
interview

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'It started with things'. An interview with Professor Richard Bradley *Andrew Meirion Jones**

Abstract

En route to becoming one of archaeology's best-known writers on prehistoric landscapes and monuments, Richard Bradley had a brief brush with the law and almost became a Romanist! Here he reflects on his early archaeological forays as a boy, his perspectives on different field methodologies, and how his ways of writing have changed over the years.

Keywords

Prehistoric Europe; field methods; writing archaeology

Richard Bradley (figure 1) is Professor of Archaeology at the University of Reading, where he has worked throughout his archaeological career. His research interests in European prehistory are diverse and include Bronze Age metalwork, prehistoric field systems, rock art and Neolithic and Bronze Age monumentality; he has published extensively on these subjects. He has conducted field projects on the landscape archaeology of Dorset in southern England, the Clava cairns of eastern Scotland and the rock art of north-west Spain; his most recent field projects are on the rock art of Ben Lawers, Strathtay, Scotland; the stone circles of northern Scotland; and the rock art and ship settings of eastern Sweden. The interview took place on 13 September 2012 and was transcribed by Emilie Sibbesson.

OK, Richard, what I wanted to talk to you about first was what led you to study archaeology. It's well known that you studied law before archaeology. I wondered what led you to study archaeology, and whether there were other branches of archaeology, like medieval archaeology, that might have interested you.

I became aware of archaeology through a schoolmaster who had dug at the Roman city of Verulamium. I don't remember what subject he taught, and he left after a term. But by then I had caught the bug. When I was seven years old, I started to find pottery on a building site near where I lived, and that led

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Figure 1 Richard (with a slightly more youthful doppelgänger) at the Prehistoric Society Europa Conference 2012 at which he was awarded the Europa Prize for his outstanding contribution to European prehistory. Photo: Alice Roberts. (Colour online)

to a professional excavation. I also developed a particular fascination with picking up artefacts in ploughed fields. I wandered around unsystematically and would always tell people how many new sites I'd found – it must have been really irritating! I've no idea of the number now, but I kept haunting local museums, giving them lists of map references of where I'd discovered things. But I never considered archaeology as a career. There seemed to be very few jobs in the subject, and tremendous competition to obtain them. So I decided to be a lawyer. When I went to university, I began to meet people who intended to work as archaeologists. I didn't feel I was better than them, but they were really rather similar to me. And that was when my interest in law began to fade.

This was when Oxford had postgraduates doing archaeology ...?

They had postgraduates, but I am thinking of undergraduates doing subjects like history who then went into archaeology. It didn't seem absolutely impossible to do the same.

You were running the Archaeology Society at Oxford?

The convention was that the president of the university Archaeological Society should be an undergraduate, not somebody who was studying archaeology. The other convention was that you had to give a lecture on original research. And that was quite a challenge. But I think law was a good subject to study because it changed me from an enthusiast who liked finding things to someone

who wanted to interpret them. It gave me a perspective which I never had as a small boy collecting artefacts.

It was the logic of studying law that was important, then?

Yes, but I can remember very little of the detail now. The teachers were superb and it was a very good discipline. I'd never had that at school, and I definitely needed it. But by my second year at university, I realized I was spending so much time reading about archaeology when I should be doing law that maybe I ought to change direction.

I had been digging at Fishbourne Roman palace and was given a specific task. In one of the later seasons, I was asked to look at a series of earthworks in the area (at that time they were described as an *oppidum*). I ended up conducting what I suppose we would now call field survey. It was very much what I had been doing before – walking round looking at earthworks, going through historical maps and, eventually, digging a trench to retrieve some dating evidence. The moment of truth was when I realized that the only way I could explain what I was finding was to write it down. It was then I discovered that archaeology was an academic discipline and that I could do it.

So you could have started within archaeology as a Romanist?

As a schoolboy, I came across something like six Roman villas. I even found the servants' wing of the palace at Fishbourne. I discovered it one lunchtime when I was too young to go to the excavation pub. It was eventually documented by one page in the Fishbourne monograph. It was just about my first article and described a layer of make-up and a wall, which was all there really was.

So that's interesting – why did you study later prehistory?

I suppose there are several reasons. One was thinking that so many people were already studying the Romans – there were Romanists teaching Classics and ancient history at university, as well as those working in archaeology departments. At the time I thought, quite wrongly, 'there can't be much left to do'. The other thing was that through my reading – when I should have been doing law – I became very interested in prehistoric sites. Soon I did an excavation of my own. I started it just after I'd graduated, and it was on a Bell Beaker settlement, Belle Tout in Sussex.

But every project somehow leads into others, and as a small boy I developed an interest in 'Celtic fields' – it's a useless term, but it's what we called them at the time. I was puzzled by ancient land boundaries and intrigued by prehistoric settlements. So I was always drawn towards prehistory because there seemed to be so much to find out. Even the earthworks around Fishbourne were Iron Age rather than Roman. In terms of medieval archaeology, I didn't have much knowledge of the Middle Ages, or any competence with documents. I was never very comfortable with the subject.

So you began by jumping off from the archaeology that preceded the Roman period?

Yes, because I felt there was plenty to do. When I'd finished my law degree and had learned how to ask questions, I found prehistoric problems more

interesting. But for a while I continued working on the Roman period. I was persuaded to run a rescue excavation at Dorchester-on-Thames. I didn't know what I was doing as I had no training in urban archaeology, but the work was finished and a report of a sort was published. When I went to Reading, I wrote up the Neolithic monument at Maumbury Rings, which had been excavated between 1908 and 1913. It was converted into a Roman amphitheatre. Since I couldn't find anyone who wanted to study the amphitheatre, I did that as well. So I never escaped the Roman period entirely.

OK, second question . . . some time ago, you talked about your father having invented a metallurgical process called the 'Bradley process', which always kind of tickled me, always intrigued me. I just wondered, if the 'Bradley process' was an archaeological process, what might that be? Could you think of what your Bradley process would be?

My father never talked about it and, beyond knowing it's a process in metallurgy, I'm not sure what it is. But as far as I'm concerned, the 'Bradley process' is not being overspecialized, being intrigued by lots of different ideas, and not signing manifestos. We should never assume that problems have been solved. On a number of occasions when I've thought about doing a new project, people have told me, 'oh it's been done already' or 'it can't be done'. I don't know if it's the lawyer left in me, but I have always ignored that advice. It's good to return to subjects that do *seem* to be closed. There is often a way of opening them up again.

This has cropped up with me in the past.

I think there was another element, which may have influenced me more than I realized at the time. As soon as I went to Reading, I wanted to work at a site on the Berkshire Downs, Rams Hill, which had been partly excavated by Stuart Piggott. I went to a lecture in London to ask him very politely whether he thought there was a case for more work there – I knew him only slightly. Before I could say anything, he invited me to finish the excavation. He'd never completed it because the Second World War broke out. So the idea that 'it's been done before' can be terribly unhelpful. I have twice been refused grants for fieldwork on the grounds that a site had already been excavated by a 'Great Man'. Perhaps it reflects on my naivety, because in one case the great man could have written me a reference if I'd thought of asking him!

Third question: of your many publications, which do you feel best characterizes your approach to archaeology?

Nothing until the Rhind Lectures (*Altering the earth*). I don't know quite how old I was then, mid-forties, I guess. Until that time, I hadn't found my own way of writing. I think it was the fact that the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland published the lectures more or less as I gave them that made it easier for me. I don't believe my earlier work is terribly original. It was written to other people's specifications.

I think of that book as the point where your thinking really took off.

Yes, because they were six hour-long lectures. Several other books followed that tried to develop the themes of the individual chapters. It's a format that I like. I respond to books that are short and not too pretentious, but it took

me a long time to learn how to write them. I shudder when I read my early articles. They're expressed in academic prose, and very awkward. The Rhind Lectures taught me that it's possible to produce extended essays that are not theory books with a capital T. It's a genre I discovered I enjoy doing, and today I don't think I would publish anything that I hadn't liked writing. That's true of other books of mine. *Rock art and the prehistory of Atlantic Europe* was fun to put together (though I wanted to call it *Signing the land*). Another example is the Clava monograph, because it involved so many people – I found that very creative. The same applies to the work that went into *An archaeology of natural places*, and *The past in prehistoric societies*, which developed some of the themes that grew out of *Altering the earth*.

It is strange going back and rereading your own work . . .

I think the breakthrough was not in the thinking, if that isn't too grand a word. It was in the speaking voice – I wasn't expected to rewrite the lectures in a formal way. Then I realized that I was more comfortable with that way of working.

So it was actually the freedom of the Rhind Lectures, of spoken lectures, which were then transferred to the written word?

Yes, and having a very general audience who were not necessarily prehistorians. It also led me to work in Scotland. It is a fact that some of the conversations that took place at those lectures eventually developed into field projects which are still continuing 20 years later.

OK, that actually neatly leads on to my next question, which is about fieldwork – and I think you've got a distinctive approach to fieldwork. I just wondered if you could characterize your approach to fieldwork? Or are there several approaches?

I don't know. For quite a long time I was dissatisfied with fieldwork – though the projects themselves were sometimes worth the effort. I think I was uneasy for two reasons. One was that some excavations were just too big. I'm a dreadful organizer, and I really resented having to spend so much of my time administering the shopping or counting the university's marker pens. The other was a purely historical thing. In those days, for perfectly good reasons, I had to teach students in the field. We now have a training school in Reading, so I'm not under that obligation – I can pick my team. Over the last fifteen years, I think things have changed. Our teams became smaller and often involved local people who didn't work in archaeology but had a strong commitment to the project. There was more scope for discussion, and interpretation happened on the site itself. In the Clava monograph, one chapter is credited to everyone who took part in those conversations – as nobody knew who had thought of what. Nowadays, I tend to work with the same people, with limited teams and very small projects, and a lot of it is like a walking seminar. I also co-direct the work with Amanda Clarke, a professional field archaeologist who runs the Reading field school. There's not a lot that's left to post-excavation, apart from the technical analysis. But obviously the work is recorded in a way that allows our interpretations to be reconsidered. I believe you can do this with a small project without being too

self-regarding. Larger projects that discover reflexive archaeology can be too solipsistic for my taste.

The scale of large projects, the Stonehenge Riverside Project, for example, I'd certainly be able to do if I had the constitution of Mike Parker Pearson, but the number of people involved, that makes me feel ill . . .

I couldn't work that way, but I envy the people who can. I worked on a larger scale when I excavated with John Barrett in Cranborne Chase between 1977 and 1981. We had 20 to 30 people on the site – but I found that was too many. And I felt that the mechanisms of the work overshadowed the business of interpretation. Since then I have discovered that I do less and less of the digging and spend all my time *looking* at what is in the ground. Being able to concentrate in this way is very important, but it is a luxury. Remember that we've had a massive increase in good-quality field projects over the last 20 years, and they operate under quite different conditions from my work. I've tended to go for small, quite intricate problems that would be difficult to address in developer-funded archaeology.

Many of the sites I've worked on have actually been investigated before. That means that I have a good idea of what kinds of data will be there. Some were antiquarian projects from which only the finds remain. Others, like the ones where Stuart Piggott had worked (Rams Hill, Clava and Croftmoraig), were excellent excavations which can't be criticized on their own terms. They simply took place too early for radiocarbon samples to be collected. So I operate on a small scale, and have been known to manage without a grant because the work can be quick and inexpensive.

Kenny Brophy once observed to me – I can't remember which site it was he visited – but he said, 'Richard seems to be able to get the maximum amount of information from the smallest of trenches' – that was quite neat.

I don't think it's planned that way, but it happens because there is a minimum amount of distraction – you can concentrate. And a small team can all be involved in discussion.

Yes, we borrowed that format at Kilmartin where we investigated rock art.

I started to study rock art for a different reason. I had been interested in the subject for a long time when I realized that it was one form of fieldwork which didn't involve any specialists. The work was non-destructive, and it meant that I could still go out of doors while I was writing up past excavations. So that was how it started – it was essentially people looking at things and discussing them together. At first, we employed methodologies that were much too rigid. But with time things got better and we developed other methods. More recently, I have excavated around rock carvings in Scotland together with Aaron Watson, but that was not the original plan. It took work by other people, including you and Blaze O'Connor, to show the potential of this approach.

If I can summarize: for me, your approach to fieldwork is thoughtful. One of the observations I'd make about a lot of field projects is that there's always a rigid methodology which is applied, whereas things like your rock art methodologies were invented for a particular purpose.

Yes. You can do that if you're working on a very small scale, because you can also do conventional recording. Amanda Clarke and I use single-context recording on our excavations in Scotland, but I write more discursive notes. It's difficult to take that approach above a certain size of project. I think one of the practical problems is that a lot of the standard methodologies used in the UK are really management tools based on the premise – which is often justified – that the people preparing a report aren't the people doing the digging. I have a lot of sympathy with archaeologists who deal with more complex sites, or write them up for other people. Given the constraints that contract archaeologists work under, they do amazingly well, but they may not have the option of choosing their own approaches. I don't subscribe to the notion that commercial archaeology is second-rate fieldwork. Universities have a poor record of published excavations.

Yes, and they are often conducted in places or regions where no one can really observe . . .

I have the luxury of working on a scale where I can try to be inventive. If I were working on a larger scale (which I wouldn't do because I don't feel sufficiently confident), then I might have to employ an off-the-peg methodology. If I were back at Dorchester-on-Thames, digging a Roman urban site, I wouldn't dream up my own recording system. I'd use one that already exists.

Presumably this is what the single-context recording system is derived from, from complex sites?

Yes. I think a lot of it has to do with the management structure of large organizations where the authors of the report may not be the generators of the record. That's understandable, not least because of people's mobility. A generation or so ago many excavators worked as freelancers and moved from place to place. Eventually they were completely divorced from the material they'd found.

Right, continuing to think about fieldwork: you've obviously written a lot of synthetic books based on theoretical discussions and you've also written fieldwork monographs. I just wonder how those two work together – does the fieldwork inspire the theoretical book or does the theory drive you to go out into the field?

Actually, it's a little bit of the latter, but mostly something different. I've tried to alternate publications – or large publications, let's say – that are based on fieldwork with ones that are not. It's a way of making sure that I don't get too far adrift from the field evidence on which everything else depends. It's a deliberate decision to work in two genres – obviously they feed into one another to some extent, but it's more a way of making very sure that when I'm using someone's excavation report, I can still remember how messy our evidence really is. In the trench, you may be worrying whether a feature is a posthole; in the published report, it has become a fact. It's important to keep one foot on the ground because it's possible to distance oneself completely from the realities of the archaeological record. In a friend's words, you do your fieldwork from a desk.

It's about trying to recall where that data comes from, isn't it?

That's certainly true. It's trying to play the two genres against one another. When I came into archaeology, I was advised to change my research completely every five years as a way of keeping fresh. This is another way of doing the same thing. But it's not so simple, as I seem to go back to subjects after a decent interval.

That is not a problem!

It's too pretentious to call it a hermeneutic spiral, but periodically you realize you could have done something more with material that you know quite well. You can return to things you've studied before – in my case metalwork hoards are one example. Again, I thought I'd finished working on rock art but went back and excavated decorated outcrops in Scotland a decade later. We even have plans to re-excavate a major Neolithic monument – the Dorset Cursus – that we first investigated in 1984. Now it is possible to use new methods to date the earthwork. But we're not doing it yet – the plan, which is still at an early stage, is to have the 'Cursus Anniversary Dig' (CAD) in which the original participants come back 30 years later to see how much better they can do!

It could include some fairly eminent figures?

It could! It could be great fun, but not all of them have been told yet . . .

OK, so what you've just commented on leads quite neatly into the next question. You're talking about changing your area of interest every five years – I'm wondering whether there is any aspect of prehistory that you've been unable to study, but that you feel is deserving of study, and whether you also plan for the future?

For a long time, like many of my contemporaries, I tried to write a British prehistory independent of more general interpretations that applied to the European mainland. We were reacting against the ideas that were around in the 1950s. Now I think we can recognize that Britain and Ireland were never coherent entities and that we *have* to work on a larger scale. We *must* acquaint ourselves with what is happening in neighbouring parts of Europe. It doesn't mean rejecting the material that was gathered years ago. It just means that it needs to be perceived through a different lens, and at a different scale. I think that's exciting. Together with Colin Haselgrove, Leo Webley and Marc Vander Linden, I am involved in a project to bring together the results of development archaeology in north-west Europe and to write a prehistory of that region. Several years ago, I published a study of prehistoric Britain and Ireland, based on similar sources. Now it is time to address the wider background to those islands. It is particularly important to do that as so little of the published literature is accessible to an anglophone audience.

Are there any particular sites, large-scale sites, that you would love to excavate?

In the past, I've chosen subjects that I think I can cope with, so I won't be frustrated by the things that I can't do. I couldn't conceive research on the scale of the Stonehenge Riverside Project – not just because of the number of

people. I don't have the technical ability to conduct a programme of research like that. Over the years of doing small-scale fieldwork, I've come closer to the projects that suit me best. I've also looked for ones that are not going to happen otherwise – they are not going to come out of developer-funded archaeology – and I am not threatening anyone's livelihood. I don't think I should be involved in large excavations or field surveys. They can be done much better by other people. There are many regions where I'd like to see more work. Within the UK, I'd certainly like to see new research on the Yorkshire and Lincolnshire Wolds – they're clearly very important and we don't know enough about them. But I don't have any ambition to do it myself. There are lots of good field archaeologists who have good publication records.

Yes. OK, my final question: there seems to be a process by which senior academics have 'funny turns' towards the end of their careers, and often return to fondly remembered ideas. They often become either culture historians or neo-Darwinists at the end of their careers – I'm naming nobody – but if such a thing were to happen to you, is there a particular idea that you would return to?

No, I don't think so. There is evidence to which I return, but not approaches. I think the distinction is that methods you can learn from other people. In fact, I find that colleagues younger than me can be more stimulating than my contemporaries – it's more exciting examining a thesis than it is giving a lecture. But, on the other hand, there are data which I've learnt and know fairly well. If you can apply new ideas to material with which you already have some acquaintance, it seems an efficient way of working. So, for example, the whole question of metalwork hoards still intrigues me – partly because I clearly got it wrong 25 years ago. I need to revisit it, but that's partly because I know some of that material already. I wouldn't go back to the same theoretical sources. This time, my approach would be geographical. It'd place less emphasis on the composition of these collections and more on the places in which they were found. The work would depend on field survey and build on research I have already done together with Dave Yates and Dave Dunkin.

New interpretations needn't be threatening. I've escaped the theoretical angst that a lot of my contemporaries experienced. As a law student, I was brought up to know that I was just using evidence – I was constructing an argument. There was always a counterargument that employed some of that same evidence, so it was a question of the logic of your case and the amount of information it could accommodate. I've never believed that I *knew* about the past. I considered some possibilities and thought that certain arguments were better than others. So in a sense, the evidence can remain essentially the same – after all, much of it exists in published form – but you can keep on interrogating it. If you take that line, we're talking about arguments and advocacy. Changing your mind is not a philosophical crisis. It's simply the recognition that another thesis accommodates those observations more effectively and might be worth pursuing.

That's really interesting. Returning to materials and problems rather than returning to particular ways of thinking?

I have a problem with 'ways of thinking' and have been aware of it since I studied law. I'm hopeless at reading philosophy. There was a whole course on legal philosophy – I think I failed it! I tend to be more influenced by worked examples. When someone can make ideas work on a body of materials, then I am excited. It's a failing of mine, but I can't see that potential in a philosophical text. I need to appreciate how it can engage with archaeological data. So I'm very much influenced by other people's thinking. But sometimes I have the notion of a place where that idea may work equally well or even better. I'm reasonably familiar with the work that's been done in the past and what material is available for study.

I quite voraciously read philosophy but it's always with an archaeological eye. At the point where I think that this can't tell us anything about the archaeology, I lay the philosophy aside. For example, reading Heidegger – ploughing through Being and time – I quite quickly came to a point where I thought this isn't telling me anything useful for archaeology. Alternatively, I've read other things like Bruno Latour's work, which seems to be very material-based, and immediately useful . . .

I think that's the difference. When a colleague can show me how something works, using a body of material that I find difficult to read in its original form, then it becomes exciting. I have a weakness with pure abstraction. What excites me most is seeing where fresh ideas combine with the distinctive material that archaeologists encounter. I think it's because of the rather odd history that I had from the age of seven – I started with the *things*; I didn't have any ideas about them. As far as I can remember, it was because I was allowed to do archaeology rather than waste time on school sports.

I wish that had happened to me!

I came at things in a peculiar way. Had I discovered prehistory after I had studied law, I imagine my archaeology would have been very different. But it was already partly formed. I'd started doing fieldwork of a kind before I went to university. The best I can say is that it was published, but I'm not telling you where because it wasn't very good!

It's interesting to see how law has informed your approach, because it obviously has. I've always thought there is an elegance of argument in your work.

Don't make too much of it, I wasn't particularly good at the subject and I didn't spend a lot of time on it. A few years ago I met my former law tutor, who has gone on to higher things. He asked me how many days a week I spent on the subject while I was teaching myself archaeology. I don't think I would ever have made a successful lawyer – I get bored too easily. But I was well taught and I think that is the real influence. Few of my contemporaries wanted to be lawyers, but all of them succumbed, apart from me.

You're the one who escaped?

I'm the one who escaped, though maybe I had already laid plans for escaping.

To archaeology's benefit?

I can't say, but the legal profession lost nothing when I defected.