

INTERVIEW

Interview with Professor Colin Renfrew (Lord Renfrew of Kaimsthorn), Director of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge

Conducted 31 August 2001 by Cornelia Kleinitz (transcribed and edited by Cornelia Kleinitz and Steve Townend)

At the beginning we usually ask our interviewees to give us a brief CV, but since you have described your path to archaeology already in your 1993 interview with Richard Bradley (1993); I would like to start differently. It is well known that you have a wide range of research interests including Aegean and wider European prehistory, the origins of language diversity, theory in archaeology, genetics, the preservation of the archaeological heritage worldwide, etc. Is this a sign that you get easily enthused or easily bored?

I think that's right. Certainly, I do get easily bored, although happily archaeology is not a subject that bores me very often. Yes, I have always chosen topics that I find interesting. Sometimes also in research I have gone for things that obviously can be productive: if you want to know about burial customs in a place and period where no burials are known this is not an ideal place to start. So, very often when I have done a piece of research it's led on to other research and that has led on to other research and it often seems productive to work in areas where there are some obvious things that one can do. And then one gets enthusiastic if one is lucky...

What would you pick out as the most fundamental changes in British archaeology that you have witnessed during your career?

I think the most fundamental change has been the move away from a diffusionist view where one was trying to tell a story on those traditional lines, which now belong to some extent in the past in British archaeology. It has always been clear that one reason people were looking for links overseas was that archaeology does need a chronology, not just a relative chronology but an absolute chronology, and the absolute chronology wasn't really available until radiocarbon dating came in. So I think radiocarbon dating has been quite a liberation, because by providing us with a chronology it allows us to some extent to forget about chronology. There are cases where the radiocarbon chronology is rather crucial, say prehistoric Orkney, where there are still controversies. But basically, I think, we no longer have to talk about chronology so much, it's no longer the first thing. That's made archaeology much more interesting. It makes possible social archaeology, it makes possible cognitive archaeology, it makes possible those interests, which are the focus of so-called post-processual archaeology. All those have come about because you don't have to start telling the old story of how ideas came to us from the Near East. It doesn't mean that no ideas did come that way, of course, but that's not what it is about anymore. I think that is a fundamental change. This has transformed archaeology from a kind of search for chronology into a much broader field. You couldn't really do something like landscape archaeology, for example, without some chronological background. You have to know how long things lasted and then you have to know what is syn-

chronous with what's happening a hundred or five hundred miles away. You can't do archaeology well unless you can do those things and the miracle is that we now can.

In your 1993 interview you say: "In British archaeology, people will put up with a certain amount of theory so long as they don't notice it too much, and they don't (or didn't) like it being called 'theory'". Would you agree that the situation has somewhat reversed (at least in academic departments) with theory having become very much emphasised? Has theory become a mass movement?

Yes, I think it has, certainly if you scan the publications or if you go to the Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG). In some departments, if you talk to the older members or if you go to meetings of the Society of Antiquaries or even the Prehistoric Society, I am not sure the world is so profoundly transformed. But if you skim, say Routledge's brochure or if you go to the Theoretical Archaeology Group, you find that a lot of people feel they've got to try very hard to say something that is theoretically new. I see no harm to that, except, I think it makes us a little more vulnerable than we were before to fashions. It's rather like, is it Galliano, Christian Dior, Tristan Webber, Alexander McQueen, or whatever; if people have heard something before, at last year's TAG, it seems a bit 'old-hat' and I am not sure that's very healthy. Although, in the end it doesn't matter very much as long as people are encouraged to say something that is new and original. I don't mind if half of what is said is nonsense, if the other half contributes something. Things don't point at first always in what proves to be the right direction. But I don't think one should mind about being wrong, so long as one is making some contributions. So I'm not as impatient as some people I know about theory that doesn't lead anywhere, because you can't always be quite sure at the time which theory is going to lead somewhere and which isn't.

Is there currently a climate of tolerance of theoretical pluralism in archaeology?

I sometimes see the theoretical field as rather factional and so again, to take TAG as a touchstone, you tend to find some sessions very crowded, others are not, depending on what is currently thought to be interesting. It's true that it's one of the doctrines of interpretive archaeology that anybody has the right to say anything, but it soon becomes clear that some things are more worth listening to than others. I don't think that matters very much so long as one knows when to turn off the loud speakers, as it were, and listen to something else.

As a regular participant, how do you think the role and agenda of TAG changed over the years?

TAG started off, when Andrew Fleming and I initiated it, as a reaction to the complete dearth of theoretical discussion in British archaeology. You did not hear any theory at all at the Society of Antiquaries or the Prehistoric Society, so it was with the wish to inject the kind of discussion which in those days you used to find at the Society for American Archaeology. And I think both Andrew and I were quite inspired by the SAA meetings of that time. Funnily enough, the Society for American Archaeology has now gone the other way. For the past decade it has been largely taken over by salvage archaeology, rescue archaeology.

With TAG the intention always was that students would make a major contribution, and I think they still do, but one has to encourage that. The proportion of students giving papers is down; the proportion of students participating is down somewhat. I am not sure if there was enough accommodation provided last time at Oxford for students just to take their sleeping bag. That's always been the intention: that the unwaged get pretty much free accommodation to encourage their participation. One has to keep battling for that, but nonetheless I think people do realize that's what it's about and that remains what is rather refreshing about it. The other thing is of course, initially, when it was smaller, there was only one session. That of course is true of any conference: once you have to decide which session you are going to, you always end up like the philosopher's ass standing in the middle with something happening over there and something happening over here, and not knowing which one to go to. When you get there, you keep on thinking "Oh bother, I came to the wrong one", then the timing goes wrong and it's all a bit of a nightmare. But I think that these things are the victims of their own success. TAG, I think was more fun when there was only a hundred people there, but you can't do much about it. I think it still does a good job.

Has TAG lost anything by becoming a major annual archaeology conference in Britain?

It's lost some of the excitement. I remember in the early days people would come over from Germany or from Poland, all would be rather excited: "Here we are, it's all happening". I think when a thing becomes a little established then – and it's a bit of its own establishment now – you perhaps lose a little of that edge. But, you do discover it again on some occasions. The TAG party is often a very good occasion if it is set up right and the music is good, and you can still get somewhere where you can talk and not be totally deafened by the music. I don't think TAG has lost too much, it just got bigger and you have to accept that.

How does TAG compare or compete with the IFA (Institute of Field Archaeologists) conferences? Do they reach different audiences and with that perpetuate a divide between theory and practice?

I am not really in a position to give a well-informed judgement. I have not very often been to the Institute of Field Archaeology conferences, so I wouldn't really wish to pronounce upon them and I am not sure to what extent they do cover theoretical issues. I know they try, but obviously that's not its primary focus. I know that there is overlap and a lot of the more energetic field archaeologists come to TAG. I do recall that in the early days, before the IFA had their annual conference, there was always a question of how field archaeologists working in units could get official leave or maybe even funding to come to TAG. That did work, not universally, but it did work. But I suspect that these days, if you are going to get funding from a unit, if you are lucky enough to get that, it's more likely to be for the IFA conference, which has the role of a professional conference for some.

The second edition of your introductory textbook “Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice” (Renfrew and Bahn 1996) has been described as having a “seductive quality aiming to deflect rather than promote critical thought about the discipline and about the past” (Tilley 1995). How would you respond to this claim?

I wasn't aware of that quote, that's from some review, is it? I wouldn't have thought the book intends to deflect critical thought. The structure of the book, when Paul Bahn and I sat down to think about it, was intended to be a series of plain questions, so each chapter is “what”, “where”, “why”, “when”, “who”, and so on. Those questions remain valid, remain the same questions and the aim, of course, is to ask how the archaeologists can answer these questions. I suspect that the reviewer is from one of the recent factions who would describe themselves as post-processual, but would be more accurately described as anti-processual, and so I suggest it is some polemic from that sorority or fraternity.

It's true that Paul Bahn and I have not gone overboard for interpretive archaeology. We have even dared in places to be a little critical of some of its aspects, but I don't think we need to be too apologetic about that. A lot of good things come out of such discourses. Certainly, I do think that some of the more ponderous writers in archaeological theory are very heavily philosophy-led. And when I say philosophy-led, I don't mean led by their own reflections on philosophy. It's great lumps of philosophy hanging on trees like coconuts, bananas, and they pull down a bunch of bananas, “Oh look, this bunch is Heidegger”, so you now read for 200 pages about Heidegger. Once you've got to the end of that, *now* we'll do some archaeology.

I do strongly welcome the thought that these people have brought to the subject, but I really don't see why, if a philosopher has said something that is worth saying, why you can't say what it is without spending a couple of days reading and discussing that philosopher. This I have often felt to be one of the problems about social anthropology. If you want to get some ideas in social anthropology, you may have to read some anthropologists criticising each other, yet unless you are very well read in social anthropology, you may not even know what the criticisms mean. I find a lot of that very ponderous. Now, I think the same applies in archaeology and it should be possible, I think, to get much more directly at the nub of the issue without this heavy baggage that is passed on to us.

Of course we take inspiration from serious writers, and of course one wants to quote when somebody has said something particularly well, but most frameworks can be paraphrased clearly, expressed clearly and simply. I think clarity is a very desirable quality. Ian Hodder, for instance, who has drawn on a lot of different theoretical frameworks in his time, manages to do so very clearly and without being ponderous. So, actually, the word ponderous is *it*. The bunch of bananas is too heavy sometimes: it is ponderous and I think that's unnecessary. And that's actually one reason why the book I've been writing just now is approaching contemporary archaeology through the visual arts. There, what I like about that, you see it, you have your thoughts, you have your experiences, and they are yours: they are not Gramsci's or Heidegger's.

How useful, do you think, are government quality assessment schemes of academic departments, such as REAs or QAAs. Do they improve the quality of academic research and teaching or do they just help to sustain the printing industry and turn academic departments into some kind of premier league with researchers being ‘bought’ on the basis of their publications score?

I think probably the Research Assessment Exercise and the Teaching Quality Assessment are in a way, separate things. The Research Assessment Exercise is not so cumbersome, it essentially involves academics naming and making available four recent publications plus a lot of research profiling and some rather pretentious statements about what departments are doing. It has had the effect of encouraging lecturers to produce more and that is probably no bad thing. I think that it's helping them to get site reports out more quickly and so on. I've heard it said that serious excavation titles are not so well regarded and so I think that there is a move towards some stereotyping. For instance; I've heard it said by many people that papers in peer review journals are very important and papers in a publication – a book – which is not peer reviewed in the same way isn't as important. I think that can be very trivial and superficial. I even had one junior colleague who wasn't interested in doing a conference if the papers were going to be published as a volume! Ultimately, it's the quality of the volume that's important and not some stereotype of peer reviewing, so I think there is a problem there.

I think that most people agree that the Teaching Quality Assessment procedure is just hopelessly overloaded. If you have real serious doubt about the quality of what's going on, then maybe you do need some evaluation procedure. I think that is quite reasonable, but most of the archaeology departments in this country are in perfectly competent universities. Everybody agrees right across the board that it has been an absurdly top heavy exercise. What they need to do is to work out a method of targeting departments (which weren't usually the archaeology departments anyway). Most students taking up archaeology are very highly motivated to do it anyway before they start. That is one of the great strengths that our subject has; very few students do it unless they really want to do it. So, to apply the same cumbersome system is totally misguided. I've not met anybody that has a very high respect for the TQA system. We were evaluated not so long ago and the people doing it did it seriously and conscientiously. I wouldn't want to fault the group that did the work but they are servants of a system that is rather absurd really.

How did the establishment of the McDonald Institute in 1990, whose director you are, influence the nature of archaeological research in Cambridge?

I don't think it changed it profoundly. It facilitated it clearly because the first thing Dr. McDonald did was offer us some finances for a fieldwork fund and we have kept that going so that it is possible to apply internally for funding (they're not vast sums once they're divided out but it's helpful in that way). Also, it gave us laboratory facilities, which were very sadly lacking. They are the Institute's facilities but researchers of the department have access to them including research students, so that's a good thing.

As you probably know, we've said Cognitive Archaeology is something we're going to deal with, so the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* which is edited by Chris

Scarre focuses on that and I think is blazing an interesting trail. And then it has been possible for us to support one or two particular lines of research; we've been developing molecular genetics here and its applications to archaeology. We also raised a grant to help with looking at historical linguistics in relation to archaeology, and we've had a whole series of meetings and produced a series of publications on that. So, I hope it's an energetic research enterprise, which has made possible some things that we weren't doing before. It allows us, I think, to do more and better, but it hasn't determined the direction except in so far as we've tried to recognise one or two directions that would be worth investing in, and I think that Cognitive Archaeology is the main one that we chose at the outset.

Which direction do you see archaeology at Cambridge take in the next five years?

One thing that Cambridge probably has always done, certainly did in a very energetic way while Grahame Clark was Disney Professor and then subsequently, is World Archaeology; to keep a global coverage, and we do very much want to do that. Obviously there are other things that we want to do such as archaeological science, and we're interested in the archaeology of the historic periods but I think we want to above all maintain our global scope. In the Faculty of Oriental Studies, for example, not in our own department, we have developed Near Eastern archaeology. In collaboration with them we have Indian archaeology, we have an Americanist now in Elizabeth DeMarrais, so we've managed to keep going with the archaeology of the Americas. One of our high priorities is to get Chinese or Pacific archaeologies going again. We did have Gina Barnes with us for many years who is now Professor in Durham, and she set Japanese archaeology going in a big way, and before that we had Chinese archaeologists, so we feel that there is a serious gap there in our world coverage. Of course there aren't many places where its possible to have a world coverage (London is one where you can) but that's something that we'd like to maintain.

Concerning illicit trade in antiquities, a matter you have been openly very much opposed to in recent years, you propagate various measures to be taken, one of them control by governments. Does it hurt that Britain took more than 30 years to sign the UNECISO Convention?

Yes, it's rather scandalous that Britain took 30 years to ratify the UNESCO convention. I think it's because in earlier years the trade (the legitimate trade) in fine art, antiques, and antiquities, was against restrictions of any kind and perhaps didn't understand the UNESCO Convention very well. They didn't really understand that ratifying the Convention wasn't going to constrain them very seriously. But I think that because of the scandals that there have been in recent years, a lot of the legitimate traders – the auction houses and so on – have begun to realise that they are getting a bad name and not very much benefit, not very much profit. So now Sotheby's, as you know have dropped their antiquities sale in Britain, and Christie's are thinking quite seriously about how they can improve on things. I don't doubt that they are concerned. Then there are the measures that have been proposed by Prof. Palmer's committee, including using our current export legislation, which is actually in place (it came in through the influence of European Community regulations and directives), so that we don't need a very strong additional framework of legislation.

We're in the process of ratifying the UNESCO Convention, which is a first step, and then these other things will be helpful. But yes, I do think it's rather scandalous it has taken 30 years. It's a reflection on successive governments, it's a reflection on the Conservative Government at that time, but I have to say that the Labour Government hasn't moved at the speed of lightening. As soon as the Labour Government was in they re-joined UNESCO very rapidly, which was fine but then there wasn't much interest in the UNESCO Convention. They had to be prodded quite hard really.

How can economic and demographic development and the preservation of cultural heritage be balanced in today's rapidly growing world?

It's true that new building, either rural or urban, threatens archaeology. But many countries – including Britain, including the United States – have set up systems that work tolerably well; environmental impact statements in the States include archaeology and the system in this country increasingly expects the developer to deal with threats; the official Government guidance PPG16 is really very influential there. I think it's more difficult in the underdeveloped world to expect people to get things right.

On the looting front, which is what we've been particularly concerned with the situation is serious. The antiquities – if they are not destroyed – can in some circumstances be of real benefit to the local communities. The case in Peru is a very good instance where Walter Alva was able to get to work at Sipan. There had been major looting, but he was able to stop the looting and do the serious digging, and then local museums have been set up, and the locals finally get far more economic benefit now than they ever did through the looting. In the case of the looting, the benefit usually comes secretly to the looters and is often not all that much financially and is always very short lived, but now the benefits go to the local villagers. This is a link that I think the archaeological world has not been very good at establishing.

We in this country, for a long time have seen the benefits of heritage tourism, but in many African countries, I think, it hasn't worked. Mali, for example, has suffered dreadfully from looting but if there were funding for a few local museums and a move to build up tourism, the benefits could far outweigh the potential benefits to the looters. Of course, I know that a lot of things have to come together before tourism works and is prosperous. I once went to Hatra in Iraq and made a film there – a wonderful site – and the Iraqis had put some money into developing it. It was spectacular! Then of course Iraq has had other problems, which have limited tourism, and now one hears Hatra has been really seriously looted, and all those wonderful statues that you used to see and wonder at have disappeared, so there is a real tragedy. But there was a site that was waiting for development and could have been one of the archaeological wonders of the world but at that time Iraq hadn't got it's tourism going.

When Richard Bradley interviewed you in 1993 you had only just started to take part in the work of the House of Lords (as Lord Renfrew of Kaimsthorn). Then you said that academic life rather than politics would be your prime concern, but that you would want to contribute to Bills on heritage or higher education. Now, after 10 years in the House of Lords, how would you judge your involvement? Were you able to make a difference?

Not a very great difference I have to say. I can claim one or two things; first of all, I had a role in facilitating the Treasure Bill, but Lord Perth introduced it and must take the credit for it. I think recently the archaeological world has been making its voice heard. As soon as I got into the Lords there was a Parliamentary Select Committee on the European regulations and directives on the export of antiquities. At the time I became aware of it, Sotheby's had been interviewed. They had arranged for their people to be interviewed and I think the Committee had been completely conned by them. The Committee hadn't asked anybody from the British Museum, English Heritage, the universities, or The Society of Antiquaries! We managed to get in there in time as it were, to make some comments but the Committee had completely swallowed the line that the export trade is the only concern.

This time round I think the initial interest was on Holocaust restitution, and naturally people concerned with Jewish issues would find that very important, as indeed it is. But we were able to say that the wider issue of looting in the world of archaeological heritage is probably of more general relevance and should be explored. This time the Committee did explore it and the relevant Minister Alan Howarth, became interested. Then we've been chipping away in the Lords with questions, so I think it has been possible to raise the profile of these issues. Then, there are of course a number of Peers who are interested. Another who is very active is Lord Redesdale, Rupert Redesdale, who is a Liberal Democrat Peer. He has been very keen to get an all party Parliamentary group on archaeology going; so he and I and others have been active in that. So I think things are happening.

As regards education it's very difficult to make an impact. There is no doubt at all that the real problems that the Government's proposals were having in relation to higher education were thoroughly exposed in the Lords. Lord Mackay of Ardbrecknish really showed up the Government's position and as you know only now is Government saying "Oh dear, is it not such a good idea that there are all these student fees to pay" and "Oh dear, isn't it the case that students are leaving with a rather high accumulated debt, and isn't this acting as a deterrent to students from lower income backgrounds". Well, all of this was already massively, totally documented. But if you've got a government that isn't going to listen to the House of Lords and if they've got a majority in the Commons they're going to get it through.

There is no doubt at all that a whole series of opposition spokespersons spoke out. What I would say though of the Labour Peers who are academics: not many of them stood out and said "This is a disgrace", whereas I would claim that when I was introduced into the Lords - I was and am a Conservative - we did at that time give the Conservative Government quite a hard time. Blows were struck for academic freedom that led Kenneth Clarke who was the Secretary of State for Education at that

time to change his mind on some matters. So yes, I think we've made a little difference, but the truth is that it is not very easy for the House of Lords to deflect a headstrong government, which we found at that time and have found much worse recently.

Britain has just signed the 'Valetta Convention', whose Article 3 calls for a strict regulation of the authorisation and supervision of archaeological activities in order to protect the archaeological heritage. This includes the supervision of excavations only by "qualified, specially authorised persons". The implementation of this legislation, it is claimed in *Current Archaeology* 174, 2001 (pg. 241-243)¹, would "ban independent archaeology" and be a disaster for British archaeology, which heavily relies on amateur work. What position do you take on this issue?

I have some sympathy with Andrew Selkirk although he does sometimes make a strong protest without quite finding out if it is necessary or not. It is interesting that the Valetta Convention slipped through without any serious scrutiny that I could see while everybody was making a terrific fuss about the UNESCO Convention whose provisions are much less severe. That provision that you read out, if implemented, could have serious consequences. I wrote just the other week to Andrew to say "Come on Andrew, this campaign that you are leading. First of all it's too late, the Convention is signed, approved, ratified, so you've definitely missed the boat on that one" - he should have made his protest about two years ago and must have been nodding at that time.

Also, I don't believe there is any intention by the Government to clamp down on amateur archaeology. Good amateur archaeology has been the mainstay of British archaeology for two centuries. What needs organising is a few people to get together and discuss with English Heritage. I assume the Government would follow the advice of English Heritage and others. In order to comply with the new regulation some licensing system will be necessary but I don't think there's much serious criticism of the way excavations are conducted in this country at the present time, including amateur excavation, for instance by the local societies which have excavated to very high standards. Just occasionally there are amateur excavations that turn out not to be conducted at a very satisfactory level. So sometimes there needs to be a grip, but it shouldn't be difficult to set up a system whereby well established amateurs are encouraged to continue their work.

So I think that Andrew Selkirk would do much more good if he addressed himself to that issue; how do we make this work? Because it clearly is a desirable requirement that excavations should not be unbridled and uncontrolled. I have great respect for the way that he always sets out to champion the amateur; I think that's fine. But rather than make this terrible caterwauling about how disgraceful it all is, and 'let's sign a petition against something that has already happened', why not just think a little about how we can make it work and ensure that people in English Heritage know that. I am a member of the English Heritage Committee (it's changed its name now to the Historic Sites and Landscapes Advisory Committee) and I'm sure that the committee should have a role there in sitting down and discussing how it can advise

English Heritage on setting up a system that is not too cumbersome, that encourages good amateurs to continue their good work and to publish in those excellent local society journals which have been the foundation of British archaeology, as I say, for two centuries.

What would you recommend for improvements in public education about archaeological heritage and the discipline itself in museums, other non-academic institutions or indeed in the field?

Well, I think first of all there is a need for education. So yes, museums I'm sure can and should do more. We should all be using the opportunities offered by the Portable Antiquities Voluntary Reporting Scheme, and the Government needs to be encouraged to make that work across the nation. Sir Mortimer Wheeler took the lead decades ago, encouraging the public to visit excavations, and there again Andrew Selkirk could have some valid points. I think that the approach to rescue archaeology became over-professionalised through professional jealousies, so that amateurs were rather edged out - they were not encouraged to take part in rescue excavations - so there is something that could usefully be done there.

Above all I think that the decline in British television has had disastrous effects. I'm not dismissing *Time Team* or *Meet the Ancestors*, although I think that *Time Team* could be criticised for everything being rather a flash in the pan. "We'll go in there and we'll do it in three days or three weeks", real archaeology isn't like that so they can be criticised, but within that framework they have done a pretty good job. I'm not criticising that, but I'm thinking about some of the appalling Channel 4 programmes. Was it Hancock who did this terrible rubbish about Antarctica? Now no producer could seriously believe that he was putting across something that had any validity whatever, so I think it amounted essentially to a conspiracy to mislead the public! Hancock is like von Däniken, who made a lot of money years ago by putting across extravagant stories that no serious investigator could believe.

At the moment we have a series that is more dross than worthwhile, I'm talking about this *Apocalypse* series which is, I think, on at the present time on Channel 4, where everything has to be some terrific cataclysm. I saw the programme on the archaeology of Santorini, Thera; the big eruption around 1600 BCE in the Aegean. Well, I have participated in and seen many television programmes on that (which have actually addressed the real issues) for decades, because it has been a theme that has been going on. Then they suddenly find some oddball in Hawaii (I think it must have been made with American co-production money) who knows something about volcanoes but had nothing new to say about Santorini and oversimplified what was going on. Then the one I saw on Egypt, again was pretty poor. It had some good contributors but the fact that the series is called *Apocalypse* says it all really. Television is not making the contribution to archaeology that it did make 30 years ago in the days, first of all, of Glyn Daniel's *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral* with Mortimer Wheeler. And then Paul Johnstone's *Chronicle* series was really very estimable. With *Horizon* for instance, BBC 2 makes serious programmes: they have people who know sense from rubbish but I regret to say that Channel 4 at the moment seems only

after ratings and has forgotten that *Chronicle* used to get as good a rating as archaeology programmes do now. There are some programmes that are quite good, but many of them are just trash basically, and I regard the Hancock series as a very good example of the latter.

Are you not concerned that some of the data generated by archaeologists, particularly concerning archaeogenetics, will be hard to control? Is there not a danger for abuse along the lines of race and supremacy issues?

Well there could be, but all the thrust in archaeogenetics and the thrust among contemporary workers in molecular genetics is to regard the concept of race as, really, outdated. We had a conference here [at Cambridge] recently on the language-farming-dispersal hypothesis. We had lots of molecular geneticists and when people started using outdated concepts of race they were reminded that all that is in the past as far as serious research is concerned. The reason is that we now have genetic markers that do tell us about lines of descent and they are not concerned with superficial issues of skin colour, or eye colour, or hair, or even facial features. All of these rather superficial phenotypes are determined by a whole number of genes. It is possible now to follow individual genes much more effectively so there is nothing in the work that leads in a race/supremacy direction. There may be archaeologists who haven't quite got the message and are thinking in outdated migrationist terms in a very simplistic way and I can well imagine that there could be old fashioned nationalists of the Balkan kind, who might try to seize on a particular genetic haplotype or something of that kind, but that isn't the way that the work is going. When you hear geneticists talking they aren't using outdated racists' concepts because the molecular genetic data don't encourage that. So I think we shall find that when people start to get informed they will realise that that is not the discourse of archaeogenetics. So I am not pessimistic about that. Certainly there are a lot of people around who still have outdated racist ideas, but you don't find much discussion of that kind when you are listening to serious molecular geneticists.

Do you think that European/American archaeologists working in developing countries (ostensibly to recover their histories) is just another form of cultural imperialism and/or can only Native peoples understand their own past?

I don't think that it needs to be cultural imperialism. It can be selfish in the sense that most archaeologists have their own interests; quite reasonably academically determined. They have a research agenda, which makes perfect sense in their own terms. They may not be saying: "If we're doing fieldwork in this particular area, what would be most useful to the people there?". I myself do believe that it will be useful for people to understand their own past and I don't think that there is anything inappropriate to the research agendas of the developed nations. I don't see why those should be in any way hostile to the interests of local communities. For instance, if you look at Australia, we now have radiocarbon dates for *Homo sapiens sapiens* in Australia, which are actually about as early as the 'Out-of-Africa' dispersal, which means that humans got to Australia very rapidly. We now know from the archaeology, including molecular genetics, that there does seem to have been an Out-of-Africa dispersal and that means that the species *Homo sapiens sapiens* is shown, on the basis of these data, to be a single species.

When it comes to different communities having their own perspectives, I think that communities must be encouraged to see things in their own way. I accept that, but I think it is a pity if that is allowed to conflict with the search for data of the kind that those from other countries would wish to follow up, and it is a great pity if we cannot all hope to study developments in different parts of the world from those perspectives. I do not see anything inimical to the interests of the local populations in any part of the world that the shared history be scrutinised by all appropriate methods. It is true that we are establishing, for instance, an Out-of-Africa history for the whole of humankind which may not give the same foundation myth as is found for instance in Polynesia, but nor does it follow our own traditional foundation myth. Our foundation myth in Europe was essentially the Hebraic foundation myth later taken over by the Christian religion, so our own literal foundation myth was that the world was founded in 4004 BC, with the Garden of Eden and so on. We had that battle 150 years ago and in a way there are fundamentalist, literalist battles being fought in other parts of the world: “Hey, wait a moment, what the scientists are telling us doesn’t completely tally with what our traditional sources are telling us”. Well, we had that battle 150 years ago and it is perfectly possible for a lot of serious scientists, it turns out, to remain Christians and to remain scientists. I think that that is a rather old fashioned debate and that a lot of the fundamentalists who say “this isn’t what our oral traditions tell us”, will have to learn to live with that. In the Western world we learnt 150 years ago to live with that even though Bishop Wilberforce was not very happy about it. Well, tough on Bishop Wilberforce.

We have to be a little more sympathetic than I may sound to the interests of local communities, but what I am really saying is that I do not think that research into the past is hostile to the interests of local communities. There are matters in genetically modified foods for instance, and there are matters certainly in human molecular genetics where profits are to be gained sometimes by modern capitalist companies, where the information is coming from local communities and where their interests are not being sufficiently regarded. So there are issues there, but I don’t think that they are fundamentally issues about the past. I think that it is rather Luddite to decline to discuss the past of certain areas because it does not meet with somebody’s foundation myth. To go along those lines is to join the people that opposed Darwin, like Bishop Wilberforce, or like the fundamentalists in the United States today who want equal time and so on because Darwinism “is only a theory”. You don’t want to go down that road. You don’t want to burn the books. You don’t want a re-run of the ‘Texas Schoolbook’ debate.

What are your personal plans and projects?

I’ve got some site reports that need publishing. Volume 2 of Sitagroi is in press I’m happy to say, Volume 1 having come out some 20 years ago. Volume 2 of Phylakopi is in press; Volume 1 having come out about 15 years ago. The Markiani volume of recent excavations in the Cyclades is in a very well advanced stage of preparation. The other excavation, of Dhaskaléio-Kavos also in the Cyclades, I hope will come together firmly next year, 2002. Those are responsibilities that will be discharged soon. I have just written a book called *Figuring it Out* where I look at contemporary art and how we can learn about the world through the eyes of the contemporary artist, and how society learns about the world through the eyes of the archae-

ologist. I see an analogy between the uncomprehending gallery-goer, looking at contemporary art and wondering, “What on earth is that about?” and the uncomprehending archaeologist, looking at the past and wondering what on earth that is about. That is something that I want to pursue. I gave the Rhind lectures at Edinburgh on that theme and they seemed to go well. I’m hoping to get that book published though it may need some revising. I also have another book in preparation on the story of the human past as an increasing engagement between humans and the material world through the medium of material culture. It is very much a cognitive engagement, and I think that a lot of questions could be profitably addressed through that perspective, so I want to write about that. Then I would like to write a book on archaeology and language, a better version of the ‘Indo-European Question’, which I think, is possible now. Some years ago I outlined a book entitled *Who Were the Greeks?* but then actually made some interesting discoveries about the Minoan language, which I published in an article called *Word of Minos* a couple of years ago, so that book needs to be re-done building that in. I would like to do more with the contemporary art direction. Antony Gormley is having an exhibition of his *Field* (all the little figures) at the British Museum next autumn and I have been asked to write an introduction to the catalogue. I’m rather pleased about that so it is something that I look forward to undertaking.

If time allows – and years do pass – but if time allows, I would be interested in excavating again in the Cyclades because Markiani, the site that Lila Marangou and Christos Doumas and I excavated, is one of the few Cycladic settlements to be excavated in recent years. We have learned so little really from the cemeteries because they were so extensively looted, so the future of Cycladic archaeology is in settlement excavation. The local people at Sitagroi, which was extensively excavated 30 years ago, would like to see that site excavated further, so you are talking about local interest. It is a marvellous site with wonderful opportunities, and all kinds of interests of contemporary archaeology could be met there. So when that second volume is out... indeed all these reports would have to be published before I could feel that I could go into the field again. So there are all sorts of possibilities there, although I am not sure how all these things might rank up because when one is well into ones sixties as I am, then you cannot expect to keep going forever. If I excavate again there is going to have to be a clear understanding as to how the excavation reports get published, given that it seems to take at least a decade for major reports to get published; there are those issues.

Do you work on different themes or topics at the same time or how do you organise all that work?

Well it is true – and I am not alone among excavators – that site reports take longer to come out than they should because other things get more exciting. But when I hit on the significance of the ‘Indo-European Question’ in European prehistory because it does subtly shape so much thinking, I formed the view that archaeologists, most British archaeologists at least, have simply dodged the column. I mean, we speak an Indo-European language, and the language of Britain before Anglo-Saxon was also an Indo-European language and it is an important part of the story that most archaeologists completely ignore. If you look in the index of most books, even those on the Bronze Age you find the question dodged or people not knowing quite what to say.

Since I began to think of this as a really major topic it is something that I have chipped away at, so I quite often write articles for obscure journals like the *Journal for Indo-European Studies* that no European prehistorian, except perhaps Marek Zvelebil, ever looks at. But the time will come!

I am very fascinated with molecular genetics which is of course giving us a lot of information about population history which may well come to affect our understandings of more recent times. What it does massively is transform any notions that we may have of the Palaeolithic period. Who would really have understood that the Neanderthals are a separate branch, so if you are interested in the origins of *Homo sapiens sapiens* you can sideline the Neanderthals? Now that could provoke a strong reaction from many archaeologists who may think that I am oversimplifying when I say that, but we are learning so much about human history from molecular genetics. The papers recently published by Underhill or by Peter Forster really make clear what the sequence of peopling of the world was by *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and yet there are still amazing problems. As you know the Americans still don't know whether it was 13 000 or 23 000 or even 30 000 years ago that the Americas were first populated. American archaeology has to resolve these problems and molecular genetics is prompting them.

So, yes it is possible to keep various things going at once, I just have three or four interests. I keep Cycladic archaeology as something that I have a long-standing interest in, the language question now overlaps with the genetics so that is something that I dabble in, and I am interested in processes of culture change and cognitive archaeology. That is the other strand, which ties in very strongly with the interest in contemporary material culture. I think that one can think about three things at once.

Endnote

¹Since this interview was conducted the comments referred to in this question were withdrawn in the proceeding volume (Vol. 175) of *Current Archaeology*.

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