

OBITUARY: MICHEL WUTTMANN (1955–2013)



Michel Wuttmann (copyright IFAO)

Michel Wuttmann passed away on Sunday, 10 February 2013, in Cairo. Michel was born on 6 July 1955 in Strasbourg, France, and spent his career at the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale (IFAO). He was the head of the IFAO laboratory for the study and restoration of archaeological materials, and head of the radiocarbon laboratory.

Michel graduated as a chemical engineer from the École nationale supérieure des industries chimiques (ENSIC) in 1979. At the same time, he began working in archaeology in Alsace, Yemen, and Syria, before completing his military service in the framework of the cooperation at the Franco-Egyptian center of Karnak temples. This opened the doors of Egypt to him, and he never closed them. As his principal interest remained archaeology, instead of pursuing the field of manufacturing, Michel chose to pursue understanding of ancient civilizations. He combined his passion for Egyptology with his education in chemistry. In 1992, Michel was hired at the IFAO as a research engineer and he set up the laboratory for the study and restoration of archaeological materials.

As an archaeologist, Michel managed a long-term project studying desert areas in a diachronic perspective, extending from prehistory to the Middle Ages. He confronted the modern problem of man and water, and the population's adaptation to environmental degradations. In 1996, Michel was sent by the IFAO for a major restoration project to the Douch temple in the Kharga Oasis. At that time, he established a systematic survey program to explore 1500 km² of desert, from the southern boundaries of the Douch basin up to the north of Baris town. This work allowed him to identify more than 250 archaeological sites, extending from the Paleolithic to the Middle Ages. Michel continued to work at Douch until a few weeks ago, continuing with such tremendous research.

As a radiocarbon specialist, Michel's enthusiasm for ¹⁴C led him to found in 2006 the radiocarbon dating laboratory of the IFAO, the first one implemented in Egypt, where the export of archaeological samples remains strictly prohibited. Thanks to him, the dating of excavated samples became possible. We only have to consider the large amount of samples sent to the IFAO every year to understand the benefit of this laboratory for both Egyptology and the radiocarbon world. In particular, excavations and survey samples he dated are contributing to the large project of the ongoing construction of a precise chronology for ancient Egypt (Wuttmann et al. 2012).

As a colleague, Michel worked for science and Egypt for nearly 30 years. By its discernment, Michel was able to use direct approaches, by dropping dead ends and by starting new ideas; he thus created and enlarged a relevant research network. As an Arabic speaker, he forged strong links with his Egyptian colleagues. Michel also played a fundamental role in the training of his team; he shared his knowledge and was involved in the formation of French as well as Egyptian students.

As our friend, we would like to remember the man Michel was—his impressive knowledge, his ability to understand the old world, this visionary, the dreamer that he was. We remember his courage, his passion, his ambition. Today, we would like to bow with respect, and remember the man that we have lost.

G Andreu-Lanoë, É Aubourg, N Grimal, B Midant-Reynes, A Quiles, D Valbelle

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