



# ROBERT ERIC MORTIMER WHEELER

(1890 - 1976)

## Foundation Fellow

### BIRTH AND EDUCATION

SIR ROBERT ERIC MORTIMER WHEELER was born in Glasgow in the year 1890. His father, Mortimer Wheeler Sr was then working for Blackie's *Encyclopaedia*. After some time he moved to Edinburgh. Wheeler's mother was well educated and taught her son and two daughters Amy and Betty until they were seven or eight. As Wheeler himself records, his father took him for long walks to the moors in Bradford and looked for wild life and antiquities. Wheeler Sr taught his son to shoot and fish, and created an interest for classics and English literature. In the impressionable years Wheeler dreamed of adventure and archaeology. He joined the Bradford Grammar School; later Wheeler wrote "my school was of no great moment to me". He had the ambition of becoming a painter and spent considerable time at home and school on poster painting though he did not possess the talent to advance his interest. The skill that he acquired in drawing and lettering enabled him to produce meaningful drawings for the scientific reports on archaeological excavations. Wheeler, studying in the sixth form, had to leave Bradford at the age of fourteen to join his father who took charge of the London Office of the *Yorkshire Observer*.

Wheeler did not join any school in London. He visited museums and galleries and worked for his Matriculation to the University of London. Having passed the examination, he won a scholarship for classics in the University College in 1907. He still cherished the idea of becoming a painter and studied by private arrangement at the Slade. However, realizing soon that he had no talent for becoming a painter, he left the Slade abruptly and took his degree in classics. With the financial assistance given by the Provost he earned the Master's Degree also. In 1913 Wheeler won an archaeological studentship for research in Roman-Rhenish pottery. Sir Arthur Evans, a great archaeologist of the times, offered to enhance his remuneration. Subsequently Wheeler took an appointment with the Royal Commission of Historical Monuments to survey the buildings. The salary he received enabled him to marry Tessa Verney, but the marriage did not last long.

In the First World War Wheeler joined the army and was commissioned into the Royal Artillery. As Captain he acquitted himself creditably and showed great courage in capturing the German guns from the Castle mound of de Warlencourt which won him MC. Military service taught him discipline, increased his confidence to command and



made him a hardened man. These qualities enabled him in his future career, especially in India, to reorganise the Archaeological Survey of India and train and lead a band of young scholars.

On demobilization in 1919 Wheeler was obliged to take up a small post in the Royal Commission in order to support his wife and son Michael born in 1915. Here he took the decision to be an archaeologist and realised his responsibility as one of the few survivors of the war. He was highly appreciative of General Pitt-Rivers' technique of archaeological excavations and did not like the unscientific method of digging followed by other archaeologists. He observes in one of his publications "excavators of repute were digging up archaeology like so many potatoes". He was anxious to put into practice a new method of digging which he had conceived by applying the principle derived from Pitt-Rivers, which he could do as a Keeper of Archaeology in the National Museum of Wales and lecturer in Archaeology in the University College at Cardiff from 1920 onwards. Initially he had to spend some time in lecturing, helping local museums and organizing the Welsh Federation of Museums as well as a training school at Cardiff. He was all the time wanting to get the idea of a National Museum accepted. Availing himself of the opportunity afforded by the excavations conducted by him, Wheeler published his first book, *Prehistoric and Roman Wales* in 1925. Though primarily written with a political purpose, to serve as a medium of integration, it was useful as a text book for students of archaeology. As a lecturer he trained his students in excavations and also used their services. The first bold step he took as Director to give the Wales Museum a sound financial footing was to visit the Treasury and get a substantial grant besides appointing a new Treasurer who could give a sumptuous donation.

Wheeler was successful in giving a historical interpretation of the excavation at the fort of Segontium by applying Pitt-Rivers' technique followed in pre-historic sites and published the report *Segontium and the Roman Occupation*. His excavation at Caerlon received a lot of publicity as the *Daily Mail* paid for the digging of the amphi theatre. Wheeler's achievements in the excavation of Roman sites in Wales made him realise his responsibility to train young archaeologists in the technique of archaeological excavations and to give a respectability to archaeology in the academic field.

Having made plans for a University Institute of archaeology, Wheeler thought of moving to London, the Centre of power for realising his ambition. This is the main reason for his acceptance of the directorship of the London Museum. In rejecting the Abercromby professorship of Prehistoric Archaeology offered to him in the University of Edinburgh, he knew that for fulfilling his mission of establishing an institute for training young archaeologists, he had to reach the High Command in London. Though he liked to live in style he did not care for money needed for such a living. By organising concerts of high level he could procure funds needed for improving the Museum. Working very hard Wheeler could publish a series of guides including *London and the Vikings* (1927) and *London and the Saxons*. The Museum became the base for his Institute of Archaeology



He delivered lectures without fee to students, and in 1934, he accepted the post of part-time lecturer in British Archaeology in the University of London. The establishment of a Post-graduate diploma course in archaeology enabled Wheeler to train the students in field-archaeology. He excavated a Roman site in 1928-29 in the park of Lydney and discovered a hoard of 5th century coins of King Arthur, which were reported upon by his wife Tessa.

Wheeler's excavations at Verulamium St Albans, for 4 seasons added a new chapter to the pre-Roman Britain and highlighted the defences of Belgic tribal centres. The stratification of the sections which he cut through reflected the succession of events in the protohistory of the Belgic people. The experience gained here helped him later to identify the defences at the Indus Valley site of Harappa in Punjab. At Maiden Castle, a Celtic Iron Age in Dorset, Wheeler came across a neolithic enclosure and long barrow. The technique of excavating burial sites adopted here was later applied to the Megalithic burials of Brahmagiri in Karnataka. The defence architecture of the settlement of Belgic times at Maiden Castle lingered for a long time in Wheeler's mind so much so he read defence measures in the Harappan fortification. However, when he visited Lothal in 1958 he admitted that the mud-brick walls of the city could be anti-flood devices. The identification of a war cemetery at Maiden Castle and of a Roman arrow embedded in the spine of a warrior brought him great fame. The excavations at Verulamium brought fame and funds.

The grid system of trenching followed here for uncovering a settlement was fruitfully applied to sites of different periods such as Taxila, Harappa and Sisupalgarh (Orissa). Wheeler was pleased to see that his system of horizontal digging carefully followed at Lothal, the port town of the Indus civilization in Gujarat, had yielded spectacular results.

Wheeler had the firm conviction that it was necessary to rouse the interest of the public in archaeology through publicity. The newspapers not only gave publicity but also raised funds. By 1930 Wheeler had trained several batches of archaeologists who could carry on excavations on scientific lines independently.

Tessa's death in 1936 meant a great loss to the camp at Maiden Castle and a personal loss to Wheeler, but he continued the excavation boldly to its logical conclusion.

By exploring and excavating sites in Normandy and Brittany (France) Wheeler established cultural connections between Brittany and the Celtic tribesmen of Maiden Castle. Another achievement of Wheeler was to publish the Verulamium excavation report in 1936. It appeared as Report of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries under the title *Verulamium, a Belgic and Two Roman Cities. The Maiden Castle, Dorset*, was published in 1943.

The criticism against these two publications is that Wheeler's highly selective method of digging could not provide the social and economic background which is provided



a total excavation of the sites of enormous size. It must, however, be noted that total excavation needs enormous funds. As regards the second criticism, it must be admitted that his interpretations were based on facts as well as tradition.

Wheeler's idea of establishing an Institute of Archaeology in London materialised in 1937. He had visualised that it would be a centre of research where humanity could be studied against its natural environments with the aid of "the geologist, the botanist the palaeontologist, the climatologist....". Prof FE Zeuner, an environmentalist, was the only natural scientist who worked for some time in the Institute, which had to face many difficulties in the initial stage. In due course, the Institute grew into a "best-endowed centre of archaeological research" in England.

Wheeler was soon summoned to the front during World War II and commanded an anticraft battery in North Africa in 1941. In Tripoli, he pleaded for protecting ancient monuments. When he was planning in Algiers for the invasion of Italy, he received invitation to take up the post of Director General of Archaeology in India. It was Lord Wavell's decision which gave him an opportunity to look after historical monuments, apply his new technique of excavation and train a band of scholars in scientific digging and publication.

With the discipline and drive of a professional soldier, Wheeler, at 53, accepted the challenge of reorganizing the Archaeological Survey of India and placing Indian archaeology on a new footing. He arrived in Bombay in early 1944, and took charge of his new post in Simla. Finding that some staff were idling their time he sacked some and others were shaken.

After reorganizing the headquarters office, he visited some monuments, sites and regional offices to know the men and understand archaeological problems of the vast subcontinent. There were many gaps in Indian history, the major gap being the one between the end of the Indus Civilization and the beginning of the Buddhist period.

In filling the gap he had to proceed from the known, namely Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, but both were subjected to unscientific digging. Before he could deploy any staff for scientific digging he had to train them. He took a quick decision to start training camps. Thus came into existence the famous Taxila School of Field Archaeology at the site of the Indo-Parthian city in the North west. He selected young scholars from various universities and gave them intensive training in scientific digging, three dimensional recording, photography, drawing, surveying, analysis and interpretation of data and above all publication. The greatest contribution of Wheeler to Indian archaeology has been one of infusing a spirit of dedication among the scholars trained by him to the cause of scientific excavation. They in turn have been training younger generations in this great task of unearthing the cultural heritage of the country and preserving it for posterity. He followed up the initial training camp of Taxila with four more, one each at Arikamedu near Pondicherry (1945), Harappa (1946), Brahmagiri in Karnataka (1947) and Saurashtra



garh in Orissa (1948). The last one was supervised by him. The scholars were taught how to dig layer by layer and record every antiquity carefully. The interpretation of data with reference to stratigraphy was the crux of excavation. He believed that "the excavation of a site, like the ordering of a battle must be thought out and coordinated by a single present and directing mind. Otherwise chaos, waste and inefficiency are inevitable." In his Presidential address to the Archaeology and Anthropology Section of the Indian Science Congress held at Bangalore in 1946 he pleaded for conducting archaeology on more scientific lines and bringing the resources of relevant natural sciences to bear on archaeological problems. He himself achieved these objects which are reflected in the scientific reports on his excavations at Taxila, Harappa, Arikamedu and Brahmagiri.

In his archaeological investigations in India he proceeded from the known to the unknown. The earlier excavations at Taxila had highlighted the Parthian contact, while in the south, Roman contact was indicated by a distinct pottery known as the Rouletted Ware. So far as the Indus Civilization was concerned he gave Harappa a stratigraphic basis and discovered the fortifications of mud-brick and baked brick. However, in his anxiety to connect it with Hariyupiya of the *Rgveda*, he interpreted the fortification as a defence against the invading Aryans. "On circumstantial evidence" he said, "Indra stands accused" (of destroying the city). BB Lal, whom Wheeler had trained, however, pointed out that there was a gap between the end of the Harappan occupation identified by Wheeler with non-Aryan settlement and the arrival of the Cemetery 'H' people who represented the Aryan invaders. This conclusion went against Wheeler's theory because it implied that the so called Aryans arrived on the scene when the so called non-Aryans had already left. But it must be said to the credit of this great savant of archaeology that he accepted new evidence from Lothal which went against the theory of Aryan destruction of Harappan towns. He visited Lothal when the excavation was in progress and discussed with the excavator the evidence of destruction by flood and pointed out that he had mentioned that the rising water table at Mohenjo-daro was one of the causes for abandoning the city. At Harappa itself the hurried repairs to city walls may be attributed to sudden floods in the Ravi. Wheeler's theory of Aryan destruction of the fortified cities of the Indus had influenced scholars so much that George F Dales who excavated Mohenjo-daro in 1964-66 admits this. He says "wanting to find a city wall and being strongly under the influence of Sir Mortimer Wheeler all the time, I found it, but then did not give it the detailed study it required".... . A re-study of the structure "revealed that the large solid brick wall some two meters thick and ten metres or more high does not itself extend as far north and south as I had proposed. It is actually a part of the complex of walls, structures and drains that bounds the eastern street of a large street" (Dales 1979). Wheeler himself changed his opinion. He says (Wheeler 1968, p 47) "For the present it would be premature to conjecture that the Lower City was fortified in a military sense, though it is increasingly clear that massive flood-defences were undertaken". This shows the greatness of Wheeler, who as a true scholar, would modify his theories in the light of new evidence. This is the main reason why in his foreword to *Lothal and the Indus Civilization* (1963), Wheeler did not contradict



the conclusion reached by the author that the decline and fall of Indus cities was primarily due to natural calamities.

When it came to a question of dating the Indus Civilization he was firm in his opinion that the Mesopotamian evidence should be taken into account. He stuck to 2500-1500 BC date for the Indus Civilization including its late phase despite the fact that Carbon 14 dates indicated a shorter chronology. As he rightly pointed out, Carbon 14 dates for the period prior to 1500 BC are too late. Wheeler's arguments run as follows:

"Now those who concern themselves, not merely with the bland end-product of the radiocarbon method, but also with its moods and modes, have become aware during the past ten years that it is by no means a mechanical end to all our troubles. The difference between radiocarbon dates and those produced by astronomy or dendrochronology or reliable history can on occasion almost pass belief. Recently scientists and archaeologists particularly those archaeologists who in Egypt and Iraq can deal with the third and second millennia BC in tolerably historical terms have approached agreement as to the magnitude of the disparities involved. And the cross-checking has been aided by the use of the long-lived bristlecone-pine which has enabled science to compare radiocarbon dating with a seemingly precise tree ring dating back to something like 4700 BC. In one way and another the disparities become serious in the earlier part of the second millennium BC and increase steadily, or unsteadily, backwards at least to the 4th millenium. During this period, the radiocarbon method is liable, unless carefully corrected, to give a date from 150 to 800 years too late. Nor is a correction easily obtained by the application of a simple corrective graph to "ordinary" radiocarbon dates. The Stuiver-Suess correction is a complicated and not yet fully adequate method, struggling with a number of "wiggles" or deviations not yet comfortably explained by science. I will not carry this catalogue of tribulations further now, except to re-emphasise the certain conclusion that all the Indus radiocarbon dates hetherto published are too late, sometimes seriously too late. The often-repeated non-sense about the Indus Civilization dating from, say 2100 to 1700 BC must be forgotten. As Sri Rao more than once implies, comparision where possible with established Mesopotamian historical dates is still the surer method. The beginning of Harappa may well be found to go back to or beyond 2500 BC."

Wheeler was searching for a datum line to give a firm chronology to the early historic sites in South India. He came across the Rouletted Ware of *circa* 50 AD in the collection of the French Archaeological Institute at Pondicherry and examined the site of Arikamedu, a Roman treaty port on the east coast. The excacvations conducted by him in 1945 forged new links with the Roman world and also provided a datum line for excavations at other sites. Ashokan inscriptions of Brahmagiri in Chitradurga district of Mysore State attracted Wheeler's attention for more than one reason. For filling the gap in Indian history he had to select an Asokan site to trace pre-Asokan Chronology. Dr MH Krishna's excavation at Chandravalli near Brahamgiri had yielded Roman pottery and could therefore be a good starting point. Wheeler's excavation at Brahmagiri in 1947



pushed back its cultural sequence to the beginning of the first millennium BC by bringing to light a Neolithic settlement. The scientific method of excavating megaliths of Iron Age at this site became the model for all future excavation of megaliths in India. Wheeler being a strict disciplinarian had a tight programme for the trainees in all camps including Brahmagiri. He insisted on careful documentation and prompt report. He started a new publication known as *Ancient India* and set the highest international standard for publishing scientific reports of archaeological excavations. This standard has been maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India. The intelligent sections showing clearly the cultural sequence and structural phases got drawn for his reports on Taxila, Arikamedu, Harappa and Brahmagiri have been good examples for illustrating subsequent excavation reports of the Survey, published in the *Archaeological Survey Memoirs* No. 78 (Lothal).

To Wheeler, archaeology and anthropology were "sciences of interpretation...they interpret an endless succession of unique achievements of the human brain, unique reactions of human consciousness to a multitude of combining or conflicting circumstances" (*Ancient India* No. 2, 1946). He held the view that so far as it could be termed a science, archaeology was a humanistic science. He was no doubt interested in the regularities of history, but also emphasized on the unique character and contributions of particular communities. For instance, he was impressed by the provincial style of Indus pottery and painting in Gujarat. Though a pioneer in science-based archaeology his view was that science must "serve man and the study of man". He insisted that archaeologists must study all the activities of man and his environment too.

## MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS OF WHEELER

One of the important bequests of Wheeler is that in Britain, India and elsewhere he made the Government and scholars realise that archaeology is very important for an enlargement of human consciousness and that the public must give unstinted support to it. At the same time, he insisted on the maintenance of the highest standard of professionalism by archaeologists of all denominations, and it is gratifying to find that the standard maintained in India as a result of his dynamic leadership is perhaps the highest in the world.

Wheeler was a great organizer and used tact to convince men in authority of the need to support archaeology. He wanted only problem-oriented excavations to be undertaken and conducted like any scientific experiment under controlled conditions. He insisted that only those trained in the basic disciplines of archaeology should engage themselves in excavations, and saw to it that a complete record of strata, structures and portable finds was maintained. Interpretative drawings and photographs were made an essential part of documentation. For the first time he made the archaeologists and historians





realise that antiquities were important not so much for their intrinsic value as to their context and the information they would yield.

He highlighted the necessity of publishing the excavation reports promptly and in full. To him unpublished excavation amounted to destruction of evidence. Though the reports should be scientific and scholarly, he wanted that the general public should be kept informed of the results and the importance of the excavation. This was necessary to win public support for archaeology. In fact, it is he who made archaeology very popular.

So far as India was concerned Wheeler bequeathed a generation of trained archaeologists who in turn have trained the next generation. He was greatly responsible for the participation of Indian Universities in archaeological research. Archaeology has become popular in India largely due to Wheeler's effort and its scientific basis is entirely due to him.

Another less known fact is that he entrusted the conservation of monuments to the Archaeological Survey of India by relieving the Public Works Departments of their responsibility since the measures undertaken by them modified and interfered with the original character of the monuments.

Wheeler was elected Fellow of the National Academy (India). His success in the TV archaeological game, "Animal, Vegetable and Mineral" endeared him to the public and made archaeology very popular.

After the death of Tessa, Wheeler married Mairs de Vere Cole in 1939 but the marriage was short lived; his third marriage to Margaret Norfolk in 1945 was also a failure.

During the last days of his life he lived in Surrey under the care of Molly Myers who had helped him a great deal during his Secretaryship of the British Academy. Wheeler died on July 22nd, 1976.

### DEGREES, AWARDS AND MEMBERSHIP

Sir Robert Eric Mortimer Wheeler had the following degrees :-  
MA, D Litt (London); Hon D Litt (Bristol, Delhi, Ireland, Wales, Oxford and Liverpool); Hon DSc (Bradford). He had the awards—Petrie Medal, University of London, 1950; Lucy Wharton Drexel Medal, Pennsylvania University 1952. He was Fellow of the British Academy, London; Fellow of the Society of Antiquarians (President 1954-59); Fellow of the Royal Society, London 1968.

### POSITIONS HELD

He was the Commissioner, Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, England 1939-58; Hon Director, Institute of Archaeology, London University 1934-44; Director



General of Archaeology in India (1944-48); Adviser in Archaeological matters to Dominion of Pakistan 1948-50; Prof of the Archaeology of the Roman Provinces, University of London 1948-55; Chairman, Ancient Monuments Board of England 1946-66; Trustee, British Museum 1963-73; President Indian Museums Association 1947-48; Pakistan Museums Association 1949-50; Hon Life Member, New York Academy of Sciences 1963.

He directed Archaeological Excavations at the following places :-

Colchester, 1917 and 1920; Carnarvon 1921-23; Brecon 1924-25; Caerleon 1926-27, Lydney 1928-29; St. Albans 1930-33, Maiden Castle (Dorset) 1934-37; Brittany 1938; Normandy 1939; India (Taxila, Arikamedu, Harappa and Brahmagiri and also supervised Sisupalgarh Excavations) 1944-48; Mohenjo-daro and Charsada, Pakistan 1950 and 1958; Stanwick (Yorks) 1951-52.

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