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Interview with the Institute of Archaeology's new Director: Professor Kevin MacDonald

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Following Professor Sue Hamilton's eight-year tenure as Director of UCL Institute of Archaeology (2014–22), Professor Kevin MacDonald was appointed into the role, beginning in September 2022. Here he summarises his career to date, together with his vision for the future of the Department in both the short and longer terms.

What brought you into archaeology?

Like most of us, I suppose there were a number of factors that led me into the discipline. My father was from a family of Newfoundland fishermen and merchant sailors. My uncle and great uncles had travelled the world at sea and I grew up listening to them spinning yarns about West Africa, South America and East Asia – so from the start I was eager to travel. Then my Dad was Comptroller [Financial Manager] for the Moody Foundation in Galveston, Texas. This was at the high point of the historic buildings preservation movement and the foundation was very involved in that. Most weekends I was out with him visiting one restoration project or another – nineteenth-century buildings, steam trains, even the tall ship *Elissa*. That fed into my passion for history. When it came time for university – I was pushing to go to music conservatory – my parents

bargained with me to undertake a pre-law degree, and in the States most any Humanities or Social Sciences degree can be pre-law. That's when it struck me that archaeology would allow me to work outdoors (which I preferred), travel and be around (pre)historic places. It seemed by far the best choice and I've never regretted it (though I still actively play the harpsichord, violin and viola).

What research themes have you been addressing in recent years?

Some colleagues will no doubt have already thought me a bit too diversified, excavating in West Africa and Louisiana, working on pottery, lithics, animal bones and earthen architecture. My approach was basically informed by a sort of new archaeology/geography David Clarke-ish approach to sites and artefacts. Then, about 20 years ago, I had a Damascene conversion to working with oral traditions and archaeologies of memory. It struck me – in the sense of Bassey Andah – that exporting generalised archaeological concepts about social organisation was potentially misleading when there is such an unrecorded diversity of political traditions and settlement structures throughout Africa. So I began working with the Malian historian Seydou Camara on recording the historic geography on one of the last pre-colonial Mande polities, Segou. This opened my eyes to alternative visions of settlement taxonomy, landscapes and political order.

We've conducted interviews at more than a hundred localities since 2005 and I have come to see oral histories in Africa as even more menaced by globalisation than the material remains of sites (Figure 1). It has shifted my work to something more akin to historical anthropology fused with archaeology. I think a number of Africanists are going down this road, including Akin Ogundiran and Cameron Monroe.

Of course, I have also been working on historical archaeology in northern Louisiana, in the Cane River region. This is work about the African diaspora and the endurance of African cultural traditions in the face of slavery, particularly in eighteenth-century contexts. My research



Figure 1 Kevin undertaking an interview of a town elder at Dialakhar, Senegal, with Professor Ibrahima Thiaw (IFAN) and Aicha Kamite

there with David Morgan, of the US National Park Service, is providing new interpretive information about African architecture, Colonowares (African and Native American pottery in colonial contexts) and Creolised cuisines. Currently we are planning a museum exhibition sharing the results of 20 years of field research with local communities.

Most recently, with increasing insecurity in Mali, I am beginning to do some survey and oral history fieldwork with Ibrahima Thiaw in western Senegal. But I am also involved in an Arcadia funded project – Mapping Endangered Archaeological Sites and Monuments in Africa. This is one of a series of global projects using satellite imagery to record and monitor heritage sites, to train local teams and to conduct field training on ‘ground truthing’ and assessing risks to sites. Our work at UCL focuses on Mali, and we are working in parallel with the Senegalese team and Malian scholars and students.

There is so much that remains to be done, but as one gets older it is apparent that the clock is ticking, so you have to make choices and use your time wisely...

You have been at the Institute of Archaeology since 1994. What are your favourite memories from your time at the Institute? What have been the biggest changes?

I was lucky to see the last year or so of the ‘old Institute’ when it still had vestiges of being an independent entity: internal departments with attached administrators and our own ‘academic board’. I was initially placed in ‘Egyptology’ across the street, but attached to ‘Prehistory’ – I’m not sure they knew what to do with an Africanist! It makes me smile to remember that Cyprian Broodbank and I pushed through the first-ever dedicated theory courses in the Institute of Archaeology (at Masters and undergraduate level respectively) in 1995.

Peter Ucko’s appointment occurred like a thunderclap. We had been promised a formal appointments process for a new Director, but suddenly it was imposed upon us from above. It was a revolutionary moment as we voted unanimously to reject the appointment (procedurally). The result was the then Provost Derek Roberts stomping into our Academic Board, telling us we were an unreasonable, ungrateful lot and then stomping out again. Arms were twisted to reconvene and undertake a second vote with David Harris (our then Director) pleading with us individually to change our minds overnight. All very dramatic, but also tragic. Our ‘academic board’ was soon no more, and some senior members of staff who had led the rebellion were steered into early retirement. I offered my resignation to Peter when he first arrived. He refused to take it and ironically we became close friends; it would be fair to say that he was an archaeological father to me. I rather think that Peter liked people who stood up to him – up to a point, of course.

The Institute of Archaeology in the Ucko era was a changed place. We became a sort of *de facto* centre point for the World Archaeological Congress and issues such as Indigenous and public archaeology became our focus. Heritage was rapidly introduced into Masters teaching, along with new staff and new degrees.

With Peter you never really knew what was coming next. You would get a call at 7.30 a.m. on Saturday, Peter on the other end saying: ‘So, what are you planning to do for your Institute today?’ Shortly you would be on your way to the airport to greet a visitor, or driving to meet

Peter on some fund-raising mission. I remember once ending a day of promoting the Institute of Archaeology to the great and the good by having a private tour of the Hellfire Caves – which was somehow appropriate. Or he would walk into your office, out of the blue, oblivious to any appointments you might have had. He would say ‘Are you busy?’ – to which there was only one acceptable answer. From thence you would meet some interesting visitor, be given some new assignment or be urged up to one of our regular ‘Happy Hours’. Seemingly endless seminar series and conferences were on the go and it was impossible to be everywhere at once. It was nerve-wracking and exhausting, but there was a sense of common mission and of doing the ‘right thing’. On the good days it was great fun.

To accomplish the growth of the Institute Peter bargained with college and ‘advance spent’ incredibly, which doubled our size and obtained the totality of our building (formerly shared). Unfortunately this left Stephen Shennan having to spend a good deal of his directorship getting us back on an even keel. What I loved about the Shennan era is that we were all more independent and free of micro-management regarding research. In a departmental dinner not long after his appointment Stephen said to me something like ‘I know that you are all brilliant and can just get on with it if you are given the freedom to do so.’ Those were very encouraging words to hear from a new director.

For a good many years (nine in total) I was Graduate Tutor. That allowed me to meet a couple of generations of research students, many of whom I still see from time to time, or at least I remotely follow their successes. My years working with Lisa Daniel, creating the induction course and following cutting-edge PhD projects, have been some of my favourite times so far.

In the past decade Sue Hamilton has moved the Institute of Archaeology into a new era and long-established inequalities in gender balance have at last been effectively addressed. There is, of course, still a long way to go in terms of overall diversity. The ball is rolling and gathering speed; we just need to keep things going in the right direction.

The less said about our recent Covid era the better; it was a crushing, demoralising experience for everyone. But we pulled together and got through.

As we move into the 2022–23 academic year, although there may still be challenges, we are looking forward to a return to more normal university life. What are some of your most immediate goals for the Institute of Archaeology this year?

To begin, we need to be more physically present in the Institute of Archaeology. I recognise the advantages of doing some elements of our work at home, but we simply cannot carry on in a largely virtual world. The Institute seminars will be back in person, as well as staff meetings. There will also be social events, ideally once a month. Newer staff need to get to know everyone else and we must have opportunities to exchange ideas in informal settings.

An immediate priority is becoming more social-media active and improving our website. This will mean the forming of a new 'Media Group' to increase our production of video podcasts concerning ongoing research projects. We will also need to make our web presence more visual and topical. This includes highlighting our EDI [equality, diversity and inclusion] activities.

During the summer, following a strengthening of our collaborative relationship with Archaeology South-East (ASE) by Sue Hamilton and Dom Perring, two interactive days for Bloomsbury and Portslade staff were organised by Manuel Arroyo-Kalin and Louise Rayner. A set of action points have already been agreed and we can expect a more visible and active relationship with ASE/Centre of Applied Archaeology.

What are your aspirations for the Institute of Archaeology in the longer term?

Since the time of Peter Ucko, the Institute has justifiably become known as one of the great centres of global archaeology. We are field active all over the world, and this allows us to provide research-led teaching for most periods and places. Yet our presence in British archaeology has faded over the past 30 years. Without losing our diversity in global research, we need to become a leading centre for British archaeology once again. This will take some time, but it is one of my goals. At present

we are not even teaching the archaeology of London! As the capital's primary archaeology department this is unbelievable – and it's going to change. More UK field opportunities are also important from a jobs perspective for our students. Proportionally most archaeological employment is in the national sector and the contract sphere is having a hard time recruiting at present. Our partnership with ASE will help us to move significantly in this direction.

Indeed, a good deal of the future is going to be about effectively joining up the various elements of the wider Institute of Archaeology. This includes our new Heritage unit at UCL East and ASE Portslade and Witham. We need to open avenues for greater exchange and a shared sense of purpose and collegiality. At UCL East we have the opportunity for opening a new door to heritage teaching at undergraduate level and enlarging our mission of working with communities. This also means more involvement via contributing public lectures, outreach and working more visibly with public archaeological organisations.

Finally, there is the need for rekindling a departmental intellectual ferment. We have so many remarkable members of staff with innovative ideas. I would like to encourage hosting more symposia on themes that can involve many of us and forge fresh links with colleagues from other universities. In other words, I want to be about saying 'yes' to new possibilities and making things happen. Of course, I have my own passions concerning folklore, settlement landscapes, cultural properties and so forth, but I want to encourage the discussion of everyone's interests. In sum, I hope that this decade will find the Institute very busy and outward looking – a place where people are excited to be.