

INTERVIEW

An interview with Professor Peter Ucko, the next Director of the Institute of Archaeology, UCL

Question. *The Directorship, which has been called one of the biggest jobs in British Archaeology, has more than a purely parochial significance. How are you going to take advantage of that, on behalf of both the Institute and British Archaeology as a whole?*

Peter Ucko. One of the reasons that I wanted to come to the Institute is because I believe that there is a risk of British Archaeology becoming very parochial. One of the few places that is large and flexible enough to avoid that happening, and to orient itself looking outwards across the world, is this Institute. I would hope to encourage a world view of the past to flourish.

What challenge do you most look forward to meeting during your tenureship?

I think it will be a terrible battle to see the role of comparative analysis re-establish itself. At the moment one of the problems is of archaeology looking just within a particular area; there is a popular line that one can't say anything about anything in a comparative way. I would think that if there is a virtue to the world view of major themes, it is to be comparative, and establishing that is probably the biggest challenge.

Will you be starting any new sub-departments within the Institute of Archaeology, such as a Department of Comparative Archaeology?

I don't even know that there are any departments, are there? I have never thought about whether I believe in such things, or whether there will be more or fewer of them. I don't understand them. I'm not entirely sure what their point is. I can't now remember what the title of my chair is; it's possible that it is Comparative Archaeology, but that in no way implies anything about setting up a department.

Would you like to elaborate upon what you understand by Comparative Archaeology?

In saying that there is a danger of inward-lookingness within a region and within a tradition, I don't mean to say that I don't see the virtue in such an approach. I do, and I think that the aspect of understanding what went on in a particular place over time has been underplayed, so I welcome that theoretical development. However, I don't welcome everything else being thrown out with the development of that approach. What I understand by comparative analysis is that there are major themes of interest to anybody interested in the past, or for that matter in the present, which can be explored at different times, chronologically, and in different places. By comparing them and seeing the similarities and differences, they raise more interesting questions. That's what I'm talking about, in contrast to the view that you cannot compare anything because the local particularities are going to outweigh everything else. I don't happen to believe that, though I think it is also very important to understand the local historical trajectory.

What do you intend to do to ensure greater cohesion and cross-fertilization between Archaeology and other relevant UCL departments, for example Anthropology?

I would expect us to be developing new contents to existing degrees. There are already some relevant ones at Anthropology, including their MA's; there may also be some new MA's here. I hope that there will be a lot of joint activity, but not just at Anthropology. That's also true of the new Batty initiative on spatial modeling, where the Institute is going to get very heavily involved. Professor Shennan is a major player in that field. I'm also intending to develop geographical modeling, through a particular attachment at the Institute (of a Research Fellow); he will be linking those people at the Institute who are interested in the environment with the Geography Department of UCL. I also want to have a very close look at the history of art, involving collections such as that of the Warburg Institute. I would hope to see us getting linked much more closely with a lot of other college activities, and non-college too.

We had a programme involving the exchange of students with Southampton, although there seemed to be a problem with distance. Will this continue?

I set this up with David Harris. I was very keen on it, and I still am. People stopped coming, from both sides. It was me who was pushing that it should include undergraduates; most of my colleagues at both institutions thought it should be restricted to postgraduates, and in a sense they have been proved right, because the undergraduates stopped doing it. Also our timetables clash all the time, and it will be incredibly difficult to timetable at the undergraduate level because of semesterization at Southampton. I am still very keen to see cooperation, at research student levels, including joint supervision and so on, but I haven't discussed this with anyone from Southampton.

Do you intend to raise the profile of theoretical research within the Institute, and if so, how?

Yes. We have already done it in one sense, by the appointment of Professor Shennan, who is one of our leading theoretical archaeologists, but I also consider that we need to make much more use at the Institute of people like Chris Tilley, quite apart from myself, I hope.

Do you see Professor Shennan's role purely as reinforcing the theoretical aspect of research, or would he have any other major teaching capacity, for instance in the field of European Prehistory?

I was particularly keen that Shennan should be appointed at the Institute because he's a leader in three areas, all of which I think the Institute will benefit from. One is theoretical archaeology. Another is computing and modeling, and cultural and social evolution, which is what he is modeling at the moment. The third thing is that he is one of our most eminent European prehistorians.

Do you have any other plans for the academic programme at the Institute?

The whole of the area that I call 'Public Archaeology', in particular Law and Education,

but also other aspects such as site presentation and Museum Studies, is missing here, and all of it needs to be added. Therefore I'm desperate for space.

These aspects are taught at the Institute, for instance in Peter Drewett's Field Methods course.

I do know that, but it needs to be not a hundred percent more but five hundred percent more. The equivalent course at Southampton was a full year's course, a core course, obligatory to all undergraduates; it also had a very strong theoretical part to it. That course originated as a collaboration between Tim Champion, myself, and Norman Palmer of the Law department, who's now at UCL, and who runs all the Heritage stuff. I hope we will rope him in too; that would be another link across to the College.

You will be aware of the imminent changes to the Bulletin of the Institute of Archaeology; do you think the Institute should have a higher profile in publications?

I am told the Bulletin is being transformed, but I don't know any details at all. I never know what 'higher profile' means. Clearly one reason for any institution to have a publication is to exchange it, particularly if it wants its own library; 'high profile' doesn't mean that it necessarily has to be a very extravagant thing, if that's all that counts. The second thing is that, given the current rules of research selectivity exercised in this country, there is a real danger with in-house publishing, because you have a lot of people who say that it doesn't fit the criteria of being refereed and so on. There's an enormous amount of utter rubbish being talked about this at the moment. Nevertheless, high profile in-house activity may not at the moment, under the current rules, be a sensible thing to do. On the other hand, for the Institute *not* to produce high quality publications, maybe externally refereed, is something which I cannot imagine would be the right way to proceed. All I can say at the moment is that it's something I want to look at; I have no preconceived ideas at all.

David Harris has been extremely effective in gaining more space for the Institute, but there is still a shortage. Do you expect student numbers to rise under your directorship, and if so, how will this be accommodated?

I'm not yet sure about the student numbers. What I can answer much more easily at this stage, which fits in with what I said at the beginning about trying to deal with the issue of world coverage, is the question of staff numbers. Staff numbers, or staff researchers, will have to go up; the number of visiting sabbatical people from all around the world will have to go up. I can't do any of these things because there isn't enough space. I have already seen the Provost about this: it's a question of getting outside funding to acquire more space.

Given the well publicized controversy surrounding your own appointment, would you like to take this opportunity to comment on the issue?

No... I'm not saying I won't try to answer your question, I'm saying I don't particularly want to.

Why not?

Well, you tell me it's well publicized; I've never come across it.

It's in Antiquity.

I never read Chippindale on anything.

At the time that the announcement of the appointment was made, there was considerable resistance from the staff, not to you personally, but to the method by which the appointment proceeded. Do you consider that the problem will have died down by now, and that people will have got used to the idea?

I can't answer that; I'm unaware of the controversy; as far as I'm concerned, this was all going on somewhere else.

The main issue seemed to be about the public advertisement of academic posts. Do you take a stance on that?

If I was the Provost or the Director of something, I would normally advertise posts, but I do know of situations, in fact I have been involved in situations as head of various things in my career, where that has not been appropriate. To achieve what I thought was the best, or what my committee thought was the best, I have in other places proceeded without advertisement. I would judge each case on its merits. I know nothing about the procedure which was followed in this case. I only know the result.

What would you consider to be your greatest achievement in your career to date?

I find it very difficult to distinguish between two things: one was getting Aborigines and archaeologists in Australia to talk to each other again. The second thing must be the creation of the One World Archaeology series.

In the light of the events in India in December 1994, how do you see the future of the World Archaeological Congress and the One World Archaeology series, and will you be maintaining your present role?

I believe that what happened in India actually strengthens the World Archaeological Congress, because, although in many ways an administrative disaster, it nevertheless produced some academic sessions that simply could not have existed in any other framework. They will produce good books. Secondly, although it was a political nightmare, that is exactly what the World Archaeological Congress is trying to expose, that archaeology *is* in a political nightmare, it always has been and always will be. In a sense, although we didn't come out of it very well, we certainly all had a lot to learn from it; I don't think it has done any harm, not in the long run. Also, we now know that the next one is going to happen in 1998, and that will be in South Africa with Mandela as patron. In a sense, even if the congress in India had totally collapsed, the symbolism of the whole of the WAC thing would live on anyway. And there is a firm offer for 2002 in Australia,

so I think the future of the World Archaeological Congress is not something to be worried about at that level, though funding is another matter. The One World Archaeology series will continue; there are going to be somewhere between eight and ten good books coming out of WAC 3. What happens to the series after that I'm not sure; the South Africans have already approached us for a joint imprint with the University of Witwatersrand's press, but that hasn't yet been decided. I will go on as Series Editor for the WAC 3 volumes, and the suggestion is that together with Professor Martin Hall, who will be the National Secretary for WAC 4, we might become joint Series Editors.

What are your current research interests?

My current research interests go back to 1985, when I finished the third field season in Crete, taking thirty students from Southampton each year; then life was taken over by WAC 1. Therefore I've never written up a word of the Cretan research, and that's what I hope to do during my sabbatical. It's all about traditional potters. These are very, very old people, who claimed to be able to recognize the style of individual pot makers from their grandfathers' pots. It's a question of finding out how they identified them. I've never had the time to go through all that and analyze it, to see whether we can learn from that as archaeologists about how we should be looking at some of the pots. That's what I hope to do for the next few months. I also hope to finish a book which I'm doing together with the Professor of Classical Archaeology in Southampton, which is called 'Reaching For The Past'. It's all about concepts of time and the past as revealed through excavation, not only today but right back to Nebuchadnezzar, who also excavated. I don't think anyone's ever put all this together.

Do you have anything further planned?

Not planned, no, though I'm in the mood to do one last biggish piece of research if I finish this Cretan work and the book, and if the Institute's job allows one any time to do anything. I have been asked to go back to Palaeolithic Art, by the French, which I'm very pleased about. It's to work actually in one of the new caves, which would be magnificent.

Would you characterize yourself as falling into any particular theoretical camp? Would you call yourself, say, pro-cognitive, or pro-Hodder; how do you position yourself in that sort of debate?

I spend a lot of time avoiding being called any of these things, but I suppose if you really pushed hard it would be more pro-cognitive than anything else; but it certainly doesn't fit into the normal mould. I don't think pigeonholing is really helpful, though it can be convenient as a shorthand. If you have seen the first of the TAG volumes, which I've just edited, you'll see that I argue against it wherever possible. I'm very pleased with that volume.

From that perspective do you see the sub-departmental structure of the Institute as being unnecessarily compartmentalized?

By definition, rather than because I have come across it as a hindrance, but I would expect

it to be. One of the few attractions of coming to this job is to actually make it into an Institution, rather than just a department of UCL, and there have got to be cross-subsection activities. I would expect the research students to take the lead in this really, with encouragement.

Interview conducted by Robert Carter and Gwyn Davies