

# Some Observations on the Remarkable Career of Richard G. Cooke

Anthony J. Ranere

Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, United States  
[ranere@temple.edu](mailto:ranere@temple.edu)

**Abstract:** My goal in this presentation is to highlight some of the many accomplishments that have marked Richard Cooke's career over the last five decades. Richard arrived in Panama in 1969 as doctoral candidate at the Institute of Archaeology, London University. His 1972 dissertation displays many of the scholarly practices that served him well throughout his career: (1) an encyclopedic approach that considers the widest possible range of information available on his subject, (2) collaboration with specialists in analyzing field data and (3) his own careful analysis of artifacts, particularly ceramics. In the decade after finishing his dissertation, Richard excavated additional ceramic sites as well as preceramic and historic sites. Concerned that the excavation of isolated sites was not providing us with a comprehensive view of Central Panama prehistory, we initiated the Proyecto Santa Maria in the 1980s, a long term interdisciplinary project that provided an overview of subsistence and settlement in Central Pacific Panama over a 13,000 year period. With this framework in place, Richard turned to directing extensive excavations in various sites, most notably Cerro Juan Diaz. Along the way, Richard has contributed major scholarly publications on too many topics to mention here, established one of the best comparative faunal collections in tropical America, mentored numerous students from Latin America and beyond, informed the general public through publications and presentations about Isthmus-Colombian deep history and collaborated in productive ways with numerous other researchers; I count myself fortunate to be one of them.

**Keywords:** Richard Cooke; Central American prehistory; Panama archaeology; faunal analysis; human-environment interactions.

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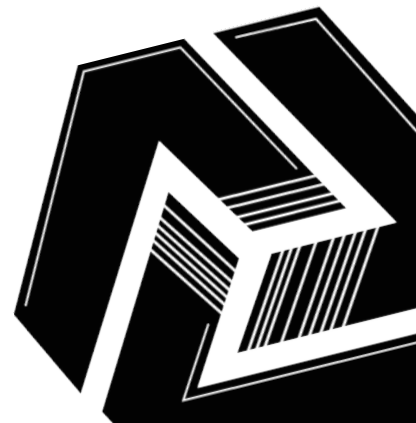
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### **Algunas observaciones sobre la extraordinaria carrera de Richard Cooke**

**Resumen:** Mi objetivo en esta presentación es destacar algunos de los muchos logros que han marcado la carrera de Richard Cooke en las últimas cinco décadas. Richard llegó a Panamá en 1969 como candidato doctoral del Instituto de Arqueología de la Universidad de Londres. Su disertación de 1972 muestra muchas de las prácticas académicas que le sirvieron de apoyo a lo largo de su carrera: (1) un enfoque enciclopédico que considera la amplia gama de información disponible sobre su tema, (2) la colaboración con especialistas en el análisis de datos de campo y (3) su propio análisis cuidadoso de artefactos, en particular la cerámica. En la década después de terminar su disertación Richard excavó sitios cerámicos adicionales, así como sitios precerámicos e históricos (al igual que yo). Preocupados por el hecho de que la excavación de sitios aislados no nos proporcionaban una visión integral de la prehistoria de Panamá Central iniciamos el Proyecto Santa María en la década de 1980, el cual es un proyecto interdisciplinario a largo plazo que ofreció una visión general de la subsistencia y los asentamientos en el Pacífico Central de Panamá durante un periodo de 13000 años. Con este marco de referencia, Richard dirigió extensas excavaciones en varios sitios, más notablemente en Cerro Juan Díaz. A lo largo del camino, Richard ha contribuido con importantes publicaciones académicas sobre muchos más temas de lo que se puede mencionar aquí, estableció una de las mejores colecciones de fauna comparativa en la América tropical, fue el mentor de numerosos estudiantes de América Latina y más allá, informó al público general a través de publicaciones y presentaciones sobre la historia antigua de la región Istmo- Colombiana y colaboró de manera productiva con numerosos investigadores; me considero afortunado de ser uno de ellos.

**Palabras clave:** Richard Cooke; prehistoria de América Central; arqueología panameña; análisis faunístico; interacciones humano-ambientales.

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

For all of us who participated in this round table, Richard Cooke is like the elephant being described by the blind. We all know parts of who this man is, but none of us know all the things that make Richard a remarkable scholar and beloved person. My goal here is to contribute my view of Richard over the 48 years that I have known him focusing mostly on his professional career.

## **Panama Prehistory BC (Before Cooke)**

It is interesting to reflect on what little was known about Panama prehistory in 1969 when Richard first came to Panama. Best known was the rich cemetery of Sitio Conte, known primarily from the two volumes published on the site by Samuel Lothrop (1937, 1942; see also Mason, 1940, 1941, 1942). Lothrop (1950)

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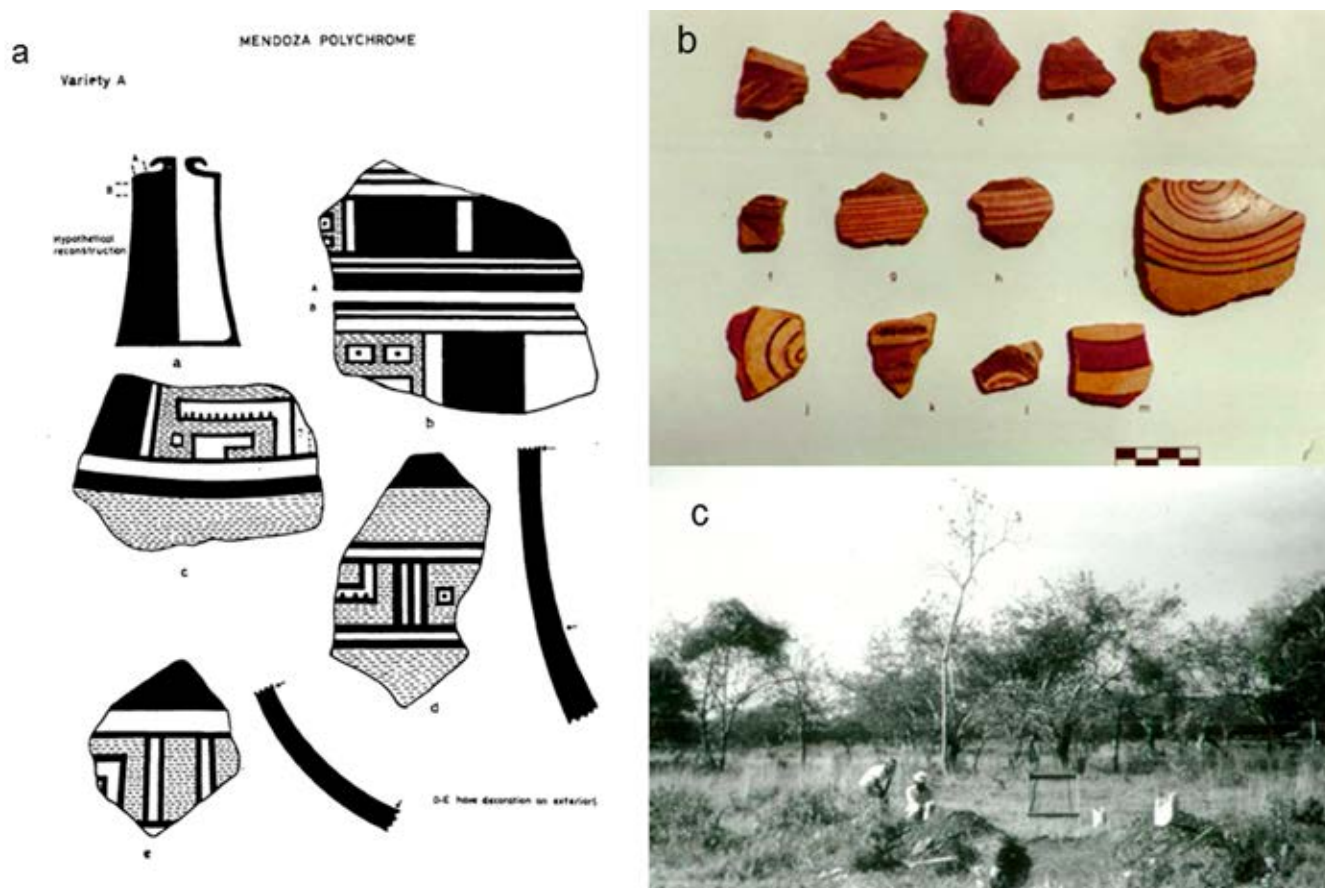
<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the paper presented in the Symposium “After a Millennial Cultural Legacy: Richard Cooke’s Contributions to the Isthmo-Colombian Area Archaeology” (*Tras una herencia cultural milenaria: contribuciones de Richard Cooke a la arqueología del Área Istmo-colombiana*), organized by Luis A. Sánchez and Yajaira Núñez-Cortés at the XI Central American Anthropology Network Congress (*XI Congreso de la Red Centroamericana de Antropología*), celebrated from February 27 to March 3, 2017 in San Jose, Costa Rica.

had also published a volume on the archaeology of Veraguas as well as articles on other Panama topics including the important Playa Venado site (Lothrop, 1954, 1956, 1959, 1961, 1964). Cerro Mangote, excavated by Charles McGimsey (1956, 1958), was the only preceramic site known from the country. Fluted points, obviously Paleoindian in age, had been reported from surface collections from the eroded surfaces of Madden Lake / Lago Alajuela (Sander, 1959, 1964). Monagrillo was the only major excavated early ceramic site in the country (Willey and McGimsey, 1954). Olga Linares (1968) had just published a year earlier her monograph on the survey and test excavations in the Gulf of Chiriquí. Much earlier (Holmes, 1888; MacCurdy, 1911), publications on Chiriquí pottery from looted tombs were also on record. A small number of other publications on Panama archaeology by professional and amateur archaeologists also existed (e.g., Biese, 1964; Ladd, 1964). Radiocarbon dates were only available for four sites: Cerro Mangote, Monagrillo, Playa Venado and El Cangrejal in the Gulf of Chiriquí. The year 1969 was also when Olga Linares began her major research project in Western Panama, but only some preliminary results were available when Richard was writing his dissertation in 1972 (Linares and Ranere, 1971).

Richard arrived in Panama in 1969 and I arrived in 1970; we met shortly thereafter. We both ended up doing the field research that led to our respective PhD dissertations in 1972. His dissertation clearly shows that many of his research interests and skills that we have all come to expect from Richard were already in evidence: (1) his exhaustive knowledge of the relevant literature, (2) his detailed knowledge of material remains - ceramics in particular (Figure 1), (3) his understanding of the natural and human modified ecology, (4) his familiarity with the texts of the early Spanish chroniclers, (5) his collaboration with other scientists (6) his insights into the early human impact on the environment and the appearance of agriculture in Central Pacific Panama (Gran Cocle), (7) his focus on the dimensions of time and space in identifying cultural patterns in prehistory.

Richard was involved in a number of archaeological projects in the 1970s, including (1) excavating preceramic sites with Junius Bird in central Panama - Cueva de los Ladrones (Figure 2a) - and eastern Panama - Cueva Bustamante - as well as directing the excavation of the Hornito preceramic site in western Panama (Bird and Cooke, 1978; Cooke, 1977a), (2) expanding on his earlier excavations at Sitio Sierra (Cooke, 1977b), (3) conducting rescue excavations at sites including El Caño and Miraflores (Cooke, 1976a, 1976b), (4) directing the excavation in the Convent of Santo Domingo in the Casco Viejo (Cooke and Rovira, 1983), and likely a number of other things that I do not recall. Richard did visit and participate in my 1975 excavations at the Aguadulce Shelter (Figures 2b and 2c), a year after he and Junius Bird excavated Cueva de los Ladrones.

By 1979, when I was re-excavating Cerro Mangote, Richard and I had come to the conclusion that our small projects excavating individual sites over the years were not giving us answers to many important questions about Panama prehistory including the nature of the earliest occupations of Panama, the initial human adaptations to tropical forest habitats, the origins and development of agriculture, and changes in demography over time, among other things. As a result, we conceived of what we called the Proyecto San-



**Figure 1:** Illustrations from Richard Cooke's 1972 dissertation. a) Mendoza Polychrome, Variety A; b) Corotú polychrome sherds from Sitio Sierra, AG-3 (a - l & m) and La Herradura, PN-11 (j & k); c) Excavations at NA-13, March 1971.

ta Maria and acquired funds from the National Science Foundation of the United States and the Smithsonian Institution to carry out a 5 year project from 1981 to 1985 in the Santa Maria River watershed in Central Pacific Panama (Cooke and Ranere, 1984, 1992). The project recorded 598 sites (Figure 3), over 100 with preceramic components, conducted excavations at 25 sites, some major in extent, and retrieved sediment cores from lakes and alvinas to collect data on environmental and vegetational histories. This multidisciplinary project provided a framework for changing environments, subsistence practices and settlement systems over the last 13,000 years.

In addition to co-directing the project, Richard intensified his efforts to assemble what has become one of the most comprehensive faunal comparative collections in the tropical America (Figure 4). As a consequence, Richard and his colleagues in the faunal wing of the STRI archaeology lab have been able to identify to species a remarkably large percentage of the faunal remains recovered from archaeological sites in Panama and other parts of the tropical America (e.g., Cooke, 1992, 1996; Cooke and Jimenez, 2004, 2008, 2009; Martinez, Jimenez and Cooke, 2009).



**Figure 2:** Two sites excavated in the 1970s with preceramic and early ceramic components, Coclé Province, Central Pacific Panama. a) Cueva de los Ladrones; b) Aguadulce Shelter; c) Richard Cooke at the Aguadulce Shelter. Photo 2a by R. Cooke; photos 2b and 2c by A. Ranere.

Throughout the 1980s and beyond, Richard cemented his position as the leading expert on multiple aspects of Panama prehistory through publications and both professional and public presentations. Topics included (1) the interaction between prehistoric populations and the environment (Cooke et al., 1985; Cooke, Jimenez and Ranere, 2007; Cooke and Piperno, 1993), (2) the relationships between indigenous populations, language and archaeology (Cooke, 1987, 2005) (3) birds, amphibians, terrestrial mammals, fish and other aquatic fauna in Central American prehistory (Cooke, 1984, 1989, 1992; Cooke et al., 2016; Cooke and Jimenez, 2008, 2009), (4) ceramics in Panama prehistory (Cooke, 1980, 1995, 2003; Iizuka, Cooke, Frame, and Vandiver, 2014; Sanchez and Cooke, 2000), (5) Gold and iconography in Panama



**Figure 3:** Richard Cooke in the field during the Proyecto Santa Maria, Central Pacific Panama (1980s). a) Carabali Shelter with Wilson Valerio; b) La Mula-Sarigua with Pat Hansell; c) Transect surveying with University of Panama students; d) Campesino patio on the Santa Fe transect in the uplands. Photos by A. Ranere.

and Costa Rican prehistory (Cooke, 1986; Cooke, Sanchez, and Udagawa, 2000; Cooke and Bray, 1985; Cooke and Sanchez, 1997), and (6) Historic archaeology in Panama City (Cooke and Rovira, 1983). In the 1980s Richard also organized and funded a workshop for archaeologists entitled “The analysis of organic remains in the archaeology of the New World Tropics” and a congress for Circum-Caribbean researchers entitled “Non-Imperial Polities in the lands visited by Christopher Columbus on his four journeys to the New World”.

In the 1990s Richard initiated excavations at the site of Cerro Juan Diaz, a large habitation site and cemetery in the valley of the Rio La Villa occupied from ca 300 B.C. until the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 5). He directed and funded the major research effort at Cerro Juan Diaz that continued for nine years, involved numerous researchers and produced major insights into the lifeways and funerary rituals of the



**Figure 4:** Richard Cooke with Tony and Joan Ranere in the faunal laboratory at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI). Photo by B. Ranere.

site's inhabitants, and, more broadly, the Central Panama region (Cooke, 2001; Cooke, Sanchez, Isaza, and Pérez, 1998; Cooke and Sanchez, 1997; Mayo and Cooke, 2005). During this same period he also carried out experimental studies on fish and other marine fauna captured in estuary traps, and examined artisanal fishing practices (Cooke and Tapia, 1994a, 1994b). Richard produced numerous publications during the decade which included many topics directly related to Panama archaeological materials (e.g., ceramics, faunal remains, metallurgy, iconography), but also other topics that included the early settlement of Central and northern South America (Cooke, 1998a; Cooke and Piperno, 1993), native peoples in Precolumbian and Colonial Periods in Central America (Cooke, 1998b), the genetics of indigenous peoples and modern inhabitants of Panama (Arias et al., 1992; Kolman et al., 1995), and the taxonomy of marine catfish (Cooke, 1996) - among other topics.

In the 2000s and 2010s Richard continued on a trajectory of collaborating with more and varied researchers and getting involved in publications that were increasingly large in scope. This is best exemplified by two articles in the journal *Science* that looked at the collapse of coastal ecosystems (Jackson et al., 2001) and the degradation of coral reefs in global perspective (Pandolfi et al., 2003) with 19 and 12 authors



**Figure 5:** Richard Cooke and Ilean Isaza at the excavation of Cerro Juan Diaz, Azuero Peninsula, Panama. Photo by A. Ranere.

respectively. Topics of other multi-authored publications included genetics of New World marine catfish (Betancur, Acero, Bermingham, and Cooke, 2007), starch grains from pre-Columbian chili peppers (Perry et al., 2007), Late Archaic fish fauna from southwest Mexico (Anikouchine et al., 2004), sociocultural transformations among native populations of Panama in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Cooke, Isaza, Griggs, Desjardins, and Sánchez, 2003a), and the manufacture, exchange and display of gold in Precolumbian Panama (Cooke et al., 2003b). Most recently, Richard has collaborated with geneticists in examining the mitochondrial DNA and Y-chromosomal data from modern Panamanians that show the major contribution that, Native American females and, to a lesser extent, males have made to the ancestry of these modern populations (Perego et al., 2012; Grugni et al., 2015). Richard also initiated a long term research project in the Pearl Islands in 2007 that has generated multiple publications over the years including two recently published important multi-authored articles (Cooke et al., 2016; Martinez-Polanco, Jimenez, Buckley, and Cooke, 2015).

Over the years, Richard has been very generous with his time and knowledge to the many archaeologists and other researchers who have appeared at his door looking for advice and assistance. In his capacity as research scientist at STRI, Richard has mentored countless numbers of students from around the world,



but particularly from Latin America, in both his field and laboratory projects. He has run workshops for aspiring archaeologists from Latin America, served on thesis committees for students from many countries and continues to mentor students in faunal analysis on an individual basis. Throughout his career, Dr. Cooke has been committed to making the information gained through scientific research available to the public. He has written countless articles in local newspapers, magazines and journals, and given even more public talks on the prehistoric and contemporary cultures of Panamá. He has also assisted in the development of museum displays in Panama for regional museums as well as the National Museum of Anthropology (Museo Antropológico Reina Torres de Araúz) and the new Frank Gehry designed Biomuseo in Panamá City.

Currently, Richard is engaged in a program to digitize the field records of archaeological surveys and excavations carried out by him and his collaborators in Panama over the past 5 decades. The number of field forms, journals, site maps, plan views, profiles, photographs, slides and other data now available only in paper, negatives and transparencies is daunting. And while a great deal of the information in these records is available in published form, much more can be learned using current investigative techniques and even more is likely to be learned in the future using methods that we cannot even imagine now. Digitizing these data and thus making them more widely available to other researchers in both the near and distant future insures that the valuable information generated by these previous projects will not be relegated to the dustbins of history.

Richard continues to be active on many fronts - research, writing, giving public talks, digitizing field records, mentoring students - and somehow manages to fit them all into his busy schedule. In this volume, we celebrate his past contributions and look forward to those in the future (Figure 6).

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**Figure 6:** a) Leaving a conference on Barro Colorado Island (STRI); left to right, Erika Wagner, Alberta Zucchi, Joan Ranere, John Bort, Richard Cooke, Earl Smith; b) In England to participate in the International Congress of Americanists; left to right, Richard Cooke, Doris Weiland, Dolores Piperno, Francisco Herrera; c) Richard Cooke in the Aguadulce field lab of the Proyecto Santa Maria; d) Dolores Piperno and Richard Cooke extracting a lake core; Richard Cooke at rest. Photos by A. Ranere.

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