

# Alexander E. Cambitoglou AO

## COMMANDER OF THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX

### FAHA

---

1922-2019



*Australian Academy of the Humanities archives*

Neither of us could know that our first encounter was emblematic of a relationship that was to last over half a century. It was in the summer of 1968, when Alexander came to visit Eretria on the island of Euboea, where the Swiss Archaeological Mission had been working under the direction of Karl Schefold since 1964. He knew Schefold from his years

in Oxford, when Sir John Beazley had entrusted him with organizing Schefold's visit. Alexander missed the last ferryboat to Athens and had to be driven to Chalcis, some 20 km to the north-west. I was at that time studying the Archaic pottery for my PhD thesis, and was quite happy to offer my services. The road, though sealed, was narrow and riddled with pot holes—but there was no time to waste, the last bus for Athens was leaving in just half an hour. Neither of us ever forgot that nocturnal ride in the Mission's old jeep, which was to remain the bumpiest distance covered on our 51-year long, not always very easy, journey—during which, however, we never lost sight of our destination.

Ἀλέξανδρος Ἐλευθέριος Καμπίτογλου was born on 15 February 1922 in Thessaloniki to Eleni and Antonios as the youngest of four children, preceded by Minos, Jason, and Hero. He rarely mentioned Jason in his later years, but portraits of Minos and of his sister, remained on his desk and later on his bedside table to the last day of his life. Alexander owed his love of music and passion for the Classical past to his maternal grandfather. His father, who ran a successful business, was aware of the importance of mastering the main European languages and made sure that

his children grew up multilingual. Alexander always spoke with great fondness of his French governess, and French remained the language to which he reverted more and more frequently in the last months and days of his life. To Greek, French and German, he soon added English and finally Italian, and I remember meetings at which he would switch from one language to another in rapid succession, enjoying himself if one found it difficult to keep up!

After attending the *Klassikon Gymnasion* (where, of course, he learned Ancient Greek and Latin), he received his BA degrees in Archaeology and History from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in 1946. The city in which young Alexander grew up and spent his formative years was still recovering and in the process of redefining its identity after the most turbulent phase of its history.

What was happening physically in the 1930s with the replacement of the old Ottoman town by a modern city, had its counterpart on the intellectual level in the 'School of Thessaloniki', formed by a group of poets, writers, and artists around the avant-garde journal *Μακεδονικές Ημέρες* (Macedonian Days), replaced after the war by *Κοχλία* (Snail).

It is hardly surprising that the adolescent Alexander became attracted to the group and soon formed a close friendship with its most prominent member, the poet, novelist, and painter Nikos Gabriel Pentzikis (1908–93). The two men exchanged long letters after Alexander left for England in 1946. Time and again, Pentzikis reminisces about their hikes and expresses his regrets about his absence. At Alexander's request, he keeps him informed about what happens in their beloved 'Mother Thessaloniki'. Not unexpectedly, their epistles (of which, alas, we only possess those written by Pentzikis) focus on literary and artistic questions, and in one of his letters Pentzikis explicitly expresses his appreciation of Alexander's aesthetic sensitivity. Yet, what

provides an even stronger bond is their Christian, and more particularly Greek Orthodox, faith, their conviction that man is not an independent and self-reliant being but one who cannot act or even exist without the protection and guidance of God. To the very end of his life and fully aware of the fact that his days were numbered, Alexander never expressed any fear of death, even though he had come very close to facing it as early as 1971, when he suffered a severe heart attack. To the end of his life he never forgot his mentor's reminder, expressed in his letter of 16 July 1948:

Δὲν πρέπει ποτὲ νὰ ξεχνᾶμε ὅτι βαπτιστήκαμε Χριστιανοὶ καὶ μάλιστα Ὀρθόδοξοι. Αὐτὸς εἶναι ἕνας λόγος ποὺ οἱ κρυμμένες ρίζες του βρίσκονται βαθιὰ μέσα μας καὶ μποροῦν νὰ μας ὀδηγήσουν στὴν σωτηρία ὑπομονὴ καὶ ἀντοχή.

Although he hardly ever talked about his religious views, he maintained close contacts with the church throughout his life and specified in his will that his funeral be held in accordance with the Greek Orthodox rites.

In England, Alexander studied first in Manchester under T. B. L. Webster's supervision, acquiring his MA in 1948, then followed Webster to the University of London. After gaining his PhD in 1950, Alexander completed his military service and returned afterwards to England for his postdoctoral studies with Sir John Beazley in Oxford.

He started to apply to the red-figured pottery produced in the Greek colonies of Southern Italy and Sicily the method Beazley was using to identify Athenian vase-painters. In 1951, he met Arthur Dale Trendall AC CMG FAHA in the British Museum: it was the beginning of a close collaboration that lasted until Trendall's death in 1995 and resulted in the publication of *The Red-figured Vases of Apulia* and its supplementary volumes, today considered to be one of Classical archaeology's *magna opera*.

Already before gaining his D.Phil Oxon in 1958, Alexander had acquired his first teaching experience at the University of Mississippi in 1954. He later moved to Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, where he taught between 1956 and 1961. During his years in the States he met George E. Mylonas in whom he found a role model of decisive importance for his future career. Mylonas had to finance his excavations at the prestigious site of Mycenae almost exclusively through philanthropic foundations and private donations and thus became a pioneer and expert in fundraising for archaeological projects.

In 1961, Alexander was encouraged by Trendall to join the Department of Archaeology at the University of Sydney. After the death of Professor J. R. B. Stewart in 1962, he was entrusted with the temporary direction of both the Department and the Nicholson Museum. Alexander set about reorganizing both institutions.

‘The teaching and study of archaeology in the University of Sydney when I arrived in November 1961 was not satisfactory’, he later wrote. His vision of the what the new department ought to look like was based on three main principles. First and foremost, archaeology is a means to an end, not an end in itself. One studies Classical archaeology because of one’s interest in, and attraction to, ancient Greece and Rome, their history, art, literature, and philosophy. In view of the Nicholson Museum collection, the library’s holdings, and the university’s tradition in Classical Studies, it seemed obvious that the new department ought to concentrate on Classical and Near Eastern archaeology. The second point to which Alexander attached a great importance was the pedagogical coherency of the teaching programme, making sure students acquired foundational knowledge and familiarity with major areas of research before being taught more marginal

topics. Last but not least, Alexander was aware of the international character of university studies and of the overwhelming importance of European languages for the study of Classics and Classical archaeology. Unfortunately, his courageous and visionary speech, given to the Australian Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in Canberra on 6 November 1963, for improved language teaching in High Schools and at university level fell on deaf ears.

In the last years of his life Alexander did not hide his disappointment at the direction in which universities, and the humanities, are heading. And yet, the number of public decorations and honours he received is impressive, ranging from the strictly professional ones, such as the fellowship of the London Society of Antiquaries and the Corresponding Memberships of the German and American Archaeological Institutes (1976 and 2011 respectively), to the foundation fellowship of the Australian Academy of the Humanities (1969), the fellowship of the Athenian Academy (1980), the Order of Australia (1987), and the most prestigious Order of the Phoenix, awarded by the President of the Greek Democracy, Konstantinos Stephanopoulos, on 24 March 1998. In 1991, the University of Sydney conferred on him the degree of Doctor of the University, and in 2001 he was awarded the Centenary Medal. What, in his own words, gave him ‘the greatest pleasure’ was his induction into its ‘Founders’ Circle’ by The University of Sydney in 2018.

By 1976, the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Archaeology had found the shape it would keep until a few years after Alexander’s retirement in 1989.

Alexander attached the greatest value to the quality of the teaching in the department, his own lectures being meticulously prepared and always presented in a formal, almost solemn style. It goes without saying that his

colleagues, too, were expected to wear jacket and tie in the classroom.

Students appreciated the seriousness with which the courses were presented, as they felt it reflected the fact that they themselves were taken seriously, as future colleagues rather than as the degree-factory's 'customers'. In 2015 he was offered the Ayios Kosmas O Aitolos Award 'in recognition of teaching excellence in the field of Hellenic Studies'.

With its counterpart at the College of Bryn Mawr in Pennsylvania, the Department of Archaeology at the University of Sydney was one of only two departments of Mediterranean archaeology in the world. The large number of its graduates who today hold leading or senior positions in universities and museums in Australia, the UK, and the US is the most eloquent witness to its high standards and the international reputation it enjoyed.

At the same time as Alexander was facing, and surmounting, numerous difficulties in the creation of the new department of archaeology, he was tackling an equally difficult task: the transformation of what was known as the 'Nicholsonian' into a modern museum of antiquities. Founded in 1860 by Sir Charles Nicholson, the Nicholson Museum had retained its character of a university collection, but it had become overcrowded. On the occasion of the museum's centenary Stewart, Alexander's predecessor as curator, expressed the hope 'that one day a new museum will be constructed'.

Doubting that hope would be sufficient to remedy the situation and remembering what he had observed in St Louis, Alexander set out to win over the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Stephen Roberts, to the cause, and pursued his endeavours with increased determination, even relentlessness (as the Vice-Chancellor's secretary once remarked with a knowing smile!) after his appointment to the chair of

archaeology. He saw this appointment as bestowing on him not only an elevated academic dignity and an eminent social standing, but also and foremost an inalienable responsibility for the discipline of which he had become the senior representative in Australia.

Having obtained the required technical staff and a fully equipped laboratory, Alexander embarked on an adventure which, in his own words, 'we had the strength to carry out only because of our faith that we were contributing something important to our University, to the City of Sydney, and indeed to Australia'. In 1962, the decision was taken to close the museum to prepare for its transformation.

Before being able to design the new display, the difficult question of the plaster cast collection assembled during William John Woodhouse's curatorship (1903-1937) had to be addressed. When it became clear that the space promised by the administration for a cast gallery would never be made available, the casts were eventually lent to high schools for teaching purposes. Only a few have survived, including, fortunately, large parts of the Parthenon frieze which today decorate the dining hall of the Women's College.

When Trendall reopened the museum on 23 September 1966, he rightly pointed out that Alexander had 'triumphantly solved ... the problems of combining the needs of a teaching collection with the presentation methods required not only to instruct, but also to attract and, still further, to excite, the general public', allowing 'the re-born Nicholson Museum [to] challenge comparison in this respect with any other University museum in the world'. For the next 30 years, the Nicholson thus retained its scholarly character, which did not prevent an ever-increasing number of people from visiting what was the de facto Australian Museum of Antiquities.

Mindful of the many gaps that still existed in the collection yet aware of the very limited resources which the university was prepared to put at the museum's disposal, Alexander pursued a policy of securing long-term loans and gifts from private collectors, and at the same time reactivated the 'Friends of the Nicholson Museum', originally established by Trendall in 1946. To raise additional funds was only one of two equally important aims, the other being educational, as Alexander was very conscious of the responsibility scholars have to step out of their ivory tower and explain the relevance of their work to society at large.

On 17 April 1971, the first Nicholson Museum Concert was held in the university's Great Hall, with the Zurich Chamber Orchestra performing, thanks above all to John Atherton Young's enthusiastic involvement. Henceforth and until 1999, the annual Nicholson Museum Concert, held in collaboration with *Musica Viva*, was to be the main fundraising event for the museum.

John and Alexander had met in 1962 at St Paul's College, where Alexander was tutoring when John, the future professor of Physiology, Dean of Medicine, President of SAUT (Sydney Association of the University Teachers), most influential member of the Academic Board, and Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Health Sciences), took up residence after being appointed as Senior Research Officer at the Kanematsu Memorial Institute based at the Sydney Hospital. It was the start of a union that lasted until John's premature death on the 10th of February 2004, at the age of 67. Whilst John had publicly thanked Alexander 'for giving [his] life its purpose', suffice it to say that John's portrait remained on Alexander's desk to the very end of his own life. It would be difficult to underestimate the extent of John's contribution to Alexander's achievements. Unlike his more introverted, reserved, sometimes even hesitating, partner, John had

an outgoing personality, a sharp mind and a disarming sense of humour. Especially in Australia, Alexander's restraint could easily be taken for haughtiness, and his self-restraint be seen as an unwillingness or inability to relax. Characteristically, even in our last conversation, a few days before I wished him a safe passage across the Acheron, the English 'you' continued to be translated into the French 'vous', never becoming 'tu'. The two moved to Darling Point in 1964. For the next 40 years, John devoted his unstinting energy to assist Alexander in achieving his main goal: the perpetuity of Classical Archaeology as a discipline at the University of Sydney.

On 6 April 1967 the Association for Classical Archaeology was officially inaugurated. It was presided over by Sir Arthur George. Over the next ten years, the Association provided the bulk of the funds needed to conduct the excavations of the Geometric settlement of Zagora on Andros, between 1967 and 1977. The artefacts yielded by the Australian expedition are displayed in the most exemplary fashion in the island's Archaeological Museum, and the excavations' results were published in two large volumes (a third is still in preparation). Their far-reaching implications were the subject of an international conference held in Athens in 2012: *Zagora in Context-Settlements and Intercommunal Links in the Geometric Period (900–700 BC)*, the Proceedings of which were presented in the 25th volume of *Mediterranean Archaeology*.

In 1978, a substantial donation to the university by Sir Arthur George led to the establishment of the Arthur and Renee George Chair of Classical Archaeology, to which Alexander was the first to be appointed.

In the meanwhile, he had started his second excavation project in Greece. Work started in Torone, in Chalcidice, in 1975. Thirteen digging and ten study seasons were conducted until 1995, their findings presented in

numerous reports and two substantial volumes.

The culmination of Alexander and John's efforts to firmly anchor the study of Hellenic Studies in the Australian community was the realization of Alexander's idea to establish an Australian Archaeological or Cultural Institute at Athens. On its existence depends the possibility of future archaeological projects in Greece, since permits to carry out fieldwork in Greece are issued by the Greek Ministry of Culture only to countries that are represented by such an institute. So far, the excavations both at Zagora and Torone had officially been joint undertakings of the Athens Archaeological Society and The University of Sydney.

The creation of the Australian Institute was approved by the Greek Parliament in 1980, and on 23 April 1981 the Australian Archaeological Institute at Athens (AAIA) was formally inaugurated at the University of Sydney. Although it is probably the only one of the eighteen foreign institutes established in the Greek capital that receives no government subsidies, it quickly asserted itself both at home and in Greece. It is 'without doubt one of the very brightest jewels in the University's crown', as was said at the ceremony held in the Great Hall on 12 May 2004 in memory of John Young, to whose moral and material support the AAIA owes so much.

The creation in 1987 of the Visiting Professorship responded to one of Alexander's main concerns, namely the need for Australian scholars to maintain close contacts with their overseas, especially European, colleagues and institutions.

After his retirement from the chair of Classical Archaeology Alexander remained the AAIA's director until 2016. He then reverted to his first love, Apulian red-figure vase-painting. In Australia, he turned his attention back to the Nicholson Museum to publish, in collaboration

with Michael Turner, its important collection of Red-figured Apulian vases in the first two Australian fascicules of the *Corpus Vasorum*. But it is above all with Jacques Chamay, the conservator of the Greek and Roman department in Geneva's *Musée d'Art et d'Histoire*, that he worked in the last twenty years. The last fruit of this intercontinental collaboration and bilingual friendship turned out to be at the same time Alexander's last major work, *Adonis. His Representations in South Italian Vase-painting*, published in the *Hellas et Roma* series, was launched by Stephen Garton on 14 November 2018, a little over a year before Alexander's passing. When asked at the end of the little ceremony if he wished to speak, he stood silently at the lectern for a while, smiling at the audience, before saying: 'Thank you.'

**Jean-Paul Descoeudres FAHA**

**This is an extract from the obituary published in *Meditarch* 31, 2018 (2020) 1–13 which includes Alexander Cambitoglou's full bibliography and is available on: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26910361>.**