

Obituary

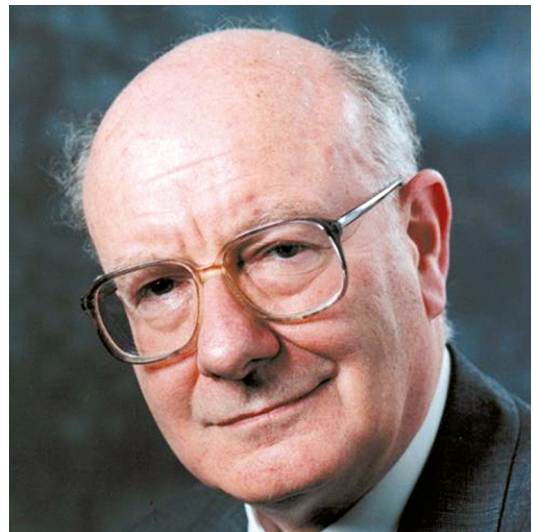
Professor Andrew Colin Renfrew, Lord Renfrew of Kaimsthorn
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25 July 1937–24 November 2024

Professor Colin Renfrew (as he was universally known; his first name of Andrew was not used), Lord Renfrew of Kaimsthorn, Fellow (1970–2000) and Honorary Fellow of this Society from 2000, died in Cambridge on 24 November 2024, aged 87.

Born in Stockton-on-Tees, raised in Welwyn Garden City and educated at St Albans School, Colin Renfrew was interested in archaeology from a young age, excavating in Canterbury while a teenager. Following his National Service with the Royal Air Force (1956–58), he began his studies at St John's College, Cambridge, reading Natural Sciences, changing to Archaeology for the second part of the degree after a discussion with Professor Glyn Daniel. He completed his PhD thesis, 'Neolithic and Bronze Age Cultures of the Cyclades and their External Relations', in 1965, marrying palaeoethnobotanist Jane Ewbank in the same year.

He was appointed lecturer in the Department of Prehistory and Archaeology at the University of Sheffield in 1965. In 1968 he also contested (unsuccessfully) a by-election in the Sheffield Brightside constituency on behalf of the Conservative Party, knocking a Labour majority of 21,000 down to 5,000 and staking a claim to further Party advancement. At the same time, following up on his PhD research, he excavated Neolithic and Bronze Age sites in the Aegean, including Saliagos (1964–65) and Sitagroi (1968–70). He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1968, and of this Society in 1970. In 1972 he was appointed to the Chair of Archaeology at Southampton



ILLUS 1 Colin Renfrew
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University, by which time he had already published important and influential papers (including 'Wessex without Mycenae', 1968, published in the *Annual of the British School at Athens*) and the first of his many books, *The Emergence of Civilization: The Cyclades and the Aegean in the Third Millennium BC* (Renfrew 1972). At Southampton – a department established just six years earlier by Professor Barry Cunliffe – he proceeded to build its reputation as a centre of excellence in archaeological theory. Together with Sheffield University's Andrew Fleming and their students, he established the Theoretical

Archaeology Group, whose inaugural conference was held at Southampton in 1977. In 1981, Renfrew succeeded Glyn Daniel as Disney Professor of Archaeology at Cambridge, and five years later he was elected Master of Jesus College, a position he retained until 1997. A highlight of his Mastership was his overseeing of the College's quinqucentenary celebrations in 1996, when the Queen opened the Quinqucentenary Library. He retired as Disney Professor in 2004, succeeded by Graeme Barker.

In 1991, he was appointed to a Life Peerage as Lord Renfrew of Kaimsthorn, and was active in the House of Lords, particularly in promoting legislation protecting cultural heritage. He highlighted the trade in looted and smuggled antiquities. He was instrumental in getting the 1996 Treasure Act through Parliament, and he also set up the Illicit Antiquities Research Centre at Cambridge. The Centre was part of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, which had been founded in 1990, thanks to Renfrew's success in securing an initial endowment of £11 million from Dr D M McDonald, an industrialist who had been fascinated by his work on the origins and spread of Indo-European languages. Renfrew became the Institute's first Director, setting up the Institute with its own new building and funding fellowships, seminars, conferences and a distinguished monograph series.

Alongside his career as an active teacher and supervisor, as the head of successive university departments, Master of a college, Director of the McDonald Institute, Council member of archaeological societies, and member of the House of Lords, Renfrew pursued a career of lifelong innovation in archaeological research. Following from his PhD research, for example, he was aware of the widespread distribution of artefacts of obsidian (a volcanic glass that fractures conchoidally) around the Aegean, so he initiated a collaboration with Cambridge colleagues to sample the sources in the Aegean and in central and eastern Turkey, characterising the material by means of spectrographic analysis, and mapping the distribution of obsidian artefacts from specific sources at Neolithic settlements

throughout the Aegean and south-west Asia. His interest in obsidian sourcing continued for the rest of his life, its focus expanding to encompass obsidian around the world, as exemplified in the review he published with Yaroslav Kuzmin and Clive Oppenheimer in 2020 (Kuzmin et al 2020).

At the same time that his papers on Aegean and Near Eastern obsidian were appearing, Renfrew was also pursuing his interest in the tree-ring calibration of radiocarbon dating. He was the first archaeologist to realise the implications, for European prehistoric chronology, of Hans Suess's 1965 paper on calibrating radiocarbon dates (as demonstrated in his 1968 'Wessex without Mycenae' article), and his 1973 book *Before Civilisation: The Radiocarbon Revolution and Prehistoric Europe* (Renfrew 1973a) proved to be paradigm-changing. In 1970 he was approached by the BBC to collaborate in the making of a TV documentary on radiocarbon dating and tree-ring calibration for their *Chronicle* series. That led to a further seven *Chronicle* documentaries and friendship with the presenter Magnus Magnusson. This TV work also took him to Easter Island and Tonga, where he was able to explore his hypothesis that the emergence of chiefdom societies, as attested there, offered the key to understanding social changes in third- to early second-millennium Britain. As Mike Pitts has recently pointed out in a World Archaeological Congress session dedicated to Colin Renfrew and his legacy, in this work – as in his other broadcasting work – Renfrew showed himself to be a talented communicator who enabled viewers and listeners to feel part of the process of finding out about the past.

Renfrew was not afraid to challenge academic orthodoxies, including the concept, widely held during the 1960s and 1970s, that there existed a 'ladder of inference', whereby archaeologists could make reasonable claims with regard to prehistoric technology and economy, but not about social organisation or belief. This brought him into conflict with Richard Atkinson, who had rebuffed a young researcher's not unreasonable question, apropos interpreting Atkinson's findings at Stonehenge ('Would Professor Atkinson

care to say anything about the peoples who built the three main phases – their culture and religion?’), with a curt ‘To speculate on such matters is not only unscientific but it encourages the lunatic fringe.’ Undaunted by such an attitude, Renfrew went on to dedicate much of his research during the 1970s to the question of the social organisation and beliefs of the Neolithic inhabitants of Britain, starting with monuments in Wessex (Renfrew 1973b) before turning his attention to Scotland, and particularly Orkney – of which more below.

He also participated in the theoretical debates of the late 1970s and 1980s in Cambridge, when post-processualism, championed by Ian Hodder, emerged as a novel approach to conceptualising the past. Renfrew’s inaugural Disney Professorship lecture, ‘Towards an Archaeology of Mind’, for example, offered a critique of the direction in which cognitive archaeology was heading and sought to redefine the relationship between cognition and material culture, reframing the debate in a more processual manner. (Renfrew had embraced processualism after spending a term at the University of California at Los Angeles in 1967, where he encountered Lewis Binford.)

Renfrew always enjoyed pushing the boundaries of archaeological theory, proposing new ideas that usually involved the blending of prehistoric archaeology with other disciplines and enjoyable collaborations with a variety of scientists. His work on archaeology and linguistics exemplifies this. Perhaps his most widely read book (apart from his multiple-edition textbook written with Paul Bahn, *Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice*, first published in 1991) is his 1987 *Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*, in which he linked the origins, development and spread of Indo-European languages with the spread of Neolithic farmers from Anatolia across the whole of Europe (about which the arguments are still rumbling). When DNA analysis of ancient human remains started to be undertaken in the 1990s, Renfrew enthusiastically welcomed this approach, exploring possible connections between genetics and



ILLUS 2 Investigating in Orkney: Colin Renfrew, dressed in his signature RAF-issue demobilisation raincoat, photographing the excavation at Quanterness in the days before Health and Safety regulations. Photo courtesy of Professor Norman Hammond

linguistics in a series of interdisciplinary meetings in Cambridge.

In addition to these and other major achievements on the world stage, Colin Renfrew made a significant contribution to Scottish archaeology during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1972–74, as part of his focus on monuments and social organisation, and leading on from his work in Wessex, he excavated the Maeshowe-type passage tomb at Quanterness, on Mainland, Orkney. (Note that his own terminological preference for this kind of passage tomb was “Quanterness–Quoyness type” in view of the unique status of Maes Howe’ (Renfrew 2000: 13). At that time, the two-word spelling of Maeshowe was the norm.) During the same period he cut two sections across the

ditch at Maeshowe, and three across the ditch at the Ring of Brodgar, in order to obtain radiocarbon dating evidence; this work was undertaken on behalf of the then-named Department of the Environment. The results were published in his influential 1979 monograph, *Investigations in Orkney*, published by the Society of Antiquaries of London.

He did so much more than just excavate: he brought his keen enquiring mind to the challenge of understanding and interpreting the Orcadian Neolithic, posing questions as to how and why a seemingly egalitarian, segmentary society changed to a more socially differentiated, centralised society towards the end of the fourth millennium BC. His use of Thiessen polygons to represent notional territories of the builders of Orkney's early chamber tombs, and of those on Arran (Renfrew 1976), injected a theoretical perspective, here borrowed from geography, into a Scottish intellectual milieu not noted for its interest in theoretical archaeology. Renfrew was particularly interested in the contrast between the users of what he (and many others) termed 'Unstan Ware' and the users of 'Grooved Ware', noting the discrete association of these pottery types with different monument types – the former being 'Orkney–Cromarty' chamber tombs, the latter being Maeshowe and Maeshowe–Quanterness–Quoyness-type passage tombs and the stone circles within henges at the Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brodgar. He described the latter monuments, located in the heart of Mainland Orkney, as the 'Brodgar–Stenness–Maes Howe (B–S–M) complex'. In 1979, on the basis of radiocarbon determinations then available, he argued for a period of overlap between the two, between c 3300 cal BC and c 3000 cal BC. Subsequently, in his lecture delivered during the 2000 Orkney Science Festival, he acknowledged the developments in radiocarbon dating that had revealed the existence of a plateau in the calibration curve spanning that period, and so revised his model, arguing that the use of Grooved Ware succeeded that of 'Unstan Ware' around 3200 cal BC, with no overlap (Renfrew 2000: 12–13). Debate on whether there was an overlap, and on

how to interpret the observed changes in material culture, monuments and practices, continues to this day.

Not only did Renfrew's work on prehistoric Orkney focus attention on the nature of Neolithic society and its transformation; through his *Investigations in Orkney* and his 1985 edited volume, *The Prehistory of Orkney*, it also raised international awareness of the wealth of prehistoric structures and material culture there, providing a counterpoint to many archaeologists' preoccupation with Wessex. Moreover, in pointing out the advantages of an 'epitopic' approach (Renfrew 2000), he highlighted the potential of using historical information on the rhythms and concerns of daily life in Orkney to inform thinking about aspects of the Neolithic lifestyle there.

His contribution to Scottish (and world) prehistory continued in 2001 with his series of Rhind Lectures for this Society, *Art as Archaeology, Archaeology as Art: Transformations through Material Culture*, which were published in 2003 as *Figuring it Out. What are We? Where Do We Come From? The Parallel Visions of Artists and Archaeologists*. These lectures brought together his thinking on material symbolism in prehistory and his active, long-term interest in contemporary art and sculpture – an interest that had initially been sparked by seeing a large, Early Bronze Age marble head from Keros in the Louvre, and reading about the influence of prehistoric Cycladic figurines on the work of the early twentieth-century artists Constantin Brâncuși and Amedeo Modigliani. (With characteristic thoroughness, Renfrew went on to excavate on Keros in 1987 with Christos Doumas and Lila Marangou, and again in 2015–18, with Dr Michael Boyd, and he was Director of the long-term – and ongoing – Keros Project, www.kerosproject.org.)

Renfrew championed modern art and was responsible for establishing the annual *Sculpture in the Close* exhibition at Jesus College in 1988, about which Professor Rod Mengham has observed: 'Under his leadership it grew from relatively modest beginnings presenting the work of British sculptors to a College-wide showcase for installations of work by a truly international range



ILLUS 3 Colin Renfrew, wearing the same raincoat, at Les Pierres Plates, Brittany, during the 1978 joint Cambridge and Southampton Universities' field trip. Alison Sheridan is beside him; Dick Beckett is front, left, and Mike Parker Pearson (now a Professor at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London) is behind him. Photo courtesy of the late Professor Tim Darvill; reproduced by permission of Caoimhe Darvill

of artists.' Renfrew also chaired the College's Works of Art committee until 2017. The affection and respect in which he was held by artists is exemplified by the moving elegy delivered during the memorial service at Jesus College in March 2025 by Sir Anthony Gormley, and by the reading of Sir Ben Okri's poem, 'The Muse of Archaeology', which had been written for Colin.

It would be impossible to overstate the breadth and depth of Renfrew's achievements. He was a man of extraordinary energy and diverse interests, a true polymath, with a worldwide reputation. His work has transformed understanding and practice in several fields of archaeology. The many honours for his outstanding contributions to archaeology – in addition to those already mentioned – include the Gold Medal of the Society of Antiquaries of London, the Archaeological Institute of America's Bandler award, the Balzan prize from the International Balzan Prize Foundation, the European Science Foundation's Latsis prize,

and Fellowship of the National Academy of Sciences in the USA. He was a Trustee of the British Museum and a Commissioner for English Heritage, and was awarded honorary doctorates from the Universities of Edinburgh, Sheffield, Athens, Southampton, Liverpool, St Andrews, Kent, London and Lima. Upon his retirement as Disney Professor and Director of the McDonald Institute in 2004 he was presented with not one, but an unprecedented three *Festschrift* volumes (Brodie & Hills 2004; Cherry et al 2004; Jones 2004), and, as noted above, an entire session during the 10th World Archaeological Congress in Darwin, Australia, in June 2025, was devoted to celebrating the man and his legacy.

All this may create the impression of a formidable individual, but Colin the man and the teacher was warm-hearted, generous, supportive, jovial and funny, as well as being passionate about, and dedicated to, archaeology and art. Legion are the 'Colin' anecdotes, with Professor Norman Hammond, for example, recalling an

evening when, during the First International Congress held on Santorini, Colin could be found dancing on a tabletop on Petros Nomikos's yacht, singing a Greek pop song. Colin had a fine singing voice, and he also loved Scottish folk songs, and so it was fitting that at his memorial event in Cambridge in March 2025 his son Magnus sang one of his favourites, 'Mairi's Wedding', in memory of when Colin had sung it during the family's stays in his beloved Orkney.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ALISON SHERIDAN FSAScOT AND TREVOR WATKINS FSAScOT

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