

Obituary of Sally McBrearty (1949–2023)

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OBITUARY

Sally McBrearty was a pioneer in paleoanthropology whose work played a profound role in shifting the focus of the archaeology of ‘modern’ human behavior from the European Upper Paleolithic to sites attributed to the African Middle Stone Age. She passed away in July of 2023. Sally embodied a “take no shit, take no prisoners” attitude, constantly pushed against gendered expectations and boundaries in academia, was a phenomenal mentor, and will be sorely missed, particularly by her friends and colleagues in the US and Kenya.

Sally grew up in the Los Angeles area, graduating from a strict Catholic high school surrounded by all that was happening in 1967 LA. She moved up to the San Francisco area, receiving her B.A. from the University of California, Berkeley in 1971. There, she studied with J. Desmond Clark, but moved to the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign to study with Charles Keller, whom she met while enrolled at a seminar he’d taught at Berkeley while Clark was on sabbatical. Around that time, Keller had shifted from working in South Africa to Tanzania, where Sally also did fieldwork (McBrearty et al. 1984), as did her close friend and fellow student Michael Mehlman (McBrearty 2011). Although as a student Sally also excavated in the western US and the UK, it was eastern Africa, and particularly Kenya, that was to be her home, both literally and academically, for much of the remainder of her life.

Sally began working in western Kenya in the late 1970s. She published a brief report on her excavations at Songhor in 1981 but her focus was Muguruk (McBrearty 1988), a site that was the subject of her Ph.D. thesis (awarded in 1986) and that initiated a deep-dive in the history of our discipline with an archival study of the Archdeacon Owen (McBrearty 1984), a foundational figure in eastern African paleontology and archaeology who was often overshadowed by the company he kept, such as L.S.B Leakey. Sally, to her credit, always refused to be overshadowed by anyone, living something of an outsized life in Kisumu and later Nairobi, driving her beloved Volkswagen Kombi van. It was during the 1980s that Sally met Dr. Andrew Hill, the love of her life and chief partner in crime, who was then at the National Museums of Kenya (Figure 1).

Sally and Andrew moved to the US while Andrew was a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard with David Pilbeam, time Sally used to work on termite collections at Harvard’s Mu-

seum of Comparative Zoology, efforts she combined with her detailed field observations to produce a classic study on termites as agents of bioturbation (McBrearty 1990). She also briefly joined teams working in the Siwalik Hills in Pakistan as well as in Abu Dhabi (McBrearty 1999).

Sally was a postdoctoral fellow at Yale, where she taught briefly as a visiting lecturer followed by time as a visiting Assistant Professor at the College of William and Mary, after which she took a position as an Assistant Professor at Brandeis University. She joined the faculty at the University of Connecticut as an Associate Professor in 1994. There, she was promoted to (full) Professor in 2002, was Head of the Department of Anthropology from 2008–2014, and profoundly shaped the character of the archaeological faculty at the University of Connecticut prior to her retirement in 2018 and appointment as an Emeritus Professor. Shortly after her arrival, Sally leveraged support from the administration to build an Old World Archaeology Program, hiring several new faculty for whom she was an invaluable mentor. The success of the program and the approximately 20 Ph.D. students it has graduated is due largely to Sally’s vision and willingness to put the effort in to make things happen.

Just before starting at the University of Connecticut, Sally began what was to be her final major field project on sites and sediments of the Kapthurin Formation, west of Lake Baringo in the Kenyan Rift Valley (Figure 2). This project led to the discovery of some of the only chimpanzee fossils known (McBrearty and Jablonski 2005) and some of the earliest Middle Stone Age sites (McBrearty et al. 1996), and was where a cohort of graduate students cut their teeth, or at least their shins, backs, and arms, on the many thorns waiting west of Lake Baringo...

All of her students (Figure 3) were pretty much held to the same exacting standards and more or less had to live by these guiding principles: Know your geology, know your history, know how to make a good gin and tonic and dry martini (with Bombay Sapphire, of course), work hard, write well, go figure out problems for yourself, and absolutely cut the bullshit. She was hard and had high standards, but she was generous with her time, and was the best mentor any of us who were her students could have possibly had.

As an academic, Sally will probably be best remem-



Figure 1. Sally and Andrew, 1996 (courtesy of Els Cornelissen).

bered for “The revolution that wasn’t,” a massive synthesis of data from across Africa that challenged the prevailing narrative of Europe as a focal point for understanding the origins of ‘modern human’ behavior (McBrearty and Brooks 2000). The paper itself represented a paradigm shift in the discipline and was an outgrowth of years of discussions with co-author Alison Brooks that culminated in the keynote address at the 1998 meetings of the Society of Africanist Archaeologists in Syracuse, New York, a talk that was the final impetus to publish these ideas. Though initially conceived of as a book project, Sally and Alison realized that they could reach a wider readership if they published their ideas as a journal article, and their paper was the first time that one article comprised a single issue of the *Journal of Human Evolution*, since cited over 3,400 times, remaining one of the most cited papers in the discipline. Writing the paper was a stressful and often frustrating process, but for Sally was an important step in overturning what she saw as racist interpretations of the African record and its use in, or more often absence from, narratives of human evolution, a theme she returned to in later ruminations on the topic (McBrearty 2007, 2013). Although the paper is usually cited for its massive compilation of archaeological evidence, Sally was just as proud of her efforts to reign in hominin morphological variability that were presented in that paper. In recognition of the importance of this and her other works, Sally was elected a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2007.

Sally had a tough exterior, was quick to anger but equally quick to forgive. She had little tolerance for those she and Andrew in their private argot always referred to as “flaming assholes,” but was a loyal and loving friend to those close to her. She did what was right but did it without calling attention to herself, quietly paying medical bills or school fees for Kenyan colleagues for decades, engendering intensely loyal friendships in the process. She was sharp, funny, and with a biting sense of humor; to sit next to her at conference and hear her running critique of the proceedings was both hilarious and, as a student, more than a little terrifying. She knew her disciplinary history and the stories of her colleagues, having been present from almost the very beginning of the founding of both the Society of Africanist Archaeologists and the Paleoanthropology Society. Sally was deeply fond of her Abyssinian cats, antiques, and obscure collectibles, and Bryan Ferry and Roxy Music. The 18th century house and former tavern in Glastonbury, CT, that she and Andrew bought and remodeled was their pride and joy and host to any number of parties over the years.

Sally never really recovered from Andrew’s death in 2015, and I suspect that few of us will ever really get over her passing. Even now, as I write that last line, I hear her asking “Don’t you think that’s a little bit much?” But no, in the end, I don’t think so, and sadly it’s us, not her, still here writing it.



Figure 2. Sally and John Kingston wedged into a geological trench dug west of Lake Baringo, 2004 (photograph by Christian Tryon).

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Figure 3. Sally with students and friends, Baringo, 2002. From left to right: Veronica Waweru, Cara Roure Johnson, Sally McBrearty, Christian Tryon, Rhonda Kauffman, Neil Roach (courtesy of Richard Sherwood).