

## Colin Renfrew: a note on his interests outside archaeology

ROGER BLENCH

Colin Renfrew, who died 24<sup>th</sup> November 2024, has been the subject of a wide variety of obituaries, reminiscences and memorials. These can easily be found online and need not be repeated here. However, I want to draw attention to his interests outside archaeology proper, which have hardly featured in these pieces. Almost all have been written by archaeologists and tend to feature his archaeological monographs, especially concerning the Aegean. But later in his lengthy career he turned to a variety of other topics, reflecting wide-ranging interests. These included global linguistics, but also the illicit antiquities trade and the tracing of stolen archaeological items, archaeogenetics, archaeoacoustics, and even the parallels between archaeology and the creativity of modern artists.

Colin Renfrew was the first director of the McDonald Institute (1990 onwards) as well as the Disney Professor of Archaeology at Cambridge University until 2004. This gave him considerable freedom to appoint individuals to follow up on his various interests and to initiate projects that would usually be considered outside the purview of a traditional archaeology department. This has now effectively been written out of the Cambridge narrative of archaeology. Although his portrait still hangs in the Institute, effectively all of the units he started have been closed down and the books relating to these divergent topics have been taken off display. The McDonald itself has been incorporated into the Department of Archaeology.

I do not propose to cover all these areas, merely to focus on his contributions to the interdisciplinary study of linguistics and archaeology. His interest in this type of long-range linguistics was reflected in his membership of the ASLIP council of fellows from 1993 until his death. His first major publication in this area was in 1987, when he published *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of the Indo-European Origins*. This represented a major challenge to the conventional model of Indo-European, the Kurgan hypothesis, originally championed by Marija Gimbutas, which had the earliest speakers as horse-riders erupting out of Central Asia. The ‘Anatolian hypothesis’ argued that Proto-Indo-European originated approximately 9,000 years ago in Anatolia and spread westwards via farming throughout the Mediterranean and into central and northern Europe. This was, paradoxically, not really a linguistic hypothesis, since it did not examine reconstructions of agricultural terms in any detail. This was the subject of much controversy and it was claimed by later proponents that Bayesian analysis of Indo-European languages supported this view. While it is certainly true that farming did gradually spread out from Anatolia during the time frame posited, it now seems this was not necessarily a linguistic expansion, or at least we cannot now associate it with particular languages. From 2015 onwards, new genetic data, especially concerning the Yamnaya hypothesis, gave further strong support to the Central Asian origin model (Lazaridis et al. 2025).

However, the reception of the Indo-European book encouraged Colin Renfrew to expand his model to global language phyla. He first floated these ideas in a paper to the Philological Society

(Renfrew 1989), but in an influential journal article, *Archaeology, genetics and linguistic diversity* he extended them to apply various types of dispersal to different language phyla (Renfrew 1992). Unfortunately (at least from my point of view) he adopted the Greenberg/Ruhlen classification, so that Amerind and Indo-Pacific made their appearances. Starting with a hunting/foraging/aquatic dispersal (Khoisan etc.), he assigned some phyla to agricultural dispersals and thence to a rather ill-defined ‘northern dispersal’ and to ‘elite dominance’ (which was not matched to language phyla). This was certainly an extremely bold and undoubtedly different approach to the conjunction of linguistics and archaeology. His contacts with Peter Bellwood, a frequent visitor to Cambridge at that time, convinced him of the importance of farming dispersals as a major element in language dispersal. A conference was held in Cambridge on this topic and an edited book was published, exploring the link (or otherwise) in the language phyla of the world (Bellwood & Renfrew 2002). This book is missing from the bibliography on Wikipedia, which is an interesting omission.

However, in some ways his most significant contribution was one where his name did not appear as an author. In the early 1990s, the third World Archaeological Congress was planned for New Delhi, taking place 4<sup>th</sup>–11th December 1994. Colin Renfrew urged Peter Ucko, the prime mover, to include a session on archaeology and language. Colin was too busy to be more than minimally involved in its organisation and, at his suggestion, Peter Ucko brought together myself and archaeologist Matthew Spriggs, and we in turn invited a large number of attendees to what turned out to be one of the most successful sessions of an otherwise somewhat chaotic conference. Selected papers plus several commissioned papers were eventually published in four volumes (Blench & Spriggs 1997, 1998, 1999a,b). It is fair to say this represented something of the state of the art at the time. Among other things, the first international presentation of the new mathematical models of historical linguistics surfaced at these sessions, in a paper by Russell Gray not included in the published proceedings.

Many linguists of a historical persuasion were convinced that this was the beginning of a great marriage of the two disciplines, and that interdisciplinary thinking, also bringing in the emerging science of historical human genetics, was about to revolutionise our understanding of the past. Regrettably, things took altogether a rather different turn. With Colin Renfrew stepping down from the Cambridge professorship in 2004, there was a reversion back to a more hardnosed ‘scientific’ archaeology. An emphasis on excavation returned, along with laboratory sciences, and collaboration with all other types of human sciences was largely discontinued. Colin Renfrew’s interest in the topic remained, however, and in 2019, when I gave a presentation in the Leverhulme Centre for Human Evolutionary Studies, Cambridge, which presented a new model of world language phyla dispersals, he attended and gave comments as a discussant.

I cannot say I agreed with many of Colin Renfrew’s specific hypotheses, but I absolutely appreciated the energy and enthusiasm with which he pursued these ideas. Although interest in these topics among a new generation of archaeologists is very restricted, honourable mention should go to the University of Gent and its Bantu studies which have continued to seek funding to

pursue and publish interdisciplinary work. Those of us who were inspired at the time continue researching these topics, which is, in part, the legacy of Colin Renfrew.

## REFERENCES

- Bellwood, P. & C. Renfrew, eds. 2002. *Examining the farming/language dispersal hypothesis*. Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research.
- Blench, Roger M. & M. Spriggs. 1997. eds. *Archaeology and Language, I: theoretical and methodological orientations*. London: Routledge.
- Blench, Roger M. & M. Spriggs. 1998. eds. *Archaeology and Language, II*. London: Routledge.
- Blench, Roger M. & M. Spriggs. 1999a. eds. *Archaeology and Language, III*. London: Routledge.
- Blench, Roger M. & M. Spriggs. 1999b. eds. *Archaeology and Language, IV*. London: Routledge.
- Lazaridis, I., Patterson, N., Anthony, D., Vyazov, L., Fournier, R., Ringbauer, H., Olalde, I., Khokhlov, A.A., Kitov, E.P., Shishlina, N.I. and Ailincăi, S.C., 2025. "The genetic origin of the Indo-Europeans." *Nature*, pp.1-11.
- Renfrew, C. 1987. *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*. London: Pimlico.
- Renfrew, C. 1989. "Models of change in language and archaeology." *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 87(2): 103–155.
- Renfrew, C. 1992. "Archaeology, genetics and linguistic diversity." *Man*, 27: 445–478.