

ROZHOVOR / INTERVIEW

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BACK AGAIN

With Stephen Shennan about theoretical archaeology, archaeology in Britain and his trip to Central Europe 45 years ago.

Questions were asked by Martin Bača

Stephen Shennan is professor of theoretical archaeology and former director of the Institute of Archaeology in the Faculty of Social and Historical sciences of University College London (UCL) in Great Britain. A very influential archaeologist in terms of archaeological theory, he is well known for his contribution to biological evolutionary approaches to archaeological theory and method, while mostly working on case studies from European prehistory. Thanks to Erasmus+ he visited the Department of Archaeology of the Comenius University in Bratislava to be the main speaker at the international conference “3rd Central European Theoretical Archaeology Group Meeting (CEA TAG 2016)”. We conducted this very pleasant interview in Bratislava city centre, in a small coffee house next to the Faculty of Arts of Comenius University. Professor Shennan talks about archaeology as he sees it today, where archaeology stands in universities and how Brexit will in his opinion affect academic life in Britain. We also talk about what happened on his trip to Czechoslovakia 45 years ago.

Martin: Hello Stephen, so to begin, one quite obvious question. How do you see archaeology today?

Stephen: I see archaeology today as really divided between, on the one hand, archaeology as archaeology and on the other hand, heritage studies. This is increasingly important and is to be taken seriously, but for me it is about what happens with the material culture in the present. If we are talking about archaeology as archaeology, I think that archaeology today is more open, at least in the Anglo-American world, than it was 20 years ago. The culture wars of twenty years ago have calmed down a bit. There is still significant division between people practicing broadly post-processual approaches and people following more processual or evolutionary lines. But in the last 20 years people have become more interested in trying to find out about the past again. So archaeology is now more like „normal science“ [in Kuhn’s sense], and I think that’s been strongly influenced, as (Kristian) Kristiansen has suggested, by the development of archaeological science and the increasing amount of information about all sort of things that archaeological science is providing. I think people felt that to a degree they had argued them-



selves into a kind of sterility on the theoretical side of things. You could still use theoretical ideas but you could now bring the empirical dimension back in, in the context of being able to abstract more information from the data by the use of scientific techniques. So I guess that's how I see the Anglo-American situation at the moment. There is of course a difference between American and British. The British pattern is quite similar to the northwest European pattern, for example the Dutch and the Danes. They are broadly very significantly post-processually influenced. But North America is much less post-processual. There are some people who are happily post-processual, but basically North American archaeology is doing some version of processual or evolutionary archaeology by and large.

Martin: That's actually interesting because, for example, these queer studies are based in the United States, and (Michael) Shanks and (Ian) Hodder are also teaching in the USA. Do they have some followers?

Stephen: Yes I think so – they're certainly not insignificant. For example, the TAG conference, the USA TAG, has come into existence, which basically represents the post-processual dimension of North American archaeology. As opposed to the Society for American Archaeology meetings, which are the more mainstream processual side of things. But if you think of let's say, queer studies, such as some of the work of people like Barbara Voss, it is much more recent archaeology that they are dealing with. There are potentially interesting things to say from that kind of perspective about recent historical archaeology. So I have my preference of what I think is productive but I don't believe in imposing a kind of censorship on archaeology. Basically I believe in the whole – “*let a thousand flowers bloom*” kind of approach. Let's see what they produce. But I am certainly disappointed when you see people going for things which are for me less well founded, whether theoretically or in terms of the empirical analysis of data. I do think students and not just students - all archaeologists - should be critical. Criticism is important.

Martin: If someone, who has nothing to do with archaeology asks you, as a former director of one of the biggest archaeological institutes in Europe with such a huge influence as UCL has, what can the archaeology give to the people of the present? Because there is still ongoing debate about what can social-humanity (s-h) sciences, if we archaeologists are s-h scientists, give to people.

Stephen: Well, in UCL there is a Faculty of Social and Historical sciences which is relatively unusual in Britain. Interestingly, we are in the same faculty as History of Art and History but also Economics and Political Science. It has been like that for many years.

I think there are lots of things that archaeology can offer people in general and again I think the heritage dimension shouldn't be neglected. I think all this stuff that people talk about concerning the roots of identity in a fast changing world actually matters to people. And on the other hand, when you get all sorts of dubious, populist narratives of all kinds about the past developing today, archaeology is really important in terms of limiting the scope of those narratives and pointing out where the archaeological evidence does contradict a lot of these claims. And it was the kind of *anything goes* epistemology of some post-processual archaeologists, that I have strongly objected to, in a similar way to Alison Wylie actually. Archaeology has to offer empirical resistance to that kind of anything goes “Donald Trump” view of the world. So I think the whole business of the empirical dimension, of trying to establish empirical truth, and of some ideas being better substantiated than others, is extremely important.

And another dimension of relevance, I would say, is that many people are genuinely interested in the process of human evolution. There are numbers of popular books about human evolution with a broad audience, which is remarkable. People are interested in long term narratives about human history, for example, books like Ian Morris's *Why the west rules for now*, which I think is very good. So the appetite for those kinds of books, the appetite for understanding where we came from and why societies are the way they are, I think is very great. And again in a similar way, Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, shows, for example, that the contrast between people in New Guinea who were still subsistence farmers while people in North America had modern technology, is not about racial differences but about social, historical development, which has led them in particular directions. So all that side of things I think is important in terms of creating climates of opinion. It is a bit disappointing when it is non-archaeologists like Jared Diamond presenting these ideas to the world when they should be archaeologists, but at least Ian Morris is an archaeologist. So I think there are a lot of reasons why the human sciences continue to be important and they define the intellectual climate of the society and an era.

Martin: What I also find interesting is that archaeology is able to strengthen the s-h approach with methods used by natural sciences, which brings me to the question. How much do you think the archaeology has changed from the 60s when you studied and what was the biggest influence?

Stephen: I think that post-processualism was necessary and, in some respects but not all, helpful. But, as I said a few times at the conference, it took away the expertise in actually analysing information and people thought that, for example, you could make a career by wandering around a few fields and saying what you saw and writing that down as “phenomenology of Neolithic perception”. I think this is not doing justice to the difficulties of understanding the past. I guess what I think is significant recently is things like the new disciplines of complex adaptive systems and complexity science and the awareness of processes „niche construction“ and so on. There is now a whole set of broadly scientific approaches and methods to go with them, which actually provide a way of saying interesting things about the past. What I find most exciting about the current period though is a move back to big questions. Post-processual archaeology in some respects was navel-gazing, very narrowly focused. If you compare where archaeology started in the 19th century, I think the early sociologists and social philosophers of the 19th century, people like Engels and Tylor, Morgan, identified interesting questions. What I think has been happening in the last 20 years is a move back to 19th century questions with 21st century ideas and methods. We try to investigate big questions about the nature of human evolution. How societies became more complex and so on. But to answer those questions, the work has to be interdisciplinary. Some of my most stimulating intellectual encounters over the last 20 years have been with non-archaeologists, for example with people doing agent-based modelling, mathematical evolutionary theory or population genetics. There are a lot of smart people doing interesting things and those ideas are relevant to archaeology, for example all the interesting stuff over the last few years about networks.

Martin: And what do you think about this network approach that is so popular these days.

Stephen: I think that like most approaches it will be largely used in fairly trivial ways but nevertheless the ideas are genuinely interesting. They can help us to understand complex phenomena and get to them in ways which we couldn't necessarily do without this source of methods. So the fact that archaeology is part of the broader human science of complex adaptive systems, I think, an exciting trend. And lots of people are doing interesting interdisciplinary projects using novel methods to address big questions. Some of it is simplistic, it's true, because in some cases people want to turn into very simple lists of traits things that cannot be oversimplified, which offends the instincts of humanists. We can't forget about the complexity of things. I think you *can* usefully be reductionist in many circumstances but the issue of what you can reduce and what you can't is one of the interesting questions, distinguishing people who do good work and those who do not.

Martin: You wrote a very important book about statistics, one of my good friends from Germany who himself is very good statistician once told me that your book is still one of his favourite about archaeological statistics. So how do you approach these methods, like statistics, genetics and etc., at UCL?

Stephen: I am not sure we do it particularly well actually, but I think the kind of methods I write about in that book are quite straightforwardly compatible with traditional archaeology. What I think is the difficult thing is model building. Because archaeologists are naturally inductivists it is much harder to think in a model building and hypothesis testing kind of way. That's the thing which I have got most out of by interacting with population geneticists in particular, and that's where agent-based modelling comes in. Actually working out the model and then putting it into operation, generating its consequences etc., I think this is difficult.

Martin: You have to cooperate with someone out of the field of archaeology...

Stephen: Yes. I work with Mark Thomas, who is a population geneticist, and we have a PhD student at the moment who is working on models about the origins of agriculture. For the last couple of years we have been meeting every two or three weeks in sessions which last two or three hours at a time and arguing about the model. What processes are important to it, how do we represent them? What we often find is that, when we go into the next session, when we recap what we did the previous session, we think “that's not really right we haven't got that right after all”. That whole process of trying to turn something into a model is a salutary process. You really have to be able to spell things out and I think that's important. And once you build these models, if you analyse them, you often find that when you iterate the processes over and over again, they don't have the consequences you thought they would, when you first came up with the verbal model. The potential outcomes of that kind of explicit modelling, I think, are very exciting. But it is hard to get archeology students interested in that kind of thing. We do have a compulsory course in the basics of data analysis. Most of the students don't like it, because most of them gave up doing anything mathematical at the age of sixteen in British system and they were very happy to get rid of maths. It is only a minority interest.

Martin: Now I would like to go back to PhD students. Now in Slovakia we have a generation gap we talked about yesterday. It is that archaeologists in the archaeological institute but also in universities are getting older and there has to be a generational change. For example, in the Archaeological Institute Prehistoric Department almost everyone is over 65 and some of them are over 70. And people are starting to get very loud about it. They waited for too long and they have knowledge and they want to put science forward and they started to shout to be heard by these guys: "Please go home, we like you, but it is time. Please go home and let us do the job". When I was a PhD student I was following some of this debate in the Anglo-American world, that there are too many PhD students and it is extremely hard to get a real academic job. So what do you think about this situation?

Stephen: I think it is difficult for people.

Martin: And it is getting more and more difficult from my point of view.

Stephen: In terms of field archaeology [in Britain], the change in legislation which meant that archaeology has to be paid for in advance of the development increased the archaeological workforce massively, so at that level people who at least have their Masters degree have jobs to go to. There is no sign of this market of contracting. There are still a lot of jobs for people in field archaeology. In academic archaeology it is more difficult for certain. Investing so many years of your young life doing PhD and it doesn't work out and you have to do something new, change direction, that is clearly difficult.

Martin: It is discouraging many people who are producing good work while they are doing their PhD, when they successfully finish and produce a fine thesis. Then they are waiting one year, two years, three years, they are trying some post-docs. Some of them work some of them don't. And actually it is not as bad in Slovakia as I know it is, for example, in Germany.

Stephen: In Britain now, because of increasing research funding, there are far more post-doc positions than there used to be. But in a sense that just postpones the problem, because then people work for two or three years after their PhD and again they are that much older.

Martin: Yes and it is harder to get another job. And while we will find the right solution in Europe or the European Union, maybe it would be good to prepare the students and to give them some other knowledge, and that's why statistics and some other things come to my mind.

Stephen: Yes that's particularly emphasized in Britain these days. For the undergraduates, there is a big emphasis on providing transferable skills, things like basic numerical skills or basic good writing skills. Fieldwork is really important in that respect, because team-working is highly valued these days, so is doing public presentations. So nowadays you have to specify what transferable skills you are providing in your course.

Martin: That's very good. I think that's a partial solution to this problem. The whole s-h sciences problem, because this is also a problem in Slovakia, is that when you study philosophy they all expect you to be only a philosopher and you can go to work at McDonalds or something if it doesn't work. But we should tell them we are good at this or that or that. For example, philosophers should be excellent in critical thinking and we should sell these skills.

Stephen: I actually think we should be selling our archaeology degrees much more than in these ways, because in Britain there has always been this tradition. For example, you do a History degree or English degree or French degree, but you are not going to ever be a history teacher etc. But that's the degree that you do for general intellectual training, and people accept that, for example, with History, which has thousands of applicants every year. It seems far more difficult to convince people of this in the case of archaeology, because they have this idea, and especially parents and teachers of the students who are thinking about applying to the university, that archaeology is not very well paid, that it is difficult to get a job. So the idea that archaeology is a fantastic general education offering all sorts of different skills in terms of science, fieldwork, analytical approaches, aesthetical approaches, is not taken on board as much as it should be, but we certainly try to get it across to students. Transferable skills are a big thing that everybody emphasises these days.

Martin: You were a director of huge institute and were aware of grand schemes and everything. What is your opinion on how the Brexit will affect the academic world in Britain. There was even a session at EAA - round table about Brexit. What are your ideas about this situation?

Stephen: I think it will be a disaster, in lots of ways. Starting with [European] research funding, which has transformed archaeological research in Britain over the last six or seven years. It has been massively influential

because research funding within Britain itself is very limited. It is possible to conduct large scale research projects in a way that simply wasn't possible before. So that coming to an end would be a complete disaster. And another dimension is that we have staff from the USA, from Spain, from Germany, from Greece. There is any number of different nationalities working there. And that is really important. So if you get people deciding not to apply for academic job in Britain, because it is not going to be a friendly place to work, that is a complete disaster, similarly for students, if there is some kind of restriction on students, if it is going to be more expensive for EU students to come. Then again even if the university fees don't go up, students still don't want to come to a xenophobic country. They'll say "thank you very much", that's not where I would like to study. If you have to pick a single area which is going to be badly affected by Brexit it is universities, because Brexit is the absolute antithesis of the university atmosphere, of everything that is good about British universities.

Martin: Do you think that Brexit is going to affect more s-h sciences?

Stephen: I am not sure whether will happen or not, because they are taken more seriously than they used to be. And I think humanities organizations have got better at lobbying for what they do and they are also supported by the natural scientists. The natural sciences are obviously always going to get more money but nevertheless I think the human sciences are more recognized than they once were and people are collaborating, for example in the various national academies like the Royal Society, the British Academy or the Academy of Medical Sciences. When they are making representations to the government, they join their presentations. And to go back to the previous point, if you are Czech or Slovak physicist wondering about taking a job in Britain then I think you would feel the same way [about Brexit] as a Czech or Slovak historian.

Martin: Once when I was talking with Friedrich Lüth, former director of German Archaeological Institute, he said to me, and then I read it in an interview, that British students and British archaeologists who are teaching on the universities, they forgot almost everything about material culture, in the sense of describing, classifying the material.

Stephen: That's absolutely true, that's really true.

Martin: And that they need to hire foreigners who would be able to process the material they have in the museums?

Stephen: We now have a Master's degree in artefact analysis precisely to train people in this kind of thing. It is particularly in demand for Roman and Medieval excavations, where massive amounts of material are recovered that need to be written up. But yeah, in general that detailed attention to material is very much lacking, no question.

Martin: Is there any sort of competition between departments of archaeology?

Stephen: Yes, we have these research assessments, around every 6-7 years. So universities are very much competing with one another and the funding to some extent depends on that as well as your prestige. And you are also competing to get the best students. So it is pretty competitive. As I said, the number of students who want to do archaeology has declined in the country as whole.

Martin: Even with this massive popularization?

Stephen: Yes.

Martin: Why do you think it is like that?

Stephen: Again, they think they can't get a job. So universities have ups and downs.

Martin: Now you will lose international students probably?

Stephen: Maybe yes, maybe no. It will depend on the negotiation. How radical the break is.

Martin: Now I would like to go back to your visit to Czechoslovakia. How it happened. I know you were traveling with your ex-wife. Could you tell us something about this trip?

Stephen: We made two trips in 1972 and then in 1973. We were doing our PhDs. This was the beginning of our PhD. My supervisor was David Clarke. And Sue had done archaeology at Sheffield with Colin Renfrew. Then she moved to Cambridge, we married. And she was supervised by Graham Clark. He was the Disney professor at that time. Actually, she did as her undergraduate dissertation a social analysis of the Tiszapolgar cemetery, supervised by Colin Renfrew. She got into that kind of thing. And I got into the Bell-Beakers with David Clarke. So it seemed that the cemeteries with the most potential for doing similar kinds of things as with Tiszapolgar were Central European cemeteries. Then I got into the Central European Bell Beakers and the beginning of the Bronze Age. And my contemporary Robert Chapman was doing Spanish beakers. So yes, we travelled around in this VW bus.

Martin: You had flowers on it?

Stephen: No we didn't (laughing).

Martin: So there was no smoke going outside?

Stephen: No (laughing). So yes, we travelled. The first trip started, I think, in July and we went to the RGK in Frankfurt. We were working in the library there. We then went to Austria and were looking at stuff in Salzburg and then in Vienna. And then to Hungary to Budapest with Nándor Kalicz and his wife, who was working on the Bell-Beakers in Budapest in the museum. I think it was a September that we went from Hungary to this conference in Starý Smokovec, where we met Eduard (Krekovič). I really get hazy about chronology. It has to be 1972, and then we spent some time in Nitra. We were living at Malé Vozokany, and working in the store rooms there. There she (Sue) was working with material from the Branč cemetery. Anyway, we were given access to the material, the records for Branč, and also to Výčapy Opatovce. So when we were in Slovakia, basically I was helping her doing recording of the records of the Early Bronze Age cemeteries. And there were other small cemeteries of that period, whose names I can no longer recall. We didn't spend any time in Brno but we went to Prague and there it was mainly the beaker things. So I got it arranged that (Evžen) Neustupný would be officially my supervisor while I was in Prague. We met him in the archaeological institute. There was (Václav) Moucha and (Miroslav) Buchvaldek as well.

Martin: And how do you remember all these guys?

Stephen: Well, I remember thinking Moucha was incredibly old fashioned.

Martin: But he was a very nice guy actually...

Stephen: I don't think I appreciated him, really. I mean we were very much Neustupný guys, you know. He was the future, he was the new archaeology.

Martin: He probably was, but was he known in Britain? Of course it is well known, that he wrote this famous article „*Whither archaeology*“ published in *Antiquity*.

Stephen: Yes, he was quite well known already in Britain, particularly for that article. So we spent two months or something there in Prague, living with a landlady, who had been a slave labourer [during WW II], this was from October to early December. So we were staying there but we cooked in our caravan in the street outside. It was wonderful actually, spending two months in Prague, the whole experience was fascinating.

Martin: So you could say that Neustupný also influenced your ideas?

Stephen: Yes, he was definitely very influential in terms of “What on earth was going on in terms of temporal sequences and in terms of, you know the Late Copper Age, Early Bronze Age – relations between the Carpathian basin and Corded Ware in Bohemia, what was going on with the Bell Beakers?”

Martin: Oh that. Yes they are still arguing about that.

Stephen: Laugh

Martin: No, I am not joking.

Stephen: Laugh

Martin: They are publishing papers about it.

Stephen: Obviously Neustupný had his own view and as I remember it, in terms of Corded and Beaker Ware – he was kind of – “*nacheinander*” whereas Buchvaldek was “*nebeneinander*” for the short chronology. No one besides Neustupný believed in radiocarbon dating at that time. Neustupný published this interesting paper on the chronology of footed bowls. All those papers were very significant. So – it was a very formative experience. And then at the end of that, after couple of months in Prague we spent a couple of weeks in East Germany. And that was interesting in itself, because the regulations were very strict. Obviously we wanted be in Halle working in the Landesmuseum but foreigners were not allowed to stay in Halle. So we had to stay in a hotel in Leipzig and commute to Halle every day. And that was really fascinating to see, as I mentioned earlier, East German soldiers, in what were, as far as I was concerned, Second World War uniforms. And all the Russian soldiers with fur hats and red stars, that was quite something.

Martin: Was it so different for you? The world you experienced there, was it so different from Britain?

Stephen: Yes, utterly, completely different. In a sense, the Second World War was still a living reality in these places. This was after Sergeant Pepper and so on, so it was strange to go to this part of world.

The person who was then the director in Halle was Herman Behrens. He was an extremely nice man. He worked on the Neolithic in the middle Elbe – Saale area. Very charming and I liked him a lot. When he retired

he was allowed to leave East Germany so that West Germany would pay his pension. His family came from near Hamburg. He came to visit us at this point when we were living in a Southampton. So we took him to Stonehenge. That was really a great moment, you know, to do that with him.

So that was the longest trip. The second year we went back again and we certainly came back to Slovakia. The main thing I remember about that trip is that we spent a long time in Brno. Sue was studying records of the Holešov cemetery and I was going through all the beaker records in the institute there. All the stuff done by (Ladislav) Hájek which has never been published. He published that book about Czech Bell-Beakers, but none of the Moravian stuff had been published at that point. I think a lot of this stuff is not yet published.

Martin: No, most of them are not published yet.

Stephen: Very interesting. We talked the other day about the relationship between Bell Beakers, Corded Ware and Proto-Aunjetitz culture and so on, which still seem to be ongoing questions that haven't been resolved, which is amazing. [On that visit to Brno] we lived in the institute's storage building in [the village of] Křtiny in the Moravian karst area. It was an old mill, which had been taken over by the state, on the edge of the village and it was quite dark really. I have one vivid memory in particular. As far as we were concerned, we were the only people living in the mill and the rest was store rooms. Then one night we heard on the floor above us these dragging footsteps, it was like thump – drag, thump – drag.

Martin: Really?

Stephen: Yes it is really true. So we were absolutely terrified, clinging together in bed. What on earth was going on? And so the next day, still shaking, we went to the institute and spoke to (Jaromír) Ondráček, and I remember saying to him “Ich glaube dass es gibt ein Geist in der Mühle”. Anyway it turned out, that they hadn't told us when giving us the keys to this place, that they had left a room to the old miller, who still lived there upstairs and he had a limp. So thump drag – thump drag – thump drag. And he never made himself known to us at all. We saw him later looking at us from the windows on the first floor. But that was hilarious really. Still a vivid experience of the ghost and the miller and the Moravian institute store room.

Martin: Do you remember anything more from Slovakia?

Stephen: I think that the following year we visited Spišský Štvrtok. It was a very interesting site. We were struck by that.

Obviously we were only students and everyone was extremely friendly and nice to us. The conference people like professor (Bohuslav) Novotný were friendly, absolutely. I think they thought we were only students and so we weren't any kind of threat or anything. If they had taken us a little bit more seriously they would have not let us see the material. So they allowed us to see it. They were very happy to be very helpful to us. Let us stay in the institute, visit these places.

Yeah, I've got kind of fond memories of those trips. And the material was so rich compared with British pre-history.

Martin: Maybe that's also a reason why theoretical archaeology developed so much in the Britain. We are very fascinated with artefacts here in CEA, we always find something interesting. We find some beautiful horse cheek pieces, and everyone is so fascinated. And they want to find another similar piece and to publish it and are so happy about it.

Stephen: Yes. Well it is a bit like in Glyn Daniel's histories of archaeology, he claimed the Americans invented archaeological theory because they didn't have Stonehenge.

Martin: So did this trip have any effect on your academic career?

Stephen: Oh yes definitely. I mean, you don't forget these kind of things. And you live with them for decades. The vast majority of my early papers were dealing with Central European and German speaking countries.

Martin: Let's move back to the present. What are your feelings about the TAG conference here in Bratislava?

Stephen: Oh yes I enjoyed it. It was kind of comfortable for me to come to that sort of medium again which I haven't been in for long time. It is encouraging to see so many young people there. When you don't have any young people and lots of old people it means that the population is dying. So when I go to opera for example, the vast majority of people sadly are of my age and older and there are not many young people, and this tradition is to a significant degree dying. But if you go to this conference you can see that everybody is young, so you can see that it is a growing population there, who have a theoretical interest and it is not dominated by people who are 50

or older. That is very encouraging. And the diversity, obviously some papers are better than the others, but the diversity is very important and the freedom to experiment and try new ideas – that was always the tradition, the original TAG. That people started their careers as graduate students, presenting their thoughts for the audience, interacting with people. So I mean all that is great.

Martin: So the last question. What projects you are currently working on?

Stephen: One is 'The making of the Mediterranean landscape'. It involves working with geographers who are using pollen analysis to look at the impact of human activity on vegetation. And we are doing demographic reconstructions on the basis of radiocarbon data, the results of surveys, and records of archaeological interventions. The other project is looking at the economics of stone axe production in the northwest European neolithic. That involves getting together a lot of radiocarbon dates from flint mines and stone quarries from northwest Europe and then we are looking at to what extent their use correlates with fluctuations of the population.

Martin: It all sounds very interesting. Thank you very much for your time, Stephen.

