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XI. Necrology

Professor Andrew Sherratt Radical Old World Prehistorian

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Andrew George Sherratt, archaeologist: born Oldham, Lancashire 8 May 1946; Assistant Keeper of Antiquities, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford 1973–88, Senior Assistant Keeper 1988–2005; Reader in Archaeology, Oxford University 1997–2002, Professor 2002–05; Professor of Old World Prehistory, Sheffield University 2005–06; married 1974 Susan Dobson (two sons, one daughter); died Witney, Oxfordshire 24 February 2006.

Andrew Sherratt was an Old World prehistorian with an unusual breadth of knowledge, interests and vision. At a time when increasing specialisation has driven most prehistorians to focus on particular aspects of life in the distant past, he moved nimbly from settlement

patterns and technology, through exchange and land use, to material symbols, language and cultures of consumption.

While expanding data sets and fascination with local process have encouraged concern with particular regions and periods of prehistory, Sherratt travelled fearlessly through space and time, drawing his hallmark diagrams with bold arrows.

He first achieved international recognition with his model of an Old World “Secondary Products Revolution”, published in *Pattern of the Past*, a 1981 volume honouring his mentor David Clarke. He argued that animals were first domesticated to secure a ready supply of carcass products. Only several millennia later were domestic animals exploited for their renewable “secondary” products of milk, wool and labour. This revolution enabled early European farmers to colonise many agriculturally marginal areas of the Continent, sowed the seeds of later social inequality (the plough supporting a privileged minority) and created some of the necessary conditions for the development of pastoralism.

The model stimulated a wave of studies, seeking to add to or challenge its arguments, and the same is true 25 years later. Hours before his sudden death, Sherratt was working on publication, with other specialists, of radical new insights from the analysis of milk residues in early pottery.

The application of new analytical techniques and continued accumulation of older forms of data may well show that the first use of secondary products was earlier and more patchy than Sherratt believed in 1981, but the questions raised by the model still provoke productive thought. Arguably more important than the model itself was Sherratt’s attempt to understand social and economic change in terms of interaction between local processes (such as marginal colonisation) and the diffusion from the urban Near East to Europe of novel ideas (the plough and wheel) and new breeds (e.g., woolly sheep).

Sherratt sought to develop and modernise the diffusionist ideas of Gordon Childe, at a time when this was unfashionable among British prehistorians, and naturally led the way when growing interest in World Systems signalled a reverse in the pendulum of fashion. His 1993 paper “What Would a Bronze Age World System Look Like?” was published in the first volume of the *Journal of European Archaeology*.

Again Sherratt’s work, including several important papers published with Susan Sherratt, his wife, differentiated itself from earlier diffusionist thinking by exploring how and why Near Eastern technologies, symbols and craft goods had been adopted by European societies.

In a similar vein, the Sherratts contributed to the debate on the antiquity of Indo-European languages in Europe, arguing – persuasively, I believe – that similar languages over large distances are as likely to reflect linguistic convergence of interacting populations as divergence of people with common biological ancestry.

A collection of Andrew Sherratt’s writings was published in 1996 as *Economy and Society in Prehistoric Europe: changing perspectives*. As the breadth of his scholarship indicates, he was a polymath with an eccentric range of interests. At times this could be frustrating: despite his fascination with maps, he was an erratic navigator and, on journeys abroad, road signs and toponyms posed such an irresistible etymological puzzle that their secondary role as aid to orientation could be overlooked. Conversations with him were likewise liable to take unexpected, but never tedious, detours.

He was an inspiring teacher: as a postgraduate student in Cambridge (having read

Archaeology and Anthropology at Peterhouse from 1965 to 1968), he delivered day-long tutorials that began over (late) morning coffee, continued over lunch in the local café and ended in the pub at closing time.

In 1973, Sherratt moved from student life to a post at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, where he remained until 2005. He played a major role in setting up an undergraduate degree course in Archaeology and Anthropology at Oxford, and was rather belatedly made Professor there in 2002. Ironically, his first real teaching position came with his appointment in October 2005 to the newly created chair of Old World Prehistory at Sheffield University.

Convivial as he was and generous with his time, Sherratt's enjoyment of wine and beer and periodic vulnerability to nicotine led to a series of groundbreaking papers that explored the role of currently legal and illegal substances in shaping social intercourse among ancient Europeans. These papers played a seminal role in introducing prehistorians to anthropological writing on consumption and in promoting the study of imbibing, ingesting and inhaling in antiquity.

Although Sherratt took his prehistory very seriously, he was a very entertaining speaker and writer, with a gift for the use of the English language that enthralled audiences on the international stage. His levity of manner perhaps did not endear him to some of the more conservative corners of academe, but it won him devoted disciples and good friends in many countries.