

Javier Urcid

Memorial Minute for Robert N. Zeitlin

Brandeis Faculty Meeting, December 5, 2025

Dr. Robert Norman Zeitlin, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, passed away at his home in Maine after a long illness on June 6, 2025. Bob retired from Brandeis in 2000 after 25 years of teaching undergraduate and graduate students. Trained at Yale, where he met Judith Francis Zeitlin, his wife and frequent collaborator, he was a Mesoamerican archaeologist, long interested in the early development of complex societies and how interregional exchange, primarily in obsidian, contributed to such complexity. Most of Bob's field research was focused on Mexico's southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

Bob was born in Brooklyn, NY in 1935. After graduating with a B.A in psychology from Cornell in 1957 and pursuing a post-graduate Bachelor of Science in Engineering at Boston University, he served in the United States Navy. His final assignment, as intelligence officer on the USS Galveston, found him deployed in the Caribbean at the height of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. After completing his service, Bob returned to a desk job with a New York engineering company but found this work unsatisfying and began pursuing other career options. A chance conversation led him to a master's degree in anthropology at Hunter College and then on to Yale, where he received his PhD.

I first crossed paths with Bob in the Spring of 1986, when Michael Coe, my mentor at Yale, invited him to be part of the faculty committee for my doctoral comprehensive examinations. Nervous as I was, I vividly remember his fair and carefully crafted questions. A couple of subsequent ephemeral encounters occurred at professional meetings, when we would stumble upon each other entering or exiting organized sessions or symposia. Then, sometime in late 1998, when I was in Mexico on an archaeological project, I received a surprise phone call from him, inviting me to visit Brandeis for a job interview. It was the incredible hospitality that I received from him and Judith that heavily weighted in my final decision to join this wonderful institution. What was initially a mere acquaintance, soon grew into a close friendship. Bob and Judith welcomed me into their house in Stow while I frantically searched for a place to live, and Bob took time from his busy schedule to introduce me to key figures at Brandeis, as well as Mesoamerican colleagues at MIT and Harvard. I will never forget a wonderful weekend trip to their house in Maine that combined archaeological exploration of 5,000 years old shell mounds in North Haven Island, just off Rockport, with an edifying lesson on the local fishing industry, topped by a gargantuan feasting of lobster that was harvested on our way to the island.

The key intellectual contributions of Bob to the field of Mesoamerican Studies are fourfold. A great deal of his published work centered on understanding the interaction between early states and the societies on their periphery. Through fieldwork on the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec, he and Judith investigated the impact of the powerful highland Zapotec polity centered at the ancient city of Monte Alban on the coastal societies of southern Oaxaca during some 600 hundred years, between 400 b.c.e. and the third century AD. Bob was also interested in the analysis of ancient trade and exchange. He pioneered the application of analytical techniques to study ancient trade networks, specifically the use of trace element analysis of obsidian artifacts to figure out how peoples procured and traded stone tools.

His interest in modeling the genesis of extensive human and plant symbioses that lead to food production took Bob and Judith to the tropical region of Belize, where they team up with

the formidable Richard Scotty Mac Neish, then affiliated with the Andover Peabody Museum, in search of pre-ceramic human settlements.

Finally, Bob and Judith's extensive work in the Pacific littoral of Southern Oaxaca, particularly at the site of Laguna Zope, still constitute the only regional archaeological survey and selective probing ever conducted there, and provided crucial data for understanding the local development of social complexity prior to European colonization.

During his tenure at Brandeis, Bob inspired many students in archaeological practice. Whether teaching theory, analyzing in his laboratory materials from his projects in Oaxaca and Belize, or implementing nascent digital tools in the field, he always conveyed a sense of awe while studying the past. His educational and social commitment with archaeology saw him seeking ways for the Anthropology department to create synergies with MIT (through the Center for Materials Research in Archaeology and Ethnology), and with the Waltham community, and for years collaborated with the Waltham Public School system to bring flocks of excited Elementary students for a day of fun learning at Sibley Farm, one of the archaeological sites near campus that Bob explored for years while teaching archaeological field methods.

In his post-retirement years, Bob turned his attention to local environmental and community issues in Maine—serving on the board of the Medomak Valley Land Trust and creating a community-accessible woodland through the Martin Point Wildlife Preserve. Besides Judith and his two sons, Andrew and Jeremy, he leaves behind his granddaughters, Noemi and Zoe, and his sister and brother-in-law, Ruth and Gerry Fischbach. The family asks that any contributions in his memory be made to your preferred environmental non-profit organization.

Let me close these remarks by dedicating to him a poem written in 1954 by the Mesoamerican ethnohistorian Robert Barlow. The poem is a reflection about time, a central trope of archaeological practice:

We do not even know when their eyeballs were eaten by time
The Cloud people, the Hill-Lords
The roof of that century has fallen in, corn lays dried on their floors
They may have examined dead bats under bright torches
Before the end of that night, they peopled like stars
Their drum-accompanied rituals must have awakened the hummingbirds
Ascending the road under the caves, with bundles of jade and dry bones
We do not find stated anywhere when the last old woman complained last
We do have a word of their language – it means 'god', or possibly 'evil'
And a paper bagful of potsherds we think they made
These pieces of jars and bowls are parts from one of the many inventions
Which were here and there on the mountain of time
In summers of a different sun and winters of a different rain
Inventions that have unfolded beyond the reach of our gathering