

Obituary / Nachruf: Gordon C. Hillman
(July 20, 1943 Hailsham – July 01, 2018 Hailsham)
Distinguished ethnobotanist and pioneering archaeobotanist
Angesehener Ethnobotaniker und bahnbrechender Archäobotaniker

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Gordon C. Hillman (Fig. 1), one of the most influential archaeobotanists, died on Sunday, July 01, 2018. He had shaped the discipline of archaeobotany worldwide, transforming our understanding of human history, in particular with regard to the origins of plant domestication and late hunter-gatherer economies.



Fig. 1: Gordon Hillman, engaged in Wild Foods. Photo: Ray Mears (<https://blog.raymears.com/2018/07/06/professor-gordon-hillman/>).

Abb. 1: Gordon Hillman bei der Beschäftigung mit Wildpflanzen. Foto: Ray Mears (<https://blog.raymears.com/2018/07/06/professor-gordon-hillman/>).

Gordon grew up in East Sussex, England, where his family operated a business of plant nurseries. He spent five years as a botanist in the European Herbarium at the Natural History Museum from 1960 onward. According to Mark Nesbitt, one of his later students, this time in the museum “combined with a remarkable - almost photographic - visual memory, gave Gordon an in-depth training in plant identification.”

In his own thinking of how he began as a scientist, Gordon described his fundamental bond to agricultural botany, which he studied at the University of Reading during the 1960s: “Curiosity over gaps in our understanding of the evolution of wheat was (...) my initial prompting. As students (...) our teachers had inspired us with the sheer beauty of evolutionary dynamics as expounded by giants such as Stebbins (...) and Grant (...), with the tragically unfinished work of Vavilov, and with the elegance of Riley’s genomic analyses of wild wheats in search of the elusive donor of the B genome. But in studies of the evolution of wheat, there was much that could not be understood without more information from archaeology (...) it was clear that much remained to be done” (Hillman 2003, 75).

After receiving his BSc in Agricultural Botany in 1969, with a subsidiary degree in pure Botany, and writing his dissertation on bio-taxonomy, he spent one year at Johannes-Gutenberg University, Mainz, to conduct postdoctoral research training in archaeobotany under Maria Hopf at the *Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum*. It should be noted here that Gordon Hillman was fluent in German, which provided him access to the huge body of scientific work in central Europe, and is well-reflected in his more than 80 publications.

Between 1970 and 1975 he became a research fellow in archaeobotany at the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, where he assembled one of the most comprehensive plant comparative collections of the Near East. From this time onward he became involved in numerous excavations, such as Can Hasan III and Aşvan, enabling him to advance his primary research interest of crop plant evolution, culminating in his research at Tell Abu Hureyra. He combined this work from 1984 onwards with his position as a lecturer in archaeobotany at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL (Moore et al. 2000; Hillman et al. 2001). During his time in the Near East he amassed an impressive collection of ethnographic records on traditional farming which he could only fully use due to his fluency in Turkish, resulting in pivotal publications on traditional farming and models of ancient farming technologies that became standard works in agricultural archaeobotany (Hillman 1984, 1985) (Fig. 2). Together with David Harris they launched a study program in Environmental Archaeology, unique at that time in the field.

The list of Gordon’s achievements in developing an archaeobotanical methodology is endless, but I would like to mention just a few, such as his studies of traditional farming systems, including his own experiments on selection pressures in plants (e.g., Hillman and Davies 1990), as well as his engagement in developing new laboratory techniques (Hillman et al. 1983; 1993). Amongst the laboratory techniques, the development of novel morphological criteria for identifying critical remains of early crops from fragments of their chaff (Hillman et al. 1996) and the re-modeling of the potential vegetation of SW Asia greatly influenced younger generations of archaeobotanists (Moore et al. 2000).

After being diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, Gordon Hillman retired from UCL as reader in Archaeobotany in 1998, but continued his research, especially on potential wild plants collected and processed by hunter-gatherers and on the wild foods of Britain as



Fig. 2: Gordon Hillman processing acorns, June 2010. Photo: M. Wollstonecroft, provided by Dorian Fuller.

Abb. 2: Gordon Hillman bei der Verarbeitung von Eicheln, Juni 2010. Foto: M. Wollstonecroft, zur Verfügung gestellt von Dorian Fuller.

an Honorary Visiting Professor at UCL. Through these later studies Gordon had a major impact on the newly emerging forager movement in Britain, described in Ray Mears' BBC series on Wild Food (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7Z0essRI8E>; last access December 12, 2018). "Visitors to Gordon's home could expect to be offered a wide range of foraged foodstuffs (...). The public's imagination was particularly caught by Gordon's description of an incident involving poisonous mushrooms: 'my vision went monochrome, not black and white, but blue and white'" (communicated by Mark Nesbitt).

Gordon received the Distinguished Economic Botanist award by the Society for Economic Botany in 2004, and a volume of studies in his honor was published in 2009 (Fairbairn and Weiss 2009).

Gordon Hillman transformed archaeobotany with his creative thinking and multidisciplinary research and set new standards for interpreting the composition of archaeological seed samples. Many of his former students describe Gordon as a wonderful teacher,

both encouraging and supporting students (Fig. 3). “*He was absolutely committed to his students, and was a master of the persuasive reference letter.*” (M. Nesbitt). He will be dearly missed but living on in the spirit of archaeobotany.



Fig. 3: Gordon Hillman 1996 at UCL, surrounded by some of his students. Photo: UCL Institute of Archaeology.

Abb. 3: Gordon Hillman 1996 im UCL, umgeben von einigen seiner Studierenden. Foto: UCL Institut für Archäologie.

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