I’m pleased to share with you activities from our fall semester as your new department head. However, let me first acknowledge Dr. Ervan Garrison’s contributions to the department as head for the last six years. Dr. Garrison stepped down on June 30 to continue his research in archaeology, both underwater and on land, and work more closely with students. Erv headed the department through a period of retrenchment then growth during which we honed our teaching and research focus in ecological and environmental anthropology. Our graduate students excelled for the number of prestigious awards and fellowships they earned, and we hired several new faculty members. Despite our modest size as a department we continue to stand out nationally among our peers for the quality of our graduate education and the level of external funding in support for our research.

Becoming department head July 1 has given me new opportunities to interact with all members of the department. I can say that students, faculty and staff are all engaged in making UGA Anthropology a great place to be at this time in history. All are dedicated to creating and disseminating knowledge about past and present human relations to the natural world through their archaeological, cultural and biological investigations. Their enthusiasm and initiative is contagious.

We have several new members of the department since the last newsletter, which in our revised format we plan to issue regularly in the fall and spring of each year. Assistant Professor Don Nelson has adapted to the Georgia heat after a few years in chillier England and is enjoying teaching and climate research in Brazil and elsewhere. Cabe Mottley joined us as departmental accountant in October to cheers by the rest of the staff. Jennifer Messer, who coordinates social science development activities for Franklin College, now has her office in the department and we look forward to working with her to enhance our relationship with our alumni. Dr. John Chamblee joined the Coweeta Long-Term Ecological Research Project based out of our department as information manager, which is really a return for him as he is a department alum and a veteran southeastern archaeologist.
René Bobe spends months in Ethiopia each year, returning each year to a collaborative research project which has resulted in some spectacular finds—like Selam, the 3.3-million-year-old Dikika baby. “Selam” means ‘peace’ in many Ethiopian languages. Why peace? The answer is no farther than the firearms bristling from the backs of the project’s local workers each day.

On this side of the Awash River, in Dikika, the armed locals assisting the researchers are the Issa. Across the river are the Afar, who are equally equipped with firepower of their own. Bobe has worked on both sides of the river, with both Afar and Issa. Each morning an Ethiopian member of the team goes out from the camp to assess that day’s situation, says Bobe. “He goes out and talks to the people, to see if it is safe to work that day. Sometimes it isn’t, and we stay back.” The conflict between the peoples, a struggle for scarce resources lent hostility by ethnic tensions, is an everyday reality for the researchers. They are there to construct another everyday reality, that of 3-4 million years ago.

Lucy was an adult when she died. Selam predeceased her by many thousands of years, and is estimated to have been only three or so at the time of her death. Lucy’s discovery was an event—Even though her skeleton was just 40% complete, her fossil yielded important information on the hominin transition between movement through trees and bipedal walking. Selam’s fossil is considerably more complete (though still, nine years on, being released from sandstone), and her bones provide more detail concerning A. afarensis locomotion. Among anthropologists, the consensus is that A. afarensis walked upright, but retained features of tree-moving creatures. How much A. afarensis relied upon walking, or whether they continued to climb, move, or live in trees, is a question still much-debated among researchers. It’s a pivotal question, for walking upright is a hallmark of humanity. The DRP seeks to establish the ecological conditions that prompted or supported such an adaptation within the hominin family tree.

Bobe is a biological anthropologist who joined the DRP in 2000, though he has worked in the Afar region since 1994. “[I’m] interested in the relationship between climatic change and evolutionary processes,” he begins, and goes on to explain that his research focuses upon the environmental and ecological context of human evolution in Africa. To that end, he says, he specializes in the study of fossil mammals that provide a long-term record of environmental change. “In East Africa, there’s a deep time record spanning several million years. I look at how fauna change over time in relationship to climate.”

The Awash Valley area is sere and bare today except for at the river’s edge. During the time when Selam lived, the environment was very different, including lush forests interspersed with rivers and lakes. Bobe describes the landscape as a mosaic environment, an evolving forest-savanna mix where different habitats permitted a diversity of plant life, which in turn supported a broader array of fauna, including grazing animals. It is thought that this environment prompted adaptations to further A. afarensis’ success. Mosaic environments tend to resist disturbances such as climate change and disease, and permit only short migrations from one habitat to the next in times of stress. Bobe notes that from the time of A. afarensis through the emergence of the Homo genus, the ecosystem was changing.

In a sense, Bobe works both backward and forward. He has found an astounding variety of fossilized vertebrates around Selam’s remains. Alongside long-extinct creatures, among those he’s identified are antelopes, hippopotamuses, impalas, elephants, and monkeys. Drawing from his knowledge of the habitats required to sustain each of these animals, he is able to reconstruct the paleoenvironment. Comparing the fossil evidence contemporary with Selam to
other data surrounding the evolution of early humans, he observes the signs showing how one climate yielded to another. Climate variability and change drives such changes in ecosystems; thus Bobe is able to assess the impact of climate change upon hominin evolution.

The Dikika Research Project is ongoing, and its researchers, including Dr. Bobe, will continue to learn more about our humanity by studying our origins.

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In memoriam: Jamie Waggoner

This fall, we lost Dr. James Cowan Waggoner, Jr. to brain cancer, at the age of 38. Officially, Jamie Waggoner was a 1997 graduate of Georgia College, where he earned a B.A. in history. However, he took classes in our department and participated in Mark Williams’ field schools during the 1995 and 1996 field seasons. Jamie also worked in our Laboratory of Archaeology.

After his time at UGA, Jamie worked for two years at a Georgia cultural resource management firm run by UGA anthropology alumni, then earned an M.S from Florida State University. He completed his Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Florida this year, not long before he died. Jamie’s M.S. and Ph.D. research were both rooted in a love for Archaic period archaeology of southwestern Georgia. Jamie recorded over 300 archaeological sites in his beloved region and left a legacy of greater understanding, especially concerning Archaic period human exploitation of upland southeastern U.S. ecosystems.

Jamie was also an infectiously cheerful and optimistic colleague and a generous and loyal friend. Over the years, he volunteered his time, energy and talent working repeatedly with Pluckhahn, Thompson, and Chamblee in many sites at Georgia and Mexico. Though Jamie was not technically a UGA alumnus, he was a great friend to many of us and to Georgia archaeology. In his professional life, he exemplified the place-based, ecological anthropology this department values. In his personal life, he represented the joyousness and collegiality for which we all strive. Like so many people across the southeastern archaeological community and beyond, we were happy to claim him as our own and we will miss him now that he is gone.

— John Chamblee (B.A. ’96), Victor Thompson (B.A. ’97) and Tom Pluckhahn (B.A. ’88, M.A., ’94, Ph.D. ’02)