

OBITUARY



At the Aztec Culture exhibit, Field Museum, Chicago, 2009 (courtesy of Vincent Brumfiel).

Elizabeth M. Brumfiel (1945–2012)

With Elizabeth Brumfiel's death on January 1, 2012, in Evanston, Illinois, anthropology lost one of its outstanding practitioners, a true generalist who pursued her long, productive, and distinguished career during a period that witnessed increasing subdisciplinary specialization. Her broad-based orientation demonstrated how a generalized perspective can provide the best foundation from which to make original and enduring contributions that speak to the core issues of the discipline. Although she was an archaeologist specializing in the study of ancient Aztec society in Central Mexico, Liz used her hard-won empirical knowledge, in concert with data and ideas from colleagues and other scholars, to address many important general anthropological issues. She also invested much effort and skill in public outreach in her fieldwork, in academia, and in professional circles, achieving considerable success in sometimes difficult and controversial contexts.

Elizabeth Margarethe Stern was born on March 10, 1945, in Chicago, where she and her older sister grew up, attending public schools there. Harrison Ford was a childhood friend; both were destined to become known as archaeologists, Liz in the real world and Harrison as Indiana Jones on the silver screen. As a child, Liz became interested in Native American dancing and with her family she attended many pow-wows in the Chicago area and farther afield. This interest in Native American culture, which continued through her years at Evanston Township High School, un-

doubtedly influenced her decision to major in anthropology when she entered the University of Michigan in 1962. At Michigan she lived at the Friends Center, where she met her future husband Vincent Brumfiel, a math major. Her first archaeological fieldwork was at the Schultz site near Saginaw Michigan in 1964.

Following her graduation, with distinction, from Michigan in 1965, a two-year stint in the Peace Corps (1966–67) took her to Bolivia, where she worked as an assistant in Carlos Ponce's archaeological laboratory at the Instituto Nacional de Arqueología in La Paz. Shortly afterward she and Vince married, and with his strong encouragement Liz decided to pursue graduate studies in anthropology, beginning with two years at UCLA, where she obtained an M.A. with a thesis in biological anthropology (Brumfiel 1969). Vince concurrently obtained an M.A. in mathematics in preparation for his future career as a high school math teacher.

Liz returned to the University of Michigan as a doctoral student in 1970. While a graduate student, she participated in Richard Blanton's survey of urban Monte Alban, Oaxaca, in 1971, and in Jeffrey Parsons's regional survey in the southern Valley of Mexico during 1972—projects that exposed Liz to dealing at different levels of intensity with the surficial study of large and differentiated archaeological sites. She then undertook an innovative program of intensive surface study at the Aztec town of Huexotla in the eastern Valley of Mexico. This important project was done on a shoestring, with Liz and Vince comprising the entire field and lab crew. This stringent economy characterized all her future field projects—none of which ever had its own field vehicle. Liz's investigations at Huexotla demonstrated how a well-designed surface study and a sound quantitative analysis of artifact distributions could economically produce statistically valid insights into an ancient urban economy. She received her Ph.D. in 1976 with a path-breaking dissertation based on this work (Brumfiel 1976).

Liz took full advantage of Michigan's four-field graduate program, and it was quickly obvious to faculty and fellow students alike that she was not shy about thinking in new and productive ways about how to formulate problems, generate hypotheses, design research, and evaluate ideas. She never avoided tackling challenging issues in different—and often radical—ways; she was always well prepared to accept criticism and then move on. When she disagreed with someone, she always tried to “find a way out” by suggesting alternative approaches or additional sources of information.

At Michigan, Liz often reached out to other departments in search of information and ideas. She was

instrumental, for example, in putting together an informal faculty-student seminar on Aztec society, which included Charles Gibson from the history department. The group met weekly for several months to present and critique on going research—an extremely valuable experience that Parsons still recalls as one of the highlights of his time at Michigan. All the seminar participants were impressed that Liz wanted to address issues that most of the others had not previously thought much about, such as the archaeological signatures of women's work, the reactions of commoners to elite domination, and the ideological meaning of pottery decorative motifs and ceramic figurines. Many of the issues that Liz subsequently went on to explore, with considerable success, in Mexico were germinated in that seminar.

During her graduate years at Michigan, Liz worked as a part-time (later full-time) lecturer in anthropology at nearby Eastern Michigan University, where she taught courses in ethnology, archaeology, and biological anthropology. Thus, early on she learned how to be an effective teacher of undergraduate students across the subdisciplines. This experience provided a sound foundation for her stellar 26-year academic career at Albion College, beginning in 1977. Liz taught a full load of cross-subdisciplinary courses, and for most of that period she directed small-scale excavations at an archaeological site on the Albion campus, both as a training ground in excavation and analytical techniques and as a form of outreach to the local community. She served as chair of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology for over ten years, from 1992 to 2003. Her contributions to academic life at Albion were formally recognized with an award as Albion College Scholar of the Year in 1991 and an appointment in 1996 as the John S. Ludington Trustees' Professor. This was also the time when Liz and Vince were raising their son Geoffrey.

The fact that so much of Liz's productive research career was spent at a private undergraduate liberal arts institution with a heavy emphasis on quality teaching speaks volumes about her energy, her commitment to anthropology, and her skill as a teacher. She once said that the sense of entitlement some of her upper-middle-class students occasionally exhibited was a challenge to her ability to instill in them a sense of intellectual curiosity and self-discipline. Liz was never one to shirk a challenge.

After her fieldwork at Huexotla, Liz wanted to undertake comparable research at other Aztec centers in the Valley of Mexico; Huexotla itself was rapidly disappearing under urban sprawl. She was attracted to the problem of Aztec urbanism both by the rich and complex nature of the archaeological record and by the equally rich corpus of ethnohistoric sources. She also felt a sense of urgency in the face of the accelerating destruction of the archaeological record underway throughout the Valley of Mexico. Her post-Huexotla research began at the site of Xico in 1981 (e.g., Brumfiel 1986), an undertaking for which she developed innovative techniques for sampling and surface collecting a large, nucleated site in a timely and economical,

yet statistically meaningful, fashion, extending and refining what she had earlier implemented at Huexotla. Xico, however significant as a local center in the southeastern Valley of Mexico during Aztec times, was smaller and less diverse than she wanted (and it too was being overwhelmed by urban sprawl), and her attention soon shifted northward to several reasonably-well preserved Aztec centers that had been located and briefly explored by earlier archaeologists.

Xaltocan was by far the best preserved of these potential study sites. However, it was known to be very difficult of access for archaeologists owing to the presence there of a modern village whose inhabitants had looked with disfavor on earlier attempts by archaeologists to conduct excavations and surveys. Nevertheless, by the mid-1980s, Liz had decided that Xaltocan offered an ideal opportunity for her objectives. At that point, she faced the biggest challenge of her career. She had to begin by convincing enough of the villagers to accept her presence in the face of considerable opposition. Calling on all her diplomatic and persuasive skills, she succeeded in establishing a foothold at Xaltocan in 1987. Over the next 24 years, she gained the confidence of most of the community as she extended and expanded her highly productive excavations and surveys, many undertaken in collaboration with Mexican and North American colleagues and students (e.g., Brumfiel 2005).

An important part of Liz's success in gaining the cooperation of Xaltocan's previously hostile inhabitants was her determination to involve local people in the research enterprise. She was instrumental in establishing a community museum and cultural center, where artifacts from her field work could be stored and where some of the materials could be exhibited to illustrate Xaltocan's role in pre-Hispanic society (Brumfiel 1994). Such an effort to instill local pride through the explication of local material culture has seldom been undertaken as successfully by archaeologists working in Latin America. The degree to which Liz attained the confidence and affection of the inhabitants of Xaltocan was manifested in 2007 when she was awarded the Presea de Honor "Guerrero Cuauhtli" by the Asociación Civil "Gran Señorío de Xaltocan," a broad-based local community organization at Xaltocan. Liz traveled to Xaltocan to receive this award at a major public festival held in her honor. She regarded this recognition as one of her most important accomplishments.

Liz also helped bring to fruition a public-outreach project in the United States, when she curated a major exhibit of Aztec material culture at the Field Museum in Chicago in 2008 and coedited an impressive book that accompanied the exhibit (Brumfiel and Feinman 2008). This monumental undertaking involved cooperation among numerous North American and Mexican scholars and lending institutions.

In addition to her major monographic contributions, over the years Liz used the expanding body of field data from Xaltocan, together with archaeological, historical, and ethnographic studies generated by students and colleagues, to publish numerous articles, in both English and Spanish.

These covered such diverse topics as ethnicity, imperialism, commoner roles, social hierarchy, craft production, the role of women in cooking and textile production, resistance to Mexica (Triple Alliance) imperial domination, feminist anthropology, ideology, and ceramic chronology. Her interpretations were often based on innovative uses of archaeological data. Particularly intriguing examples are her imaginative analysis of painted ceramic decorative motifs (Brumfiel in press), ceramic figurines (Brumfiel and Overholtzer 2009), calendrics (Brumfiel 2011), and spindle whorls (Brumfiel 2008) to generate hypotheses about social relationships in Aztec society.

In addition to her many prestigious invited lectures, in national (Brumfiel 1991) and international (Brumfiel 1997) venues, and her numerous volumes edited (Brumfiel 1994) or co-edited with prominent archaeologists (Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Brumfiel and Robin 2008) and ethnologists (Brumfiel and Fox 1994), Liz's stature as one of the foremost anthropologists of her generation was recognized in 2001 when she became president-elect of the American Anthropological Association; she served as president from 2004 to 2006. Her tenure was marked by two controversies: the AAA campaign, which Liz led in 2004, in support of same-sex marriage, and her decision in 2006 not to hold the annual meeting at the San Francisco Hilton Hotel during a labor dispute. In both cases, Liz encountered significant opposition, but her good sense and courage in doing what she felt was right prevailed. Her work on human rights issues and social justice as AAA president brought her a notable distinction in 2006, when she was listed as one of the "101 most dangerous professors in America" in a book by David Horowitz, a leading conservative (Horowitz 2006). For an older generation, of course, this recalled the dozens of influential U.S. citizens who once found themselves on Richard Nixon's "enemies" list.

In 2003 Liz was appointed Professor of Anthropology at Northwestern University, a position she held until her death. At Northwestern, she had her first opportunity to work with her own graduate students, and several quickly became her junior colleagues in field research at and around Xaltocan (including Christopher Morehart, Elizabeth Overholtzer, John Millhauser, Kristin deLucia, and Pilar Escontrias).

The final decade of Liz's life was one of the most active and productive periods of her career. One marvels at how well she managed her many responsibilities—to her family, her students, her colleagues, her institution, and her profession—particularly during the last couple of years when she persisted so gamely in the face of deteriorating health. Indeed, her last professional honor—the Squeaky Wheel Award of the AAA's Committee on the Status of Women in Anthropology, which she was presented in November of 2011—recognized Liz's impact on improving the status of women within the profession.

Throughout her career, Liz demonstrated that for an archaeologist innovative thinking and sound empirical prac-

tices in the field and laboratory are by no means mutually exclusive but are, in fact, interdependent. Elizabeth Brumfiel led by example, extending traditional approaches to address difficult questions of broad general interest, many of which had been neglected by archaeologists; encouraging and inspiring students at all levels; serving her profession with dedication and good sense; and creating goodwill among scholars and local people in Mexico that will long be remembered. Parsons also remembers that she was a formidable opponent in many games of "Killer Parcheesi," no quarter asked or given.

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NOTE

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