

## Peter Lewis Shinnie 1915–2007

Nicholas David

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Born in London on 18 January 1915 to an Aberdonian doctor father and a Welsh mother, Peter Shinnie always considered himself a Scot, even while appearing to others as quintessentially English. At the age of 12 he was entranced by the chapter on Egypt in H.G. Wells' *Outline of History*. At 14, he joined the Egypt Exploration

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N. David (✉)  
University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada  
e-mail: ndavid@ucalgary.ca

Society and, while still a schoolboy at Westminster, the Chelsea branch of the Communist party. Despite discouraging advice from F.L.I. Griffith regarding career opportunities, he went up to Oxford's Christchurch College to read Egyptology, then a text- and art-based discipline taught by Battiscombe Gunn. A full undergraduate life included the university Communist club, learning modern Greek and to fly with the university air squadron, a pursuit stimulated by O.G.S. Crawford's early work in archaeological air photography. He also, exceptionally for a would-be Egyptologist, sought archaeological field experience on European sites, training for three seasons with Mortimer Wheeler at Maiden Castle. This led to a third class degree, a £3 a week job as a Communist Party organizer and a temporary assistantship at the Ashmolean museum. Swept up into World War II, he saw service first as a bomber pilot and later, like Glyn Daniel, Stuart Piggott and Hallam L. Movius Jr, as an intelligence officer specializing in air photography interpretation. In Italy one of his tasks was to tell the RAF what not to bomb, and he later served in the Balkans and finally Greece during the battle for Athens against the ELAS Andartes, an ambiguous role—and not the last in his career—for one whose political sympathies lay rather with the guerrillas.

With the coming of peace he returned briefly to the Ashmolean before accompanying Leonard Woolley to Tell el Atshana in Turkey where he learned little new about the practice of archaeology but much Arabic. This helped him gain his first permanent job in 1946 as assistant commissioner for archaeology in the then Anglo-Egyptian Sudan where he worked under A.J. Arkell before replacing him as commissioner in 1948. It was in Sudan that he began his long and distinguished career as a field director, starting with excavations at Amara West where after a year's apprenticing he succeeded Hubert W. Fairman as director. He applied for the first time the best European standards of excavation and recording to this and other Nile valley sites including Soba, capital of the mediaeval Christian kingdom of Alwa (Shinnie 1955) the el-Ghazali monastery, and Tanqasi, where he investigated post-Meroitic X-group burial mounds. In all this work, in which his first wife Margaret Cloake played a vital collaborative role, he "urged the integration of archaeology, social anthropology, ethnography and linguistics in a research effort to throw light on Sudan's history". Here too began a continuing fascination with the language and culture of Nubia past and present. After the death of C.H. Armbruster, he saw that author's grammar and lexicon of Nubian through to publication in the 1960s (Armbruster 1960, 1965). Much later in life he produced a book on *Ancient Nubia* (Shinnie 1996)—and we may still see the dictionary of Mahas on which he was working with his former student Ali Osman.

This degree of engagement with people and with both past and present cultures is characteristic, and helps to explain the richness of Shinnie's descriptive writing and success as a lecturer. In 1953 he founded the journal *Kush*, the first in a series of editorial services to archaeology that include the founding, editing and publication—in collaboration with his second wife Ama Owusua Nantwi—of *Nyame Akuma*, the Newsletter (later Bulletin) of the Society of Africanist Archaeologists, and a series of Occasional Papers from the University of Calgary that make available the works of African archaeologists who would otherwise have gone unpublished. His insistence that copies of *Nyame Akuma* be sent free to colleagues in the Third World who lacked access to hard currency kept scholarly lines of communication open for those

who would otherwise have been cut off. Shinnie also deserves special recognition as a communicator to a wider, and especially African, audience. While in Khartoum, he produced pamphlets on Sudanese archaeology and history that appeared in both English and Arabic. He also set up a departmental museum of antiquities, the nucleus from which the Sudan National Museum was to develop. In later years, his and Ama's 1995 monograph *Early Asante* (Shinnie and Shinnie 1995) is also primarily directed to an African audience.

In 1957, following the 'Sudanization' of Peter's position (bizarrely he was replaced by Jean Vercoutter), he became briefly the Director of Antiquities in Uganda. The realization he gained there of the potential of oral traditions to be used in conjunction with archaeology—he dug at Bigo, associated with the legendary Bacwezi state—has been influential to the point of becoming commonplace in the study of the later archaeology of Africa. A year later he moved on to become head of archaeology at the University of Ghana, a unit that in short order he had built into a viable university department active in both teaching and research, the first such in Black Africa. Besides a major project related to the history of states, particularly Dagomba, on the southern fringes of Islamic Africa, he persuaded President Kwame Nkrumah, apostle of pan-Africanism, to seize the opportunity of the building of the High Dam at Aswan to send the only Black African team to the UNESCO salvage campaign, where Peter and his Ghanaian crew dug a mediaeval Nubian town, Debeira West (Shinnie and Shinnie 1978). His excavations here, and later for eleven seasons at Meroë, the site and the civilization that he played such an important role in bringing to the attention of the world, and with which his name will always be associated, introduced many Africans to careers in history or archaeology (Shinnie and Anderson 1980; Shinnie and Bradley 1980). In 1966, the offer of the chair of archaeology at the University of Khartoum gave him the opportunity to continue this work on a somewhat firmer footing.

Curiously the book for which Peter Shinnie is best known, *Meroë: a civilization of the Sudan* (Shinnie 1967) was published before his excavations at the capital. The massive final monograph appeared in 2004 (Shinnie 2004). The excavations—typically mainly in town mounds rather than pyramids and temples—are characterized by fine contextualization and excellent documentation. We learn about the lives of the citizens, their houses and their crafts, and in particular the making of iron. These finds gave impetus to his interest in and publications on iron working as an important, if not prime, mover in later African culture history (Haaland and Shinnie 1986).

While at Khartoum, Peter decolonized the graduate diploma syllabus, increasing its archaeological and Sudanese content, and involved the students in fieldwork. But in 1970 Sudanese politics and the need to build a pension led to him to take up first a visiting professorship at SUNY Buffalo and then the headship of the department of archaeology at the University of Calgary. From there he conducted further seasons at Meroë before turning his attention back to Ghana, where he undertook excavations at Daboya that answered historical questions on Gonja settlement and state formation and threw light on the earliest food production in Ghana. His last field project, again combining history, oral traditions—Ama's responsibility—and archaeology, and undertaken with the moral and financial support of the Asantehene, was into Ashanti origins, investigating the early history of the Asante state in the northern part of the forest. During his tenure at Calgary and after his official

retirement in 1980, Shinnie brought many African students to Canada for M.A. and Ph.D. degrees, and he introduced dozens of Canadians to fieldwork in Africa.

Peter Shinnie consistently sought to build bridges between past and present, appreciating the relevance, and not just to archaeologists, of one to the other. Archaeologist by technique (but “in no way ... a prehistorian” [Shinnie 1990] for he was remarkably uninterested in the Stone Age), whose early excavations were perhaps the finest of the time on the African continent, he was at heart a historian, concerned with the development of sites over time, with the building of chronologies and changes in material culture and the lives of the people. He learned from the New Archaeology while never accepting its claims to scientific generalization. He was at once central—combining in himself several disciplines and skills, realizing multidisciplinary investigations before these became fashionable—and marginal. He used this disciplinary and geographical marginality to great advantage and effect, to integrate the diverse historical records, material and linguistic, oral and written, of Meroë, Nubia, and Ghana, and to write accounts of them that are richer and more rounded than normal archaeological fare.

His scholarship was an expression of his politics, a humane liberalism that underlay his deep interest and sympathy for the exploited, the colonized, the ‘Other,’ and his respect for others’ freedom and others’ cultures. The efforts made throughout his career to put the results of his scholarship at the disposal of the people, and especially of those whose past he studied, must be seen in the same light, as was in a different register his membership of the Scots Nats. It is both remarkable and just that, years after his formal retirement, an African society should have funded his research on Asante. While never realizing his early dream of becoming a professional Egyptologist, he achieved far more as an Africanist, scholar, administrator and builder of programs, teacher, facilitator and publisher. The continent, its peoples, and the discipline are the beneficiaries of a notable African commitment honored in his lifetime by an honorary doctorate from the University of Calgary, the Order of the Two Niles, awarded some years previously but formally conferred in 2006 during the 18th biennial meeting of the Society of Africanist Archaeologists, and also by a *festschrift* (Sternier and David 1992).

The colonial period of African archaeology was characterized by such quasi-heroic figures as Vaufrey, Mauny and Monod, Leakey and Van Riet Lowe. Peter Shinnie, together with J. Desmond Clark and Thurstan Shaw, of whom only the last is still with us, succeeded as the preeminent archaeologists of English-speaking Africa during the four postcolonial decades of the twentieth century. Besides being fine field archaeologists they were also builders of institutions, committed to the Africanisation of African archaeology while never denying the useful role that could and can be played by expatriates.

Characterization of Peter Shinnie as a distinguished and influential archaeologist does not do full justice to the man. He had broad interests in music and literature and enjoyed fine wine, a variety of cuisines and good conversation. He was a gentleman scholar, an excellent colleague and mentor, and a wise and witty friend, concerned to the last both for his discipline and the future of humanity. A great tree has fallen, but its many fruits fell on fertile ground and will continue to flourish and to nourish.

Peter Shinnie died on 9 July 2007. Predeceased by his son Nicholas, he is survived by his wife Ama, his children Caroline and Paul, six grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

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