

George Armelagos, 1936–2014

A wide network of friends and family mourn the death of Professor George J. Armelagos (Fig. 1), one of our most respected and admired biological anthropologists. Exploring the intersection of human biology, archaeology, and culture, Armelagos made many significant contributions to evolutionary anthropology.

The son of Greek immigrants, George (he always preferred to be called George) was born in Detroit on May 22, 1936. Surrounded by friends, colleagues, students and family, he died peacefully of pancreatic cancer at home in Atlanta on May 15, 2014. He is survived by his brothers Nick and James Armelagos of Detroit and his “adopted families” of friends, students, and colleagues.

Armelagos received a B.A. with honors in 1958 from the University of Michigan, where he played football and also spent a year in medical school. He received his Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Colorado in 1968. His career included teaching positions at the University of Utah, the University of Massachusetts (Amherst) and the University of Florida. He went to Emory University in 1993 as the Goodrich C. White distinguished professor of Anthropology, where he served as chair of the Anthropology Department from 2003 to 2009.

He was awarded the highest honors for his scholarship and service to Anthropology, including the Viking Medal from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Charles Darwin Award for Lifetime Achievement to Biological Anthropology from the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, and the Franz Boas Award for Exemplary Service to Anthropology from the American Anthropological Association. The Universities of Massachusetts and Emory both presented him with awards for his teaching and mentoring. Above all,



Figure 1. George Armelagos. (Color figure can be viewed in the online issue, which is available at wileyonlinelibrary.com.)

George was a much beloved teacher and friend to thousands of undergraduates and hundreds of graduate students, well known for his generosity, encouragement, humility, and humor.

Deeply curious intellectually, George read broadly in anthropology and many other fields. He was strongly influenced by Leslie White at the University of Michigan, and A.J. Kelso at the University of Colorado. From the outset of his career George was interested in the relationship between biology and culture. While there may not be precise agreement on a definition of “biocultural” among those with whom he collaborated, George was clear that his biological research was about the various ways that culture, past and present, influenced human health and nutrition. He did so with innovation, originality, and a singular ability to inspire students and colleagues to join in the projects at hand.

George was a passionate teacher, and perhaps he was most passionate about a non-racial approach to human variation. George also thought deeply about method and theory. Early in his career he was influenced by the promise of a new physical anthropology, one that moved beyond descriptive studies, typology and races to one that uncovered evolutionary, ecological,

and biocultural processes. Some of George’s first papers critiqued racial theories of population replacement in Sudanese Nubia. George was also interested in the dynamics of racism and helped write the American Anthropological Association’s statement on race.

What most fascinated George about human evolution and history were the transitions. Transitions were natural opportunities to observe how, for example, ecological changes, means of subsistence, settlement patterns, and other cultural processes produced stress and adaptive responses. He pioneered the use of skeletal remains to study the scars incurred by individuals and populations in transition.

George saw complexity and embraced it. The purpose for anatomy in George’s lab was to understand, on multiple levels – macroscopically, microscopically, biomechanically, biochemically, and molecularly – how disruptions to normal healthy bodies occurred, what the manifestation of those disruptions signified, and their probable cause. Cause was seldom considered in simple terms; rather, it was a matter of interactions among diet, nutrition, pathogens, stress and trauma. George also linked these aforementioned immediate causes to ecological and political-economic changes. George famously championed a multiple indicators approach, combined with identifying patterns in complexity.

His doctoral dissertation involved the study of health changes in Sudanese Nubia. He continued work on this project throughout his entire career. A major article in *Science* in 1969 illustrated the importance of a population perspective in studies of past health. His work helped launch the fields of paleopathology and bioarchaeology.

George was at the node of a huge network of students and colleagues, making it all the more difficult to single out names of collaborators without slighting others of equal

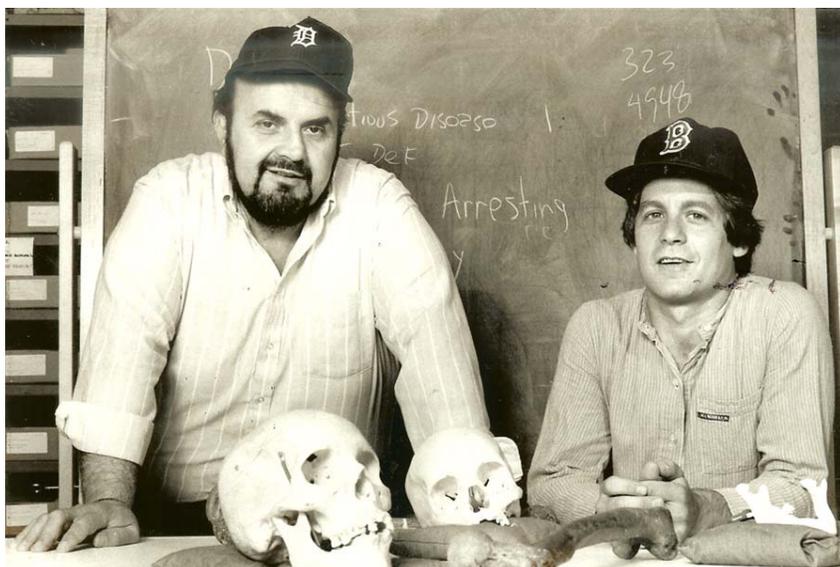


Figure 2. George Armelagos with graduate student Alan Goodman in 1982.

significance. Similarly, his career highlights are too numerous to be inclusive. Below we mention a few foci. Each highlight could be prefaced by, "George, with his students (names here)..."

From macroscopic studies of bone lesions such as porotic hyperostosis and periostitis, he went on to study osteon remodeling at the histological level, leading to the discovery of tetracycline in Nubian bones, which may have been related to beer consumption. At about this time, he took an active interest in the developing fields of medical anthropology and nutritional anthropology and became a strong advocate for using epidemiological and paleodemographic methods, for taking an ecological approach to the study of disease and he became one of the founders of nutritional anthropology.

Befitting his interest in change, he became fascinated with the biological consequences of agriculture. Going against the grain of some theorists who argued for a simple progressive model of expanding benefits, he argued that there could be significant health costs from increased population density and dependence on grain-based foods, highlighted in the 1984 edited volume *Paleopathology at*

the Origins of Agriculture. George and a gaggle of students expanded from Nubia to work on the biological costs of economic changes at Dickson Mounds, Illinois and in the Southwest. He took an interest in the controversies over the origins of syphilis and continued to explore the history of syphilis and HIV, as well as the sequence of past epidemiological transitions, arguing for a third epidemiological transition in human history.

George was magnanimous in support of his legions of students (Fig. 2). He got to know them, their friends and their families. It was hard to sneak by George's open office without being called in for a chat. He was very gregarious, and had a way of making those around him feel comfortable, accepted, and valued.

He went overboard to credit his students' contributions. Quite often, George could see in the fomenting kernels of ideas of students the wider potential and often their greater significance towards understanding the human experience. He also listened carefully to his students, and let them explore their own ideas and approaches. Working with George was a heady, free-flowing give and take.

The power of his writing was in the ideas, in his mentoring style, and in his ability to form dynamic collaborations with his students. Whether around a table in the lab or around the dining table in his home, he encouraged each student to take her/his thinking to the next level, making connections, and trusting them to do good work. As his bibliography of over 250 articles and thirteen books (<http://anthropology.emory.edu/home/assets/facultydocs/armelagos-pub-12.pdf>) attests, George, with high frequency, showcased his students' contributions by giving them first or higher ranking in authorship.

George's legacy goes well beyond his presentations, papers and books. He seemed to know everybody by their name: what they were working on, who they were connected to, and more. His smile was infectious. His wit and humor was kind and quick. His generosity was boundless. George's home was a gathering place. Dinner parties and informal gatherings at his house were frequent. Especially famous for his penchant toward meat over anything green, George cooked with spice and gusto; he fed the bellies of those around him as well as their minds.

A public memorial and celebration of this life and work will be held at Emory University on Friday, August 29th. In lieu of flowers, donations should be given to the Armelagos Lectureship Funds at Emory University, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, or the University of Colorado Boulder.

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