

## INTERVIEW / INTERVIU

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FOR ME, ARCHAEOLOGY HAS ALWAYS BEEN ATTRACTIVE AND EASY TO TALK TO PEOPLE ABOUT.

INTERVIEW WITH **MATTHEW WHINCOP**, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE ICOMOS INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT (ICAHM)



*Site visit to the amazing gobeckli tepe stone circle in Turkiye (2018)*

**DR MATTHEW WHINCOP** holds a Bachelor of Arts in Classics and Archaeology and a Master of Arts in Archaeology from Melbourne University (Australia) and a PhD in Archaeology from Durham University (UK). He has more than 20 years' experience in a variety of archaeological research and cultural heritage projects, including extensive surveys and excavation projects in Asia, Australia and the Middle East. Matt has experience training field archaeologists and managing large archaeological projects. He has provided a wide variety of cultural heritage advice, including: expert advice, cultural heritage management plans, cultural heritage assessments,

cultural heritage strategies, due diligence reports, and a range of World Heritage advice (e.g. Technical Missions, Advisory Missions, workshops, risk assessments, Preliminary Assessments, Upstream Missions, ICOMOS panels, and nomination reviews). Following the completion of his PhD in 2009, Matt worked for 3 years with a leading cultural heritage advisor in Melbourne. In early 2012, Matt joined the University of Queensland Culture & Heritage Unit as Deputy Director and spent 5 years providing a mix of teaching and archaeological consultancy to the university. In 2016, Dr Whincop started Whincop Archaeology, a small, Brisbane-based archaeological consultancy servicing the Australian cultural heritage industry and has not looked back. Since 2014, Matt has been actively participating in the World Heritage nomination and assessment process as part of ICOMOS and ICAHM. Matt was a member of the Australian ICOMOS executive committee for 6 years (2016-2022), when he served as treasurer. Matt has served on the ICAHM Executive since 2024 as Secretary General. He has helped organise the last 3 ICAHM conferences and is the current chair of ICAHM's monthly webinar series.



*World Heritage mission to the Gaya Tumuli of South Korea (2021)*

- 1. Dear Matt, our interviews for Plural magazine aim to talk to people from the academic environment about life and work, about challenges, barriers and successes in each person's work. Therefore, the first question refers to childhood. Where were you born and spent your childhood? Where did you go to primary and secondary school, and what memories come to mind most often regarding your hometown, parents, friends, teachers and schoolmates, etc.**

I was born in Brisbane, Australia, a long time ago (too long). At the age of 5, my family moved to Melbourne, where I attended two very ordinary state schools, both of which no longer exist (they did not have a good reputation). I grew up in a family that actively participated in a local Christian Church, so many of my memories are associated with the church and its activities. I was also a very active child, always playing sports and roaming the neighbourhood on my bicycle. I still love to be active, but team sports have been replaced with solo physical pursuits, such as running (I recently completed my first half marathon in Santiago, Chile and am training for my first full marathon in Iceland in August 2025).

- 2. How did you choose your profession, and where did you do your initial training? Which of your teachers impressed you the most, and what do you appreciate most about them?**

I remember reading a history book about the discovery and conservation of ancient manuscripts, and was immediately sold. I knew then that I wanted to do something with the physical fragments of our past. I contacted Melbourne University and spoke with Professor Antonia (Tony) Sagona, who gave me clear direction about how to enrol and what to expect. Professor Sagona was an inspiring teacher, and it was easy to get caught up in his passion for the archaeology of the Ancient Near East. I took all his classes and harassed him to attend his project in eastern Turkey, which I eventually did in 2001. Professor Sagona supervised my



*Working in the former battlefield of Majnoon, Iraq (2014)*

honours thesis and again my master's thesis, and was a fantastic mentor. He was always quick with a smile and a joke, and I dreamed of one day being an academic like him. Although I have never held an actual academic position, I saw him last at a conference in Vienna in 2016, not long before he passed away, and he commended me on what I had achieved. His support and encouragement made me realise that we all pave our own paths, and even if we aren't academics, there is no reason why a consultant archaeologist cannot make a meaningful contribution to the discipline. I wish there were more fun, inspiring, and selfless teachers in archaeology, like Tony.

**3. Where and under what circumstances did you start your career? What do you remember about your first professional assignments, and what was your relationship with your superiors like at the time?**

I always thought I would be an academic archaeologist. After I graduated from Durham University (UK) with a PhD in Archaeology, the Global Financial Crisis hit. When academic funding became tight, I was forced to return to Melbourne and explore Australian-based archaeological research opportunities (which are fewer). While I kept applying for funding, I took some work as a consultant archaeologist working on Australian Indigenous archaeology. I quickly learned my craft and enjoyed the opportunity to participate in consistent fieldwork and learn the ins and outs of Australian cultural heritage legislation. I had a great team of professional archaeologists mentoring me as I transitioned into consultancy and the Australian way of doing things. My skills in GIS, fieldwork and project management developed quickly. After 7 years of Australian consultancy work, I started my own consultancy, based in Brisbane, and have not looked back. Working for my consultancy has allowed me to volunteer for ICOMOS and ICAHM, as I began to develop skills in the World Heritage process. I am a World Heritage Advisor for ICOMOS and actively involved in the assessment of World Heritage nominations.

**4. Which of your projects do you consider the most successful? What excellent results and what lessons have you learned from the activities carried out?**

For the past 16 years, I have been a consultant archaeologist working on Australian Indigenous heritage. This means that I have worked on numerous small projects with a well-defined scope and limited research capacity. Rather than



*Survey with Traditional Owners in rural New South Wales, Australia (2016)*

look back at a single, successful project, I feel my most significant contribution to this field is the cumulative impact of my work over many years. For many archaeologists, the investigation of Australian Indigenous archaeology was the search for an immutable, authentic past that predates the corrupting influences of British colonialism. This static approach is outdated, and does not recognise that Australian Indigenous culture is a living culture, and one that is constantly being reimaged, enacted and developed. This perspective is central to my approach to archaeological research and one that is becoming more widely appreciated. I like to think that my work has contributed to this evolving perspective, which has resulted in a more dynamic and culturally sensitive approach to Australian cultural heritage.

**5. Archaeology has gone beyond the scope of a classical science, today covering a wide variety of research areas, including Industrial archaeology, Arctic archaeology, nuclear archaeology, etc. How do you assess these trends, and how far will 21st-century archaeology go?**

There is an explosion of different foci in archaeology, but they are all still essentially archaeological research. In my opinion, many of these nuanced approaches are simply new and creative ways to market research and ensure it remains visible and relevant. For instance, an archaeologist calling themselves a space archaeologist who uses satellite imagery to undertake landscape analysis is, in my mind, not practising space archaeology, but creating an interesting brand to create visibility. Such approaches employ a landscape archaeology approach, utilising tools that have been available for several decades (e.g., satellite imagery, multi-spectral imagery). Archaeology is the study of material culture, and the great diversity of human expression means that there is a diversity of culture, and subsequently a diversity of new archaeological perspectives.



*World Heritage mission to the Jomon Sites of Northern Japan (2020)*

**6. As ICAHM Secretary General and one of the active members of ICOMOS, how do you see the perspective, role and weight of this organisation in protecting and promoting cultural heritage?**

ICOMOS, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, is a global non-governmental organisation dedicated to the conservation of cultural heritage sites. It's a network of professionals who promote the application of scientific techniques, theories, and methodologies to the preservation of cultural heritage, including monuments, buildings, and landscapes. ICOMOS also advises UNESCO on the assessment of sites proposed for the World Heritage List. I participate in many ICOMOS initiatives, including undertaking Technical Missions to newly nominated properties, attending the ICOMOS World Heritage panels to assess new nominations, and a wide range of technical evaluations on existing and proposed properties.



**ICOMOS**    **ICAHM**  
International Committee  
on Archaeological  
Heritage Management

The diverse membership base of ICOMOS ensures great diversity of skills, including archaeologists, architects, museum curators and conservators, amongst others. As a result, ICOMOS maintains a vast network of International Scientific Committees (ISC) on specific disciplines: ICAHM is the ISC for Archaeological Heritage Management, and we provide guidance to ICOMOS in this field. We hold annual conferences (we were in San Pedro, Chile, in May) and run a monthly webinar series. ICAHM also provides support and expertise on archaeological heritage management across many contexts.

Both ICOMOS and ICAHM hold great responsibilities for maintaining high standards for heritage conservation. Because we work with World Heritage, but are

also uniquely positioned to set new standards and guidance in international best practice. The world looks to us for guidance on how to conserve and protect our globally significant common heritage.

**7. What is it like to be an archaeologist in the 21st century? What are the risks of the archaeologist profession, and what should young people who want to do archaeology know?**

For many years, archaeology was largely an academic profession. If you studied archaeology, the most obvious path to being an archaeologist was to teach at a university and publish academic research. But the industry is changing, and quickly. Greater appreciation for the significance of cultural heritage is resulting in greater recognition and protection of heritage within different legislative jurisdictions, resulting in a significant increase in heritage professionals, including archaeologists. Job opportunities are increasing, as archaeologists find rewarding careers in practical heritage management. This industry has different names in different global contexts. Of particular interest to me is the increasing recognition and involvement of Indigenous Stakeholders in the management of their own heritage values.

One of the most significant risks (or detractors) for new archaeologists is that it is a fieldwork-based discipline; this means there can be long periods of travel and absence from home. This should not be underestimated, as many young archaeologists have left the industry because of this. And digging in the dirt is not for everybody!

As mentioned above, archaeological consultancy (at least within Australian contexts) is carefully regulated by strong legislative frameworks. This means that archaeology sometimes comes under very close scrutiny and is tested in a court of law. Archaeologists must be fully aware of the legal framework under which they are working so that they take the work seriously and act carefully but decisively. This also means that there can be a lot of pressure on archaeologists.

**8. What needs to be done to make archaeology more attractive to today's young people so that they choose this field as a future profession?**

For me, archaeology has always been attractive and easy to talk to people about. For some people, however, archaeology can appear dry, dusty and stuck in the past. We as practitioners have an opportunity to demonstrate that there are many, many facets to archaeological research, which can have broad appeal. For the science-minded, there is lab-based archaeological research. For those interested in objects, there is a museum and conservation-related work. For those focused on culture, there is interpretation, and so on. I think that is one of the most outstanding appeals of archaeology: that it incorporates so many different disciplines. I find working with Indigenous communities enriching and something that keeps me well-grounded.

**Thank you and best of luck in your activities!**

**Interview by  
Sergiu MUSTEAȚĂ**