

## *HELEN PATTERSON (1958–2022)*



Helen at Vindolanda, 2007.

The passing of Dr Helen Patterson on 21 October 2022 took away from many of us a dear friend and esteemed colleague, and deprived Italian medieval and early medieval archaeology of one of its leading lights. Helen achieved so much and helped so many, yet always remained down to earth, slightly shy, even self-effacing, but always true to herself and to others. A lifelong friend, Karen Bilton, recalls how Helen had a happy childhood with her beloved family at Cullercoats, near Newcastle, and did typical childhood things: raiding the sweet shop, climbing trees and scrumping apples. As a slightly older girl she'd head into town with friends in her white flares and platform heels (it was the 1970s after all), and pursued her passion for sport, becoming the Under 14 tennis champion for her county. But from early days, interest in the past beckoned and, as often happens, it was the right teacher at the right moment that planted

the seed. The headteacher of Helen's junior school, Mrs Sheila Gordon, had a love of Roman history which she shared enthusiastically with her pupils, taking them to Hadrian's Wall, and its sites such as Vindolanda, Housesteads and Carlisle. This was before mass tourism or education officers, so Mrs Gordon carefully prepared beautiful worksheets herself, for use on site, then, very importantly, followed them up in detail later in class time. Helen loved these trips and developed a real fascination for the Romans.

It looked as though this would end when Helen went to Reading University to read law. But then she decided law was not for her, and after the first year she changed course to archaeology, eventually gaining her BA in 1980. Mike Fulford remembers Helen (or Nellie P as she was affectionately known at Reading) for her lovely warm personality. She was down to earth, a Geordie through and through, though also quite diffident. She excavated a Bronze Age site at Cranborne Chase Dorset, and it was here that she first showed a flair for sorting pottery. Helen then went out to Henry Hurst's excavations in Carthage to help David Peacock and Mike Fulford with the colossal quantities of Roman material. Her passion for pottery was reflected in her choice of the early Roman thin-walled wares from the Carthage Harbourside as the subject of her dissertation (which was very well received).

In 1980, Helen first arrived at the British School at Rome (BSR) as an assistant in the Camerone (the great open archaeological workspace on the upper floor of the BSR). She worked closely with Director David Whitehouse during this period, which marked a 'white heat' of revolution in ceramic studies of early medieval Italy, in which the BSR under David Whitehouse was an undisputed leader. Helen joined him in the study of material from excavations and surveys around Rome, such as from the abbey of Farfa, and further afield, in particular the important ceramics from Richard Hodges's excavations of the early medieval monastery at San Vincenzo. This material was the subject of Helen's PhD at Sheffield University, awarded in 1989.

Helen spent much of the mid- to late 1980s researching and teaching between England and Italy. At the BSR she became involved in studying ceramics from new excavations in Rome at the Crypta Balbi and San Clemente, as well as in the hinterland such as Tim Potter's excavations at Monte Gelato and (on the other side of the river Tiber) the projects of David Mattingly and John Moreland around Rieti. Indeed, there were few central Italian projects involving early medieval material in which Helen wasn't consulted. She taught major courses on pottery in the archaeological record at Siena, Naples and Sheffield. But Helen's interest in pottery went beyond Italy, and in 1984 she travelled the river Nile on an ethnoarchaeological study to document potters at work using millennia-old techniques. A small vessel from these potters joined ceramics from all over the Mediterranean in Helen's home.

It was during one of Helen's stays in the BSR that I first met her, in summer 1985. She had pottery laid out in one of the artist's studios, and as a pottery newbie I was terrified as I knocked on the heavy door and went in to meet this great pottery specialist. I needn't have been: Helen was lovely, helpful and

supportive, and delighted that another British archaeologist was embarking on Italian ceramic studies. We soon began to work together on BSR projects, with me tackling the Roman pottery and Helen anything later. Helen was a professional archaeologist and archaeological manager, but at work was, I think, happiest when sitting at a table heaped with pot or in a storeroom surrounded by crates of it, looking for that significant context ... or bag ... or single sherd! On one occasion Helen and I spent a particularly freezing day in the abbey of Farfa (with only a packet of Pocket Coffee for sustenance, as the restaurant was closed) looking for late Roman contexts. The building was so cold we had to run around the (external) courtyard to warm up. But self-questioning about why on earth we ‘did pots’ evaporated, as it always did, once we found the pots in question and oohed and aahed over the finishes and shapes, linking them to others we knew. Helen loved her pots, and in her I effectively found a ceramics sibling.

I remember vividly the occasion when we were both frustrated at our inability to find the ‘dark age’ material at Casale San Donato and elsewhere in the Rieti area. Although everyone agreed that settlement levels dropped dramatically after the fourth–fifth centuries AD, it wasn’t possible that everyone had run away at the end of the Roman period, nor that they had gone completely aceramic. We realized that they must have been using types of pottery we simply hadn’t identified yet, but where were they? We piled onto a table all the material that looked promising or puzzling and then each began to take away pieces that looked more securely our own. At the end we had a small but important group of material left on the table, including the now much better-understood Combed Slip Ware (we named it that night). I’ll never forget the excited look on Helen’s face and her very Geordie ‘eeeeh!!!’ (meaning ‘that’s really amazing’). In this and so many ways, Helen’s work was hands-on and groundbreaking.

Her reputation as an expert on the history and ceramics of medieval Italy grew ever greater. Working again with the BSR between 1987 and 1996, Helen was a research associate studying and publishing early medieval and medieval pottery from a whole range of excavations and field surveys. From 1992 until 1996 Helen was also a research fellow in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Siena. Working with Riccardo Francovich and his team, Helen set up and developed the section of ceramic petrology and established and expanded courses in that area, concentrating on the early medieval and medieval pottery of central and southern Italy. At Siena she was also research fellow for the important European Union *Populus* project, looking at methodological approaches to research on demographic change in the Mediterranean, and organizing conferences and publications on field survey and geographic information system (GIS) in archaeology (Francovich, Patterson and Barker, 2000). I remember many happy conversations with Helen about her time in Siena — it suited her very well.

The knowledge and expertise that Helen had gained through her influential study of medieval pottery from central and southern Italy made her the clear

choice as director of archaeology at the BSR following the creation of the position in 1997. Following the excavations of Richard Hodges (director 1988–95) at San Vincenzo al Volturno, under the guidance of the new director, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (director 1995–2009), the BSR was seeking to establish a major research project that would bring together scholars from the UK and Italy.

As Stephen Kay recalls, Helen's proposal was to revisit the vast and overlooked resource of the archive of the South Etruria Survey, collected over the 30 years of intense survey led by John Ward-Perkins, which included 80,000 fragments of pottery that were still housed at the BSR. Through her research, Helen had noted how much the precision of ceramic sequences had improved, and realized that far more nuanced understanding could be gained of settlement in southern Etruria than that proposed by Tim Potter in his authoritative 1979 volume *The Changing Landscape of South Etruria*. Following a successful funding bid to the Leverhulme Trust, the Tiber Valley Project was launched in 1997 with the broad aim of examining the changing landscape on both sides of the river Tiber, from 1000 BC to AD 1300. Central to the project was the creation of a relational database linked to a GIS that would allow the spatial analysis of the data at a landscape level, a unique tool for understanding the impact of the rise of Rome as a regional and then imperial power and its subsequent decline. The success of the project owes much to Helen's leadership, dedication and ability to foster engagement between a broad group of international scholars. The ambitious project brought together scholars working in diverse fields, but the synergy created by Helen is evident in the first volume resulting from the Tiber Valley Project, *Bridging the Tiber: Approaches to Regional Archaeology in the Middle Tiber Valley* (Patterson, 2004). The volume neatly knits together studies of the very first recorded settlements in the river valley with analyses of Roman urban centres, through to aspects of production and exchange in the early medieval period. As the project proceeded, Helen's intuition regarding the importance of a restudy of the ceramics was borne out, as evidenced in the paper 'Three South Etrurian "crises": first results of the Tiber Valley Project' which she co-authored with the project's two research fellows, Helga Di Giuseppe and Robert Witcher (Patterson, Di Giuseppe and Witcher, 2004). Whilst she noted the need for further excavation at rural sites in the Tiber Valley, the restudy noted major changes in the third century AD, with a marked drop in rural settlement. From the fourth century the ceramic evidence indicated a breakdown in the economic system, with a final collapse in the sixth century AD.

As the project neared its conclusion, a further conference was held in 2004, assessing the preliminary results of the investigations of the Tiber Valley Project with those undertaken by the University of Perugia in the upper river valley. The resulting volume, Mercator placidissimus: *The Tiber Valley in Antiquity. New research in the Upper and Middle River Valley* (Coarelli and Patterson, 2008), provided a cornerstone for research that had been undertaken the length of the river Tiber.

The Tiber Valley Project, as well as restudying the South Etruria archive, also led to several new fieldwork projects, one of which was an investigation of the

Roman town and bishopric of Forum Novum (Vescovio) in the Sabine Hills (Gaffney, Patterson and Roberts, 2001). Jointly directed by Helen with myself and Vince Gaffney, the team from the BSR, British Museum and University of Birmingham extensively investigated the site with geophysical prospection, including one of the earliest applications of ground-penetrating radar on a Roman town in Italy. Over the course of five seasons, Helen led a team excavating immediately behind the apse of the church of Santa Maria in Vescovio.

The BSR is of course a powerhouse of research, and was Helen's place of work, but it was also the place where, appropriately during a conference dinner, she met her future husband, Prof. Filippo Coarelli. Following the conclusion of excavations at Forum Novum, together with Filippo, Helen embarked on what was to be her final major excavation in the Sabina at the site of Falacrinae (Cittareale, Lazio), the birthplace of the Emperor Vespasian, to mark the bimillenary celebrations of his birth in AD 9. Following a systematic programme of fieldwalking and geophysics, excavations began in 2005 (Coarelli, Kay and Patterson, 2009). Initial work concentrated in the area of Pallottini following the discovery of a small Republican inscription referring to the Social War, but Helen's attention was drawn to the nearby villa site at San Lorenzo. The geophysical prospection and surface material had indicated a site with potential multiple phases, and this was borne out through the excavations. A substantial area of the *pars rustica* was excavated which brought to light a significant late antique phase, the chronology of which assisted Helen in further refining her understanding of the late antique and medieval pottery of the Sabina.

Circumstances change and as the BSR began to look at projects beyond the original Tiber Valley remit, so Helen's trajectory of research also began to change. Whilst retaining the prestigious Molly Cotton Fellowship at the BSR, Helen increasingly brought her considerable experience and skills to bear on the local and regional archaeology and heritage of the Sabina region, north of Rome. Her passion for the area was already clear when, in a village near the site of Forum Novum, she bought a house — a place where she always seemed happiest. Helen later became the first director of the Museo dell'agro Foronovano and was the catalyst for numerous cultural projects and initiatives in the area.

But she didn't forget her wider research interests, and co-organized a major conference at Spoleto in October 2012, looking at ceramic evidence for social, political and economic developments in central Italy from the third to eighth centuries AD. The conference proceedings were published as *Le forme della crisi* (Cirelli, Diosono and Patterson, 2015), a single, groundbreaking volume which brought together evidence ranging from Emilia-Romagna to the Molise and looked in particular detail at the sixth–eighth centuries, once so under-researched and little understood. This was a milestone and stands as one of Helen's great legacies.

Helen was so widely respected, and achieved so much — this despite being a woman in what was still very much a male-managed field. And she would have achieved so much more, but in the recent past she was not able to devote the time she wanted to her work — life got in the way. But Helen was coming

back. Her masterly contribution to the concluding Tiber Valley Project volume (Patterson, Witcher and Di Giuseppe, 2020), which only she could have written, was a reminder of the depth and breadth of her knowledge and experience. In 2020 Helen began writing again and spoke with me and other friends and colleagues about picking up where we had left off across a range of projects. And then that cruel and dreadfully unfair illness, which eventually took her from us.

At Helen's memorial service in December 2022 her friend Karen Bilton recalled how she met Helen in Italy a number of times, 'a little less Geordie and a little more Italian, but still the same warm and lovely person I remembered from our school days'. And the fact she was British-born but committed to Italy was very important. Helen was immensely proud of her Italian citizenship and she loved Italy (and she cooked Italian food excellently; her recipe for Amatriciana sauce will, for me, never be surpassed ...).

But she was always British, too. She never lost sight of her origins in the northeast of England, reflected in her mannerisms and her speech — after 30 years' residence in Italy her language was still filled with terms like 'pet', 'canny' and (my favourite) 'you cracker'. For rare moments of relaxation, she happily watched Italian programmes and films but her favourites remained those echoes of Britishness — in particular *Morecambe and Wise* and *Midsomer Murders* (*Barnaby* to our Italian friends) — on her tablet even in her last days.

Very importantly to Helen, amidst all her academic work and responsibilities, she made a home for herself and husband Filippo and always gave a warm welcome to friends, relatives and colleagues who visited their home, or rather homes: her beloved house in the Sabina, and their lovely, book-lined apartment at Rome in the San Lorenzo district, itself like a big village, where people still know one another. Helen made a real impact on her communities and became part of them. As Filippo recalls, Helen possessed a very rare gift, a great capacity for understanding, and a great ability and willingness to listen to others. She had time for people, from princes to paupers, and everyone in her communities knew her far more, he conceded, than they knew him. I myself witnessed how news of Helen's death was received in both her neighbourhoods, with shock and deep sorrow.

She leaves a great legacy not only of projects, but of people. People that she helped, advised, gave their first break to, assisted with their projects — often at the cost of time she could have spent on hers. Firmness but fairness and opportunity characterized Helen's Camerone, and there are many who owe their current positions, projects and careers largely to her. The BSR willingly acknowledges its debt to her for setting up its modern, sustainable archaeological unit, still one of the foremost in Rome's archaeological scene today. As for Helen's written legacy, her great bibliography, it is inconceivable that anyone interested in early medieval Italy could write anything meaningful without mention of her work.

The photo, showing Helen in 2007 at Vindolanda — where her journey into archaeology began with Mrs Gordon so many years before — is a rare example of

a photo of Helen alone. She didn't particularly like having photos taken. Her kindness and her shyness I think come through. Evidence of her modest nature emerged again at her memorial service. Friends and family were amazed to hear what she had achieved, especially since, when they quizzed her about what she did in Italy, she replied she 'played with pots'.

Little could they know that this typically self-effacing reply (though in part true!) concealed the fact that Helen was a senior and very esteemed colleague: a world specialist, who revolutionized the study of early medieval pottery in Italy, reshaping our ideas about Italy in that period — the 'Dark Ages', which, thanks to a large extent to Helen, are no longer so dark. Well done that Geordie lass from Cullercoats. *Sogni d'oro*, Helen.

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