

## INTERVIEW

### **Interview with Professor Stephen Shennan - MA, PhD, FBA**

Director of the UCL Institute of Archaeology  
Professor of Theoretical Archaeology  
Elected Fellow of the British Academy in July 2006

Interview  
conducted by Susan Poole and Amara Thornton  
on 12th May 2008



Photo: Stuart Laidlaw.

Professor Stephen Shennan is a man with a gentle manner which belies a formidable intellect. Originally Cambridge educated, Shennan has published numerous articles and written (or edited) a number of books relating to his research interests (the application of biological evolutionary theory and methods to archaeology, prehistoric demography, ethnicity, and prehistoric social and economic institutions). He now heads UCL's Institute of Archaeology (IoA), the largest, and one of the most important centres for archaeological research and education today (rated first in Britain by the Guardian League Tables 2008). Shennan sees his Directorship here as giving him the opportunity to enable some of the "brightest and most diverse talent in the field of archaeology today... to do what they want to do". However, heading the Institute is not the only peak he has reached. He is also a Fellow of the British Academy; only top scholars of recognised distinction and achievement in one or more branches of the academic disciplines that make up the humanities and social sciences are elected to its fellowship. Shennan was described by their representative as "one of Europe's leading theoretical and prehistoric archaeologists". To have reached such heights is consistent with one of his main 'outside work' activities: he has been an avid rock climber since he was fifteen, and as recently as April 2008 was climbing in Nevada with his wife and Rob Boyd, one of a handful of people who have strongly influenced Shennan's own thinking.

In the interview that follows, Shennan talks about what inspired his earliest interests in archaeology, and outlines the people and books that have been influential. He speaks about the importance of combining empirical with theoretical aspects, and of his own research interests in evolutionary archaeology. He also reflects on what it is like to be Director of the IoA, an Institute that is now "absolutely at the centre of things", and gives his views on related issues such as the Institute's research groups and the new Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) regulations. Finally he speaks of the leading role that the Institute is now playing in developing links between archaeology and heritage.

*Papers from the Institute of Archaeology 19 (2009): 28-36*

**AT: What made you take up archaeology?**

SS: I remember first hearing the word 'archaeologist' when I was about eight or nine years old, playing in some sand hills in a place called Meolls, not far from Liverpool, where we used to live. I met this guy in the sand hills, he was digging, and I asked him what he was doing. He was about twelve years old, and he said "I'm an archaeologist, I'm looking for Roman swords". In fact, as I discovered later, there is actually quite a big Roman site not very far from there. So there was some basis to what he was doing. Then, my developing interest was one of those inexplicable emotional things. On family holidays in north Wales, I used to make the family trail around and visit megalithic tombs, and that sort of thing. So it started pretty young really. For no accountable reason that I can see I had this strange emotional attraction.

**SP: So where did you actually do your first dig?**

SS: I went on my first dig at the end of my time in the sixth form. I did Ancient History for one of my A levels, and in one of those years the special option was Roman Britain. So I read vast amounts of things on Roman Britain, and we even visited an excavation. And at that same time I actually came to an Ancient History lecture here at the Institute given by Momigliano.

**SP: Whilst you were still in the Sixth Form?**

SS: Yes, whilst still at school. I went on an excavation at Dragonby, which is a site up near Scunthorpe, in Lincolnshire, one of the big excavations of the time, run by Jeffrey May, who died quite recently. This convinced me that I really wanted to do archaeology. I came from a rather conventional background, and excavations in the late 1960's were anarchic sorts of places, so it was something of a revelation to go on one. The life style was at least as important as the digging. One of the site supervisors there at the time was Sarah Champion, who became quite a well known Iron Age specialist who sadly died just a few years ago. I remember on that same excavation there was also Adrian Olivier, now one of the senior people at English Heritage. That was in the summer when I was 18. Then I came back to the sixth form for a term to sit the Oxbridge entrance exam. I spent the time in that remaining gap year digging, from the spring until the autumn just going round on different excavations. In fact that's where I met Tim Schadla-Hall, on my second excavation, and he's not changed that much actually, since then!

**SP: So do you think you enjoyed the digs as much as you enjoy the theory?**

SS: Certainly the digging got me into it, and I like digging. I didn't know anything about theoretical things until I got to Cambridge and discovered these...[pauses]...in fact I think I went out of my way to look for theoretical things. One thing that I can remember really vividly, when I was in my first year, David Clarke's *Analytical Archae-*

*ology* came out. I can remember buying that at great expense. It cost seven guineas, and I can remember regularly falling asleep late in the evening trying to make head or tail of it. I was determined to persevere and understand it.

**SP: You come across as a theorist, being very interested in the theoretical side.**

SS: I've got increasingly interested in theory. For me it's ever more important, if you're going to do fieldwork, to have a clear aim, to have a question, but one that can only be answered by means of fieldwork. I have done quite a lot of fieldwork over the years. I think I've accumulated my credentials in field archaeology. After I finished my PhD I spent two years as the Hampshire Archaeological Committee Field Officer. I was based in the University of Southampton; I did a lot of intensive field walking surveys. It was where I got back in touch with Tim [Schadla-Hall] actually because he was, I think, a Wessex Field Archaeologist at the time. It was an interesting experience working outside the academic sector for a couple of years, though at the time, when you're just starting up, if you want an academic job and you're desperately worried whether you're going to make it or not, I was worried I was going to get stuck in field archaeology. Having eventually then moved on into academia, looking back at it I'm really grateful for the experience I had.

**AT: Could you tell us broadly about your research interests?**

SS: When I was at Cambridge I specialised in the Neolithic and Bronze Age and in particular the person whose teaching really interested me was David Clarke. Also, for no accountable reason I can give, I was particularly interested in the origins of the Bronze Age, and that tied in with David's work. He'd just published his huge great tome on Beaker Pottery in Great Britain and Ireland, which had been his PhD. So I wanted to do a PhD, about the beginning of the Bronze Age, and I wanted it to be New Archaeology, for want of a better term, which was just coming in at the time, and I knew I wanted it to be supervised by David Clarke. So I decided that I would do it on bell beakers in Central Europe, where obviously a lot of the Bronze Age things started. It seemed to me culturally an interesting area as well. My former wife [Sue Shennan], who was also a PhD student at the same time, also did a Central European topic. Just before we started her grandfather had died and left us a legacy, so we bought a VW camper van and travelled around central Europe for over a year.

I was interested in looking at the issue of whether bell beakers spread over large parts of Europe as the result of a Beaker folk, or some other kind of process. This was very much the time of rejecting 'folk' of any kind. I basically came up with an argument that the distribution of bell beakers and copper daggers, and related things, was associated with prestige and really nothing to do with movements of people. In the context of doing the thesis, and again no doubt because of the Clarke influence, I came to the conclusion that it was very important to use quantitative methods to analyse data. If I

was going to make any sense, identify any patterning, in all my pot drawings, then I had to subject them to quantitative analysis. I sat in on lots of lecture courses on things like statistics and quantitative geography, just to get the hang of all that.

The first academic job I had at Southampton, where I'd been a field officer for two years, was to be lecturer in quantitative methods for a new MA in Theoretical Archaeology which Colin Renfrew was setting up. He was Head of Department there at the time. In fact Todd [Whitelaw] was one of my very first students when that course started! For an archaeologist I knew quite a lot about quantitative methods, but I didn't really know that much at all, so I think I was just about able to keep ahead of the people I was teaching! At the same time myself attending lots of lectures in the Social Statistics department.

**AT: How do you divide up your time now between being Director and working as an archaeologist?**

SS: It's pretty much 80% to 90% Director things, I think it's fair to say, and the remaining 10% – and all that non-existent spare time – in pursuing archaeology. But increasingly, in terms of the projects that I do, it's post docs doing most of the work, while I take part in the writing and the developing of ideas and discussion. So I can overview things and be involved in a supervising and writing way in these projects, but mostly it's other people doing the concrete work.

But being the Director is an interesting thing to be, for lots of reasons. It's a bit of a daunting responsibility. You feel that weight of tradition that you've got to somehow live up to. But I feel that this [UCL Institute of Archaeology] is a fantastic place, with fantastic staff and fantastic students. And I see the main aspect of my job as trying to give people the possibilities to do what they want to do. Inevitably it's not always sweetness and light because there are all sorts of impositions, because there are various jobs that need to be done, and somebody has to do them. But if you think of this job as trying to facilitate a place where lots of exciting things happen, that's the way I look at it, and I think that's the right way to look at it. When you look around and see how many good people there are here, that very much feels a worthwhile thing to do.

**AT: We wondered whether you could tell us what you think is the future for the Research Groups at the Institute?**

SS: The Research Groups are very broad umbrellas. I would say that they are more 'management groups' in many respects than research groups. They represent the main different areas of Institute interest. To some degree they have specifically fostered research, and to some degree they haven't. That varies from group to group. So if you look at the Material Culture and Data Science group, they're clearly quite coherent in many respects, because there's a kind of lab-based identity, which makes them a bit more like the research groups in the hard sciences. The Social and Cultural Dynamics

group has arranged interesting meetings, and maybe most of the people in that group would identify themselves with specifically anthropological approaches, but there isn't much more unity than that. Just to run the place we need some sort of management groups in which all the different interests are broadly represented. But in many ways the most coherent research group is the AHRC centre, the Centre for the Evolution of Cultural Diversity. In terms of staff that are involved with that, they come from pretty much all the research groups. I think the main thing that mustn't happen is for the research groups to become a kind of strait jacket and to prevent, as it were, for want of a better word, 'real' Research Groups from developing. I've said this to people before; I can't see why people shouldn't develop their own groups of like-minded people pursuing particular themes, regardless of what group they're in. Like the Phenomenology Interest Group. I've got no idea which groups the people that go along to those meetings are from, but as far as I can see there's no reason why there shouldn't be many groups like that cross-cutting the main research groups, and pursuing particular academic agendas that they are keen on pursuing.

**AT: I'd now like to ask you about the new AHRC regulations: what is your opinion of them?**

SS: What are you thinking of in particular?

**AT: The fact that the Universities now are in charge of distributing funding. Is that right?**

SS: I personally think that is not such a good thing. I think, a few years ago we arrived at a really good system, and now they're making it worse. The long standing system of having individual students applying for grants, coming with a project, and submitting that to a panel which is completely outside the Institution was a good one. There couldn't be any question of favouritism, or fights between colleagues about who is going to get a grant for their student, it was all taken away at one remove and done in a pretty effective way. A few years ago I was on that panel for three years, giving out studentships, and on the whole justice was done really. You could argue that occasionally a grant should have been given to somebody instead of somebody else, but nevertheless, I thought that was a good system. Then a few years ago the AHRC introduced the system that made it possible for academics to apply for a PhD studentship as part of a grant application. That met what I thought was the one shortcoming of the previous system. It enabled a member of staff to say 'I want a PhD student to work on this particular topic related to my broader project'. I think that the block grant is a real retrograde step. I guess it will save the AHRC some money, and time, in terms of processing all those applications, but it's not clear to me that it will be the best possible way of funding the best possible people. I thought it was much better before. And the new system is likely to provoke some degree of internal fighting, both at the student level and at the staff level, and I think that's a pity.

**SP: To return to a question more specifically about archaeology: in 2007, here at the Institute, a series of lectures entitled “Discussing Evolutionary and Interpretative Archaeology” was led by pairs of speakers who presented a certain theme from each perspective. In your opinion which side had the stronger case?**

SS: Well I’m clearly biased, as you know very well. First of all, I think too much is made of the opposition between these things. Some of the false oppositions I think are beginning to disappear a bit; melt away. The things I like about the evolutionary approach are that it has a very, very strong theoretical foundation in lots of different areas, from optimal foraging theory, to costly signalling, to quantitative methods of studying cultural evolution. They provide a strong basis for developing interesting hypotheses. If it was all just theoretical stuff it would be a complete waste of time as far as I’m concerned. I think ideas are only interesting in as far as they can generate productive, empirical work. And I think the evolutionary approach does do that. I also think it’s exciting because a lot of this work is very much at the frontier in terms of the theory of how evolutionary processes work in relation to culture; exploring how useful they can be, I find that exciting. Once you start looking at things through an evolutionary lens, somehow the world is never the same again. It gives you a different angle on things, which I think is an exciting angle. But that’s not to say that I would want this to be an Institute of Evolutionary Archaeology. I think it’s extremely important for there to be a diversity of views. If everybody was pursuing the same things it would be a recipe for stagnation. So I think it’s important to have different people with different views playing them off against each other. The only thing that I sometimes feel slightly irritated about is that some of the oppositions are simply false oppositions, in that some people from the non-evolutionary camp have ideas about what an evolutionary approach consists of which simply don’t correspond to reality. There are misconceptions which need to be overcome, I would say. But I think having a diversity of views is extremely important. And I think a lot of those discussions were quite interesting. Nor do I necessarily think that an evolutionary approach has the answers to everything. I wouldn’t want to claim that.

I think one of the things which is encouraging here at the Institute is the lack of polarisation; that it’s possible, within the bounds of the Institute, to encompass all those different views. Rather than people falling out and not speaking to each other, it’s possible for people to discuss and debate things in productive ways; for people to be influenced by each other’s views. I think that’s how it should be, and I think that’s exciting. Maybe it’s because the Institute’s such a big place. If it were a much smaller place, maybe people would rub each other up the wrong way perhaps more than they do. But it is also because there is a whole range of views between those that are at opposite extremes. It’s very exciting and stimulating to see this range of viewpoints.

**SP: Even though many diverse approaches are active, especially in the Institute, do you think there's a gradual return in British archaeology to processual archaeology?**

SS: What has happened, to a degree, is that people have got sick of all the theory wars. I think that's certainly true. So I think there is a move for people to want to do more empirical work; to run things like a Stonehenge Riverside Project; to 'do archaeology' and find new information. In that connection a major recent trend is the use of more and more scientific techniques to find out information about the past. That's taken a much higher profile. I think a lot more people are more interested in that than they were a few years ago. I don't think it is becoming more processual as such. All those people who were the earlier post-processualists, they're still there in the Universities, teaching. I know that the ideas of some of them have shifted, but they're still presenting their ideas. I just think there's more catholicity these days and people are more eclectic than they used to be. But I think it's a good thing to have come back round again to people actually wanting to do the archaeology. And I think there are far fewer theoretical position-taking papers. After a while they get boring. You want to see how the ideas work and how they influence things, whether in archaeology or in the heritage area.

**AT: I know you mentioned David Clarke as someone who had a great influence on you. Who else has had a strong influence on you, personally or professionally?**

SS: David Clarke was certainly the most important one, no question. And at the time, in Cambridge, that involved taking sides, that involved being anti-Eric Higgs and co., who were developing the palaeo-economy approach. Higgsians were slightly dubious, and Glyn Daniel was altogether beyond the pale; he represented the worst kind of traditional archaeology.

I suppose in terms of people who were a bit older than me or the same age as me, Ian Hodder was influential. Ian was a direct contemporary of mine as a PhD student. He was certainly a person who had an influence. At the time he was pursuing his quantitative geography work. Also, a few years older than me was Andrew Sherratt, who was around at the time. He had similar interests to me in European prehistory. And then, I was certainly influenced in many ways by Colin Renfrew. My former wife, at the same time as I was a student at Cambridge, was a student in Sheffield, which is where Renfrew was at that point, and we both dug for him, at the site at Sitagroi in Northern Greece. Then, I worked with Colin in Greece after that at the site of Phylakopi for a couple of seasons. He gave me all my first employment opportunities in fact. Initially a one-year fellowship was to put together a catalogue of British prehistoric amber finds; then he was involved in me becoming a field officer, and later appointed me to my first academic job. But apart from all those practical things, I admire how sharp he is, how engaged he is, in all sorts of different ways. My respect and admiration for Colin has

only increased over the years. He's 70 now and he's still engaged and active, and that's impressive.

To turn again to David Clarke, I was definitely influenced by *Analytical Archaeology*. But, in the mid, or late [19]70s, what got me interested in evolutionary approaches, was reading *The Selfish Gene*. There's absolutely no question about that. I was totally impressed by the clarity and lucidity of the vision being presented in that particular book. And then, subsequent to that, I came across a book by Rob Boyd and Pete Richerson, called *Culture and the Evolutionary Process*, which for the first time enabled me to start seeing the possibility of using the ideas in an anthropological context. So that book was certainly an important influence; one of those serendipitous discoveries in a book-shop which caused a change of direction. Rob Boyd is somebody who I've since become friends with over the years and have a great deal of respect for.

**SP: I'd like to ask you finally, what do you think is one of the most interesting things happening in archaeology at the moment?**

SS: I do think that one of the most interesting things happening at the moment is how things are going in terms of the relationship between archaeology and heritage/public archaeology. They've tended to be separate from one another, in terms of archaeology on the one hand and heritage things on the other. I think there's a lot more capacity for integration. And I think linking archaeology to heritage ideas is going to be ever more important. That doesn't mean that the heritage agendas need to be the same heritage agendas as say five or ten years ago. We can develop new heritage agendas. I think the new Virtual Centre for Heritage, Museums and Material Culture which is being set up between us and Anthropology and UCL Collections, is an exciting development. On the basis of the first meeting I went to it has the potential to integrate all sorts of theoretical agendas which are usually considered to be unrelated, or even opposed to one another. I think we can be, and should be, leaders in Britain, if not in the world, in that sort of area, in pursuing these things, because we've got the critical mass in all these areas. We've got people in Anthropology with related interests who can bring different perspectives. We've got people in UCL Collections with different perspectives. I think we should really be making the running here in pursuing the links between archaeology and heritage things, and I think we're beginning to, in all sorts of ways. That's really important. I think it's important intellectually. I also think it's going to become more important financially as well. We're being told more and more that we have to show we're being involved in 'knowledge transfer'. That involves integrating with broader public interests, and other public organisations. I just think we've got to be more engaged with people. In some quarters that's dismissed as 'dumbing down' but it needn't be, and it shouldn't be. I think there's a chance here to be creative intellectually, as well as engaging with wider issues.

**AT: Is there anything else you would like to say?**

SS: The only thing I would like to add is that I think there is nowhere else around that is even remotely as exciting as this place. When I was a student in Cambridge, we rather looked down on the Institute of Archaeology as being a pretty dreary place, which was basically out of the stream in terms of where all the exciting developments were going on. I think that we are absolutely in the centre of things now. There isn't anywhere at all that I would rather be than here.

**References**

- Boyd, R., & Richerson, P. J., c.1985. *Culture and the Evolutionary Process*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Clarke, D. L., 1978. *Analytical Archaeology*. London: Methuen.
- Dawkins, R., 1976. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- The Guardian*. 2008. University League Tables. [<http://education.guardian.co.uk/universityguide2008/0,,2027789,00.html>] [Accessed 27 July 2009].