

The ancient city between Archaeology and History: an interview with Rebecca Sweetman*

A cidade antiga entre a Arqueologia e a História: uma entrevista com Rebecca Sweetman

Rebecca Sweetman

Interviewee

João Carlos Furlani

Interviewer

Rebecca Jane Sweetman, born in 1973, is a renowned Irish researcher specializing in the archaeology of Roman Greece and Late Antiquity. Currently, she holds the position of Professor of Ancient History and Archaeology at the University of St Andrews, where she previously led the School of Classics. In September 2022, she assumed the role of Director of the British School at Athens, having previously served as Assistant Director from 2000 to 2003.

Her academic journey began with studies in Archaeology and Ancient World at University College Dublin, followed by a year dedicated to excavations. Her doctoral research at the University of Nottingham focused on the Roman and Early Christian mosaics of Crete. Throughout her career, Sweetman has stood out for notable projects, including her significant contribution to the Christianization of the Cyclades in Late Antiquity. In recognition of her achievements, she was awarded the Leverhulme Trust Major Fellowship and has led various projects addressing issues ranging from landscapes and networks to the processes of Christianization in the late ancient period.

As archaeologist, her research is centered on Greece in the Roman and Late Antique periods. Initially focused on Roman Crete, her work resulted in a comprehensive monograph on the archaeology of the island, with a special emphasis on mosaics, their craftsmen, and patrons, covering the period from the 1st century BCE to the 7th century CE.

* Interview granted to Prof. Dr. João Carlos Furlani on July 25, 2023.

With a significant presence in the Peloponnese, Sweetman delved into the study of Late Antique church construction, Christianization, and the strategic and organic processes involved in the spread of these structures. Notably, her work on the Acropolis Basilica in Sparta, in collaboration with Dr. Evi Katsara, has been a cornerstone of this project. Currently, her research focuses on the Cyclades in the Roman and Late Antique periods, exploring the reasons behind the success of these islands in challenging times, such as their integration into the Roman Empire and later into the Christian world.

Beyond her academic commitments, Sweetman has engaged in collaborative interdisciplinary projects, including digital reconstructions of archaeological sites with colleagues in Computer Science, and studies of haptic experiences with archaeology for well-being in collaboration with colleagues in Neuroscience. Her work in the latter area led to the award of the 2021 Chandler Screven Memorial – Visitor Studies Outstanding Paper Award. Demonstrating her philanthropic side, she raised funds for refugees in Athens in 2019.

Affiliated with the School of Classics at the University of St Andrews, she supervises students on topics such as Late Antique Ports and Trade, Late Antique Women in Funerary Spaces, Haptic Experiences with Archaeology for Well-being, and the Cult of Isis. Throughout her career, she has guided research on Sparta, the Cyclades in the Late Antique and Byzantine periods, and the Cyclades and Crete in the Iron Age.

1. João Carlos Furlani: Firstly, I would like to thank you for accepting our invitation. It is a pleasure to interview you. To start our conversation, a personal question. There are many reasons why scholars dedicate themselves to Archaeology and Ancient History. In the case of Paul Veyne, for example, it was the discovery of a fragment of an amphora in a Celtic site when he was a child. But I believe not everyone is that fortunate. In your case, what led you to dedicate yourself to the study of the Ancient World?

A. Rebecca Sweetman: Thank you so much! This question always makes me smile. I have wanted to be an archaeologist for as long as I can remember.... (with only a short blip when I thought I wanted to be a vet!). My parents are both archaeologists and I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to grow up on site as my dad spent his summers excavating in Ireland. It was on a family trip to Knossos when I was 12 that I really fell in love with Greek archaeology. I was able to take Classical Studies at School as an 'extra' subject that our History teacher, Mr O'Leary offered to a group of us during our lunch breaks. And then at university I did a joint degree in Archaeology and Classical Studies. I had many years of digging in Ireland and working in Crete during my degree, but it was

clear from an early point that Greek archaeology was my passion (that and the fact that Irish archaeology can be a bit challenging weather-wise!!).

2. Having worked as Assistant Director of the British School at Athens (BSA) at the beginning of your career, between 2000 and 2003, as a professor of Ancient History and Archaeology at the University of St Andrews since 2003, and currently as the Director of BSA since September 2022, what is your opinion regarding institutions like the British School for society and the international community of researchers?

A.: It is so important for these institutions like the BSA to be as embedded in local community and academic community as possible. Our discipline has broad appeal to a wide audience which makes knowledge exchange and public engagement really rewarding. In Athens, we are expanding our outreach programme, that Knossos already does so well, to share our knowledge with groups of school children and forced migrants and to broaden the scope of how archaeology, history and science can be used in everything from education to well-being.... And fun of course! There is a lot more to be done in this area. When I was at St Andrews I ran a 4 year project with one of my PhD students, Alison Hadfield on haptic experiences with archaeological material for well-being; we worked with various groups of people with caring needs (for example, children with learning challenges, people with mental health concerns, and prisoners) to introduce them to material culture and over the course of a number of sessions, we were able to record that people felt happier, more confident, knowledgeable and even fortunate after working with our team. Alison is now working with people with early-stage dementia to show how haptic experiences with archaeology can be of benefit. It's been fantastic having Alison come to Athens to see the great work that is being done here at museums such as the Benaki, the Canellopoulos and the Tactual.

The BSA works to provide facilities for scholars in the library, archive, permits, Knossos research centre and through our own research programmes we have fantastic opportunities to collaborate, and this is also a fundamental role to share resources and knowledge and to use our 137 years of experience in the field! At the BSA, our Fitch Laboratory (which turns 50 years old next year) is beacon of our innovative approach in promoting STEM, and women in STEM through mentoring and engagement. Together the Fitch with the BSA are working at the intersection of Arts and Humanities and Sciences in a way that not many institutions are able to do.

3. I had the pleasure of attending the British School at Athens between 2021 and 2022. During this short period, I had the opportunity to learn about the institution's work and

observe the dedication of its members. Could you tell us about some of the research projects currently being conducted by the BSA?

A.: We have a number of fieldwork projects that are being run under the auspices of the BSA. For example, Toumba Serron (Dimitra Malamidou, Nicolas Zorin and James Taylor) are excavating a Neolithic Tell site close to Serres in Northern Greece. Colleagues here are integrating digital and excavation methods to keep an impressive handle on the complexities of this site and already they appear to have evidence of houses within the settlement and burials outside the perimeter of it. Anastasia Christofilopoulou, Michael Loy, Naoise MacSweeney and Jan Mokrišová are running a survey in the western area of Samos. New work is beginning on the Late Antique and Byzantine rural settlement of Kato Choria in Naxos which is being run by James Crow and Mark Jackson. New areas of the site of Palaiokastro, a long running BSA project, have been the focus of new excavations by Carl Knappett and Andrew Shapland. Work at Knossos is year-round and colleagues there are researching a mix of legacy data and more recent projects. The Knossos curator, Kostis Christakis is working in collaboration with the University of the mountains on an ethnography study of weaving which involves growing cotton at the Knossos certain. The Fitch's research concerns Neolithic to Medieval periods and geographically has expanded beyond its main Aegean focus to include areas from Cornwall to the Iberian coast to the Balkans to northern Mesopotamia.

The Fitch is buzzing with international collaborations including work with Vasif Sahoglu and his team at Cesme looking at the Late Bronze Age settlement there. They have some exciting preliminary results regarding the Thera eruption! The Fitch also collaborates closely with colleagues in the University of Thessaloniki on Toumba and with several other institutions on the PlaCE project. The latter is an international network training programme in ceramic technology.

The 1821 project, sponsored by the Stavros Nicharos foundation is a huge study led by Michalis Sotiropoulos and with the work of the BSA Archivist, Amalia Kakassis, they are focusing on the Finlay material held here at the BSA, to shed light on this turning point in Greek history. Digital Finlay is now available online!

Our School Students, Leventis Post Doc, Visiting Fellow, Early Career Fellow and Arts Bursary award holder run their own research projects and it has been one of the highlights of the job of the Director getting to know these colleagues and being part of the institution that supports their research.

4. As the theme "Cities in the Ancient World" is one of the main focuses of the current issue of the Journal, it is impossible not to mention the Knossos 2025 Project, which will promote the reconstruction of the Stratigraphical Museum and investment in the Knossos Research Centre, on the island of Crete. We know Knossos is one of the most important archaeological sites in the world, the oldest settlement in Europe, and the centre of the Minoan civilization. It is undeniable that the history of the BSA in Knossos has played a significant role in the academic development of archaeologists and historians and in the construction of historical knowledge. What impact do you think the Knossos 2025 Project will have on future generations of researchers, and how does it feel to be part of this significant moment for Greek Archaeology?

A.: The material holdings at the Stratigraphic Museum are without parallel... the finds from excavations undertaken in the Knossos valley (mostly by the BSA) are stored here and range in date from Neolithic to Byzantine. Colleagues from across Greece, UK and Internationally are encouraged to research and consult the material as well as work on the primary material itself for publication or even new understandings of old material. The new stratigraphic museum is going to make all of this material much more accessible to scholars allowing new interpretations of the past to be forthcoming as state-of-the-art research facilities will enable this. The integration of storage and specialist working spaces will enhance this work considerably. Ideally researchers will be able to consult the material in connection with the archival data stored at the BSA and also Evans' material at the Ashmolean.

5. Material culture and archaeological remains from ancient societies that have endured through time and reached us today, such as those found in Knossos, are often disconnected from their original condition, function, and even their geographical location. In this regard, how do archaeologists deal with these issues?

A.: This is a good question and there are many different ways of thinking about this. It is critical to try as much as possible to retain knowledge of the original context which can always feed into better understanding of function. But as with space, functions and meanings can change depending on a range of circumstances. We did a series of experiments in St Andrews to understand the impact of different kinds of haptic experiences with material culture (seeing objects in a glass case, interacting with digital reconstructions, feeling objects but not seeing and handling originals). The results were really interesting... once people handled the objects (regardless of knowledge of the original context) they would talk about the maker or user of the object... it was the practical element. In other contexts,

the remove of the object meant that people considered them more as art rather than artefact. In any case, the key thing here is to publish promptly and openly... provide all the data and enable researchers to agitate at the data again and again.

6. Although they had the Mediterranean as a unifying element, the different ancient cities built around this sea presented many differences among themselves, whether in terms of buildings, architecture, or the topography that constituted the urban landscape. In your studies, such as those on the Peloponnese, what have you observed?

A.: Although as archaeologists we study people through their material culture... when it comes to spaces we are not as adept as understanding those spaces as populated spaces that change according to the weather/number of people/periods etc. Topography is fundamental for shaping the development of cities and vice versa... regardless of where that city is located. So many ways to address this question... but I think I would like to consider resilience particularly in urban landscapes. From my recent work on the Cyclades, it is clear that the islands were buffered from significant disasters by their resilience. The upside of often being the first to experience bad times is that these spaces are often the most open to new ideas.

7. In recent decades, scholars have sought to emphasize the differences between the khôra and the ásty. However, for a long time, there was not a more consistent concern in differentiating these spaces. Considering the cities into a civic zone, what is your opinion on understanding and differentiating these spaces for the comprehension of everyday life?

A.: Hummmmm.... There is a lot to be said about this. I think as noted above, it's important to see both of these spaces as populated spaces and connected and changing... One of the key issues we have with this question is the fact that the focus of archaeological and historical analysis has been on the city. There is a significant acknowledgement of this and archaeological surveys and environmental archaeology and eco-critical approaches are helping to redress the bias, but still there is a long way to go before we have as in-depth information about the countryside as we do the city. Traditional arguments regarding interdependencies still linger, but new approaches to understanding use of space which incorporate approaches from different disciplines signal a positive way forward. I think the key thing with understanding space is to get to terms with its temporality and flexibility... that spaces are made and remade as quickly as the change from day to night or depending on who is occupying those spaces. In our volume

on Lived spaces (see below) we have noted that all our contributions define space in different ways and all note the fluidity of space.

8. Over the years, I have noticed a certain disconnect regarding the history of religions, especially Christianity, with issues of a spatial nature. However, I consider the relationship between individuals and space fundamental to understanding the development and erasure of religious traditions and cultures, as I suggested in my studies on the Christianization of Constantinople. I know that you have developed the project "The Late Antique Cyclades: Landscapes, Networks and Christianization", in which you analysed the Christianization of the Cyclades in the late ancient period. Could you mention the results obtained and comment on the importance of space for your analysis?

A.: That's a good question! I have been thinking about this because I think it partly arises because students do not have as many opportunities to undertake fieldwork and see the sites in the landscape as before. To counter that thought, I have been working with Carlos Machado on an edited volume entitled Lived Spaces and Late Antiquity. I would like to think that the work of colleagues in that is challenging the disconnect you mention.

9. The relationship between Ancient History and Classical Archaeology is undoubtedly very close. There are numerous works that correlate them, making it sometimes difficult to separate them. As a historian, I see the contribution that Archaeology brings to my research. However, I would like to know how Archaeology currently relates to History.

A.: I am not sure how helpful this answer is... I think you always need to relate both Archaeology & History wherever possible. They can tell different stories about the past as we as archaeologists and historians bring our own interpretations of the past to those stories. So, I think it's always useful to distinguish perspectives while using them without bias... if that makes sense?

10. In the field of studies on the Ancient World conducted in Brazil, we have witnessed an approximation between different areas of knowledge, such as History, Archaeology, Anthropology, and Arts, which has provided valuable theoretical and methodological exchange. However, for beginner researchers, reconciling textual and archaeological sources is still a challenge. Do you have any advice for these cases?

A.: That's a great question! As academics the amount of time we can devote to scholarship is being reduced... but interestingly, as our librarian here at the BSA pointed out recently, the number of monographs that are being produced has risen significantly in the last 10 years in our discipline. But to return to your question, I think the answer is to read. Read as much as possible and as broadly as possible. Ask friends and colleagues to read your work. Go to seminars and conferences that are not directly related to your particular topic and be open minded!

11. On April 29, 2023, we experienced the loss of Rosemary Cramp, an important archaeologist specialized in Anglo-Saxon studies and the first woman to be appointed a professor at the University of Durham, in 1971, where was head of Department of Archaeology until 1990. More recently, on February 8, 2021, we also lost Cyril Mango, one of the leading Byzantinists of the 20th century, responsible for combining Archaeology, History, Art, and Architecture. I would like you to comment on the contribution of authors from past generations to the consolidation of Archaeology and how you see the future of the discipline.

A.: Its always important to understand the development of archaeology, where we have been, who the key figures are. In fact, one of the first classes we offer to our new archaeology students is on the history of archaeology. Its important to reflect on the people who studied the people as much as the people being studied. This is obviously because of the fact that the experience we have and context in we make our interpretations impacts on our understanding of the past. I worry a little about students and the challenges that they face in being able to undertake fieldwork, gain experience, get funding to do postgraduate degrees and of course gain positions. Its not an easy time. The importance of working on legacy data cannot be underestimated, particularly when we see the impact of climate change so clearly on archaeological sites. In saying all of that, mentoring and encouraging future students, enabling them to get as wide a range of experience in archaeology as possible must be the way forward.