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OBITUARY

Colin Renfrew—A titan of archaeology

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Colin Renfrew
1937–2024

Photo courtesy of Y. Kuzmin

On 24 November 2024, Professor Emeritus Colin Renfrew passed away in Cambridge, UK. He was a giant of world archaeology and one of the last representatives of a generation of polymaths who made a significant contribution not only to archaeology but also to other fields of science. The role of C. Renfrew in the development of modern archaeology and application of natural sciences to it (i.e. geoarchaeology) in the 1960s–2020s is significant and deserves careful analysis, and this should be done in the near future.

Andrew Colin Renfrew was born on 25 July 1937 in Stockton-on-Tees, County Durham, UK. He showed an interest in archaeology from an early age; at 13 he took part in the excavations of the Roman settlement at Canterbury that were led by Sheppard Frere, the leader of the study of Roman Britain (see Frere 1987). After National Service in the British Army (1956–1958), Renfrew entered the University of Cambridge in 1958, where he read natural sciences, archaeology, and anthropology at St. John's College. He was fortunate to be a student of a group of outstanding British educators and researchers: Glyn Daniel, Sir J. Graham D. Clark, Eric Higgs, Charles B.M. McBurney, and John Coles. Renfrew's classmates were future leaders of British archaeology: Martin Biddle, Sir Barry

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Cunliffe, Charles Higham, and Sir Paul Mellars. In 1961, Renfrew was elected President of the Cambridge Union Society and participated in the excavations of the Early Neolithic settlement of Nea Nikomedia in northern Greece.

In 1962, Renfrew completed the basic 4-year course and received a 3-year research student status to continue his studies at Cambridge University. The main area of his work in the 1960s, an interest that he retained until the last years of his life, was the small Cyclades Archipelago in the southern Aegean Sea. In the 1964–1965, Renfrew discovered and excavated together with John D. Evans the first Neolithic site in the Cyclades—Saliagos near the island of Andiparos. In addition, he studied in detail all available archaeological collections of the Cyclades, paying particular attention to the presence of obsidian (waterless volcanic glass) tools.

In 1964, Johnson R. Cann and Colin Renfrew published a seminal study (see Cann and Renfrew 1964), focused on a new method for investigating obsidian sources and artifacts in the Mediterranean and the Near East using geochemical methods. The results obtained clearly indicated prehistoric connections between the regions (or their absence) and ancient exchange/trade of lithic raw material. This paper immediately became a classic example of this kind of research, and had a decisive impact on the rapid development of this direction in geoarchaeology in Europe, the Americas, and Oceania. Renfrew's scientific arsenal has always consisted of an interdisciplinary approach—not only the artifacts were studied, but also their chemical composition (obsidian), geomorphology and paleogeography of the areas surrounding the settlements, plant remains from the cultural layer, and other analyses.

The result of Renfrew's graduate studies was a thesis titled *The Neolithic and Bronze Age Cultures of the Cycladic Islands and Their External Relations*, for which he was awarded a Ph.D. degree in 1965. Soon the young Renfrew family (in 1965 Colin married archaeobotanist Jane M. Ewbank, also a graduate of the University of Cambridge) settled in Sheffield, where Colin took a position at the Department of Archaeology, University of Sheffield (1965–1972). Here his career as a scientist rapidly developed. Excavations of the Neolithic and Bronze Age settlement of Sitagroi in Greece were carried out by Renfrew in 1968–1970; the main goal was to obtain a reliable chronology of the Balkan region. In 1972, his monograph on the Cyclades and the Aegean in the third millennium BC was published (see Renfrew 1972). His subsequent activities were marked by a series of monographs and edited volumes, produced by Renfrew with coauthors and coeditors until 2024.

In 1972–1981, Renfrew was a Professor at the University of Southampton. Already in the 1960s, he was skeptical about the extensive cultural links between the Levant, Asia Minor, and the Cyclades (as part of the Aegean region) with the distant parts of the Mediterranean (Spain) and Western Europe (France and Great Britain). With the development of the radiocarbon dating method in the 1950s–1960s and its application to the correlation of cultural phenomena (especially with the use of radiocarbon calibration, which began in the late 1960s), it became obvious that the diffusionist paradigm, whose prominent representatives were the famous archaeologists Oscar Montelius and V. Gordon Childe, was incorrect. This was reflected in Renfrew's Ph.D. dissertation and his subsequent works.

International success for Renfrew came in 1973 when his monograph with the new concept of the prehistoric cultural development in Europe was published (see Renfrew 1973). In this book, new views on the chronology and cultural processes in Europe during the Neolithic and Bronze Age were systematically presented. Renfrew called the emergence and use of radiocarbon calibration the "second radiocarbon revolution." Using the examples from the Mediterranean and Central and Western Europe, it was convincingly shown that the attempt to link cultural processes and the emergence of certain types of archaeological monuments (for example, megaliths, passage graves, and temples of Malta) as a result of influence from the more "advanced" regions such as the Levant, Egypt, and Greece into the more "backward" parts of the Mediterranean and Western/Central Europe has no scientific basis. After calibration of existing radiocarbon dates for the Neolithic and Bronze Age complexes of Europe, it became clear that the phenomena that had been considered the result of diffusion arose in the "backward" regions *earlier* than in the "advanced" areas. The so-called "fault line" in prehistoric Europe established by Renfrew demonstrated that the basic links of the traditional (i.e. diffusionist)

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chronology were now broken, and Europe no longer directly connected, either chronologically or culturally, with the early civilizations of the Near East. It was concluded that, "Radiocarbon has helped to show the inadequacy of the conventional diffusionist picture built up by Worsaae, Montelius and Childe. The task now is to build up something demonstrably better to replace it" (Renfrew 1973, 256).

In 1972–1974, Renfrew excavated the Neolithic burial site of Quanterness in the Orkney Islands, for which a number of radiocarbon dates were obtained. In 1974–1977, he investigated the Bronze Age fortified settlement and sanctuary of Phylakopi on the island of Melos (Cyclades).

In 1981, Renfrew returned to the University of Cambridge as Disney Professor of Archaeology, and occupied this chair until 2004; it was and remains one of the most prestigious positions in British archaeology, founded in 1851. Renfrew managed the almost impossible—in 1988, he received funding of £11,000,000 from the wealthy British manufacturer Daniel McLean McDonald to build a new research organization, the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research. It was opened in 1990 by the Charles, Prince of Wales. The new building was integrated into the university's complex of old structures that was also no easy task. It was similar to what was done in the early 1930s when the Royal Society's Mond Laboratory was built across Pembroke Street in central Cambridge for Soviet scientist Pyotr Kapitsa, using the endowment of Ludwig Mond and supported by one of the greatest physicists, Ernst Rutherford (a.k.a. Baron Rutherford of Nelson). However, Renfrew had considerable influence in Cambridge, and in 1986–1997 he was Master of Jesus College (founded in 1496). A highlight of his Mastership was the opening of the Quincentenary Library by Queen Elizabeth II in 1996. Naturally, he became the first Director of the new McDonald Institute (1990–2004). In 1987–1991, Renfrew again directed work in the Cyclades, excavating the Bronze Age fortified settlement of Markiani on the island of Amorgos and the Bronze Age sanctuary of Dhaskalio on the island of Keros, returning to the latter in 2006–2008 and 2015–2018.

One of Renfrew's most famous and somewhat provocative books from the Cambridge period was *Archaeology and Language* (see Renfrew 1987), devoted to very complex problems in the history, archaeology, and philology of Eurasia. Renfrew's point of view was called the "Anatolian hypothesis," and is still being discussed. Subsequently, he and Peter Bellwood organized a large conference about the relationship between the spread of prehistoric agriculture and the origins of languages; the results of it were published in an edited volume (Bellwood and Renfrew 2003).

According to Bruce Trigger's classification of archaeological schools of the twentieth century (see Trigger 2006), Renfrew is one of the most prominent representatives of processualism ("new archaeology"), which is associated with such trends as cognitive anthropology in ethnology and anthropology; Ludwig von Bertalanffy's systems approach in biology; and second cybernetics and systems approach in philosophy. New directions, largely proposed by Renfrew for the first time, are "social archaeology" that began in 1973 and continued in 1984 in his book (see Renfrew 1984); "catastrophe theory" (since the late 1970s); the organization since 1977 of conferences that resulted in the formation of the Theoretical Archaeology Group; "cognitive archaeology" or "archaeology of knowledge" (since 1982); the relationship between archaeology and contemporary art (since the early 2000s); "adaptation to the material" (since 2001). When in the late 1980s the DNA analysis of modern human populations began to appear in the practice of archaeological research, Renfrew immediately responded to this promising direction and took part in a number of projects.

Among the most fundamental works of Renfrew (with coauthor Paul Bahn) in the 1990s–2010s are the comprehensive (about 700 pages) textbook, *Archaeology: Theories, Methods, and Practice*, which has gone through nine editions since 1991 (the latest in 2024) (see Renfrew and Bahn 2020; Renfrew et al. 2024); and the encyclopedia *The Cambridge World Prehistory* (see Renfrew and Bahn 2014).

In 1991, Renfrew was created a lifetime peer as Baron Renfrew of Kaimsthorn and became a member of the House of Lords of the UK Parliament (until 2021). This was the second case in history after John Lubbock who received the hereditary title of Baron Avebury in 1900. In parliament, Renfrew was mainly involved in the issues of preserving cultural heritage and higher education. He devoted a lot of time and efforts to the problem of looting in museums and illegal excavations, having achieved some success as a member of the House of Lords in changing the UK legislation in this regard.

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In 2004, Renfrew officially retired from his Disney Professorship and position of Director of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, but remained a member of the McDonald Institute staff. He continued to research and excavate, albeit on a reduced scale.

In 1980, Renfrew was elected to the British Academy, and in 1996, to the National Academy of Sciences of the USA. In 2006, he became a Foreign Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences (in the Department of Historical and Philological Sciences). Renfrew was also a Member of Academia Europaea (1988), Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (2001), Foreign Member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, and Corresponding Member of the German Archaeological Institute. He was also a Member of The Society of Antiquaries (London) since 1968, and of The Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (since 1970; Honorary Member, since 2000).

Renfrew received several prestigious international prizes and awards: Prix International Fyssen (1997), the European Latsis Prize (2003), the Balzan Prize (2004), and the Bandelier Prize (2016). He was awarded a number of medals: Rivers Memorial Medal (1979) and Huxley Memorial Medal (1991) of the Royal Anthropological Institute; and Lucy Wharton Drexel Medal of the University of Pennsylvania Museum (2003). A number of universities (Sheffield, Athens, Southampton, Liverpool, Edinburgh, St. Andrews, Kent, London, and Lima) awarded him an honorary doctorate degree.

In 2013, Renfrew was selected for the First Shanghai Archaeology Forum Prize, and in 2019 he received (jointly with Michael Boyd) the Prize of the Fourth Forum for fieldwork in the Cyclades. In December 2023, he was awarded the first prize for outstanding contributions to archaeological theory by the Theoretical Archaeology Group.

Many other details of his life and works can be found in Bradley (1993) and in the series of Renfrew's oral interviews to Paul Bahn (https://www.webofstories.com/play/colin.renfrew/1).

Renfrew had a keen interest in research into obsidian sources in Northeast Asia (see Renfrew 2014). In 2015, I presented a lecture at the McDonald Institute on obsidian exchange in the Russian Far East, Japan, and Korea, and on prehistoric seafaring in these regions that he attended. Prior to this, I had met Renfrew in Oxford (2006), Cambridge (2013), and at the Society for American Archaeology conference (Austin, TX, 2014) where a whole day session was held in his honor to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the beginning of modern obsidian studies. In May 2019, Renfrew invited me to his home in Cambridge (it was a bank holiday Monday) to announce the Shanghai Archaeology Forum and to talk about obsidian, and soon afterwards he endorsed my candidacy for the Fourth Shanghai Archaeology Forum prize (which I won). We exchanged obsidian samples—from Andiparos (Cyclades) and from Lake Krasnoe (Chukotka). In 2020, together with Colin Renfrew and Clive Oppenheimer, we published a review of the state-of-the-art in the study of obsidian sources in various parts of the world (see Kuzmin et al. 2020).

The role of Colin Renfrew in the development of archaeology in the 1960s–2020s is truly great and deserves careful analysis. He was in demand and very successful in a variety of scientific fields, and his works retain their value not only as facts of historiography, but remain an example of deep analysis of theoretical and specific problems of a wide thematic spectrum.

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