INTERVIEW

Interview with Neal Ascherson, Honorary lecturer at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL

How did you become interested in archaeology in the first place?

Well, I suppose it was because archaeology was all around me in the part of the world that I grew up in. We spent our holidays in the west of Scotland in Argyll around Crinan and the Kilmartin Glen, a sacred area with its prehistoric monuments of whatever kind, and we also used to spend time on Coll, for example. I remember when I first started to find things and pick things up there, because of the sandhill sites, you might suddenly find yourself looking at a recently uncovered hearth and I'd find pottery or the odd flint. I started to send these things to the Society of Antiquaries in Edinburgh. Then, when I was a schoolboy, I used to act as a guide to the area to visitors from Edinburgh, people such as Kenneth Steer. When we went down to England, although my father was stationed in Kent, we stayed in Sussex and nearby there was a Roman ironworks. Again, there was no excavation going on, but you could just walk over the site and pick up what the rabbits and badgers kicked out. There were enormous masses of Roman pottery, slag and scoriae and whatever else came out. In this way I made contact with Henry Cleere, who was working with this material even at that stage, and also with Christopher and Jacquetta Hawkes, who for some reason answered my letters.

What aspects of your past career are most relevant to your work at the Institute?

Really, it's an indirect route, as a lot of my work has been in central and eastern Europe and Scotland, all places where there are various problems of identity with intellectual recourse to the use and re-use (and even re-invention) of the events of history and, for the most part, of prehistory as well. So I was obviously interested in that dimension to national struggles or national aspirations, or whatever you want to call them. And this brought me back to archaeology, particularly the way in which archaeology was dragged into the affairs of states (or wannabe states) on a large scale. I witnessed the last phases of the struggle between Slav and German archaeologists, ethnologists and politicians over who was there first, and indeed I continued to witness this all over what you might call western Eurasia, including the Caucasus. This confirmed my belief that archaeology was more important than its practitioners cared to admit, although in those long-ago days of the 1960s most practitioners were extremely, not to say neurotically, pragmatic and were too busy with some typology or other to venture a theory. This, of course, was the period when Mortimer Wheeler was snorting around trampling his feet and reciting things like 'We've got all the timetables, it's time for a few trains!' I rather sympathized with that, and at the same time I became aware of the sudden breakthrough which started with the New Archaeologists. That interested me a great deal, because it was in part an argument about cognition. What is now called processual archaeology interested me a lot less, as I was much more interested in the argument about how you approached a problem. People now like to say that the New Archaeologists claimed

to obtain absolute truth from objects that speak to you.   In fact, in the 1970s, they said exactly the reverse of that: if objects are speaking to you, then you should go and see a psychiatrist because what you are really hearing are the wee voices within your own head! At that time I met the early practitioners of rescue archaeology and there again you could see that archaeology was expanding at blinding speed, not only overflowing into various other disciplines, but also into national politics and the culture of the State.   In fact rescue archaeology was, in a way, the peak of the profession's demands upon the State.   It was at that point that Martin Biddle was turning out those amazing documents, in which he said 'Right, now it is time for a State Archaeological Service'. This would have been decentralized substantially less than the Fire Brigades or the Police forces.   All these things were happening and, again, I had the sense of archaeology as an amazing occupation and discipline which was in a state of expansion, quite difficult for the profession itself to cope with.   So that was my early experience as a journalist, in countries where history and prehistory were being called into question or called as evidence for all kinds of stupid political claims.   That got me interested in the subject which is now called Public Archaeology.

The forging of the nation-state, particularly in the 19th century, is evidently a subject that engages you.   Archaeology has long been cast in the roles both of handmaiden and gravedigger in these dramas (often with the active participation of archaeologists themselves).   Are there any safeguards that should be adopted to limit such blatant political manipulation in the future?

No. There is only one safeguard, and that it is for archaeologists to say loudly what they think.   There is a potent argument that any statement that you care to make about origins is valid so long as it is sufficiently intensely believed by a substantial number of people. I certainly wouldn't go as far as that, but if there is a limit, it is that a critical intelligence must be vocal, there must be no censorship. For example it might be said that 'Arthur is now almost 100% historically certain as the ancestor of the British State', but I would wish to deconstruct why you are making this interesting statement and what its implications are. At the same time somebody has got to say 'The physical evidence for that statement is very, very shaky...something turns up at Tintagel scribbled on a piece of slate, it's probably not even a name...it's the thinnest of evidence.' It is important that someone is saying that sort of thing: let the debate continue, let there be no censorship. A classic case for how wrong this can get is Ayodhya. The difficulty there was the intellectual terrorism exerted by one part of the profession against another part. One part felt it had the current dominant political power in India behind it and attempted to silence (and indeed, to destroy the careers of) those who said that the material evidence for the pre-existence of a temple underneath the mosque was simply rubbish and that the circumstances of 'discovery' were absolutely unreliable, and that the comparison with what those same claiming archaeologists had written in the past under other political conditions rendered their current claims utterly meaningless. The really important thing is that that side should not lose its voice. That is the limit: the maintenance of a free intellectual society with no censorship where there is a maximum of academic freedom from political

interference, so that one side in an academic debate cannot, as it were, call in the cultural police to evict its adversaries from their academic posts.

What is the exact nature of your role at the Institute?

I have two jobs as I understand it, although I can't say they are tightly defined! Job one is to take part in teaching Public Archaeology and then the second job (which is probably more interesting) is to set up or to lead the setting up of a journal about Public Archaeology, and to be its editor.

Perhaps you could outline the circumstances surrounding your appointment.

Really this goes back to my meeting Peter Ucko in the '80s. We have a mutual journalist friend who, at the time, worked at *The Observer*, where I was also on the staff, and he drew my attention to the gathering storm clouds over the World Archaeological Congress at Southampton, and the great issue of the 'dis-inviting' of the South Africans. I looked into this and I was intensely interested and moved by it. I think that Peter Ucko was absolutely right, in fact, all the more convincingly right because he found it very hard to make that decision, and his own mental struggles, I thought, did him a great deal of credit. Had he been a right-on fanatic who had been indecently lusting from the first moment to dis-invite the South African archaeologists, then of course it wouldn't have been nearly so interesting and touching. Thus I wrote a column in *The Observer* which strongly supported him against his critics, as I thought that his decision to dis-invite, painful as it was, was correct. Something bigger was at stake here, not just political correctness but the shifting of the entire discipline off Eurocentricity on to this world track of World Archaeology, which was a tremendous thing to have undertaken, so the sacrifice was well worth making. I also have, as a journalist, a habitual suspicion of the idea of total academic freedom as a kind of absolute, I don't like *any* absolutes. After all, I have spent a lot of energy fighting the idea of absolute sovereignty, on which, unfortunately, 'Ukania', the country we live in, is still constructed. Absolute academic freedom is as irrational and disreputable a concept as that. Anyway, that is how I first met Peter Ucko, and we got together and talked and really became friends. I wrote something else about the controversy as it unfolded and indeed, about some of the resulting World Archaeology publications. Then a couple of years ago, I went down to a WAC-related meeting at Southampton concerning heritage, an area that I was already writing about anyway, where I gave my amateur thoughts on heritage to this distinguished gathering. I didn't quite realize who I was addressing at the time, and now I'm amazed at my own temerity at lecturing them on the dangers of the heritage culture. After Peter moved here, he asked me if I would come to help to begin a project which is to make the Institute, in some sense (as well as its other functions), into a base for developing the study of Public Archaeology and to be the centre of whatever debate might develop. We talked about a lot of possibilities, the idea of a chair, of a department, but above all, the idea of fundraising for such a concept. What we finally ended up with was the present position, i.e. me here as a

part-time lecturer with a further responsibility to found this journal and to get it up and flying.

What do you think from your experience is the general public perception of archaeology in Britain?

Well, it has changed enormously. The media's perception and representation of archaeology are not a very good guide to public attitudes. Here at the Institute all you have to do is look at the huge e-mail traffic containing endless demands from *Live-TV* or whatever, for evidence or information on the lines of 'Tell us more about the Curse of Tutankhamun'. This is what the media conditions us, to some extent at least, to expect from archaeology, and this representation of the discipline is one of the things that I talk to my students about. More important, however, is the colossal spread of basic knowledge, understanding and interest in the subject which has occurred in the last 30 years. This is more advanced in some cultures than others, and particularly in Britain, probably because there was, in European terms, a very early advance here into television. Almost immediately, from the early '50s, archaeologists discovered what terrific publicity this medium conferred, and indeed, what self-publicizing talents they themselves had got. It wasn't as if the BBC, or later ITV, decided that archaeological programmes would talk about the subject in a chatty way that would condescend to the masses. Suddenly the country woke up to this amazing set of stars like Mortimer Wheeler or Glyn Daniel, who went about identifying objects. They were wonderful! Of course it wasn't just about objects, but about raising the general awareness of archaeology: not the old media-born image of archaeology as something you did abroad, the image of the imperial archaeologist who puts on a solar topee, goes on an expedition and controls, possibly sjambok in hand, huge hordes of native labourers (although this is still the news editor's stock image which has gone uncorrected by sophisticated archaeology correspondents). On the contrary, after Daniel in particular, the public have been perfectly aware that the primary focus of archaeology is here, at home, carried on as a domestic occupation with domestic problems. But I also think that public awareness of archaeology is based on a kind of thirst for information which archaeology, for the moment, is unable to satisfy. That is the source of the real difficulties, such as they are, and why parascience and pseudoarchaeology, cunningly packaged and cleverly sold, reach such a huge audience. 'Respectable' archaeology cannot keep up at the moment with this voracious public appetite. It also interests me that we have arrived at a situation in television, for example, where programmes about the past are now journalist-led instead of being professional-led. So if there are professionals in the Daniel mould around, they aren't making the programmes any more, despite the fact that there is something theatrical about archaeology, with its capacity for flamboyant self-projection and publicity. The journalist culture has closed up against this sort of programme on the basis that 'We know best what the public want', so that now a new TV archaeological programme must have elements of *The Big Breakfast* in it, with people in baseball caps jumping up and down and screaming.

Do you think that that sort of behaviour threatens to undermine public awareness?

Well, no, because you can't go back on that sort of awareness, but what it is does do is to drift off and feed that appetite for the pseudo- and para-archaeology which the professionals are unable to satisfy. If one was to invent percentages, perhaps 60% of the demand for information is fulfilled by the discipline whilst the remaining 40% is still the preserve of arrant nonsense from all kinds of sources, some of which are fuelled by television.

To what extent does making archaeology widely accessible entail simplifying a complex and contested past?

Of course it does involve simplification, some of which ought to be welcomed, after all. If you are going to talk on television then you have to simplify the terms so that people know what you are talking about, and that is an absolutely healthy exercise. Archaeology has two obvious communication problems. One is linguistic, in that you are dealing with a lot of objects and a lot of nouns which are not in common use. These are precise terms with an assigned definite meaning, but that is a perfectly respectable professional problem to have. The other particular difficulty is when you get the use of cloudy philosophical language which, although translatable, somehow defies anyone to translate it. What I really would like to see is some of the basic debates about the nature of time, arguments about rights such as those of local people and localities, and the idea of continuity, taught in sixth form, not least because these are important arguments about how we regard the past which immediately confront any bright kid. History as taught by the State doesn't require people to ask what the past is and what it is for (which archaeology at its best does). But this should be part of the basic intellectual equipment addressed in schools, and this is not communicated at the present time. On the positive side, what is communicated to the general public is this huge awareness, not simply of the actual domestic archaeology being undertaken but also of the profession, which is light years away from that shared by the Fleet Street news editors. The public now have another image, which is that of young, muddy, sometimes slightly obsessive people squatting in the rain scraping away with trowels and brushes and this is interesting and impressive. It is an activity which a lot of people would like to join or at least to understand more about. It is a significant change of perception and it has also, at last, returned to the localities, so that there are centres radiating archaeological information and concern scattered all over the UK. These are often quite small places which attract local people, so that a primary school will send every class once a year into the local museum where the kids can dig around in a sand pit and find objects, a process that allows the children to learn constructively. All this has changed for the better.

What contribution does archaeology and the heritage industry make to the construction of culture in the broad sense?

I have my worries about the heritage industry. I'm not criticizing the project of preserving the past but rather I'm worried about some of the implications. The word

'heritage' is obviously quite an interesting one, with its original connotations of a legacy, of an individual thing coming from the past which you could reject or accept. However, the thing about the new 'heritage' concept is that it is total and inescapable. If one goes back to, say, the 19th century, people felt that they owned only that slice of the past that was part of their story, that which was based in historical records and documents and anything else which could be shown to be part of that story. Then there was a large residue of monuments of various kinds, relics of a material past which could not be interpreted as part of 'our story' and which must have 'belonged' to someone else. So there were two sorts of past, which could be taken out of the unknown into the known range, but what you have now is a total claim where everything is heritage, which even extends far back to include geology in the form of buried Pre-Cambrian landscapes. From our point of view, what matters is that you can't say 'I don't want it' to all the artefacts that comprise this heritage, as you have to accept it. Not only do you have the right to enjoy access to your heritage, but you also have the duty to respect it and to hand it on in proper (if not 'improved' out of all recognition) condition to the next generation. Heritage therefore becomes quite a burden, and that is a worry because of the social, if not political, control which it implies. Of course the heritage industry is not all bad and there are a lot of good things which come out of it. There are some good theme parks for example which, although not necessarily accurate, still manage to touch some authentic nerve in people and which work in a respectable way. Then there are those other theme parks which are outrageous attempts to pretend that you can re-enter the past and that the past is really 'there', thus losing all humility in the face of time, destruction and loss.

You have written that *the idea that there was some necessary connection between Beethoven and benevolence, between Mantegna and mercy, collapsed as totally as the Frauenkirche in Dresden*, **but isn't this an overstatement? After all, the notion that culture might be disseminated by some mysterious osmotic process clearly is still pervasive in many influential circles.**

Well, that's not really what I meant by that. What I'm trying to do there is to attack the term 'civilization' (which I never use), which rested upon an assumption that 'high culture' produces highly cultured behaviour. The Second World War demonstrated that this was not the case, that there is no connection. People can be highly literate and listen to classical music, yet commit unspeakable monstrosities of callousness and cruelty. The word civilization is mixed up with the idea that listening to Beethoven makes you a better person, and although sometimes that might be true, there is no necessary connection here. I'm not attacking the idea of culture, or the possibility that culture makes people more gentle and sensitive in their relationships with each other. It's the implications of the term 'civilization' that I have always detested.

Very well, but isn't 'culture' itself an encoded concept. Only those *perfecti* **who have been initiated into an understanding of its hidden structures can represent its 'higher values' to the external world. Why then should we not join the**

former Reichsmarschall in 'reaching for our revolvers' whenever we hear the word mentioned?

Well, I have nothing against the word 'culture', although one might ask *which* word culture, as there are so many versions, from material 'culture' to the 'culture' of spores that may be grown in a dish. I sometimes use the word to refer to opera, reading etc., but I always use it with some misgivings, and I prefer culture in the rather old-fashioned sense of the description of how a society lives, extending from its material equivalent to its spiritual and psychological equivalent. With that you obviously have certain dangers which archaeologists understand better than anyone else.

You have claimed that memory is the individual's defence against the relentless and distracting flow of information that the State generates to undermine the certainty of continuity. Can archaeology serve to counter this instability?

Archaeology is obviously not the same as memory. It would be a good thing if archaeology were to study memory more closely, and I think that this, to some extent, is coming about. Archaeology of the strict excavation kind is not necessarily going to interfere with the State's continuous attempts to manipulate memory, although it sometimes does. For example, in the Caucasus you get some State propaganda thoroughly endorsed by society along the lines of 'We were always here. We have been in this country for 3,500 years of total continuity. We predate Indo-European culture and no-one has ever lived here apart from us'. Then the archaeologists discover inconvenient layers, at which point the State, or those that think they are helping the State, descend with a bulldozer and the layer is removed and dumped elsewhere. That kind of thing does go on. But broadly speaking, I think archaeology's role (shared with anthropology and history) is to study commemoration a little more. One of the ways in which you identify what exactly is being done to what you might call 'public memory' by the State is by studying how events are commemorated. If you look at the way in which the death of Wolfe Tone in 1798 was being commemorated 200 years later, you will see quite dramatic changes of emphasis. Another Irish example, as Ireland is particularly good territory to investigate changing types of commemoration (as memory is manipulated in line with shifting political and social agendas), was the Famine commemoration. Originally, the first commemoration of the Famine was simply as a crime by the British and therefore it was a legacy about struggle. Later, of course, the situation had changed and there was an attempt to try and make a settlement in Northern Ireland. What Mary Robinson, the then Irish President, did was to say that the important thing about what was being commemorated was the cherishing of the diaspora. It is perfectly true that the Irish diaspora was created by the Famine and it is almost legitimate to say that the main consequence of the Famine was this dispersal of the Irish people across the world. But she said this because she didn't really want to talk about how horrible the British had been, and she tried to change the emphasis. Meanwhile, in the United States, the old Irish lobby were still following the old track, and they made an application to the centres of Holocaust and Genocide Studies to include the Famine on their curricula, which of course would have classified the British with the Turks

and with the Nazi Germans. The study of monuments, or whatever they may be, where there is no written evidence may reveal the existence of some episode of commemoration. Let us not, though, try and find out exactly what is the truth about the original event in question, but let's just see how it was commemorated and who was doing what to emphasize a particular point, or to validate a particular agenda through this commemoration. The advantage of the archaeology of prehistory is that you will probably never have the faintest sense of what the original event was or what the truth about it was. All you gain is some inkling about how groups of people, possibly at successive times, chose to commemorate something. So that is a way that archaeology can interrupt and modify the State's constant interference and manipulation of memory.

As you have identified jacobin ideologies of centralism as having powered the engine of social progress from 1789 onwards, would you also regard the increasing intervention of the State in the educational realm as an inevitable product of the same dogma?

Yes it is, although in the rest of Europe the intervention of the State in this area was part of the struggle against the Church, which presented the last real challenge to the power of the State. Of course, control over higher education has gone much further in Britain than in most countries apart from the late, unlamented Soviet Union. I lived for many years in West Germany, and coming back to this country was in many ways an enormous cultural shock. One reason for this was the fact that the government could set up a commission that would travel up and down the country asking questions such as 'How many archaeology departments have we got now, say north of the Trent? What, 15? God, we only really need about 6, don't we? Let's close this one, this one and this one by switching off the funds.' Then some desperate university would respond by saying 'Well, we would rather close our department of applied mathematics and perhaps we could re-allocate their grant to archaeology'. Of course, this route was also closed off. In Germany this would have amounted to a constitutional scandal, as there is some prevailing concept of social subsidiarity, where social institutions have an entrenched constitutional right to exist. If Mrs Thatcher had tried to do to the city of Bremen the same as she did to the GLC, she'd have gone to prison for a very long time indeed. The degree of arbitrary centralized State power which is still tolerated in British higher education is quite staggering to me. Admittedly, not all the interventions of the State have been unfortunate: some indeed have, been quite positive, but the general position really is quite unimaginable to me. I have never been an academic and I'm now living my first months in a world of higher education and I find this aspect of things amazing. The degree of State control, the fear of central State sanctions, even acts of vengeance at times for what the State might regard as provocation, is extraordinary, and that this community tolerates this is ridiculous. It's typical in a way of the present government that, although it has taken on board a lot of the intellectual arguments, it has still to realize that the status of universities is a constitutional matter. It is about a modern democracy. It is not just that academic freedom should be respected wherever possible, but more fundamentally, it is about the right of social institutions to enjoy autonomy. This is much more profound than a general decentralization of authority

to regional assemblies, and concerns the real dissemination of power in society itself. So yes, the jacobin tradition lives on right here, and in the field of higher education, probably stronger than anywhere else in Europe, with the possible exception of Ireland.

What is the new *Journal of Public Archaeology* (JPA) meant to achieve? Will it be more than an exercise in profile enhancement for the Institute?

First of all, I think that the journal should relate to the Institute, but it shouldn't be perceived as simply an Institute journal although the Institute might be the centre of it (and will indeed be identified as such). In the same way it shouldn't be seen as a WAC journal, although it is quite obvious that many of the concerns that it will share are WAC concerns. There's a huge amount of common ground, but not of common personnel. As to what it is intended to achieve, it is meant to explore the expanding perimeter of archaeology. Another way of putting that is to say that it is to discuss seriously and systematically the great number of topics that archaeologists discuss very animatedly amongst themselves but wouldn't normally consider writing about. For example, the problems of an archaeological plc and its relationships with a predatory developer: the pressures which exist in that relationship and how they are sometimes surrendered to or sometimes resisted, and at what cost, and all that kind of stuff is intensely interesting. I never see that in print, although it is often primary in the profession's experience and ought to be in the profession's self-esteem. Another area which is now hugely inflamed is the relationship between archaeology and the antiquities trade. This is the real crisis of the moment and it needs to be talked about on several dimensions. It not only needs to be assessed quantitatively but also the moral dimension has to be explored. There is the whole question of authentication for money. Should you do it? Is authentication the same as identification? Is there any line that can and should be drawn? Other questions that might be addressed are those of changing laws, the history of the profession, self-understanding. Representation is another very important area that we ought to be studying and writing about. How true is it that archaeology started as a private discipline in the hands of learned societies that then became nationalized and appropriated by those who were building the nation-state project? It then became accustomed to itself in its role as part of the state apparatus, part of the great toolbox of cultural equipment that a state ought to have. How did this relationship gradually come to an end so that the State is now clearly moving away from devoting resources to archaeology and the whole discipline is now emerging into a new daylight of being self-supporting, both in terms of resources and raison d' ®tre?

What would you identify as the target audience of the JPA?

Obviously archaeologists but also people who have all kinds of tangential relationships with the discipline which are very important. I would like to reach people in local government, central government who are concerned with heritage and its management, intelligent people in the business world who are concerned with development and construction, lawyers, many other academics, anthropologists,

historians, even perhaps teachers of fiction, and everyone who is concerned with the problems of the return of things, whether they are the representatives of aboriginal peoples or the curators of the holding institutions. Although the main body of contributions will be refereed, I would also like to include other material which might basically be considered as 'higher journalism'. For example, if there was a whistleblower who would seek anonymity to write about some particular scandal in 'privatized archaeology plc', I would like to run that very much and I think that a lot of people, not just in the profession, but across this wider audience, would want to read it too.

Given the overt politicization of archaeology, will JPA be adopting a conscious political stance of its own?

I doubt if it would take such a position. A lot of the positions or interests would traditionally be defined as left-of-centre. In the sense that I am personally critical of the free market, in a whole series of ways, I also think that the journal will be critical of it on various dimensions, and that is a left-of-centre position. I doubt whether the journal will have any more clear political positioning than that. It will have a sympathy to local claims, local demands, local searches for identity and have a general understanding for them as against the claims of traditional central museums, for example, or central heritage authorities, of which I think I would be suspicious. Whether that is a left or right wing concern is difficult to say.

Interview conducted by Gwyn Davies and Andrew Gardner