

Reflections

Medieval archaeology at UCL: retrospect

James Graham-Campbell^{1,*}

How to cite: Graham-Campbell, J. 'Medieval archaeology at UCL: retrospect'. *Archaeology International*, 2024, 27 (1), pp. 159–71 • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/AI.27.1.15>

Published: 31 December 2024

Copyright:

© 2024, James Graham-Campbell. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/AI.27.1.15>

Open access:

Archaeology International is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

*Correspondence: j.graham-campbell@ucl.ac.uk

¹UCL Institute of Archaeology, UK

Medieval archaeology at UCL: retrospect

James Graham-Campbell

Abstract

Medieval archaeology was taught as a single honours BA degree at UCL for some 30 years, following its establishment by Professor (Sir) David Wilson in 1973. This personal account explores its origins and describes its early days in the Department of Scandinavian Studies, its subsequent floruit in the History Department (1978–90), followed by its transfer to the Institute of Archaeology. Despite its record of academic distinction, this unique BA degree was discontinued following the retirement of Professor James Graham-Campbell in 2002.

Keywords: Medieval archaeology, history of archaeology, UCL

Origins

In 1964, David Wilson resigned his post at the British Museum, where he had been Assistant Keeper in charge of the Anglo-Saxon and contemporary Continental collections since 1954, to take up a new readership in the archaeology of the Anglo-Saxon period, in the Department of English Language and Literature at UCL – an initiative of Professor Hugh Smith, Quain Professor of English and Director of the Survey of English Place-Names. Such an appointment had long been in gestation at UCL with its ‘Development Policy Quinquennium 1962–67’ (December 1960) stating, for the English Department, that: ‘The need for filling the Chair of Archaeology of the Anglo-Saxon Period, instituted before the beginning of the quinquennium 1952–57, is as strong as ever.’

These were to be, in David Wilson’s (2004, 909) own words, ‘the easy days’ – initially, at least:

I did some service teaching in various departments and taught a post-graduate diploma in Anglo-Saxon archaeology. More exciting was my postgraduate seminar, attended not only by London students, but also by colleagues and students from other universities. It met on Friday evenings and continued over drinks and supper. Papers were given by the students and colleagues from Britain and abroad, who gave generously of their time and often paid for their own travel – although I managed to

establish an informal fund with monies from lecture and other fees, which helped out the more impoverished.

This was the seminar that I joined in 1969 on enrolling as David Wilson's postgraduate research student (after first studying for a year in Norway at his insistence). In due course, I was to inherit the 'informal fund' and the seminar continued to flourish for many years along the lines that he had established (it really deserves a history of its own!). It still takes place today, but as is the case with many such research seminars it has gradually transformed into a series of occasional, rather more formal, presentations – open to all – now under the joint sponsorship of the UCL Institute of Archaeology and the British Museum (see below).

The postgraduate diploma in Anglo-Saxon archaeology, which was also taught by Professor Vera Evison at Birkbeck College, continued for some years, but as a two-year full-time course it was eventually replaced by what had by then become the standard one-year MA taught course (for which student funding was available), or two years if part-time. The MA Medieval Archaeology (The British Isles in the Anglo-Saxon and Medieval Period) thereafter remained a constant UCL postgraduate programme, whereas various other of its medieval MAs with an archaeological component came and went depending on the prevailing practice at the time. (Periodically it was deemed desirable to increase the number of MAs available at UCL to attract more postgraduate students, after which it would be declared administratively burdensome and generally uneconomic to have so many MAs on offer that individually attracted few students!) This personal memoir is not, however, greatly concerned with postgraduate teaching and research in medieval archaeology at UCL, being focused on the history of the provision of its unique BA degree in medieval archaeology – from inception to abolition.

The UCL 'Development Policy Quinquennium 1967–1972' (December 1965) noted somewhat laconically of the English Department that: 'The proposed Honours degree in Archaeology will call for assistance from the Department's specialist in Anglo-Saxon Archaeology.' Indeed, David Wilson had laid plans for a 'First Degree in Anglo-Saxon Archaeology' for implementation in 1968–9, but 'owing to a lack of teachers it was impossible to accept students' (there having been several applicants).

Before any such degree was to come into being, David Wilson was promoted to a personal chair, becoming the first Professor of Medieval Archaeology in the University of London (in 1971) – and, indeed, in Britain. With the appointment of Frank Kermodé as Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English Literature in 1967, change to the English Department made it more appropriate for the subject to be developed in UCL's Department of Scandinavian Studies, where David Wilson became Joint Head (1973–6), together with Professor Peter Foote, until his appointment as Director of the British Museum in 1977 (see Figure 1). Sir David Wilson (knighted in 1984) did, however, remain connected with UCL, being elected an Honorary Fellow in 1988 and appointed an Honorary Professor in the Institute of Archaeology. In addition, he served as the first (and only) Chair of the Institute's short-lived Advisory Board. This was established under the directorship of Professor David Harris, following the Institute/UCL merger in 1986, but put into abeyance by his successor, Professor Peter Ucko.



Figure 1 Professor David Wilson on his appointment as Director of the British Museum (Source: Sir David Wilson)

The early years

It was thus to the UCL Department of Scandinavian Studies, located in Foster Court, that the first undergraduates were admitted for a degree course in early medieval (Anglo-Saxon) archaeology in 1973, when joined by myself (see Figure 2) as Lecturer in Medieval Archaeology (Wilson 2013), having spent 1971–3 as an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Archaeology at University College Dublin. In fact, the first year of the new degree programme was taken at the Institute of Archaeology, with the addition of an introductory course on the archaeology of Britain and Ireland (AD 400–1100), hence the adoption of the course-unit system which was in use at the Institute, but then something of a novelty at UCL.

The second and third years of the new BA importantly included courses in both Anglo-Saxon history and Old English, taught by specialists in the relevant UCL departments (initially Dr Christopher Holdsworth and Dr John Dodgson, respectively). Students admitted without knowledge of German (at O or A level) were required to take an introductory (half-unit) course provided – and examined – by the Department of German. There was an eight-week minimum excavation requirement on approved medieval sites. Our first external examiner was Leslie Webster (British Museum), who later became co-organiser with me of the postgraduate seminar – and an Honorary Professor in the Institute.

This continued to be the period when British universities were funded under the quinquennial system and the creation of a lectureship in post-Conquest archaeology had been accorded high priority by the Faculty of Arts in the following round (1972–7). This bid proved successful, and the new post was taken up in 1977 by Dr Helen Clarke (whose obituary is published in this volume; see also Figure 3). Helen had initially been appointed an Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Scandinavian Studies in 1975 and had



Figure 2 James Graham-Campbell in 1979 as Lecturer in Medieval Archaeology (Source: James Graham-Campbell)



Figure 3 Helen Clarke, in retirement from UCL, being presented with the silver medal of the Royal Swedish Academy by King Carl XVI Gustav in 2012 (Source: Mikael Röhr)

undertaken some part-time teaching for David Wilson while he was serving as Dean of the Faculty, before acting as temporary lecturer (1976–7) during his departure for the British Museum. The BA degree course could therefore cease to be one in the archaeology of the Anglo-Saxon period (known officially as ‘B.A. Archaeology Branch III’), being replaced by ‘Medieval Archaeology’ in 1978 – the first such in Britain.

In the early years, funding was available for an annual series of three or four lectures by visiting experts on medieval archaeology from Britain and beyond – as also for a long weekend field trip for third-year students (continuing throughout the 1980s). Our first

such trip (in May 1976) was hosted by Professor Rosemary Cramp at Durham University, while the most ambitious – and certainly the most memorable for those present – took place the following year to Professor Brian O’Kelly’s department at University College Cork. Annual full-day excursions for all students also took place to visit medieval sites, excavations and/or museums within easy reach of Bloomsbury.

On 21 December 1976, David Wilson wrote a parting letter to the Provost of UCL, then Lord Annan, expressing his concern for ‘the future of Medieval Archaeology in this College having spent 12 years building it up’, emphasising both its importance for medieval studies there and its standing in Britain and Europe. He concluded with the words: ‘I am sorry to leave this child on your doorstep, but it was conceived here and I hope that it will not go un nourished.’ Such proved to be the case, but not before the infant had to overcome an unexpected obstacle placed in the way of its growth.

When Professor John White (History of Art) became Dean of the Faculty of Arts in 1976, he was adamant that there could be no long-term future for medieval archaeology at UCL without a third post. He was strongly in favour of us making the case and supportive in persuading the Faculty of Arts to commit to this new development, even at a time when cuts in university funding were having to be implemented elsewhere. However, when the faculty board was invited to confirm their decision in our favour at its following meeting, Professor Foote, in welcoming the allocation of a new post to the Department of Scandinavian Studies, announced – to the surprise of those present – that he had other plans for it than for medieval archaeology. On leaving the meeting, I was approached by the then Head of the Department of History, Professor Ian Christie, with the welcome suggestion that we might like to transfer there – and such duly came about (on 1 January 1978). There we were joined by Dr Martin Welch (see Figure 4), who had successfully applied for the new lectureship from his post at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Martin was to remain integral to teaching and research in medieval archaeology at UCL until his retirement in 2010, shortly before his untimely death (Reynolds and Hamilton 2011).



Figure 4 Martin Welch (Source: Edward Welch)

In the 1970s, an attempt to gain access for UCL students of medieval archaeology to courses at the University of London's Courtauld Institute of Art was rebuffed, although the recently appointed Director, Professor Peter Lasko, was himself sympathetic towards the suggestion. In the event, Dr Peter Kidson was sufficiently annoyed by his Institute's official stance on the matter to provide voluntarily – for a period – courses on English medieval architecture especially for the benefit of our students.

UCL Department of History

In the Department of History, the Medieval Archaeology offices and teaching/seminar room were on the upper floors of 26 Gordon Square, with mine being at the very top, in the attic space with the dormer window facing towards the Institute of Archaeology. There we were ably supported by our part-time secretary, Sheila Shaw, who – in addition to coping with all our routine administrative business – helped first me and then Helen to run the Society for Medieval Archaeology of which we were successively honorary secretaries.

Medieval Archaeology was to flourish in UCL History, left largely to its own devices as an unofficial sub-department, then under the umbrella of the University of London's Board of Studies in Archaeology, familiar with the ways of course-unit degrees (unlike the Board of Studies in History at that time). We benefited from the encouragement and support of successive heads of department, among whom was Professor Wendy Davies, an early medieval historian with strong archaeological interests, who taught the Anglo-Saxon – and subsequently the Celtic – history option to our students (and involved some in fieldwalking on the East Brittany Survey that she ran together with Dr Grenville Astill at Reading University).

However, it fell to Wendy Davies to oversee Helen's early retirement, requested by her in 1990, and the subsequent transfer of Medieval Archaeology to the Institute of Archaeology. This re-launch became necessary because there was no possibility of making a direct replacement for Helen, during that particular period of financial cuts for British universities, combined with the fact that recent low student enrolment was putting the BA degree itself at risk of abolition.

During the academic years 1982–7, our undergraduate student body had averaged 22, only slightly below target admissions, but then during that period our courses had been taken as options by students from eight UCL departments and three other colleges of the University, in addition to the Institute. At that time medieval archaeology was also a combined degree with UCL History of Art and available as a subsidiary subject with Scandinavian Studies. In 1987, an MA in Anglo-Saxon Studies was launched in collaboration with the Department of English.

The taught courses in medieval archaeology on offer in 1987, although not all available in any one year, were as listed in the 1987 prospectus (see Figure 5):

First year (compulsory courses)

'Sources for Medieval Archaeology' (½ unit)

'Anglo-Saxon Settlement Archaeology' (1 unit)

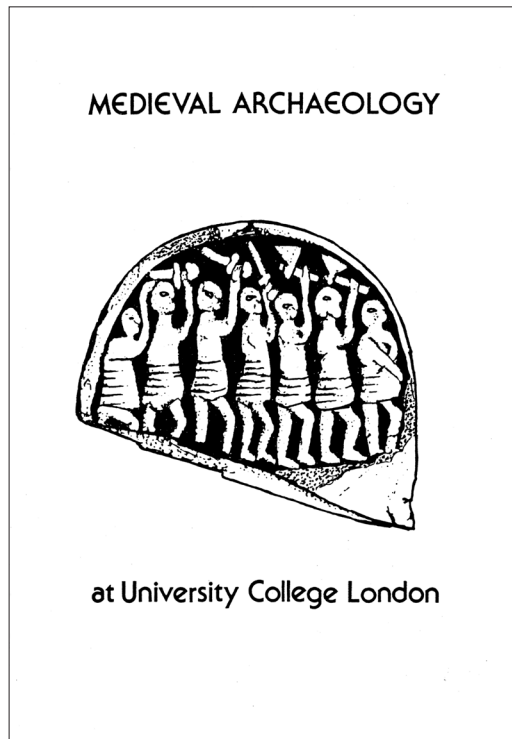


Figure 5 Cover of the (1987) prospectus for ‘Medieval Archaeology at University College London’, with a drawing by Eva Wilson of a ninth-century Anglo-Saxon grave-marker from Lindisfarne, Northumberland, perhaps representing the Viking raid on the monastery there in 793

These courses were taken in addition to the Institute of Archaeology’s first-year courses: ‘Introduction to Archaeology and its Methods’ (1 unit); ‘Archaeological Science’ (two ½ units); and ‘Introduction to the Archaeology of Britain’ (½ unit).

Second- and third-year archaeology courses (options: 5 units required)

‘Early Anglo-Saxon England: Art and Artefacts AD 400–700’ (½ unit)

‘Late Anglo-Saxon England: Art and Artefacts AD 650–1100’ (½ unit)

‘The Archaeology of England AD 1050–1500’ (1 unit)

‘The Archaeology of Celtic Britain and Ireland AD 400–1150’ (1 unit)

‘The Archaeology of Migration Period Europe’ (1 unit)

‘The Vikings in the West’ (1 unit)

‘Problems in Medieval Archaeology’ (½ unit: 3rd year only)

New 1-unit courses on ‘Anglo-Saxon Burial Customs and Religious Structures’ and ‘Vendel and Viking Age Scandinavia’ were announced for 1988. The requirement of a compulsory course in a medieval language (Old English) had by then been dropped, being replaced by a new regulation:

Second- and third-year courses must include two non-archaeological course units.

One of these had to be a course in medieval history (British, European or Celtic) and the other chosen from the following: anthropology, historical geography, medieval history, history of art, architecture, Old English, Old Icelandic, classical Latin or medieval Latin.

The Institute of Archaeology/UCL merger had resulted in the excavation requirement being increased to a minimum of 10 weeks, of which 10 days had to be spent on the Institute's field course during the Easter vacation of the first year.

The 1987 prospectus also announced that 'practical classes are held in the British Museum with the permission and assistance of the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities', with some additional teaching being 'provided by members of the Department of Coins and Medals [Marion Archibald] and the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities [Leslie Webster]'.

A close relationship had existed between UCL and the British Museum from the start, as documented by an exchange of letters in 1976 between David Wilson and Neil Stratford (then Keeper of Medieval and Later Antiquities), when it was agreed that lectures and classes on early Anglo-Saxon pottery would be given by Dr Dafydd Kidd. There was welcome for me to undertake the cataloguing and publication of the massive Viking silver hoard found in 1840 at Cuerdale, Lancashire – a project not in fact completed until after my retirement (Graham-Campbell 2011). Another, more tentative, plan for international object-based seminars to be held in the Museum failed to come to fruition.

For many years Leslie Webster continued to offer handling classes to our students at the British Museum – and after Dr Gareth Williams joined the Museum in 1996, as a curator in the Department of Coins and Medals, he willingly took over from Marion Archibald the provision of teaching in numismatics.

With David Wilson as the new Director of the British Museum, a major international exhibition (the first) on *The Vikings* was mounted by the British Museum in 1980, before being transferred to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The content of the exhibition was organised by Dafydd Kidd and myself (Graham-Campbell and Kidd 1980), with a term's research leave for me spent travelling Scandinavia to prepare a catalogue raisonné of the objects themselves (Graham-Campbell 1980).

From 1988–90, I was absent from UCL, in receipt of a two-year British Academy Research Readership to work on the archaeology of the Vikings in Scotland, being replaced for the duration by Dr Colleen Batey (see Figure 6), who went on to museum and university posts in Glasgow.

UCL Institute of Archaeology

My return from research leave coincided with Helen's retirement and the need to organise the transfer of Medieval Archaeology to the Institute (from 1 August 1990), although the physical move was delayed a year until office space became available. To provide cover for Helen's teaching – as temporary appointments – we were joined first by Chris Scull (in 1990–1), who was later to become an Honorary Research Professor in the Institute, and then by Gustav Milne (see Figure 7) from the Museum of London's Department of Urban Archaeology, which was closed down in 1991.



Figure 6 Colleen Batey in 1988 at the Earl's Bu excavation in Orkney (Source: Colleen Batey)



Figure 7 Gustav Milne in 1981 on a London waterfront site while working for the Museum of London's Department of Urban Archaeology (Source: Paul Tyers)

The Institute had officially merged with UCL in 1986 and given that, under the directorship of Professor David Harris, it had continued to maintain its internal departmental structure, Medieval Archaeology could readily be fitted in, with myself as Head (promoted to a personal chair in the University of London, with effect from 1991). During that first year we were able to welcome Dr Ulf Näsman from the University of Aarhus for a short period as an Erasmus Visiting Lecturer.

Teaching and research in later medieval archaeology at the Institute was continued from 1992 by Gustav Milne who was appointed (part-time) Senior Lecturer in London and Maritime Archaeology, remaining in post until 2008, but then continuing to contribute

teaching on London archaeology as an Honorary Senior Lecturer. On the suggestion of Professor Harris, Gus combined with Clive Orton (Professor of Quantitative Archaeology), who had strong medieval interests, to develop a new course on the archaeology of Roman and medieval London, involving a substantial component of field trips and museum-gallery visits. Student-based building recording exercises in London churches, nautical archaeological research and artefact studies in the Museum of London were welcome innovations all undertaken under his supervision. From 1995–9, he directed the Thames Archaeological Survey, which encouraged Institute students to participate in foreshore fieldwork and research (Milne et al. 1997).

A research partnership between UCL's Department of History and the Institute of Archaeology was created in 1996 with the establishment of the Celtic Inscribed Stones Project (CISP), directed by Wendy Davies and myself. One of the principal objectives of CISP was the compilation of a corpus of the inscribed stones from Brittany of AD 400–1100 (Davies et al. 2000), with the photographic record undertaken by Dr Kris Lockyear, one of the project's Humanities Research Board Institutional Fellows from 1996 to 1999 (see Figure 8).

In 1996, Andrew Reynolds (see Figure 9), who had been at UCL since 1990 (when he had embarked on his BA Medieval Archaeology as a mature student), was recruited to the staff as a temporary Lecturer in Medieval Archaeology, being awarded his PhD on 'Anglo-Saxon Law and the Landscape' in 1998. Andrew's post was continued for four years, but because of its temporary nature, which could no longer be fully funded after 2000, he moved away to King Alfred's College, Winchester (2000–3).

During the 1990s, discussions took place with a view to establishing what eventually came into being as the 'British Museum and Institute of Archaeology, UCL, Joint Seminars



Figure 8 The CISP team from UCL (with Gwenaël Le Duc) in 1999, at the Pen Pont stone in Brittany, a re-used Iron-Age *stele* with an early medieval inscription and crosses: Paul Kershaw, James Graham-Campbell, Wendy Davies, Mark Handley, Gwenaël Le Duc and Kris Lockyear (Source: Kris Lockyear)



Figure 9 Andrew Reynolds standing on the steps of a newly discovered ‘palace’ at Aksum, northern Ethiopia, in December 1995 (Source: Sarah Semple)

in Early Medieval Studies’. This new seminar series (that continues today) was launched at the British Museum in October 1999, with a paper on ‘Framing chronology in the Merovingian period’, by Dr Patrick Périn, Director of the Musée des Antiquités Nationales at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, whose visit also included a public lecture at the Institute on the excavations at St Denis, Paris.

The final (BA) years

As is well documented, after Professor Peter Ucko was appointed Director in 1996, the Institute of Archaeology was comprehensively restructured with its internal departments being abolished in favour of five research groups, with Medieval Archaeology assigned to ‘Complex Societies’. A revised syllabus was implemented – and the writing was on the wall for specialised first degrees.

Indeed, it was not long since Professor Ucko (1990, xii) had published his opinion that there was ‘something inherently wrong’ with ‘the fact that at several British

universities it is possible to graduate with a single honours degree in archaeology with by far the greatest part of the syllabus devoted exclusively to the Middle Ages', given his premise that:

Without significant change in the nature and aims of medieval archaeological enquiry, it seems at least questionable whether it should really remain accepted within the mainstream of the discipline.

Under the circumstances, however, a personal commitment was given for the continuation of the BA Medieval Archaeology during my professorship that lasted until my ill-health early retirement in 2002. At that time (2002–3) replacement teaching was provided by Dr David Griffiths (Oxford) and Dr Katherina Ulmschneider (Oxford), together with Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir (UCL), who had recently been employed to teach the 'Viking' course for me and who had just become a member of the Institute on a Leverhulme-funded research project, after which she continued as an Honorary Senior Research Fellow. Then, in 2003, Andrew Reynolds was successful in his application to become the new Lecturer in Medieval Archaeology, as my long-term replacement at the Institute.

The BA Anglo-Saxon/Medieval Archaeology at UCL thus lasted for some 30 years, in its various manifestations – the period that 'spanned the growth and maturation of medieval archaeology as a discipline, first firmly associated with history and then set on its own feet as a fully fledged sub-field of archaeology' (Reynolds and Hamilton 2011, x). It is, however, of greater significance that, following the origins of medieval archaeology as an academic discipline at UCL in 1964 (now celebrated by an annual lecture in medieval studies named in honour of Sir David Wilson), it continues at the UCL Institute of Archaeology 60 years on, with Andrew Reynolds as its third Professor of Medieval Archaeology (see below), but he is not alone as a graduate of UCL Medieval Archaeology in having attained a personal chair, being joined in this academic distinction by Professor Sally Foster (Stirling), Professor Neil Price (Uppsala), Professor Sarah Semple (Durham) and Professor Gabor Thomas (Reading).

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful for the help that I received in compiling this memoir from Dr Colleen Batey, Professor Wendy Davies, Professor David Griffiths, Dr Kris Lockyear, Gustav Milne, Professor Andrew Reynolds, Sheila Shaw, Dr Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir, Leslie Webster and Sir David Wilson (*fons et origo*), who all played some part in the rise – and/or witnessed the demise – of UCL's unique BA degree in medieval archaeology. It is dedicated to the memory of my late colleagues, Dr Helen Clarke and Dr Martin Welch, without whom none of this would have been remotely possible. The official documentation referred to in this article, and related material concerning UCL Medieval Archaeology, has been deposited in the archives of the Institute of Archaeology.

References

- Davies, W., Graham-Campbell, J., Handley, M., Kershaw, P., Koch, J. T., Le Duc, G. and Lockyear, K. 2000. *The Inscriptions of Early Medieval Brittany/Les inscriptions de la Bretagne du Haut Moyen Âge*. Oakville/Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications.
- Graham-Campbell, J. 1980. *Viking Artefacts: A select catalogue*. London: British Museum Publications.
- Graham-Campbell, J. 2011. *The Cuerdale Hoard and Related Viking-Age Silver and Gold from Britain and Ireland in the British Museum*. London; British Museum.
- Graham-Campbell, J. and Kidd, D. 1980. *The Vikings*. London: British Museum Publications.
- Milne, G., with Bates, M. and Webber, M. D. 1997. 'Problems, potential and partial solutions: An archaeological study of the tidal Thames', *World Archaeology* 29(1): 130–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.1997.9980367>.
- Reynolds, A. and Hamilton, S. 2011. 'Martin G. Welch MA DPhil FSA: An appreciation'. In *Studies in Early Anglo-Saxon Art and Archaeology: Papers in honour of Martin G. Welch*, edited by S. Brookes, S. Harrington and A. Reynolds, x–xi. Oxford: Archaeopress (British Archaeological Reports [British Series] 527).
- Ucko, P. J. 1990. 'Foreword'. In *From the Baltic to the Black Sea: Studies in medieval archaeology*, edited by D. Austin and L. Alcock, ix–xii. London: Unwin Hyman (One World Archaeology, 18).
- Wilson, D. M. 2004. 'Retrospect', *Antiquity* 78: 904–13. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00093340>.
- Wilson, D. M. 2013. 'Foreword'. In *Early Medieval Art and Archaeology in the Northern World: Studies in honour of James Graham-Campbell*, edited by A. Reynolds and L. Webster, xi–xiv. Leiden/Boston: Brill (The Northern World, 58).