COLIN RENFREW, MARK LEONE, JOHN BARRETT – PASSING THROUGH ARCHAEOLOGY



I have been bringing to mind again three archaeological colleagues, friends of long-standing. No longer with us. Passing on.

Mundanities in the life of ideas. So much loss in the fleeting ephemeral.

Of Colin Renfrew.

A sympathy of interest and concern, from when we first got to know each other. We met regularly but not often after I returned to Cambridge for doctoral research in 1988. At department events. He was on my advisory committee, at least unofficially, was examiner with Alain Schnapp from Paris (Colin made the oral examination into a

fabulous formal ritual in the Masters Lodge at Jesus College). At conferences, after TAG (Theoretical Archaeology Group) at Newcastle in 1989 when we offered a keynote plenary panel together – and realized a common concern for procedural rigor in theory – science! (To be more philosophical, we shared respect for the likes of Habermas's communicative competence.) Dinners at Jesus through the 90s talking about contemporary art. European Association meetings and more annual TAG gatherings. Visits and dinners at Stanford. Occasional writings exchanged and reviewed.

Common enough matters in a more privileged academic life.

But I noted a curious convergence. Towards the end I sent him an email. I outlined vectors, trajectories, lines of interest and focus in his work that I shared, and pointed out that they almost ran in opposite directions, such that I was now very much appreciating where he had been in the 1970s and 80s. Public-facing archaeology, big-picture socio-cultural modeling, the mathematics of complexity, language and cognitive evolution, symbolic systems, cultures of collection in the antiquities market and art world, managing material-pasts-in-the-present, modes of material engagement. A pivot in all this is the complementarity of art-science. He had said to me how he saw as a highpoint in his career his work as chair of the government committee that established a national curriculum for the arts in England and Wales. It was a tremendous achievement, taking seriously the importance of arts education, and coming from someone who was a champion of archaeological science. And, as he was quick to mention, the curriculum was hardly implemented – too radical.

I suggested that this mélange made mockery of the stories we are told of disciplinary progress and the way-too-neat text-book histories of the discipline. The intellectual territories we are exploring, seeking pathways, are irreducible to a linear definitive story, except as personal itineraries in however much time we are able to give to the journey.

I never received a reply. Another missive lost in space. Perhaps it was just too late.



Colin chuckling on a visit to Stanford January 24 2006 – not taking archaeology too seriously. He died on November 24 2024.

Of Mark Leone.

He was already there. He seemed to have anticipated it all:

- archaeology taking precedent over historiography
- concepts of ideology and materialism in an archaeology of mind

- critical theory holding that we are situated in our building of knowledge, and accountable to community
- pursuing an archaeology of US – you, me, all of us (and yes, the USA!)
- with deep concern for professional scholarly ethics.

Anecdote. He had offered support for our efforts to raise the bar on the standards of a critical archaeology (*Reconstructing Archaeology* – the book I wrote with Tilley). We anticipated perhaps an endorsement, at most a foreword, which he did later deliver. But his first response was to write a complementary paper, thoroughly worked out, mature and sophisticated in its argument. He was already there. We were somewhat overwhelmed.

Anecdote. I had come to Stanford in 1999 to set up an archaeology center in transdisciplinary mode and aspiration (at least that was my vision). Bill Rathje joined us after his move to the Bay Area when he retired from University of Arizona Tucson. Bill and I got on very well (as did our dogs) and set up what he called "super seminar" in archaeological thought. We would take archaeological guests to dinner with our graduates, hold seminar, chat over lunch, and record an interview about matters of concern in archaeology and beyond. With Chris Witmore we published a collection of edited transcripts as *Archaeology in the Making* (2013).

It wasn't quite good-cop-bad-cop, but Bill and I managed to get the guests to relax and open up. Mark astonished us with his frank criticism of institutions and archaeological orthodoxy. In editing we had to have him confirm he wanted to publish such pointed comments. He responded by clarifying even further what he meant to say. Critical theory – concerned with the conditions within which we work to build knowledge, embedded, responsible, honest.



At a seminar with mutual friend Bill Rathje, October 24 2002. Mark died on December 11 2024.

Of John Barrett.

We had chatted on visits I made to Sheffield. In 1992 I started working with Mike Pearson. John and Mike had shared a place as undergraduates at Cardiff. This created a more personal link with John and we chatted more freely, albeit at a distance – key concepts in social archaeology, such as agency, in a specifically archaeological methodology focused on people's lives. A prehistory to be applied to any historical period.

After my move to Stanford I took up fieldwork again in the Roman north. John and I embarked on a kind of fantasy archaeology – what would it be like for us to collaborate in a Roman field project, taking on a site like Housesteads on Hadrian's Wall. A prehistory in Roman archaeology! Quite marvelous fun.



John Barrett in Lisbon September 15 2000 for the meetings of the European Association of Archaeologists. We were asking – what would it involve to excavate a Roman outpost like Housesteads, on Hadrian's Wall? John died over Christmas, December 27 2024.

Later John reacted strongly against an archaeology of the more-than-human that some of us called symmetrical archaeology (holding mind and matter, human and non-human, in symmetry, equal partners in complex living adaptive systems). This was part of a move to take in relationships between people and artifacts, engagements-within-the-world – debates around archaeological epistemology and ontology, materialist questionings of what it is we seek to know and understand, and how. Bjørnar Olsen, Tim Webmoor and Chris Witmore and I delivered a kind of manifesto in our book titled *Archaeology: the Discipline of Things* (2012). Colin Renfrew affirmed that we "were on the side of the angels"; John was highly critical of what he took to be betrayal of a commitment to radical human-centered archaeology, and later summed up his own reflections on archaeology in a book in 2021, *Archaeology and its Discontents*.

I thought John's theory had got the better of him, that he was arguing about abstractions from what we were all doing as archaeologists, and that he was reading both too much and too little into this debate. I hardly recognized us in his descriptions of our argument and told him so. John could be combative; perhaps his fondness of dialectic led him to cast us as antithesis to his own commitment. I have no doubt that when we next met we would have uncovered a deeper synthesis in our understanding of matters archaeological.