

OBITUARY: DR DAMIAN EVANS, ARCHAEOLOGIST OF ANGKOR (1975–2023)

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We mourn the passing of Damian Evans, who died after a short battle with an aggressive cancer on 12 September 2023, in Paris, France. He was a major scholar of the Angkorian Empire and his work will influence generations to come.

Damian enrolled at the University of Sydney in 1998, doing fieldwork in Cambodia and graduating with First Class Honors and the University Medal in Archaeology in 2002. He continued his research with the University's Greater Angkor Project for over a decade, completing his Ph.D. in 2007, then settling in Cambodia, where he co-directed Sydney's Overseas Research Centre in Siem Reap-Angkor until 2015. During that time, Damian was awarded the first of two grants from the European Research Council and joined the prestigious *École Française d'Extrême Orient* (EFEO). He moved from Cambodia to Paris with his wife and son, later welcoming a new addition to the family, a daughter.

Damian was born in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada but grew up in Australia, his family having immigrated there in 1982. Damian was proud of his experiences in both countries, with family still residing in Canada and Australia. His family has shared the following: "Damian originally wanted to study law but went on to enroll in archaeology and anthropology. It is fortunate he did not listen to his mother's advice about archaeology not having a good career pathway. Damian was highly intelligent, very determined and had a strong sense of curiosity and adventure. It was those attributes, plus his interest in computing and new technologies which allowed him to excel in his work. He is very much missed by us all.

The University of Sydney has since the 1950s acquired an excellent reputation worldwide for its teaching and practice in Archaeology. "Near Eastern" archaeology had been particularly well served but Southeast Asia did not figure in the curriculum until Professor Roland Fletcher initiated his wide-ranging Greater Angkor Project (GAP) in the late 1990s. This created wonderful opportunities for students at any level to work on one of the world's great historical sites.

GAP was one of several foreign research teams—French, German, Indian, Japanese, Swiss—but following Prof. Fletcher's interest in *The Limits of Settlement Growth* (1995), it concentrated on the urban area rather than on individual monuments or temples. Damian's research was integral to that and was to some extent based on the work of the great French scholar, Bernard-Philippe Groslier (1926–86). Born in Cambodia and deeply committed to preserving its heritage, Groslier had been forced to leave in 1973 when the Khmer Rouge took over and was never able to carry out the necessary fieldwork. He had conjectured that Angkor might have overstretched its hydraulic resources. To test this hypothesis, one needed to know precisely how big Angkor had been. This involved multiple surveys and small-scale excavations at key points in the Angkor territory but what was needed was a larger overview.



Figure 1. Damian Evans, shortly before his final illness. Family photograph

Damian provided this through painstaking studies of radar imaging, first in his B.A. Honors thesis, “Pixels, Ponds and People: Urban Form at Angkor from Radar Imaging” and then in his Ph.D., “Putting Angkor on the Map: A new Survey of a Khmer ‘Hydraulic City’ in historical and theoretical Context”. On the basis of this work, he was invited to give lectures at Yale, U.C. Berkeley, Academia Sinica (Taipei), and the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation. His work was also picked up by the well-known U.S. archaeologist Michael D. Coe, who invited him to co-author a revised edition of his best-selling *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization* (2018, first ed. 2003).

By 2012, Damian had replaced radar with Lidar (“Light Detection And Ranging”), a technique in which a laser beam is bounced off the ground—on that occasion over 370 km²—to detect surface features concealed by dense foliage; it had been used in Central America, but not on anything like that scale. In 2015, after moving to the EFEO, he carried out a survey about five times the size (1910 km²), with funding from the European Research Council. The resulting paper, “Airborne laser scanning as

a method for exploring long-term socio-ecological dynamics in Cambodia”, was published in the *Journal of Archaeological Science* (2016) and was described as “the most extensive acquisition ever undertaken by an archaeological project”; this has now been extended into the Archaeospace dataset (Perron *et al.* 2024). In early 2023 Damian organized an even larger project—3000 km²—in southern Laos for the EFEO, with support from the Agence Française de Développement.

Damian wrote or co-authored over 90 articles in scholarly journals. A search through comes upon scholars from Cambodia, France, Hungary, India, Japan, Poland and the US; a 2015 article involves people in the UK and Singapore; and a 2021 article Australia, Canada, France, the Netherlands, and the U.S. Despite his illness, he also found time to co-edit and contribute to an encyclopedic work, *The Angkorian World* (2023) with Mitch Hendrickson (U. Illinois at Chicago) and Miriam Stark (U. Hawai’i at Mānoa).

Damian was widely admired as collegiate, courteous, considerate, and with a wry sense of humor. He had an engaging charm, evidenced in several TV documentaries. The application of Lidar at Angkor was first presented to the general

public in the BBC documentary series *Jungle Atlantis* (2014). Damian also worked with the National Geographic (*World Heritage: Angkor Wat*, 2013; and *Ancient Angkor*, 2015); the History Channel (*Angkor: The Lost Empire of Cambodia*, 2021); and French television (*Secrets of Modern Archaeology: Making Sites speak*, (Barbot 2023)). In 2022 he headed *Lost Cities of the Jungle*, made by Windfall Films for the Discovery Channel (Mortimore 2022). On that occasion he worked with Sarah Klassen (now U. Colorado at Boulder), who began co-directing the Cambodian Archaeological Lidar Initiative with Damian in 2018. She writes about his kindness in rushing her back to Siem Reap for fear of rabies after a dog-bite, and about his good humor and resolve while directing his research team from quarantine in a Laos hospital during the COVID pandemic.

The landscape architect Scott Hawken (U. Adelaide) also remembers his generosity towards younger scholars: “He was a friend and mentor to me and my work wouldn’t have been possible without him. ... At the end of a day in the field Damian was always there to talk through finds, ever ready to help with a technique or advice to navigate some intractable technical or conceptual challenge. There was a flexibility and expansiveness in his thinking that linked cutting-edge technology and conceptual questions through an imaginative scientific rigor. He mentored several successive generations of scholars.”

As an archaeologist, Damian had many great qualities, but one has stood out: tenacity. Terry Lustig has sent the following comment on an 8-kilometre-long embankment at Koh Ker, a short-lived Angkorian capital. “Researchers had long recorded this structure, but its function was not understood. Damian kept at it, and noticed a number of unusually shaped laterite blocks at one section of the embankment, which were then identified as part of a spillway, designed to discharge water efficiently from a large reservoir. Damian and his colleagues proposed that the failure of this reservoir contributed to Koh Ker’s demise.”

Leonard Cox writes: “Overall Damian will be remembered as an archaeologist who not only

thought his way around big questions, but measured them in pixels; a man who worked purposefully and efficiently to solve unknowns and provided intellectual verities; a serious man who was quick to laughter; a son, a friend, a husband and a father who was not permitted to continue Life’s project by Death come too soon”.

In June 2024, after the SPAFCON conference in Bangkok, the Siam Society hosted a memorial evening in Damian's honor. It was organized by Dr Christophe Pottier of EFEO, Chiang Mai. Speakers included Jean-Baptiste Chevance (Archaeology and Development Foundation), with whom Damian had worked on the Phnom Kulen, above Angkor, and fellow GAP-members Mitch Hendrickson and Martin Polkinghorne.

It was a privilege to have known and worked with Damian during GAP’s early years. I am joined in paying my respects by those of his many friends whom I was able to contact at this time.

FRIENDS WHO HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THIS MEMORIAL

Kirsty Altenburg, David Brotherson, Leonard Cox, Maital Dar, Gaby Ewington, Roland Fletcher, Scott Hawken, Mitch Hendrickson, Wayne Johnson, Sarah Klassen, Eileen Lustig, Terry Lustig, So Malay, Sam Player, Martin Polkinghorne, Ngaire Richards, and James St Julian.

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