

Obituary: Stuart Piggott

In an autobiographical essay published in *Antiquity* in 1983, Stuart Piggott admitted to incredulity when Gordon Childe, Professor of Archaeology in the University of Edinburgh, said, in the course of a chance meeting in 1945, that he hoped Piggott would succeed him in the Abercromby Chair. The University considered only two names (the other being that of Graham Clarke, later to become Disney Professor in the University of Cambridge), and to Piggott's surprise in the early summer of 1946 offered the chair to him. Edinburgh had a professor, aged only thirty-six, who was new to Scottish archaeology, but one who was determined to work on that archaeology and to teach it in a European context.

Piggott was one of a small body of academic archaeologists who helped to present British and European prehistory to a wide audience both through his books and in the medium of television. He was a wordsmith of great skill. Whether writing for an academic audience or for a more popular market, his beautifully crafted prose has clarity and sparkle. Indeed, in 1947 he published a volume of verse, *Fire among the Ruins*. His lectures showed the same thorough preparation, care in composition and skill in communicating. He set many students on the way to archaeological discovery by his own enthusiasm for finding out about the past. Under his leadership the Department of Archaeology at Edinburgh maintained its international reputation and grew into a formidable teaching unit. Several generations of his students undertook important research on a wide range of subjects, including many important Scottish themes, reflecting his own extraordinary breadth of interest. His enduring contribution is in the scholarship of his many books and major articles, which bring interpretation and synthesis to different archaeological and antiquarian themes that by their nature demand the marshalling of myriad pieces of evidence.

It is important to recall the circumstances of the creation of the Abercromby Chair, for it has a bearing on why Childe was happy to think of Piggott as an appropriate successor. Piggott's constant citation of the terms of Abercromby's foundation was a significant and lasting influence on how he chose to undertake his own teaching and research, and on the way that he developed the Department of Archaeology. John Abercromby, 5th Baron Abercromby of Aboukir and Tullibody (1841–1924), was an eminent amateur archaeologist whose work on British Bronze Age pottery showed the importance of understanding British material in a European context. He had been Secretary of the Society from 1902 and contributed to its Excavation Fund. By 1905, however, he had become so dissatisfied with the Society's methods of excavation that he resigned from this position and withdrew funding, and in 1916 he laid the foundation of the Chair of Prehistoric Archaeology through a bequest that the University would receive on his death, as well as the requirements demanded of the eventual incumbent. The holder was to have a wide knowledge of the archaeology of Europe and the Near East, to be able to impart his knowledge to the general public, and was to be actively engaged in research. Proficiency in French and German and to some degree in Italian was expected.

What were Piggott's early contributions to archaeology that caused Childe to consider this young Englishman as a worthy successor in the only chair of prehistoric archaeology in Britain? Stuart Piggott was born in 1910 and brought up in the chalk country of southern England, between Uffington and the Vale of the White Horse in Oxfordshire, where his father's family had lived for



Illus 1 Professor Stuart Piggott (centre), with Professors Gordon Childe, Richard Atkinson, Graham Clarke and Christopher Hawkes, Schaffhausen, 1950 (Ashmolean Museum).

centuries, and Petersfield in Hampshire, where his father was a teacher and where he went to school. He had early formed the notion that he would be an archaeologist, but had no idea how he might realize that ambition. Things fell into place by a series of erratic coincidences. Having left school without one of the critical qualifying elements that would have allowed him to go forward to university (and away from archaeology, no doubt), he was employed as an assistant at Reading Museum, among the natural history and local archaeological collections. An archaeological note he had written was put into the parish magazine by the local vicar, where it was picked up by the local newspaper; thus Piggott came to the attention of O G S Crawford, who was working at the Ordnance Survey on the *Map of Roman Britain*. The world of professional archaeology in England was a tiny circle in the 1920s and 1930s, and soon Piggott was known to them all. In 1928, at the age of eighteen, he was appointed an investigator with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales, where for five years he undertook fieldwork, including survey in Anglesey for the Inventory of that county, but other scholarly work was done, elsewhere and in his own free time.

He dug with E C Curwen on the Neolithic enclosure at the Trundle, near Goodwood, Sussex, and with Alexander Keiller on the Neolithic long earthen burial mound on Thicket Down in Dorset. He left the unsympathetic Royal Commission to work as Keiller's archaeological assistant, and for five years he dug on a number of prehistoric sites in Wessex, notably the great henge of Avebury. Later he excavated with Gerhard Bersu at the critically important Iron Age settlement site

of Little Woodbury. Finally, under the shadow of the war, he and his wife Margaret (Peggy) were members of Charles Phillip's small team excavating the Sutton Hoo ship burial. What a pedigree as an excavator. But Piggott's exceptionally active and alert mind was also fully engaged. The Trundle produced an extensive range of Neolithic artefacts that lit the fuse of his scholarship on British Neolithic cultures and their European connections. His own research, particularly on the material in Devizes Museum, laid the foundations for important publications such as his paper in the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* which gave us the Wessex Culture. His sensitive penmanship ensured that his papers were illustrated with clarity and precision.

Along with a number of other archaeologists, Piggott's war service was in aerial photograph interpretation units. While based in Delhi, he used any available leave to visit museums and sites, research which resulted in his book *Prehistoric India*, which remained the first and only synthesis of the subject, and whose scholarship and confident handling of the material make its origins the more astonishing. Piggott's grounding had been in the practicalities of excavation and recording, in artefactual research, and in the preparation of reports. He had an innate ability to gather information (aided by an encyclopaedic and photographic memory) and to see both the wood and the trees. By the end of the war he had a formidable publication record, but lacked formal qualifications. In 1945 he became a member of St John's College, Oxford, and began work on a thesis on William Stukeley, the 18th-century antiquary, but even before the thesis was completed and the B Litt awarded, the invitation to take up the Edinburgh chair had been received. His interest in the antiquarian tradition was maintained throughout his life. An engaging volume on the Druids was published in 1968. In 1977 he gathered several papers together into a volume of collected essays, *Ruins in a Landscape*. In his retirement he re-worked the book on the Druids, published a revised and enlarged version of his book on the enigmatic William Stukeley, and in 1989 produced *Ancient Britons and the antiquarian imagination: ideas from the Renaissance to the Regency*.

His breadth of interest attained the intentions of the founder of the Abercromby Chair, and the balance between such broad research and teaching and his responsibilities in Scotland were to be maintained for the next thirty years – a period that may be considered under four themes: archaeological research and excavation; work within the University; involvement in the affairs of the Society; participation in the running of British archaeology generally.

Stuart Piggott has said that he was unprepared for the fact that archaeology in Scotland had not kept abreast of developments further south and he and Peggy set out to remedy the situation by means of excavations and publications that might be seen as models of best practice. The Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and the Scottish Field School of Archaeology frequently acted as sponsors of the excavations. Something of that determination is seen in the *Proceedings* of 1947–8 (published in 1950) with the reports of the excavations at Cairnpapple Hill, West Lothian, and C M Piggott's work at Hownam Rings, Roxburgh, and those of 1948–9, published in the following year, which include C M Piggott's report on Hayhope Knowe and that of Stuart Piggott and T G E Powell on three Neolithic chambered tombs, including Cairnholy, Kirkcudbrightshire. Work on the Clava cairns followed. The Piggotts' draughtsmanship in the presentation of excavation information and in the recording of artefacts set standards that are hard to emulate. Excavations were also undertaken in Wessex notably at Stonehenge, West Kennet long barrow and Wayland's Smithy long barrow in association with R J C Atkinson, initially a colleague in Edinburgh, and latterly Professor of Archaeology at the University of Wales, Cardiff. With Atkinson he studied the pieces of Celtic metalwork that had been put together to form the Torrs Chamfrein, from Kirkcudbright; they concluded that the drinking horn terminals and the pony head decoration had not originally formed a single decorative unit, but the publication in 1955 of the results of the investigation in *Archaeologia*, the occasional journal of the Society of Antiquaries of London, brought the importance of Scottish Celtic art to a

wider audience. In 1970 this continued enthusiasm for Celtic art, from fire-dogs and swords to cauldron chains, brought about the memorable Edinburgh Festival exhibition on Early Celtic Art, which was later transferred (less sympathetically arranged) to the Hayward Gallery, London.

Piggott saw the archaeology of Scotland within the wider framework of north-west Europe, and felt that knowledge about that archaeology should be on a firm base and should be widely known. Students and researchers were encouraged to have first-hand knowledge of material in the field or in museum collections, to catalogue, examine, draw, and then to form conclusions. In the spirit of Abercromby, the popular distillation of new approaches to such a broad vision was published as *Scotland Before History* in 1958.

Within the University of Edinburgh, Stuart Piggott set himself a huge task, the building of a Department of Archaeology that taught a full honours degree programme. Piggott formed a new MA honours degree in archaeology to replace Gordon Childe's BSc degree. By necessity, at first he taught single-handed, but he patiently and skilfully built up a broadly based departmental team, with a national and international reputation for excellence in teaching and research. It was at this period that he wrote *British Prehistory* for Hutchinson's University Library, and somehow found the time to complete his monumental work on the British Neolithic, *The Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles*, outdated maybe, but not yet surpassed. Soon he had Richard Atkinson at his side; with the support of the medieval historians, a post was created for an early medieval period archaeologist, which brought Charles Thomas to Edinburgh. Then in collaboration with David Talbot Rice of Fine Art and the classicists, a post in classical archaeology was established that would serve the needs of all three groups, and Anthony Snodgrass was appointed. All three of these first appointees went on from Edinburgh to influential chairs elsewhere, Atkinson to found the Department of Archaeology at Cardiff, Charles Thomas to Exeter via Leicester, and Anthony Snodgrass to the Chair of Classical Archaeology in Cambridge. Mary-Jane Mountain was appointed to extend the teaching scope to early hominids and hunter-gatherer societies. She was to play an important role, along with Trevor Watkins, in Piggott's last Scottish excavation at Dalladies long barrow in Kincardineshire in 1970 and 1971 (published promptly, with his own inimitable site drawings, in the *Proceedings* for 1971-2).

Postgraduate research students were channelled towards Scottish topics among others, with the results appearing in the pages of the *Proceedings*, notably John Coles on the Late Bronze Age in Scotland. Piggott was an inspiring teacher whose lectures and seminars not only gave the student the essential grounding, but also the encouragement to dare to emulate his scholarship, and to explore ideas widely and deeply. His university teaching on European prehistory was distilled into the Rhind Lectures of the Society in 1962, which in turn led to the publication in 1965 of *Ancient Europe* by Edinburgh University Press. It is not only Piggott's grasp of European prehistory from the Neolithic period to the Iron Age, but his geographical range that is so remarkable. Piggott encouraged his students to think and to wonder, to observe and to record. He taught the dual importance of the literal description and the visual interpretation and he pondered this in his Walter Neurath Lecture *Antiquity Depicted* in 1978. His former students will remember a figure that could be distant or could be fun. As host, often to archaeologists from overseas, his carefully scripted menus spoke of a precision in preparation of a series of dishes that were always a delight to experience.

Stuart Piggott regarded his responsibilities to the University as a senior Professor and Head of Department as a chore, and he was not to be seen willingly participating in the affairs of Faculty or Senatus. He was by no means a single-minded prehistorian, however. He had a wide circle of intellectual friends and acquaintances in Edinburgh, including major scientific thinkers like C H Waddington the geneticist, Longuet-Higgins, and Richard Gregory. Stuart's archaeological science was based on

philosophical foundations concerning the nature of history as well as prehistory, and an appreciation of the problems of perception and knowledge, though these foundations were rarely laid bare in his writings.

Piggott found certain members of the Society particularly supportive, notably A O Curle, and he was soon involved in the Society's affairs. He had been a Fellow since 1938, and on his arrival in Edinburgh was at once elected a Council member, and Secretary for Foreign Correspondence from 1950. His election to the Presidency in 1967 represented an important change in the Society's tradition. He ensured that the Society had scholarly leadership and used his presidency, the last to be a five-year term, to work with the Secretary, Basil Skinner, at the modernization of the Society, fitting it for its role in the intellectual life of Scotland in the later 20th century.

Stuart Piggott's service to archaeology in Scotland, Britain and beyond had a constancy that is important to stress, for it involved meetings and committees in London and elsewhere, that necessitated travel and preparation that lessened time for what mattered, archaeological thinking. He believed that participation in such committee work was part of the job, but he never relished it. He was a Trustee of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland from 1954 until he left Scotland in 1977, a member of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland between 1946 and 1976, and a member of the Ancient Monuments Board for Scotland for most of the time that he was in Edinburgh. Between 1968 and 1974 he was a Trustee of the British Museum. For many years he was one of the Trustees of *Antiquity*. He had a long-standing interest in the Prehistoric Society, having been one of the Young Turks who, in 1935, engineered the transition of the Prehistoric Society of East Anglia into the national society that it is today, and he acted as its President between 1962 and 1966. His scholarship and service were widely recognized. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1954. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by Columbia University, a CBE in 1972, the Gold Medal of the Society of Antiquities of London in 1983 and an Honorary DLitt by Edinburgh University in 1984.

Piggott has been criticised by some for not creating a Scottish school of archaeologists. The clarion call for a Scottish school of archaeologists was given by J Anderson in his final Rhind Lecture to the Society, but it was not taken up by his immediate successors. Abercromby's intervention initiated a different perspective for teaching and research at Edinburgh, seeing the Scottish element in a wider dimension, and this was a road that Piggott was happy to maintain. His scholarship was reinforced by his travels in Europe, while his international reputation meant that he received visitors and offprints from all over the world – all neatly filed into box-files in his library, where he could pull out anything by means of the wallpaper offcuts with which he colour-coded his files. He was a quiet internationalist, supporting the congresses of the UISPP, and working through the British Academy to establish links and arrange academic exchanges with the USSR Academy of Sciences and the academies of other countries of the Soviet bloc.

On retirement in 1977 he moved to a thatched cottage that had belonged to maiden aunts in West Challow, nestled below the Uffington White Horse. He extended the house to contain his prodigious library, and there he continued his research and writing. His friends were liable to receive calligraphic postcards from Professor Piggins, of the Department of Speculative and Preventive Archaeology, University of West Challow. He had once horrified a serious visitor who asked him what was the purpose of archaeology; Stuart replied that it should be fun. That meant seeking to satisfy his curiosity and develop a better understanding, setting himself challenging and high standards of scholarship, and producing work of the highest intellectual quality communicated in the most beautiful of prose. In his latter years, he found the tendentiousness of much 'New Archaeology' tedious. Ill-health took away more of the fun, but did not prevent him from adding significantly to his formidable contribution to archaeological scholarship with major publications including the editing of

the first part, *Prehistory*, of Volume 1 of *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, The Earliest Wheeled Transport from the Atlantic Coast to the Caspian Sea* in 1983, *Wagon, Chariot and Carriage: Symbol and Status in the History of Transport* in 1992, and a contribution to *The Celtic World* in 1995.

The writers are indebted to Dr I B M Ralston for his contribution to the preparation of this memorial. The illustration is courtesy Dr A Sherratt, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

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