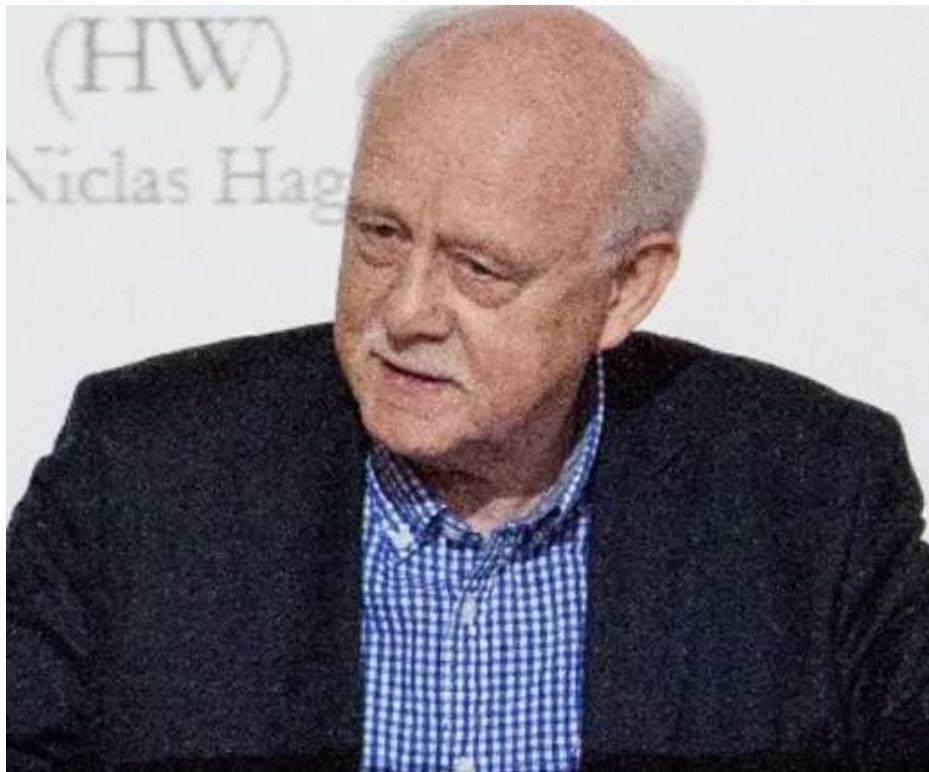




# Early Career Archaeologists

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Professor Dr. Kristian Kristiansen

*“I always preach to my students ‘forget everything about career planning, be open, never put all your eggs in one basket, that will only make you unhappy’. ‘Be open to the unexpected’.”*

# Kristian Kristiansen

**Professor of Archaeology (Gothenburg University), initiator and first President of the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA)**

Interview conducted by Maxime Brami and Bianca Preda-Bălănică

**Thank you for accepting our invitation. You were the initiator of the European Association of Archaeology (EAA) and its first President in 1994. Can you tell us more about the foundation of the EAA and its specific ambitions regarding early career archaeologists?**

The ambition was simply to create a more international/European archaeology and that includes networks of course for young archaeologists. We first started talking about creating a European journal of archaeology around 1988. I was 40 at the time and I had a two-year leave from my administrative work. At that time you have to remember that Europe was divided in two blocks, and there was no free travel between the blocks. So we felt that this was one obstacle we wanted to do something about.

The Council of Europe was the umbrella for activities across, but personally I had looked into the publication structure of archaeology in Europe and I had realised that there was no trans-European journal. Everything was national. All journals were in one way or another organised within a national framework.

Another factor motivating me at the time was that I belonged to the first generation of young academics with research ambitions for archaeological heritage. I moved into heritage in 1979 because at that time in my career all doors were closed to university. So, I took the

road to heritage but with a clear theoretical and research-based perspective. I think we were the first generation who did that. We found each other in a way. There was Alain Schnapp in France. He was at the university but was also engaged in heritage. Later came Jean Paul Demoule. In England, there was another generation with Mike Parker Pearson, who took the road to English heritage as an academic, with a clear research agenda.

We felt that the archaeological heritage, all legislation and everything linked to it was very narrowly national. Not nationalist necessarily, but we felt that we needed a dialogue, a network, so we could learn from each others' experience. I remember that Alain Schnapp organised the first meeting in Paris already in 1982.

Back in the early 1980s we started thinking about bringing archaeology together from all over Europe. We also felt that we needed to abolish the barrier between universities, heritage agencies, and museums. Now being young researchers working in heritage, with a link to the university, we felt that heritage had become quite isolated. So, in a way it was an attempt to create dialogue across boundaries, not only national boundaries but also internal boundaries within archaeology. In that respect, the EAA had a different and more embracing view. We wanted to be a broad church for archaeology.



Kristian Kristiansen at the EAA 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting in Ravenna, 1997. (credit: Kristian Kristiansen)

## **What sort of struggles did you face as an early career researcher?**

I have a long historic perspective, and I think the situation today is very different compared to when I was in my late twenties. At the time I received a gold medal from my university for the best PhD thesis. I became a post-doc for a few years, and then I realised that there were no more jobs. Those who were 5 years older than me had got the jobs, and I could see for the next 20 years that they would sit there and there would be no more jobs. So, I realised that there would be no career for me at the university in Denmark or I had to wait 20 years.

And it turned out to be true, actually. Because at that time departments were quite small, student numbers were smaller, so there were not that many jobs. The jobs started coming in during the mid-1980s probably, with large numbers of students, the big expansion of contract archaeology, the expansion of archaeological heritage as a new sector that received a lot more government money. So suddenly a huge expansion started that created a lot of new jobs, both at universities and in the heritage sector. But I was before that.

When I was a student and when I took my PhD I never worried. I never thought about my future, which was probably very stupid (laughing). PhD students today are very worried, they are thinking a lot more about their future than my generation ever did. But we live in different historical conditions. We lived in an age of optimism and even if there were few jobs we thought: ok, we will probably manage one way or another. Then I think there are personal differences between people, some people tend to worry and some people tend not to worry, or perhaps tend to be a little bit unrealistic.

But I can see my career has been on a knife-edge several times. And it was perhaps a single senior person who saw me and said, 'I want to support that guy'. I can see that in retrospect. The Director of the National Agency for Cultural Heritage and Nature Conservation saw me and thought 'here is a smart guy with some interesting ideas. I can use him to modernise the Danish archaeological heritage sector'. It was incredibly controversial at the time. But I was controversial, I was theoretically controversial also. So, I realised that they didn't want me in my [University] Department, because the last job they had there they decided it should go to someone else. I knew that was the last job.

But then the Director of the National Agency for Cultural Heritage and Nature Conservation invited me to apply for a job to become the leader of the archaeological heritage section. I was 30 years old. And suddenly I could see, ok, why not. Then I have a chance to practice what I have preached. This can be interesting. I had never imagined I should stay for so many years. I ended up staying for nearly 15 years but I had two years off in the middle. I still kept doing my research because I knew at heart I was a researcher. And I had a great time there. Ok, it was a bit difficult in the beginning because there was a lot of opposition, because I was controversial.

But over time we succeeded and we proved that we could expand and develop archaeological heritage. So, in a way sometimes you do things just because you feel that this is the right thing to do right now, and you don't think too much about the consequences or about the future really. And that was the same with the EAA. We just sat down and said we need to do something, there is a need here. We first wanted to make the [European Journal of Archaeology] and no publisher wanted to take the journal. We were really up against opposition.

I always preach to my students 'forget everything about career planning, be open, never put all your eggs in one basket, that will only make you unhappy'. 'Be open to the unexpected'. I took a huge detour I had never imagined, I had never thought I should become

an administrator in heritage. I saw myself as a university guy. And then suddenly one door closed and another opened and I said 'Ok, I go for it'. It was completely out of my plans and out of whatever I had imagined.

But I got a lot of experience there that became extremely useful when we had to organise the EAA. I learned a lot about how to organise things. I had a big organisation behind me that could pay since I was a boss. I could invite and pay for people to travel from eastern Europe, which was very important at that time since they did not have the money to attend meetings. So sometimes what looks like a failure or a kind of 'plan B' that you are not really happy with can turn out to be an advantage in the long run. Therefore, be open, careers are situational.

I was actually prepared to go to England before I received the offer from the Danish Heritage, because I knew there were some jobs soon coming up there. I had good connections and I had already started thinking about applying in England. But then I got this job, and thought now I could try to do what I had been preaching. And then I got an offer at some point, I think in the late 1980s from the US to go to Chicago University and I declined, because at the time I had a two-year research grant where I was writing Europe before History. I felt then that I was on my way back to university, in the middle of something very interesting, so I chose not to leave. It was a chance to take and I ended up going back to heritage, because there was no academic position for me. But then at some point I said to myself: 'Ok, now I have done enough in heritage, now I will apply for any job at any university that will come, any professorship', and the first one was Gothenburg in Sweden. So, I have always been situational, and willing to move or try something unexpected. There is a chance that not everyone is like that. One has to pay respect to the fact that we are all different humans and some need more security than others. And my journey has involved risks. It ended up well but it has been tough sometimes. In my time in the heritage, I slept very little. I worked 12 hours a day for many years. So, I have been willing also to do something extra. My wife and I only had our child when we were

35, because we both should have a career, and therefore it also became a single child.

### **Did your wife face the same struggles as you did?**

My wife, Lotte Hedeager, is Professor of Archaeology at the University of Oslo. She did not have a permanent job until she became a chair professor. These are the risks you are taking. And there is always a price to pay for making a career.

If you really want to achieve something, go for it. I mean a career is not just to get a job, a career is to follow your ambition, to be a good researcher, to be a good heritage administrator, whatever. If you really want to be up among the best it costs you something. You cannot become one of the best by working from 9 to 5. And this is also something I preach to my students. You have to make up your mind if you want to have a family with four children and work from 9 to 5. You can be a good archaeologist, but you will probably not make it to the top. I know this is terrible to say, but that is how I see the realities we are facing.

And I made decisions together with my wife in our life, where we sacrificed certain things to achieve other things. So, you know, I have sometimes the feeling that some of the PhD students today think that they can have everything: a career, be top researchers, have children, and work from 9 to 5. But it won't work and I guess most PhD students have to go through that personal experience because this is when you grow up and realise what the realities facing you are, and you have to make some tough choices.

We also had to make some tough choices and of course it is a kind of stress to do that. But I think we all have to go through that phase in life when we make our priorities for the future. And that phase in life where we have to make those priorities is unfortunately also the phase where we should qualify ourselves in a PhD. So the years with a PhD and post doc are years that put a lot of demands on you. I can understand why people get stressed and sometimes frustrated, but it is part of it. It is nearly unavoidable.





Kristian Kristiansen excavating a Bronze Age coffin. (credit: Kristian Kristiansen)

**Can we ask another question in relation to this? Some people have safety nets, parents to fall onto and family and money, and others don't have this. There is a degree to which some people feel it is a bit unfair, because if you are poor it is very difficult to stay in academia, but if you are from a rich background it is easier. Do you see that?**



Yes and no. Yes, this is a reality of life, some have more solid foundations than others. There can also be a social foundation. Some have very good family backgrounds, parents who support them irrespective of money. Some have not, irrespective of money. Some come from broken up families. Obviously, there are backgrounds that give you a different kind of mental and social support.

I never had money from my parents, maybe a few times just a little help, but we had stipends, we did some extra work, and so on. I do think that the mental and social background you bring with you, the baggage you have, matters a lot. But then on the other hand you must also face it, because if you make yourself a victim, it is easier to lose. You have to face it and say 'ok, then I have to fight harder'.

Women have been discriminated very seriously. I think that is much worse in a way. At least in our youth women in archaeology were really discriminated against and it was very visible. I can see it also in my wife, the way she did not get the stipends and research positions that I got, although she was just as qualified. I think perhaps gender discrimination has been, and perhaps still is, a really serious issue.

**This is very preliminary but we've had over 100 responses to our online survey [regarding integration of early career archaeologists in research] and so far around 70-75% of respondents are women. We don't know if this reflects the number of PhD and postdocs in archaeology, but it is somehow striking that 3/4 of the responses are from women. Asymmetrical challenges seem to be real.**

I agree. I think there are slightly more women than men in archaeology, but 3/4 is more than what would be expected. I think it tells you something important. If my wife and I had not been married, if I had not been able to support her morally and mentally, and socially, there was a time when she started considering leaving archaeology. She thought it was too tough. And I do think that you can feel alone and you see many marriages among archaeologists be-

cause they support each other. Because archaeology is a very special thing.

Archaeology puts strains on family life whether you are field archaeologist or researcher or whatever. You have to go away from the family on excavations. You live in stress. And if you are a researcher you have to constantly apply for money, it never ends – I can tell you. It never ends! It hasn't ended for me.

And you must face it and say, is it worth it? Can I live with it? Do I have the mental strength and positive attitude to life? Do I have a partner who accepts this? And I think because archaeology is so demanding on family life, many archaeologists find each other and marry (and of course also because of the shared interest).

**Given what you just described, why do you think people are still motivated to follow a career in archaeology, despite all the difficulties and how demanding archaeology is?**

I do think that many of those who seek to make archaeology a career are driven by passion. You know, not everyone has a passion. And a passion is a privilege. To have the ability to follow a passion is a privilege.

But it also has a price. You can never have everything, and some people prioritise family life and a more normal job from 9 to 5 and then they follow their passion as a hobby. They become amateur musicians instead of professional musicians. I have a brother who is a musician, and it's also tough for him.

But to have a passion for research or a field of knowledge, I consider it a privilege and I think it was all worth it when I look back. There have been difficulties at times, for instance when you get a refusal for a grant, you know it stresses you, but then 'up on the horse again' because a passion drives you!

You obviously learn some tricks along the way. You learn how to cope, you learn that this is a profession like any other, and there are

certain rules and you learn the rules so it becomes easier. And that is part of the stress of being a young PhD or young post-doc. You haven't quite got all the rules right yet. You are learning. And you make some mistakes and that is also of course frustrating and stressful. And, therefore, I think the idea of a mentor is a good one.

**The skills you learn at university are not necessarily the skills you need to make a career in archaeology, applying for grants for instance, publishing papers, etc.**

That is true, it is absolutely true. We try to teach courses on some of these more rule-bound skills, like how to write and get your paper published. Much of it is a craft. To write a good grant application is a craft, but of course there are also some unwritten rules and it is good to get to know them.

Everything is about networks. That is also part of my teaching or preaching. I have always said, when you publish your first paper in a good journal: people don't read it automatically, make sure people read it! Send it to people, don't be scared! I did that with my first one or two papers, I made a list of those colleagues in Europe who I wanted to read them and then I sent my articles by post at the time. Networking is also a kind of hidden marketing. And is also a way to enter a dialogue with your colleague and find some inspiration.

When I was younger, but also now, I often asked people to read a manuscript and comment on it, as a kind of unofficial peer review. Things like that are small practical skills that are useful to know about. But, of course not every young PhD or post-doc wants to have a senior mentor. Maybe they think they already have enough professors supervising them. So, I think it has to be an offer. I think you have to make up your mind what you expect from a mentor.

**We would like to go back to mobility, because you said early in your career at some point you found all the doors closed and you said you considered moving to England to work there. The question of mobility has completely changed. Nowadays you can pretty much go anywhere in Europe. To some extent the market is very open. How has it changed with your early career, how do you see the benefits of mobility?**

The benefits are that every time you move outside your box or comfort zone you challenge yourself and you learn something new, for good and bad. I have always believed in moving also between different archaeological fields. You learn something new. We decided as a family to move to Sweden in 1994 when I was 46 and we had a son of 10, and it was a family decision, but we felt that in order to further develop we had to get outside of the box and daily life we had been in the last 15 years. We needed a new environment, which is not easy, but it is rewarding.

At the time when I was a student you could hardly think of moving outside the country, there was no Erasmus, etc. We were reading things, we were international, but to move...I moved from Aarhus University to Copenhagen for some years and then back. I think during that decade we were two students who did that, who moved between Copenhagen and Aarhus just inside Denmark. It was so uncommon at the time.

In some countries like Germany, there are mobility rules, such as you cannot stay in the department where you took your PhD, you must move somewhere else before you can come back etc. I think that is good. I think movement keeps a discipline alive and inspired. I think those departments that have only employed their own PhD students will never make it to the top level. You need to get inspiration from the outside, you need to get people with other horizons, other experiences and bring them together. So, movement is vital to academic and research excellence.

**You have been involved in several panels of the ERCs [European Research Council]. We often hear that an ERC starting grant is a gold standard for an archaeology career. On the other hand, we hear that less and less universities offer permanent jobs to ERC grant holders. How do you explain this? Is the European model being challenged?**

I think this is a very complex question with a complex answer as well. Sometimes and in some places you can get a permanent position with an ERC grant, but in most countries, and I can see that in Sweden as well, you are not allowed to offer someone a job without competition. There are rules for that. The position must be announced publicly. There is a democratic thing here that you are not allowed to privilege someone even if you can say that person has already been through a competition and is a top researcher. Then national rules in several countries demand that you announce the position.

A second aspect can be that we have been through a period over the last six-seven years when we have seen a decline in the number of Humanities students including archaeologists. Now that might change because we have a crisis. Whenever there is an economic crisis, we see more Humanities students, and whenever we have good economic prospects we see less such students. The last six-seven years has seen dwindling numbers of students, which means that resources have been scarce for departments, and therefore it has not been easy to announce new jobs.



Kristian Kristiansen chairing a 'session' at the EAA 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting in the Hague, 2010. (credit: Kristian Kristiansen)

**In terms of movement between disciplines, which is the other big topic, you have written extensively about the Third Scientific Revolution. Are more traditional archaeologists losing out? If nowadays you work with ceramics, typology, can you still have a career in archaeology or do you need to be almost a computer scientist or a palaeogeneticist to have that career?**

No, I don't think so. It may look like that right now because the scientific lead is with archaeogenetics, but we are already moving into the next phase where it is increasingly clear we need a lot more archaeology, context from archaeology. We need to be able to talk about local histories of archaeology, to compare to the big histories. I think we will need more archaeological skills and interpretations in

the future. But you must be theoretically informed and you must be able to understand the genetics.

We have also seen in recent years an opposition against this revolution, as you would expect. But that is more on a theoretical level. There are archaeologists who accuse archaeogenetics for sometimes making too simplistic interpretations. And at some point it was justified, but I don't think that is justified any longer, we have become better to integrate the disciplines. What I see now is rather a fight of different ontologies against each other, a post-humanistic against a humanistic ontology, and so on, and then sometimes using archaeogenetics as a straw man.

**Within the ERC panels if an archaeologist submits an application which is entirely archaeology, does the project have any chance of being funded?**

Absolutely.

**So you don't necessarily need to have this scientific component?**

No! There are pure archaeology projects that are getting ERC grants. I am out of it now, but I have been in the panel for Starting Grants for 8 years and in the early years I know there were panels that have been rather negative against genetics. So, it is not given that you will get a grant because you have genetics. Everything is about the structure, how good the research questions are, is the application consistent, from research questions, to methodology, to data, it has to fulfil these basic requirements.

And I would say that most of the grants we have been giving out have not been about genetics. Maybe one third of them have had a genetic component. Science is important, that is true, but that is not only genetics, also strontium, lipid residues in pots etc. But the basic thing is to have a good research question and a good application. So, you are not privileged because you have genetics.



**We wanted to finish with one more general question. How do you see the ECA Community taking things further? We need something like an action plan, do you have any idea for us?**

I think there are two ways forward here, there is one of principles and there is one of practice. So, a strategy of principle would be that you formulate some principles. One of the first things we did when we created the EAA was to come up with a Code of Conduct for the EAA, i.e. where we stand and what we stand for. And I have said to [the EAA President Felipe Criado-Boado] that I thought now is the time to renew it and modernise it. If the EAA does that, it could include something about young archaeologists. You can also choose to say we want to formulate a statement for young archaeologists. That is one way forward, formulating principles for action.

The practical way forward would be to discuss with the EAA if they could create a panel of mentors. If you have a panel of 40-50 mentors like me, each with a profile, willing to mentor and help out, on the webpage, that could be a kind of practice. I am willing to be part of such a mentor panel, and I think there are many in my generation who would be willing to do it. I think many of us really feel this would be meaningful.