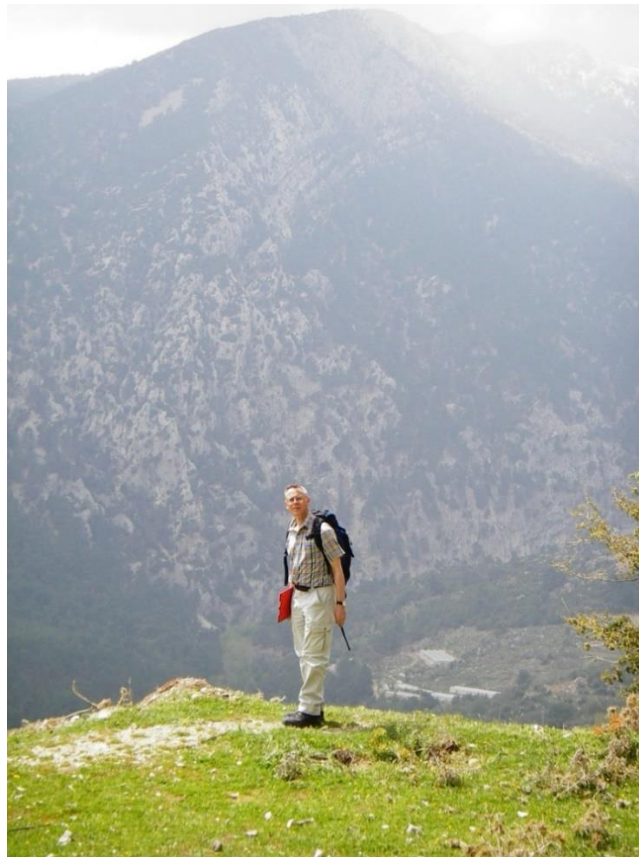


Stephen Mitchell (1948–2024)

by Elena Isayev

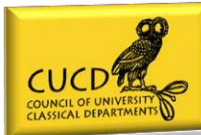


Arykanda, Türkiye 2006.¹

Many within and beyond the academy will be familiar with Stephen Mitchell's outstanding contribution to ancient scholarship, his ability to inspire, his energy and unassuming leadership.² At the University of Exeter, where he held his last teaching

¹ All photographs by the author, Elena Isayev.

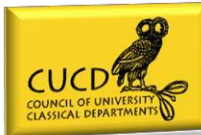
² This text draws on conversations with Stephen's family, friends and colleagues, especially during the celebrations of Stephen's life at St. John's College in Oxford on 25 April 2024, and the remembrances that many have written in the wake of his passing, which can be found [here](#). Drawing together the multiple strands of such a life as Stephen's has been possible thanks to the generosity of those who shared their stories and the discussions in co-writing about his life, especially with Lut, Hartwin and Turhan for *Anatolian Studies*: Lutgarde Vandeput, Hartwin Brandt, Elena Isayev and Turhan Kaçar (2024) 'Stephen Mitchell 26 May 1948 (Oxford)–30 January 2024 (Berlin)', *Anatolian Studies* 75, 1–10.



post, we have been particularly fortunate to have Stephen among us for a decade as a colleague, teacher, mentor and friend. Those who have had a chance to enjoy a meal at Stephen and Matina's table will have experienced the warmth of their hospitality, the colourful storytelling, the scent of Matina's freshly baked bread and, if lucky, tasted Stephen's slow-cooked mouth-watering roast alongside their garden vegetables. For an ancient historian just starting out, as I was when I first met Stephen, there could not have been a better role model for what it means to be a scholar and a human – unknowingly he set a high bar to aspire to in the academy and beyond it.

The household which Stephen grew up in laid many of the foundations for his thriving curiosity about the ancient world. His mother, Barbara, was a Fellow and Tutor in Ancient History at St. Anne's College, while his father, David, lectured on philosophy at Worcester College, both at Oxford University. Unsurprisingly it was there that Stephen chose to study *Literae Humaniores* (Classics and Ancient History) at St. John's College (1966–1970). Already in his early years as a scholar, he had a fascination with the history of Türkiye, which he visited for the first time in 1965, at the age of 17. By the time he started his doctorate five years later, Roman Asia Minor was the focus of his research. He completed his DPhil thesis – *The History and Archaeology of Galatia* – in 1974 under the supervision of Ewen L. Bowie and Eric W. Gray. It was an ambitious piece of work, covering the region's history from the Hellenistic to the Islamic period. It was also innovative for its time, integrating into ancient history his expertise in the Classics with archaeology and epigraphy – which he knew first hand from his own time on archaeological fieldwork and especially the survey of North Galatia. One of his first publications stemming from this postgraduate work soon appeared in the *Journal of Roman Studies*, 'Requisitioned Transport in the Roman Empire: A New Inscription from Pisidia' (1976: 106–31).

During his doctoral research Stephen had already begun lecturing in Latin and Ancient History at the University of Bristol (1973–1974), and on completion of his thesis a two-year Research Lectureship followed at Christ Church in Oxford University (1975–1976). His first permanent position was as a Lecturer in Ancient History at the University of Swansea, where he stayed for almost a quarter of a century, gaining a



full professorship in 1993. Throughout this time and already while a doctoral student he was active in fieldwork. In his earliest days he carried out his archaeological explorations alongside Matina, who would become his life-partner. In 1972, they were in Eastern Türkiye, with Stephen on a rescue excavation on a stretch of the Euphrates Valley that was to be dammed and flooded, while Matina was researching the role of women in the rural community in the surrounding villages. Inadvertently they were pioneering a holistic approach to studying ancient culture, situating it in the *longue durée* of both the human and the natural landscape, with attention to communities that continue to inhabit them. The innovativeness of their joint work in the region at the time has left a rich and unique archive of an area that is now under water, and their materials are being incorporated into the digital repository of the British Institute at Ankara (BIAA).³

The focus for his own research survey was Pisidia located in the Taurus Mountains to the north of the Pamphylian Plain. It was another area of Türkiye which had been under-studied by 20th century scholarship. Like his earlier research, this survey too was ambitious: the aim was to explore the remains of Pisidian Antioch, which he carried out 1982–1983 with his colleague and friend Marc Waelkens, who was then at Ghent University (later at Catholic University Leuven in Belgium). Their survey provided the first comprehensive record of the remaining architectural features of what was once a colony founded by Augustus. In the process, by exposing the richness of the ancient culture that flourished in this region they could challenge the simplistic tropes of ‘warlike and barbarian’, which some ancient authors like Strabo (12.7.2–3) used to characterise the inhabitants. The fruitfulness of their initial investigations of Antioch led to the setting up of the Pisidian Survey Project in 1985, which incorporated Cremna and Sagalassos, in the first instance.

Stephen's ongoing fieldwork across Anatolia catalysed possibilities for international partnerships, exchange and life-long friendships. Joining in the Pisidia Survey Project were such colleagues as Sabri Aydal, Assistant Director at the archaeological museum

³ The Digital Repository is part of the BIAA project: [Lost Villages of the Upper Euphrates: A Digital Archive](#).



in Antalya who for a long time had been the geographer in the field, and Lut Vandeput, the current director of the BIAA, who then led the fieldwork of the Pisidia Survey Project (1998–2012). Young historians from Germany, such as Hartwin Brandt, later professor of Ancient History at Bamberg University, joined the Pisidian explorations and brought other historians to experience the fieldwork, the dynamism of the research and the materials first hand. The results of the survey and archaeological explorations appeared in various publications with colleagues across the years. Milestone volumes of these regional studies include *Cremna in Pisidia* (1995),⁴ and *Pisidian Antioch* (1998).⁵ Central to such investigations was ensuring that the remains were not isolated from their contexts, whether ceramics, structures, inscriptions, or the routeways that interconnected the diverse sites and cultures. Throughout his career Stephen continued to engage with the ongoing fieldwork in the region, including tracing the roads that had run through it. When one consults the Asia Minor sections of Richard Talbert's *Barrington Atlas*, Stephen's routeways are there too, from the time that he shared responsibility for the mappings of that region in the atlas.⁶ His most recent co-authored publication on one such major artery and the settlements along it, is the co-authored monograph on the Via Sebaste (with Robert Wagner and Brian Williams, 2021).⁷

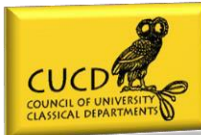
From a less well-known part of the ancient world, the Pisidian surveys showcased the richness and diversity of the urban culture of inland Anatolia and its transformation from Hellenistic times, through the Roman Imperial period and into Late Antiquity. Stephen's early projects in the field led to major studies on Asia Minor in antiquity, explored through texts, inscriptions and archaeology, with a growing emphasis on

⁴ Mitchell, S. et al. (1995) *Cremna in Pisidia. An Ancient City in Peace and in War*. London: Duckworth & Co. Ltd and The Classical Press of Wales.

⁵ Mitchell, S. and M. Waelkens (1998) *Pisidian Antioch. The Site and Its Monuments*. London: Duckworth & Co. Ltd and The Classical Press of Wales. For an overview and bibliography on the Pisidia Survey Project: Mitchell, S. and L. Vandeput (2013) 'Sagalassos and the Pisidia Survey Project: In Search of Pisidia's History', in J. Poblome (ed.), *Exempli Gratia: Sagalassos, Marc Waelkens and Interdisciplinary Archaeology*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 97–118.

⁶ Talbert, R. J. A. (ed.) (2000) *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

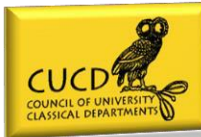
⁷ Mitchell, S., R. Wagner and B. Williams (2021) *Roman archaeology in a South Anatolian landscape: the Via Sebaste, the Mansio in the Doseme Bogazi, and regional transhumance in Pamphylia and Pisidia with a catalogue of late Roman and Ottoman cisterns in memory of Sabri Aydal (1948-2016) and David French (1933-2017)*. Istanbul: Koç University Press.



religious and cultural history. He had sketched the foundations for the first of such works during a research fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, which hosted him and Matina with their young family in 1983–1984. This led to what he identified as the bench-mark publication of his earlier career: *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor* (2 vols. OUP 1993). Its final form took shape during a further research fellowship he held in Göttingen, where once again Matina was able to join him with the boys, to live in Germany from 1990 to 1992, a period in their life which would be instrumental for their decision in later years to make Germany their home.

Throughout his explorations in Türkiye, Stephen was attentive to the current stewards of the sites that his research focused on. He highly valued local expertise, both the villagers who had the most detailed knowledge of their landscape and those with specialist training in the materials and the ongoing care of these ancient remains. His warm unassuming personality and his fluency in Turkish along with other languages, which made him so welcome on the ground, was also instrumental in his ability to bring together teams across continents. He was especially active in joining experts and institutions in Türkiye with those in the UK and Germany, where he had built relationships already early on in his career. By 1996 he was elected as a corresponding member of the German Archaeological Institute. Stephen's close relationships with European colleagues and especially Humboldt University led to him becoming a leading member of the newly set up *Centre for Early Christianity* by Cilliers Breytenbach in 2008, which was part of the Berlin TOPOI cluster. His work with colleagues at the Centre and as a co-editor of its monograph series *Early Christianity in Asia Minor* (ECAM), fuelled the research for his final book.

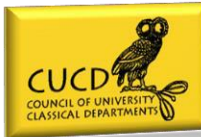
Through the years, these exchanges brought European students and colleagues to Türkiye, and those from Türkiye to Europe, not least the students who came to study with Stephen in the UK. His first Turkish graduate student – of many who followed – was Turhan Kaçar (now chancellor of the University at Muğla). He came to Swansea to work with Stephen on the formation of early church councils (1995–2000). As part of his dedication to creating opportunities for scholarly exchanges, Stephen invested great energies in facilitating the growth of programmes at the British Institute at Ankara



(BIAA), which provides a focal point for British academic research in Türkiye in the Humanities and Social Sciences. It had been the touchstone for his research and fieldwork from his earliest days in the region, when he became a member of the Institute already in 1970. Over the decades he became the Institute's greatest champion, advocating for its importance in the UK, and from within the British Academy. For years Stephen was a BIAA Council member, then Honorary Secretary (1996–1999, 2009–2014), BIAA Chair (2016–2021), and most recently in 2023 he was elected as its Vice-President. His energies have been instrumental in its transformation into a substantial research powerhouse that connects the ancient and the contemporary, and pivotal in directing the role of the wider BIRI network as a whole (British International Research Institutes). These ambitions for the institute continue to be carried on by Lut Vandepuit who has for decades worked closely with Stephen before becoming the current BIAA director, and whose MBE in 2019 was given precisely for her role in UK/Turkey cultural relations.

Contemporary Türkiye increasingly held a special place for Stephen alongside his lifework on ancient Asia Minor. His contribution to such fora as *Archaeology and Soft Power: Cultural Diplomacy between Türkiye and the UK* (18 October 2022) is exemplary of the many years of his bridge-building from the platform of ancient history. This particular dialogue was hosted in London by the BIAA and the London School of Economics. On that occasion he shared the podium with Tuna Şare Ağtürk, Professor of Classical Art and Archaeology at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University in Türkiye, and Sir David Logan, who was the British Ambassador to Türkiye from 1997 to 2001. Among those in the audience were students and colleagues who had worked with him across the decades, and the current Turkish ambassador to the UK.⁸ Together they discussed pressing issues, including political and cultural tensions as well as opportunities, and the significance of archaeology as a tool of cultural diplomacy, which institutions such as the BIAA and the BIRIs can help facilitate. As part of this ambition, during his time at Exeter he was a founding member and first director of Exeter Turkish Studies, which came into being through his many contacts in the region.

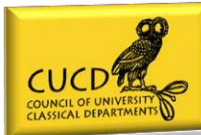
⁸ A summary of the event is available on [the BIAA website](#).



Stephen's deep interest in a holistic approach to understanding ancient societies and their landscapes are manifest in his international initiatives and multiple leadership roles, not least in his capacity as one of the foremost epigraphers of our time. He served as President of the British Epigraphy Society (1999–2002), and later of the Association Internationale d'Épigraphie Grecque et Latine (AIEGL, 2008–12), a role that brought him such honours as being invited as an 'honorary Canadian' to the celebrations at the epigraphic conference in Berlin, just as he was finishing his term as AIEGL President. His interest in inscriptions as a source for telling diverse histories, from his earliest fieldwork in Türkiye, culminated in the preparation of a new edition of the corpus of Greek and Latin inscriptions of ancient Ancyra. This was a project he worked on for many years with David French, the former Director of the British Institute at Ankara (BIAA), who sadly did not see the completion of the second volume, as he passed away in 2017.

Essential for such an undertaking was working with colleagues and experts, and epigraphic sources across numerous institutions, especially in Germany. A favourite spot was the library of the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften (BBAW), home to the *Inscriptiones Graecae (IG)* and *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (CIL)*. At the University of Cologne he worked on the second of the Ancyra volumes in 2012, and in Munich Stephen was involved in the research activities of the Kommission für Epigraphik und Alte Geschichte des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. The two monumental volumes of *The Greek and Latin Inscriptions of Ankara (Ancyra)*, appeared in 2012 and 2019.⁹ For his wider commitment to the field of epigraphy and particularly for the second volume of this work – *Vol. II. Late Roman, Byzantine and Other Texts* – Stephen was awarded the prestigious Gustave Schlumberger Prize by the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris (2020).

⁹ Mitchell, S. and D. French (2012) *The Greek and Latin Inscriptions of Ankara (Ancyra) Vol. 1: From Augustus to the end of the third century AD*. Munich: Beck. Mitchell, S. and D. H. French (2019) *The Greek and Latin Inscriptions of Ankara (Ancyra) Vol. 2: Late Roman, Byzantine and Other Texts*. Munich: Beck.

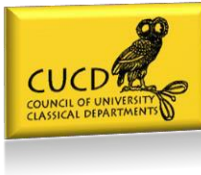


Stephen's international work was never separate from his commitment to his own home departments back in the UK. Following his time as professor in Classics and Ancient History at University of Wales, Swansea (1993–2001), Stephen took up the position of Leverhulme Professor of Hellenistic Culture at the University of Exeter in 2002, which he held until 2012. Bringing his knowledge especially of Ancient Türkiye to the Department, he was instrumental in setting up the *Centre for Hellenistic Culture and Society*. In addition, he directed an ambitious research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) on *Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* that brought numerous scholars and lively debates to Exeter. Among them were the postdoctoral fellow Peter Van Nuffelen, now professor in Ghent University, and doctoral student Anna Collar, now professor of archaeology at the University of Southampton. Their joint work with other scholars led to several publications, including *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (CUP 2010). Stephen's continued interest in the subject is evident in his final writings. He did not shy away from addressing sceptics and he enjoyed taking on the challenges of disparate and difficult material, as in his publication on 'Theos Hypsistos and Theosebeis in and out of Asia Minor' (2023), where he argued that:

'the large number of monuments relating to this cult, most of which derive from sanctuaries across the Eastern Mediterranean, the Greek mainland and Asia Minor, Thrace and the eastern Balkans, and the Black Sea region, should be treated as evidence for a unified religious movement, namely the worship of a supreme deity who was distinguished from other gods and goddesses of the Greek-speaking world in several important respects.'¹⁰

Along with bringing inspiring projects to Exeter and guiding many doctoral students and colleagues, Stephen introduced innovative undergraduate and MA courses. He taught across all levels, whether *Language in Action* for first years, or his special subjects of *Hellenistic Culture* and *Late Antiquity* for final year undergraduates. A

¹⁰ Mitchell S. (2023) 'Theos Hypsistos and Theosebeis in and out of Asia Minor', in D. Hofmann, A. Klingenberg, and K. Zimmermann (eds), *Religion und Epigraphik. Kleinasien, der griechische Osten und die Mittelmeerwelt. Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Walter Ameling*. Bonn: Habelt, 43–61, quotation p. 43.



particular favourite was the *Roman and Hellenistic Asia Minor* MA field course, which brought a motley crew of students, colleagues and friends to ancient and current Türkiye. As a colleague Stephen made you aware of the much larger world that you were a part of, and the opportunities and responsibilities that this brought with it. He was committed to helping shape the subject nationally and internationally, and as an elected member of the Council of University Classical Departments (2000–2004), one could expect an email from him to colleagues asking for any issues to raise nationally, ensuring we had voice – and that it mattered.

Not long after his arrival in Exeter Stephen became the Head of Department. Martin Pitts, a colleague who just joined the Department in 2006, noted how in this role:

‘Stephen was ... exemplary, ... understanding the needs of colleagues as scholars and campaigning tirelessly on our behalf. Despite ... administrative demands, ... he would often be encountered ... chatting enthusiastically with colleagues about their ideas... Stephen has left an indelible mark on many of us as individuals, but moreover on our departmental community, in his championing of early career colleagues and postgraduates, and as a staunch advocate of democratic principles in academic life.’¹¹

He never ‘preached’, just led by example, which meant supporting students and colleagues, whether by reading their applications, listening to their ideas – and being honest about his thoughts on their projects and ambitions – or showing up to celebrate achievements. One such moment was when he, as often, was between different journeys, and still found time to come and take part in the finale of the project *Future Memory in Place*, between academia, art, music and local schools, which included the unveiling of a sculpture in Swansea (*Tessera Hospitalis*, July 2011).

¹¹ All reflections by colleagues are from the public ‘Remembrances of Stephen Mitchell’, document, set up by the Department of Classics and Ancient History, University of Exeter: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1WNhTxp8gG9Ux_8PYkhi9OYEQcKwxoVCVr0Zq6-enf_E/



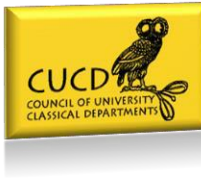
At the unveiling of the *Tessera Hospitalis* sculpture, Swansea July 2011

Not surprisingly many note his profound impact on their lives: as, for example, Peter Van Nuffelen:

‘Without exaggeration I can say that Stephen was one of the most important people in my academic career He represents the academic that I wish we all could be: intellectually brilliant, modest, soft-spoken but with clear convictions, and caring...’ (Peter Van Nuffelen in a remembrance written with Lieve Van Nuffelen-Van Hoof)

In each of his multiple roles Stephen never missed an opportunity to build bridges; he was a diplomat, yet remained unflinching about principles of equality and inclusivity. He helped many get through tough times, and often took on extra work as a result, which no doubt had a detrimental effect on his own energies. We at Exeter felt his profound absence when he took early retirement in 2012, a personal decision that must have been difficult. As he stated in an email to the department (on 22 March 2011):

‘Disengagement, after 38 years in the profession, is not easy, and I will certainly not be turning my back on scholarly activity, Exeter, or all the other things that have kept me motivated and absorbed, but it is time for me now to turn a corner



and get a view of the landscape on either side, as well as the road ahead.'

This road took him to Sheffield following Matina's path into artisan baking, then to their new home in Berlin, and time and again to Türkiye.

His trips to Türkiye's rich cultural landscape with students, colleagues and friends have become legendary. They form one part of his much wider travels and field work, whether in the UK, in Italy or in Iran. Many, in their remembrances of Stephen, tell stories from those journeys, with humour, wonder and gratitude. As Judith Humphries recalls:

'I met Stephen in 1968 working with Dr Clare Goff at Baba Jan Iran. I will never forget watching him hike up to the site carrying a copy of Thucydides in the original, which he read during breaks in the excavation. A purist to the bone, on a fishing trip to a very cold stream on a break day he took his fly-fishing rod while the rest of the motley crew used dynamite provided, legally, by our host. A scholar, a gentleman and always unassuming.'

His knowledge coupled with his great ability in telling stories, opened the natural and human landscapes to new possibilities for understanding, as his colleagues describe:

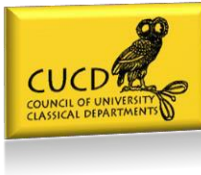
'We will remember him for guiding us through the towns, museums and landscapes of Anatolia, for helping us and the doctoral students in Berlin to find our way into the study of Christian epitaphs within the later Roman Empire. His kindness, humility, and willingness to spend his time to improve the work of others, his generosity to share his knowledge and research results with others are an example to all of us. It was a privilege to be part of his life in Berlin and an honour to be his friends. As someone from our wider circle said: "Stephen Mitchell war ein Mensch, wie ich mir einen Menschen vorstelle. Sein Tod ist wirklich ein sehr großer Verlust für alle, die je mit ihm zu tun hatten.'" (Cilliers Breytenbach - Patrick Hommel - Ulrich Hutter - Julien Ogereau - Philipp Pilhofer - Christiane Zimmermann – Maya Zürcher (geb. Prodanova)).



Termessos, Türkiye 2006, pondering inscription with students.

Stephen's research, incorporating history, epigraphy and archaeology, especially that which focuses on Hellenistic, Roman and Late Antique Anatolia, has made him one of the leading scholars of the ancient world. From regional studies stemmed works of much wider scope, including the ambitious sweeping survey of the Roman Empire from the accession of Diocletian in AD 284 to the death of Heraclius in 641: *A History of the Later Roman Empire, AD 284-641* (Wiley-Blackwell 2007¹, 2015²). It has been translated into several languages and is now out in a revised 3rd edition in English (extended to AD 700 with the further contributions of Geoffrey Greatrex 2023). In the last book that he wrote, multiple subjects coalesce with a focus on religions: *The Christians of Phrygia from Rome to the Turkish Conquest* (Brill 2023). Within it he set out to follow the non-Pauline tradition of the earliest Christian communities in central Anatolia, situating them among their Jewish and pagan peers.

His contributions to the study of ancient history and to academic co-operation between Britain and Türkiye have been widely recognised: from being elected Fellow of the British Academy in 2002, and serving for a while on its Council, to being elected



honorary fellow of St. John's College Oxford in 2018. His receipt of an honorary doctorate from the Theology Department at the Humboldt University in Berlin in 2006 encapsulates the way his work reaches into wider horizons, and brings together people from diverse disciplines. The following is an excerpt from the welcome speech to Stephen Mitchell on that occasion (1 February 2006):

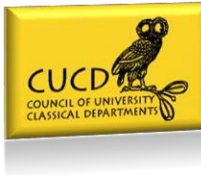
'When a Faculty of Theology thus awards a knowledgeable historian who has not only dealt with the spread of antique Christianity and the epigraphical and hagiographical sources of this amazing transformation of the Roman Empire, but has also conducted sensitive research on the institutional and historical context of the imperial era, it professes first of all to the undismissable significance of historical work in the theological fields and to the priorities our grandfathers set at this point....

The history of the spread of Christianity in the ancient world can only be written jointly, by specialists from different fields – and with this honorary doctorate the Faculty of Theology documents its gratitude for the contributions to this interdisciplinary dialogue that Stephen Mitchell has made and still makes...

I congratulate my Theological Faculty on this honorary doctorate, but I congratulate you especially, dear Mr. Mitchell, to this award and express my gratitude to you personally as a Patristic Scholar for the many valuable impulses to our and my work.'¹²

Within these official recognitions his many forms of generosity may not always be visible. These include such acts as giving part of his library of classical textbooks and specialist literature to the university of Cluj in Romania. His generosity stretched well beyond the academy to colleagues, friends, family, and people unknown to him who were in difficult life circumstances. Especially in recent years, while in Berlin, Matina and Stephen often shared their home with those seeking asylum. Using his passion for languages he worked with young refugees and helped them practice German alongside being a mentor. Further afield, as a contributor to URAFIKI, a small UK

¹² The full text of the speech is available [online](#).



charity that supports grass roots development in Western Kenya (<https://www.urafiki.org.uk/>), he visited the village of Yala. There, too, he brought his energy to idea-building especially with the youth. As one of its founders Mari Davis remembers, Stephen worked with local volunteers:

‘...to carry out a survey of community resources and needs which led to the development of an agricultural improvement programme covering hundreds of farmers. This has produced fantastic results ... [including] a more diversified and sustainable approach to farming. All this done with humility, generosity of spirit, kindness and a practical “can do” attitude.’ (Mari Davis on behalf of the Urafiki teams)

These life achievements in no way summarise all that Stephen was and what he brought to all who had the privilege of engaging with him. Those who had a chance to accompany him on study trips to Türkiye, where he and Matina took time to share their passion and knowledge, will know their ability to open before them new ways of understanding the world, the ancient and the contemporary. Stephen combined wisdom of judgement with humanity and kindness. He will be sadly missed by all those who knew him, especially those of us who had been so much looking forward to sharing new ideas with him, whether on a walk or around the table, and hearing about his latest adventures in the land and on the page. His dedication in his book *A History of the Later Roman Empire*, speaking to the youth in his life and to all students of any age, recognises their potential and power:

‘For Lawrence, Daniel, and Samuel Mitchell, and Polat Aydal, students of science, law, history, and business, shapers of an uncertain future.’