

## Conversations with ARCE fellows past and present

### Peter Lacovara

ARCE Fellow 1979-80

### Elizabeth Hart

ARCE Fellow 2012-13

*Peter and Beth spoke in January by phone. Their exchange has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

**PL:** How are things at The Met?

**BH:** They're great! I'm having a lot of fun looking at the sickles here, seeing how they change over time. I'm going to Egypt in about two weeks to look at some of the complete sickles at the Egyptian Museum. They have some from the tomb of Hemaka and Tutankhamun's tomb as well. And then I'm going to Giza to look at some of their flint sickles, and then pull it all together for my project.

How are things with you?

**PL:** Good, good. I'm just back from Egypt but I have to go back for a tour in about two weeks.

**BH:** Oh great, you'll be there.

**PL:** Yeah, so maybe we'll run into each other. Okay, we should start the chat. How do you think fellowships or conducting research in Egypt has changed over time? Have the available resources changed?

I just checked and I was a fellow in 79 and 80. It was pretty rough back then. I did an archaeology fellowship, which was rare, so the budget had to be stretched. I went to Deir el Ballas, which was the site I worked on for my dissertation, and I lived in a tent at the site. It was Petri-esque; it was really cold, and I ate tuna fish out of tin cans and bathed with cold water poured over my head. It was a lot different back then.



**PETER LACOVARA** (B.A. 1976, Boston University; Ph.D. 1993 The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago) is director of The Ancient Egyptian Archaeology and Heritage Fund. He is also consulting curator for the Egyptian collection at the Albany Institute of History and Art and visiting research scholar at the American University in Cairo. He has worked as senior curator of ancient Egyptian, Nubian and Near Eastern art at the Michael C. Carlos Museum and assistant curator in the department of ancient Egyptian, Nubian and Near Eastern art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Peter has taught at universities in the U.S. and Egypt. His archaeological fieldwork includes excavations at the Valley of the Kings, the palace city of Amenhotep III at Malqata, Abydos, Hierakonpolis and the Giza Plateau, and currently he is directing the survey and restoration of the site of Deir el Ballas. His publications include studies on daily life and urbanism in ancient Egypt, Egyptian mortuary traditions and the material culture of ancient Egypt and Nubia.

**BH:** Oh wow! Well, I did mine in 2013 and I was sort of doing an archaeology fellowship as well. I was analyzing artifacts that were stored in dig houses. I had to be on permits and go to the excavation houses and live there.

I was at Abydos, looking at the lithics from Dave Anderson's Mahasna project and from Steve Harvey's Ahmose and Tetisheri Project and then I was in Aswan at Naq el-Qarmila with Maria Gatto. We had much better living conditions – lovely dig house, lovely bathrooms.

**PL:** So, things have changed! Okay, the next question: Why was it crucial for you and other scholars to be able to work in Egypt and not just remotely?

The reason I went to Ballas was that the site had originally been excavated by George Reisner and never published. I'd found the records when I worked at the MFA, but they were very incomplete. There were plans of houses which had never been attached to a map, so there was no indication where they were on the site. I had to go back and re-survey and then of course found much more and found a lot more data. That kind of archaeology, of course, you can't do in a library.

**BH:** Yes, the artifacts are in Egypt, so going there is the only way to study them. Working with an archaeological collection in the field means it's very complete. I get to see everything, even the not-so-pretty pieces which are actually very important.

**PL:** Yes, and your project is so important because we know so little about flint tools and the Dynastic period; nobody pays attention to them.

**BH:** Right, and I want this project I'm working on now to show that there's still a lot that we can learn from them even in the Dynastic period when we have all this other data. With



the flint, you can still have a really good look at the economy and how it works because these flint remains preserved so well and there are so many of them. I'm also hoping eventually to write a kind of field guide for lithics, with collection strategies, an overview of the tool types and debitage types just to help make it easier for people to collect and deal with their lithics.

**PL:** That's great. What was living in Egypt like for you?

**BH:** Well, I spent most of my time in the field, in dig houses on projects. I got up at an ungodly hour, like 5 a.m., and was in the lab studying artifacts by 6 a.m. I took a break for second breakfast at 9:30 and worked until lunch at two. Then back in the lab for another few hours until it got dark. And then I processed data on my computer until it was time to go to bed, around 9 p.m.

But one thing I love about being in the field is that it's so remote; the Internet is complicated (though it's a bit better now). You get to ignore or not be able to access everything else in your life and just focus on doing the research. It's actually kind of relaxing in that way.

**PL:** Yes, escape all the political news at home. I've spent a fair amount of time in Cairo and I like Zamalek a lot really; you can walk around, there are shops and stuff. Cairo can be overwhelming. I'm from New York City, but I can't imagine somebody from a small town visiting Cairo for the first time.

**BH:** What are your highlights of your travels around Egypt? What do you recommend people visit?

**PL:** Let's see; I've led a fair number of tours. I try to take people to the Egyptian Museum and give them enough time. I think sometimes people are rushed through these things and don't get to see a lot of what they should see. Often, they don't put newer things on the itinerary, like the Imhotep Museum at Saqqara, or the serapeum



**ELIZABETH HART** is a J. Clawson Mills fellow in art history at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. She received her Ph.D. in anthropological archaeology from the University of Virginia in 2017, M.A. from the same institution in 2010, and B.A. from the University of Michigan in 2004. Beth's research specialties include ancient economies, the Predynastic period of Egyptian history, and lithic artifacts. She has participated in Egyptian fieldwork projects in Abydos, Aswan, Elkab, Giza, Helwan, El-Mahâsna and Wadi el-Hudi, and is the head lithic specialist for the University of Vienna's Wadi el-Sheikh project. She has worked as a research fellow with the University of Vienna, as board relations manager for the American Research Center in Egypt, taught at the University of Virginia and helped coordinate a special exhibit at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology. Her research has been supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, the University of Virginia and the American Research Center in Egypt.

since that's just recently re-opened, or even the Nubian Museum in Aswan which is fantastic.

**BH:** I took my family last year, and we did make it to the serapeum and the Nubian Museum. One of my favorites is Bab Zuwayla. Getting there, you go through the Egyptian market and that's really fun and not touristy, and Bab Zuwayla has the amazing views over Cairo. It's kind of scary to get up there and kind of exciting, and people love that.

**PL:** I also like The Gayer-Anderson Museum to get a snippet of what life was like in the past.

**PL:** Do you have any words of wisdom you'd like to share with those just starting out in their studies of Egypt's cultural heritage?

**BH:** Well, go to Egypt, with a tour or a group or to study. Being able to study while you can actually visit the sites and museums and the artifacts brings it all to life. It really helps you find out what you want to do. If you're planning to spend a long-term career dealing with Egypt, then you definitely have to go and see what you're getting yourself involved in because it's an amazing and fun place, but it's also very intense.

**PL:** And I think in particular, now, there's so much destruction happening because of the expanding population, and everything that goes along with it – cultural expansion, industrial expansion, cemetery expansion. Things are disappearing and being destroyed at a frightening pace. I would certainly encourage people to go to Egypt and try to record some of this material before it's lost forever. Probably not since the Aswan Dam have we faced such an urgent situation in archaeological recording.

**BH:** Do you have any advice for people who are doing fellowships?

**PL:** I was pretty much on my own back when I first started. But nowadays, ARCE goes out of its way to be very helpful to fellows. I was very



# FELLOWS FORUM

---

‘I would certainly encourage people to go to Egypt and try to record some of this material before it’s lost forever.’

APPLICATIONS  
FOR ARCE  
FELLOWSHIPS  
OPEN  
NOVEMBER 1.

LEARN MORE AND  
APPLY AT  
[ARCE.ORG/FELLOWS](http://ARCE.ORG/FELLOWS).

lucky because Lanny and Martha Bell really took me under their wings and helped me when I was down in Luxor, but the ARCE Cairo staff really go out of their way to be very helpful and provide everything the fellows need. They have a lot more support.

**BH:** And they do usually have groups of seven or eight coming in at a time and they get together in Cairo and try to build some community there. I’m sure it’s nice to have other people just to study with or know that are doing the same thing. I spent most of my fellowship, like I said, outside of Cairo and I

didn’t get to tap into that as much.

**PL:** But you did get to meet a lot of people in the field, so that was a really good thing.

**BH:** Yes, exactly. That’s one of the best parts of doing the fellowship: getting to connect with other scholars at the same time.

**PL:** Yes, you make the international connection, not only with Egyptian scholars but with people from all over the world. 🌸