

## Marek Zvelebil (09.01.1952–07.07.2011)

*Professor of Archaeology, University of Sheffield*

No more than 59 years was he given. Even though we were aware of his ill health, the notice that Professor Marek Zvelebil has passed away is still shocking. We have lost a colleague and friend, a bright light in prehistoric archaeology, who will be painfully missed.

He was professor of archaeology in a British university, but also a citizen of the world, and, one should stress, especially a Central European person. Born in Prague, he migrated with his family to the Netherlands, and soon thereafter to Britain, where he graduated in Sheffield (1974), the university where he returned to teach after gaining his PhD at Cambridge (1981). According to his many scientific projects and his teaching at different stages of his career, he was mainly at home in Finland and Russia, in Scotland and Ireland, at both the East and West Coasts of the United States, where he was a guest professor giving courses at Boston University and the University of South Carolina, as well as at UC Berkeley. But meanwhile, or perhaps above all, he kept up intensive contact and cooperation with his Czech and other Central European colleagues.

He was a devoted teacher, whose students came to learn from him from many parts of the world, and he never refused to share his knowledge with anyone who he felt deserved it. As a teacher, he was not only engaged in tutoring and organising university life, but was always open for new challenges, whether raised by students or simply by the *Zeitgeist*. Thus, some of his courses and publications focused on agency and identity in the Mesolithic, some on modern hunter-gatherer societies, or even on archaeological research related to ethnicity and nationalism. Several of his teaching courses, lectures or chapters, such as *Who were we 6000 years ago?* (2004), discuss these issues.

One of the focal points of his research was the transition to food production and sedentary life. He researched Postglacial hunter-gatherers in Europe and the transition to farming. He first investigated the origins of agriculture from a North European viewpoint, based on Late Mesolithic and Earliest Neolithic research projects that culminated in monographs



*Marek Zvelebil*

*This photo, and the text relates to it,  
can be found in Mariana  
Cooks' Faces of Science Norton (2005).*

such as *From Forager to Farmer in the Boreal Zone* (1981), and edited volumes, e.g., *Hunters in Transition* (1986), *Harvesting the Sea*, *Farming the Forest* (1998).

This meticulous work made him one of the best Mesolithic experts. Apart from the study of the chipped stone industry, he also analysed other key elements of material culture, such as antler tools, or ground and polished stone tools, and did pioneer work on pre-Neolithic pottery. One splendid outcome of this interest is a recent volume (co-edited with P. Jordan), *Ceramics before farming. The dispersal of pottery among prehistoric Eurasian Hunter-gatherers* (2009). Further, his research was extended to Mesolithic and Neolithic human skeletal remains, including their pathology and biomolecular analysis, especially from regions such as the East Baltic and European Russia. Since he thrived on seeking to understand complex processes, the scope of his research involved palaeoenvironmental, faunal and palaeobotanical remains, and the survey of sites and offsite areas. This soon led to him studying the ancient landscape as a whole, hence the two major landscape projects, including GIS, aerial photography and survey, in Ireland and Bohemia, together with a large team of Irish, American, Scandinavian, British and

Czech scholars. He was one of the first archaeologists who saw the potential in ancient DNA analysis in the context of the spread of farming in Europe, as reflected in studies such as that in the volume on Archaeogenetics, edited by C. Renfrew and K. Boyle, *The social context of the agricultural transition in Europe* (2000), and a further summary in *Documenta Praehistorica*, *The agricultural transition and the origins of Neolithic society in Europe* (2001).

Marek Zvelebil's work was not restricted to a wide range of teaching and publication; he gave guest lectures at many universities, and was an enthusiastic session organiser and speaker at various conferences and meetings. As a long-standing and devoted member of the European Association of Archaeologists, many of his sessions, papers and discussions served as the basis for future volumes, chapters and further collaboration. My first real discussion with him took place at one of the now famous Ljubljana Neolithic Seminars in 2000, which, as usual, was the scene of a real workshop for prehistoric problems in the broadest sense – unforgettable for all those who participated.

In researching the Neolithic transition, his initial, North European approach was soon extended to other areas, because of the growing evidence for the importance of Central European processes in the spread of farming. This new dataset made him focus more on the Linear Pottery culture (LBK): the papers of a session organised by him at the Thessaloniki

EAA meeting were published in a BAR volume (co-edited with A. Lukes), *LBK dialogues. Studies in the formation of the Linear Pottery culture* (2004). One of his last projects was the evaluation of a Neolithic settlement and cemetery at Vedrovice in Moravia, where the research objective was to trace the areas of origin of the LBK. Accordingly, the next project, now never to be completed, was already in his head, the excavation and evaluation of a similar cemetery in Western Hungary.

One of his latest publications, on the Vedrovice biological and cultural identity (together with P. Petitt), on *Human conditions, life, and death at an Early Neolithic settlement: Bioarchaeological analyses of the Vedrovice cemetery and their biosocial implications for the spread of agriculture in central Europe* (2008), concludes in a unique and plausible reconstruction of late 6<sup>th</sup> Millennium calBC generations and families. This is one of the highlights of recent prehistoric research: a most welcome combination of hard science, traditional archaeological methods, of empathy and wisdom in its inferences – a real historiography.

The international scientific community, and within this the European 'Mesolithic-Neolithic family', has lost a distinguished colleague and friend. But Marek Zvelebil's ideas and his immense achievements will continue to influence the trajectories of European archaeology.

*Eszter Bánffy*