



Remembering Walter

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Remembering Walter

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- 1 In the late summer, 1979, after closing down the St. Pierre l'Estrier dig in Autun I drove up Dardon to keep my promise to Carole to « lend a hand » with the unexpected discovery of an early medieval church on a protohistoric site and there he was, clad in sturdy army boots, bright blue jockey shorts, and little else. It must have been one of those hot and clear afternoons, offering that unforgettable panoramic view. As I recall Walter was directing the displacement of an MFR – I need not elaborate on the meaning of this technical term, need I ? – which had apparently been taken to the spoil heap before, on second thought, it was regarded as perhaps having been in place where it had been found. Walter connected me back up with Kitch, who had begun her archaeological training with me at Psalmodi, in the Camargue, back in June, and soon we were scraping away to define the level in place and prepare the profile for drawing. Getting the trench ready for photography and the profile drawn just right under pressure – time was running out – with the help of the then almost absolute neophyte Kitch was proving daunting and so Walter came to the rescue, finishing up the stratigraphy as we finished cleaning the trench as the sun was sinking in the west. You get the picture. It became clear to me that day that Walter Berry was a first-rate field man : no matter the pressure he would get the job done right. When he mentioned later that he would be interested in joining the St. Pierre dig the next summer I could not have been more pleased.
- 2 Scott and others will remember that memorable evening when our whole group drove down to Gueugnon to eat and drink, in the Celtic feast tradition, with our local friends – especially drink to the refrain of « glouey-glouey ». Some may even remember the drive back up the mountain. I have an impression, as I somehow wrestled my stalwart little 2 CV around a turn, of a huge pair of headlights beaming at me, but I don't remember connecting them with one of those monster harvesting machines at work, though I was



told the next day that I just kept going and ran it off the road. I barely remember making it somehow inside to my sleeping bag but I do very clearly remember coming out the next morning to see a pair of booted feet sticking out from under a car. Not always so serious a fellow, our Walter !

- 3 But as an archaeologist he was the absolute and exacting professional. In the 1980s Walter Berry transformed the excavation of St. Pierre l'Estrier, which Christian Sapin and I had begun by ourselves one week in 1976 and continued in the late 70s with volunteer teams – with virtually no funding – in which Christian's teenage cousins and their chums figured prominently, with Jean-Charles Picard and his youngest daughter Clarisse later joining in. Our 1976 trial trench outside the building as it currently stands had showed recent rubble fill running deep, to the level of destroyed foundations we then presumed to be Late Roman ; a cursory examination of the cellar under the building seemed to confirm that although the standing walls certainly included early masonry the archaeological levels had been destroyed when the vaulted cellar was constructed after the French Revolution. Working by himself with the help of extension lamps in that dark cellar Walter soon proved that that critical Roman and Late Antique vestiges and stratigraphic levels had survived on the western side due to the original slope ; these provided the vital clues allowing the reconstruction of the early history of the site as first published in 1982 in *Archéologie Médiévale* and in English in *Gesta* in 1986 – an article which emphasized Walter's vital contribution. In 1983 Walter found the intact child's burial in a lead sarcophagus that provided critical evidence for the chronology of the transformation of the Late Roman memorial structure into a funerary basilica – a photo of him and Christian grinning happily, contemplating this art-factual thing of beauty, appears in my article in the 2016 Sapin *Mélanges, La mémoire des pierres*. It is no exaggeration to affirm, as Christian did in his eulogy for Walter at the Autun Cathedral service, that without Walter Berry's contributions, without his absolutely reliable professionalism, the positive identification of St. Pierre l'Estrier as the site of one of the very oldest, if not the oldest, Christian memorial sites in France would not have been possible.
- 4 On that last point, a not-so-serious aside. We were drawn to begin our work at St. Pierre partly because of the discovery there in 1839, when it was a farm, of a marble funerary inscription in Greek citing the name *Pectorious*, epigraphic evidence – much discussed ever since that time – for a plausibly pre-Constantinian Christian community in Autun. The inscription is not complete, and Christian used to evoke, hopefully, the possibility that we could find a missing piece. In cahoots with Jean-Paul Guillaumet, then in charge of the *Musée Rolin* where the inscription is conserved, we devised a practical joke. Jean-Paul furnished from the museum reserves a suitable blank marble fragment. Walter was to find it in the cellar. Everything depended on how he played his part when I went up, on cue, to bring Christian down to have a look at the object in context. It would be so easy to overplay, to let that eye twinkle and thus tip one's hand. If anyone who knew him ever doubted Walter's ability to do deadpan, let him (or her) put it to rest. Let History record that Walter did it perfectly, balancing a sense of possible excitement with suitable reserve – *gravitas*. Christian fell for it to such an extent that I soon became alarmed. He was on the point of calling the newspapers when I urged that maybe we had better take a closer look first, hinting that... *Walter est bien fort, tu sais, mais c'est plus prudent de se méfier...* After a moment, he understood. Ah well. Good archaeology

involves some good luck, a lot of hard work, good instincts guided by sound methodology, *esprit d'équipe*... and a leaven of humor helps. Walter understood that too.

- 5 After the Autun years, with the discovery of the Carolingian cloister as the highlight of the St. Nazaire excavations which followed St. Pierre, our paths diverged. When I went to Reims for the Clovis commemoration in 1996 I suppose I ought to have been more surprised that Walter Berry had obligingly found for us (and showed us) the remains of the baptistry where Clovis must have taken his famous plunge – but somehow such an archaeological exploit seemed only fitting for him, a rising to the occasion. A few years into the new millennium Christine and I stopped by Autun where Walter obligingly showed us the ruined old house on the ramparts which he and Sylvie were fixing up as their home, with infant Alice. I remember standing with him on the steps down to the garden, looking west at Mt. Beuvray and the heart of the Morvan and thinking... you need to be an archaeologist to appreciate all this! It should be just right for Walter. I expect, and I hope, that it was. I count myself privileged to have known, and for a time to have for a time worked alongside, Walter Berry.
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