

## NEWS

# The Institute of Archaeology Conference Competition

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One of the most creative innovations of Stephen Shennan's directorship is the annual Institute of Archaeology Conference Competition. This scheme is now in its seventh year (with the result of the eighth competition just announced) and it seems a good time to document and celebrate its success.

The competition takes place in the spring of each year, with the winning conference being held in the following academic year. In the present format, applicants are asked to outline and justify the conference topic, list the proposed speakers and present a rough budget, with an indication of where the rest of the funds will be obtained if the conference costs are likely to exceed the £2000 of the award. There is no restriction as to the subject of the conference or its scale, though it is stipulated that the award must make a significant difference to the viability of the conference and that the conference fee for Institute attendees should be minimal, with a maximum of £10 for students.

## Conferences 2008–2014

The first competition (2006–7) was won by David Wengrow and Andrew Bevan and their conference on 'Cultures of Commodity Branding: Social and evolutionary perspectives' was held on 10–11 May 2008. This

conference, also sponsored by the British Academy, had the aim of exploring the robustness of branding as an analytical concept outside the confines of Western capitalism, and across a wide range of cultural contexts from prehistory to the present day. Papers from the conference were published in 2010 in an edited volume, also called *Cultures of Commodity Branding*, (eds Andrew Bevan and David Wengrow), published by Left Coast Press in their Institute of Archaeology series.

The winners of the second competition (2007–8) were Kathryn Piquette and Ruth Whitehouse and their conference on 'Writing as Material Practice: Substance, Surface and Medium' was held on 15–17 May 2009. The aim of the conference was to balance the traditional emphasis on linguistic approaches to writing with studies of its material nature: the ways in which materials, techniques, colour, scale, orientation or visibility inform the creation of inscribed objects and landscapes, and structure subsequent engagement, perception and meaning-making. Papers on writing systems covering a temporal span of 5000 years and spatial contexts from the Near East to the Americas were published in 2013 by Ubiquity Press as *Writing as Material Practice: Substance, Surface and Medium* (eds Kathryn Piquette and Ruth Whitehouse).

The third competition (2008–9) was won by Susanna Harris and Laurence

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Douny for their conference 'Wrapping and Unwrapping the Body: Archaeological and Anthropological Perspectives', which was held on 20–21 May 2010. The aim of the conference was to bring together archaeological and anthropological understandings of wrapping the human body. Papers from the conference have been brought together with those from another event to address the wrapping and unwrapping of objects as well as bodies, in a book entitled *Wrapping and Unwrapping Material Culture: Archaeological and Anthropological Perspectives* (eds Susanna Harris and Laurence Douny), published in August 2014 by Left Coast Press in their Institute of Archaeology series.

The winners of the fourth competition (2009–10) were José Carlos Sánchez Pardo and Michael Shapland for a conference on 'Local Churches and Lordship in the European Middle Ages', which was held on 13–14 November 2010. Its aim was to explore the role of lordly agency in the establishment of local churches across Europe in the Early and Central Middle Ages, and the corresponding importance of churches in the expression of lordly power in these centuries. The conference proceedings are being published by Brepols, under the title *Churches and Social Power in Early Medieval Europe* (eds José Carlos Sánchez Pardo and Michael Shapland).

In 2010–11 the competition was won by Peter Gould and Paul Burthenshaw for their conference on 'Archaeology and Economic Development', which was held on 21–22 September 2012. The conference brought together experts from archaeology, development and economics to address, from a theoretical, ethical and practical point of view, the increasing involvement of archaeologists in economic development at the locations in which they work. The conference proceedings will be published in 2014 as a special edition of the journal *Public Archaeology* (published by Maney Publishing).

The winner of the 2011–12 competition was Stephen Quirke, for a conference on 'Forming Material Egypt: Pragmatics and Policy in Global Distribution of Excavation Finds', held on 20–21 May 2013. The conference explored the ways in which archaeological finds from Egypt have been dispersed worldwide on a massive scale, the impact this has had on the formation of contemporary attitudes to the Egyptian past, and the implications for developing practical policies for the future. Papers from the conference are being published in 2014 as a special issue of *EDAL (Egyptian and Egyptological Documents, Archives, Libraries)*, published in Milan.

The 2012–13 competition was won by Renata Peters, in collaboration with Anne-Marie Deisser, Jessica Johnson and Susanna Pancaldo for a conference on 'The Impact of Cross Disciplinary Conservation Practices on Social Development', held on 16–17 May 2014 (Fig. 1). It also gained a 2013 UCL Grand Challenges Small Grant (for Intercultural Interaction). The aim of the conference was to explore the impact of conservation ethics and practices on socio-cultural, economic and ecological contexts in need of development, areas of post-conflict recovery and reconstruction due to natural disasters. A further aim was to stimulate lasting discussion on how the practice of conservation can promote human wellbeing and economic prosperity, support conflict or disaster recovery, and foster social cohesion. A selection of the conference papers and posters will be published in peer-reviewed issues by UCL Press and the *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*.

### Comment

The variety of subjects chosen and the success of the conferences reflect the Institute's work as a whole. In spite of the wide variation in subject matter, the conferences have shared a number of characteristics. They have all been international, attracting speakers from a wide range of countries, but have



**Fig. 1:** Discussion during the conference on ‘The Impact of Cross Disciplinary Conservation Practices on Social Development’ May 2014.

also had a strong Institute of Archaeology ‘feel’ – that is, the conference topics have developed out of what were already established research interests in the Institute and they have all had several home-grown speakers amidst the international gatherings. Many of the conferences have also been interdisciplinary, attracting scholars from, *inter alia*, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, history, economics and conservation, in varying combinations depending on the topic. All the conferences have led to (or are leading to) publications, which are likely to have considerable impact within their subject areas; some may well be regarded in future assessments as seminal works. Finally, all the conferences have been attended by Institute students, especially graduate students, and there is anecdotal evidence that they have found the experience enjoyable

and instructive, even inspirational. All in all, this is an impressive result for a modest outlay of £2000 per annum. Moreover, the success of the competition goes beyond the result for the winners. The very existence of the competition stimulates the development of innovative proposals for conferences and in some years the outcome has been quite close. On occasion runners-up also have been offered some level of financial assistance or help in kind, to enable their conference to take place as well.

At the time of writing the outcome of the 2013–14 competition has just been announced. The winners are Bill Sillar, Miguel Fuentes and Viviana Siveroni for a conference on ‘Technology: Ideology, Economics and Power in the Andes’. I wish them the best of luck for what I confidently predict will be another excellent conference.

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