

# J. J. (Jim) Coulton

## 1940-2020



Picture: Australian Archaeological Institute at Athens

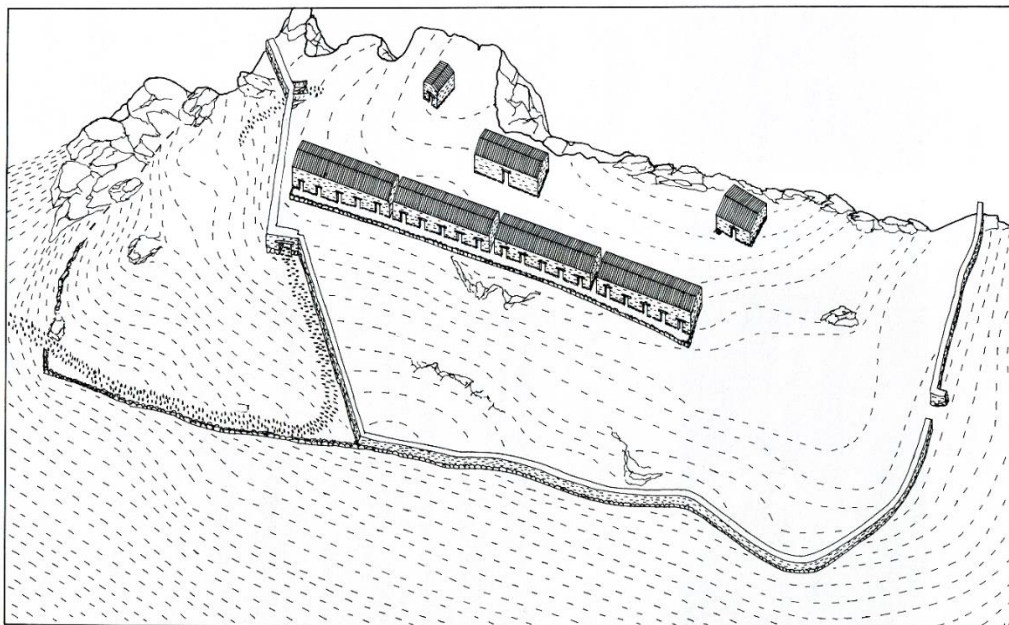
**by Robin Barber**

**J**ohn James (Jim) Coulton, who won widespread admiration for his ground-breaking work in the field of ancient architecture, died in Edinburgh on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2020. Born in Pentney, Norfolk, the third of four children of Gordon Francis Coulton, a solicitor, and Annie Goldie (née Denny) from Glasgow, he won a scholarship to Winchester where he took up Classics, continuing to a BA at St John's College, Cambridge. There his interest in archaeology was sparked by a fellow student (later Professor) Malcolm Colledge, with whom he embarked on an ambitious tour of sites in the Middle East which culminated at Petra and led, not only to Jim's absorption with ancient architecture, but also to Colledge's specialisation in the archaeology of Palmyra, and of the Parthians.

His doctoral thesis (1966), also at Cambridge, under the supervision of W. H. Plommer, and completed in three years, was an exhaustive examination of one of the most prominent ancient monumental building types, the stoa. Subsequently published as *The architectural development of the Greek stoa* (Oxford Monographs on Classical Archaeology, 1976), the book immediately became a standard work of reference for architectural historians.

His work on ancient architecture was particularly marked by a concentration on the practical problems faced by architects and builders and the solutions they adopted. Ranging from questions of design to methods of quarrying, lifting, transporting and finishing huge blocks of masonry, these formed the core of his highly-acclaimed book *Ancient Greek architects at work: problems of structure and design* (1977), of which one reviewer wrote ‘...its particular claim to excellence lies in the fact that it achieves what is perhaps the hardest and most important thing to do in classical scholarship – it identifies and deals with a topic in the mainstream of classical studies that is both of vital relevance and has hitherto been neglected in this much pawed over field’. This emphasis on the practical details of architectural work chimes with his skill as a draftsman and woodworker – he was an accomplished furniture-maker, sometimes copying ancient prototypes.

He initiated or participated in numerous archaeological projects – in Libya, Jordan, Iran and Turkey, as well as Greece – often providing precise archaeological plans and drawings for their publications, together with reconstructions of important buildings. The latter brilliantly distil information otherwise difficult to convey on the basis of sketchy remains. Of the text figures in *Ancient Greek architects...* over three quarters were his own work, some adapted, with acknowledgement, from other sources. A first major project was the reinvestigation, supervised by the then director of the British School, Peter Megaw, of the stoa at Perachora, the site first excavated by Humfry Payne in the 1930s and memorably described by Dilys Powell in *An affair of the heart* (1958). This he published as a major article in 1964. At Perachora he lived in the landmark lighthouse and shared meals with its keeper – no doubt with considerable benefit to his modern Greek. At Lefkandi in Euboea, as member of a team led by Mervyn Popham, Hugh Sackett and Petros Kalligas, he published the architecture of the *heroön*, including a fine and much-reproduced reconstruction. Also on Euboea he collaborated in the excavation and publication of the fort of Phylla-Vrachos, with E. Sapouna-Sakellarakis.



*Reconstruction of the fort at Phylla-Vrachos by J. J. Coulton (Reproduced by permission of the British School at Athens)*

A key moment came with his participation in the excavation of what turned out to be the rare and important Geometric settlement at Zagora on Andros, led by Professor Alexander Cambitoglou. Publications of the site, partly authored by Jim Coulton, are extensively illustrated by his drawings, of which one colleague recently observed 'only in Jim's architectural plans can you work out the sequence of the walls being built, and he drew those over 50 years ago'. Also a member of the excavation team was Mary Burness, his future wife and sure support over many years, then a student of Archaeology at the University of Athens, whose Scottish–Greek parentage reinforced his attachment to both countries.

At Zagora too he took the opportunity to study traditional local building styles and methods, where similar technical conditions applied to those which prevailed in antiquity and which ensured that his reconstructions of the Zagora buildings conformed to the style and techniques dictated by locally available materials and techniques. Incidents recalled by colleagues from the same period bring to the fore notable aspects of his character – goodwill, strength, resourcefulness and determination: on Andros, carrying on his back a sick workman from the excavation over two kilometres up a steep and stoney track to transport for treatment in Athens; in Australia, carrying on undaunted for a caving expedition after his car rolled over on a dirt road and returned to upright. Caving was another of his interests, allied to a love of the countryside and camping.



*Drawing at Zagora (Picture: Australian Archaeological Institute at Athens)*

Later in his career he participated in survey work at two ancient cities in the southwestern highlands of Turkey – first at Oenoanda, under the direction of Alan Hall, where he undertook study of the architecture, and later, with his own project, at the previously uninvestigated town and wider area of Balboura in the same region. Work at the latter, which demonstrated his willingness to explore methods of research other than those traditional to Classical Archaeology (a palaeobotanical project to clarify the history of climate and vegetation, and the recording of pre-industrial agricultural practices in the region), greatly expanded knowledge of the city itself and of its relationship to other settlements over a wide and little-known area. The Balboura survey was published in two volumes in 2012 (*The Balboura survey and settlement in highland southwest Anatolia*). These projects were undertaken under the auspices of the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, whose series of Monographs he also edited for

several years. In Turkey too, he was preparing a study of the temple of Aphrodite at Aphrodisias and its conversion into a church in late antiquity as part of the publication of excavations there by Professor R. R. R. Smith, Lincoln Professor of Classical Archaeology at Oxford (in succession to those of Professor Kenan Erim).

His long association with and love of Greece began with periods of study at the British School at Athens in the early 1960s and became personal with his marriage. At the British School he made various good friends, including Michael Angold, later a colleague (now Emeritus Professor of Byzantine History) in Edinburgh who, like all of us there at the time, has vivid and grateful memories of the Coultons' hospitality, friendship and support. These were extended to virtually all students and colleagues with whom they came into contact.

After completing his doctoral dissertation, his first post was a lectureship in the Australian National University in Canberra, where he remained until 1968. One consequence of this was his involvement in the Zagora excavations. Subsequently he was Assistant Lecturer in Latin and Greek (teaching in both Departments) at the University of Manchester, until his appointment as lecturer in the Department of Classical Archaeology at Edinburgh in 1969. There his catholic approach to study of the ancient world and his inspiring teaching were ideally suited to a student audience drawn from a wide range of departments, in the Scottish way. In 1979 he left Edinburgh to take up the Readership in Classical Archaeology in the University of Oxford, which he held until 2004. Teaching apart, he was Director of the Institute of Archaeology, Chair of the Sub-Faculty of Archaeology and instrumental in the creation of a BA degree in Classical Archaeology and Ancient History. A colloquium on *Architecture and archaeology in the Cyclades* (British Archaeological Reports International Series 1455, 2005) was held at Lincoln College, Oxford, to mark his retirement. This included a full bibliography of his published work.

Subsequently he and Mary lived in her family home in Athens for several years prior to his illness. In Athens, he continued to make excursions to archaeological sites, to work in the library of the British School and to give occasional lectures and seminars – at the Athens Polytechnic and elsewhere.

In University life he was much in demand for committee and administrative jobs, unsurprisingly in view of his practical attitude to problem solving and organisational capacity, and his calm ability to reconcile conflicting views and personalities. For the British School at Athens, he served on the Managing Committee for twelve years as representative of the University of Oxford. The only British participant in the early technical discussions held in Athens to examine methods of conservation of the buildings on the Akropolis, his contributions are recalled by Professor Manolis Korres, President of the Committee for the Conservation of the Monuments of the Akropolis who, in addition to Coulton's technical expertise, was struck by an impressive ability to produce clear, concise and virtually simultaneous translations of papers given in Greek.

He was a Corresponding Member of the German Archaeological Institute (1982), Visiting Professor at Canberra (1984), and Geddes-Harrower Professor at Aberdeen (1988-9).

An account of Jim's academic career and achievements gives only an inkling of the man himself whom those who knew him – as teacher, colleague or simply friend – will remember with exceptional warmth. Jim Coulton's life and work have been widely recognised in Greece, prompting many press notices and a special announcement from the Ministry of Culture. As well as his unique academic achievements, his philhellenism and his intellectual and personal approachability have been much remarked.

In response to the news of his death, one of his 1970s undergraduates in Edinburgh wrote of 'the fondest of memories...such a kind man... teaching so challenging'. Both there and elsewhere the mutual stimulus to research gained from interaction with colleagues in other departments is extensively acknowledged in his books.

Generations of students (including his postgraduates, many of whom went on to occupy exalted academic positions), and a multitude of others, will remember his constructive habit of worrying away at problems (often theirs rather than his) with a persistency which could sometimes be rather alarming but whose sole intention was to elucidate the matter in hand. This approach and his avoidance both of sweeping generalisations and of easy solutions undoubtedly contributed to setting his academic achievements, in which stimulating teaching must certainly be included, in the first rank.

We salute the life and person of a scholar of distinction, a considerate and inspiring teacher, and a man of great integrity, steadfast in his concern and affection for family and friends.

Jim is survived by his wife, Mary, daughter Joanna, son Richard, and their families.

**R. L. N. Barber**  
British School at Athens  
[robin\\_bar@hotmail.com](mailto:robin_bar@hotmail.com)