1980s by Juris Zarins, who died suddenly aged 78 at his home in Corrales, New Mexico on 8 July 2023.

As so often with career turns, chance had played its part. In the early 1970s a fellow PhD student at the University of Chicago, Dr Abdullah Masry, was appointed Director of Antiquities and Museums in Saudi Arabia, and he invited Zarins to be his Archaeological Adviser. Together they set about filling in what was until then a virtual blank in the map of the ancient Middle East, by instituting the Comprehensive Survey of the Kingdom, initiating a programme of museum development, and starting *Atlatl*, the Journal of Saudi Arabian Archaeology. The resurgence in these fields evident in recent decades owes much to the foundations laid down at that time.



Zarins had had a challenging start in life, having been born on 17 February 1945 to Latvian parents in a refugee camp in Bad Oldesloe, Germany. When he was five, the Zarins family emigrated to the United States and settled in Lincoln, Nebraska among other Latvian families, and he retained a lifelong connection with his Latvian roots. A gifted student, the young Juris graduated with high distinction from the University of Nebraska in 1967, and moved on to the University of Chicago as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow. There, in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, studying under such luminaries as the renowned Assyriologist Ignaz Gelb and the Mesopotamian archaeologist Robert McCormick Adams, he earned his doctorate in 1974 with a PhD on the domestication of the horse. This work has stood the test of time and was recently expanded and published as *The domestication of Equidae in third-millennium BCE Mesopotamia* (Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology, 2014). It was at Chicago that he gained his familiarity with cuneiform that enabled him to combine archaeological research with information drawn from Akkadian texts.

Zarins' time in academia had been interrupted in 1969 when he was drafted to serve in Vietnam. The experience made him hypersensitive to life's insecurities and he disliked leaving anything to chance. He would always, for example, turn up at the airport hours early for a flight. This was balanced by a sharp sense of the absurd, and he revelled in witticisms and humorous give-and-take. With his imposing physical presence, clarity of aim, and

explosive, infectious laugh, he was a natural leader regarded with respect and affection by his co-workers in the field.

He had a voracious appetite for the latest research. ‘Gotta assimilate all that data!’ he would cry, as he fell upon some dense table of ceramic typology with the characteristic omnivorous gleam in his eye. It was all fuel to his enthusiasm for casting his net wide to find connections and patterns. Some of this did not go down well with more cautious colleagues, who regarded it as wild speculation. But his wide-ranging erudition was obvious when I first met him in Riyadh during Ramadan in 1975, when we spent a couple weeks together working out the contents and sequence of the planned Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography.

In 1978 he left Saudi Arabia to become Professor of Anthropology at Southwest Missouri State University (SMSU) in Springfield. He was succeeded as Archaeological Adviser in Riyadh by Dr Alasdair Livingstone (see obituary, *IASA Bulletin* autumn 2021) but continued to conduct annual surveys in Saudi Arabia. He would remain at SMSU, by then renamed Missouri State University, until his retirement in 2006, having built a reputation as an inspiring scholar, teacher, and mentor. His main interest was in Saudi Arabia, with a specific focus on climate change in Neolithic Arabia, the development of pastoral nomadism, and the origins of the Bedouin. However, he also developed projects in the eastern desert of Egypt, in the Mahra Governorate of eastern Yemen, and in several regions of Oman: the Empty Quarter, the Dhofar region and, a final project with his second wife, Lynne Newton, in the medieval port of al-Baleed, the UNESCO World Heritage Site just outside Salalah.

After several years in Oman and then in Qatar together, Zarins returned to the United States with Lynne in 2015 and settled in Corrales, where he continued to research and write until his untimely death. A prolific scholar, he published some sixty articles during his career, which are characteristically wide-ranging and original, with a penchant for interdisciplinary research, at once scholarly and imaginative, broad in scope while clearly focused in detail.

He is survived by his first wife, Sandra and their five children, and by his widow, Lynne.

William Facey

(Abridged from the obituary published in the *IASA Bulletin*, autumn 2023)

Photograph courtesy of Lynne Newton