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Accordia Research Institute

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Accordia Research Papers
(Editor Ruth D. Whitehouse)

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The photograph was taken in 2007, on the island of La Gomera in the Canaries. The occasion was a holiday, not fieldwork, but John couldn’t resist the opportunity to explore the local ‘whistling language’, developed by shepherds to communicate across the gorges that transect the island, reflecting his interest in broader aspects of language and communication.
Neither the *cursus honorum* of an academic career nor a simple list of publications can capture the rich texture of a scholar’s life. This is especially true of the Protean figure that was Accordia’s first Director. John B. Wilkins’ interests were so varied, his intellect so formidable, and his influence on subsequent generations of scholars so profound that I cannot hope to do him justice in a few short pages.

Of course, it is easy enough to convey the bare facts. John was born on the 27th of April 1935. He was educated at Bristol Grammar School whence he went up to King’s College Cambridge in 1954, where he was an Open Scholar in Classics for the next seven years. He excelled in the study of philology, which, at the time, was considered the pinnacle of all scholarly endeavour in Classics.

Following the completion of his BA, with the inevitable Double First, John embarked on research into the Etruscan language with the support of a Major State Studentship as well as Studentships from King’s and the University of Cambridge. He was supervised by the brilliant John Chadwick, who, at the time, was still heavily involved in the defence of Ventris’ decipherment of the Linear B script.

As a postgraduate, John studied for a year in Freiburg before moving on to a prolonged stay in Italy. In 1958, he was awarded a Rome Scholarship and, from this point on, the British School at Rome figured prominently in John’s life. He retained a deep affection for the School until his death in 2017. In Italy, John studied under the tutelage of Professor Massimo Pallottino, the leading Italian authority on the Etruscan language.

It was while at the British School that John first got his hands dirty as a field archaeologist. Like most residents of the School in the late 1950s, he was roped in by the Director, John Ward-Perkins, to participate in the seminal South Etruria Survey.

John relished his postgraduate years, especially the time he spent travelling around Italy in a very small car – a somewhat incongruous image given that he was such a big man. It was in this period that his deep love for Italy, its culture, its cuisine, and its people took root. It never left him.
John’s doctorate, awarded in 1961, had the official title “Studies towards a Formal-Contextual Analysis of Etruscan: the Etruscan numeral system”. It focussed on the Tuscania dice, which, in itself, is an early sign that John was not only interested in language but also in the materials and objects upon which inscriptions are recorded and in the social use of literacy. For a PhD, it was quite short but beautifully argued. He published the main conclusions of the thesis in a very well-received paper in the Transactions of the Philological Society for 1962.

The subsequent discovery of the Pyrgi tablets vindicated John’s interpretation of at least one of the numbers. Some time after the discovery of the Pyrgi tablets, he appeared on the BBC’s Chronicle programme, talking about the Etruscan language and the Tuscania Dice. He enjoyed his brief moment in the media spotlight.

Upon completion of his PhD, he spent three years at the University of Cardiff as Lecturer in Latin before moving to Queen Mary College, University of London, in 1965 as Lecturer in Classics. John spent the remainder of his official career at Queen Mary, finally retiring in 1996.

The Classics Department at Queen Mary was small and, like many of the other Classics departments in London and across the country in the 1960s and 70s, it was struggling to come to terms with the diminished status of Latin teaching in secondary schools. The advent of the new Universities of the 1960s, which had no such restrictions, led many of the traditional Universities to remove Latin from their matriculation requirements. The result was a dramatic collapse in the number of pupils studying Latin at school, which translated into a disastrous decline in the number of well-qualified applicants for Classics courses at University. It led to an era of mergers and closures of Classics Departments and never again would Classics enjoy such a privileged place in Britain’s educational system. The response to these trends was the development of Classical Civilisation courses, vel sim. While many of these new degrees simply followed the old curricula of Classics programmes but with the canonical texts read in translation, Classics-lite if you will, John was among the first, both at Queen Mary and in the wider London scene, to realise that such degrees needed radical rethinking and a discrete rationale to ensure that Classical Civilisation had its own intellectual rigour. John was never one to accept loose thinking and unsupported arguments.

At the same time as he took up his post in London, he also began to work as the Linguistic Consultant and co-author of the Nuffield and Schools Council Latin Project at Cambridge University, more commonly known by its publication title, The Cambridge Latin Course.

The course was revolutionary for its time. Instead of the rote-learning of conjugations and declensions, The Cambridge Latin Course had pupils reading Latin from the very first page. The traditional teaching methods were one of the reasons why the learning of Latin was unpopular with many school children and why so many of them opted out of learning the language once the need for it as a passport for University entrance was removed. The approach pioneered by The Cambridge Latin Course, which focussed primarily on translation and getting students engaged with the language from the earliest point, has become the standard way to teach Latin (and Greek for that matter) at both school and university levels. The same philosophy may be seen in the Minimus books for younger children and in the Reading Latin course used in many universities. The Cambridge Latin Course itself remains in print and is still widely used in schools and by independent learners.

While working on the project, John published three papers on his approach to the theory of translation as applied to the Classical languages in Didaskalos, the Journal of the Joint Association of Classical Teachers.

John resigned from the project in 1968, frustrated at its level of resourcing and what he felt was a lack of formal recognition for his creative input into the project. Despite his personal disappointments, his work with the project, where he was most heavily involved in the development and writing of Units 1 and 2, must stand as one of his most enduring and influential contributions to the study of the ancient world. Generations of English-speaking schoolchildren have been introduced to Latin through The Cambridge Latin Course. My own
initial encounter with John’s brilliant mind was in my first week of secondary school, when I started learning Latin. My textbook was the *Cambridge Latin Course*. I can still picture the very first page and the opening words “Caecilius est pater”. The approach of rapid engagement with the language together with the story of a family living under the shadow of Mount Vesuvius, the lively illustrations, and the informative sections that explained how we know so much about the Roman past, had me hooked. I was by no means unique.

The sections of text on the site of Pompeii featured many of John’s own photographs – one of the many skills at which he excelled – and were a manifestation of his interest in archaeology and material culture.

The 1970s was a period of re-evaluation and re-direction for John. He had begun to feel somewhat constrained by the strictly philological approach to the study of the languages of ancient Italy and was looking for new directions. The Department at Queen Mary was still struggling with student recruitment but John was not yet in a leadership role that would allow him to influence the situation profoundly. In his personal life, his marriage had come to an end.

In 1975, while staying at the British School at Rome, John met Ruth Whitehouse, who was to become his life partner for the next 42 years. Theirs was not just a personal relationship, it was also an lifelong academic and intellectual collaboration – meeting of minds, a partnership of equals. Ruth’s established research interests led John towards archaeology and he began to participate in excavations in Italy. By the end of the decade, he was jointly directing an excavation at Botromagno, Gravina-in-Puglia with Ruth.

The excavation was funded by the British Academy, the British School at Rome, Lancaster University and Queen Mary. While it was a research excavation, it also served as a training dig for undergraduates from the University of Lancaster, Ruth’s institution at the time, and Queen Mary, as John moved much of his teaching in the direction of archaeology. It was through the excavation that I first got to know John, when I joined the department at Queen Mary College as an undergraduate in 1982. Many years later, in 2000, he, Ruth, and I published the results of the excavation as *Botromagno, Gravina-in-Puglia. Excavation and survey, 1979–1985*.

John played many roles on the field projects that he co-directed. At the highest level, he helped to shape the intellectual direction of the research, always insisting on the unbreakable link between theory and practice. He often served as the official photographer of the projects, recording finds and features, even though he often complained that what required documenting was not photogenic enough. He dealt with practical problems and official bureaucracy, not always an easy task for someone who could be irascible and stubborn. Projects require basic logistics; John was not above ensuring that the hardworking diggers were fed and watered. He also kept a close check on a project’s finances, recording every expense in his trusty *Vademecum*.

To me, as a student, John was an inspirational mentor, perhaps less for his lectures than for the post-lecture drinks and discussion in the Senior Common Room Bar. This routine was like an informal seminar, as the keen students would question John about any aspect of antiquity that currently held our fascination. Not only could he always answer us but he always did so with enthusiasm, erudition, and wit. I had never met anyone like him and I was overwhelmed. Again, I was not alone in that reaction.

In the early 1980s, the survival of the Department at Queen Mary was hanging by a thread. Following an aborted closure attempt, John was appointed as Head of Department. At the time, there were just two members of staff and some hourly-paid part-time teaching assistance. This did not deter John.

To give a flavour of John’s drive and foresight, in 1984, he and Ruth went to the Third Conference of Italian Archaeology, where they gave a ground-breaking paper on Greek and Native relations in Southern Italy. John usually had an ambivalent attitude to conferences but, on this occasion, he returned enthused. He announced that the Department, despite its staff complement, should organise the next Italian Archaeology Conference and, moreover,
it should publish the proceedings. This was long before home-computing had taken off; desktop publishing was, as yet, unheard of. Nonetheless, in 1990, the conference was held at Queen Mary and published in four volumes as one of the first publications of the Accordia imprint.

John brought the same qualities of creativity and determination to his leadership of the Classics Department. Over the course of the 1980s, John took the rump of the Department that he had inherited and rebuilt it into the Department of Mediterranean Studies, with a full-time staff of seven and numerous part-timers. He took advantage of mergers and departmental closures to bring in Classics colleagues from Westfield College and Hugo Blake and Ruth Whitehouse from Lancaster, which gave the reimagined unit a concentrated strength in Italian Archaeology. John could also spot young talent, as he gave early career opportunities to Mike Edwards, a future Director of the Institute of Classical Studies, and Hans van Wees, now the Grote Professor of Ancient History at University College London, among others. Another who benefited from his advice in this period was his doctoral student, Vasileios Vagios, who is now Associate Professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the National Taiwan University. The mentoring of younger scholars would be the hallmark of John’s career for the remainder of his life.

The new department developed a fresh and unique conception of how to teach Mediterranean antiquity in a truly interdisciplinary manner, bringing together Ancient History, Archaeology, Classics, and Historical Geography. Student recruitment boomed. Alongside this, and affiliated to it, was the creation of Accordia, which was founded in 1988. It was originally intended to be the research arm for the Department’s Italian interests but soon the vision grew grander. Accordia was John’s idea. He invented the name, which was catchy and evoked the Italian word accordo, and the cumbersome acronym from which the letters of Accordia derive. The name captured the essence of the expanded vision for Accordia as an Institute devoted to the study of early Italy, which fostered collaborative research, especially between British and Italian scholars. Unlike the Department, Accordia has proved to be an enduring institution and is perhaps John’s greatest academic legacy.

Alongside these activities, John continued to publish his own research, with two notable co-authored papers with Ruth on ancient South Italy and a renewed interest in the social uses of ancient literacy, notably in his paper “Nation and Language in Ancient Italy” in the first issue of Accordia Research Papers.

In 1986, he and Ruth co-authored a book entitled, The Making of Civilization: history discovered through archaeology, for Collins. Although he would described it as a “coffee table book”, because it was beautifully illustrated and aimed at a non-specialist audience, neither he nor Ruth shied away from dealing with difficult concepts and ideas in the text.

On completion of the excavation at Botromagno, he and Ruth began a collaboration with Armando de Guio and other Italian colleagues from Padova on a major field survey project in North Italy – the Alto-Medio Polesine Basso Veronese Project – which enjoyed funding from the Regione del Veneto, the British School at Rome, Lancaster University and Queen Mary College. Many of John’s publications from the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s related to this project.

In 1991, there was a change of management at Queen Mary. In a climate of threats to university funding, the new management chose political expediency over creative intellectual activity and the Department was closed despite its manifest achievements. This was a bitter blow that hit John especially hard. Nevertheless, it did not constrain the scope of his vision for Accordia, which was taken independent. In those years, Accordia crystallised around a core team of John, Ruth, and me. It became as much a vehicle for our defiance of the Queen Mary management as it was for our collective research endeavours. We were determined to prove the management wrong and this appealed to John’s natural anti-establishment inclinations.

The negotiations around the closure were protracted and bruising. During the final phase of negotiations, John used his own retirement as a bargaining chip to secure permanency of
employment for Mike Edwards and some continuity of employment for me. The fact that we emerged from the negotiations with more jobs than we went into them with, and a Land Rover to boot, speaks volumes about John’s powers as an advocate and an adversary.

Over time, Accordia has built a powerful international reputation through its lectures and events, its library, and its publication arm. Accordia has just celebrated its 30th Anniversary. Since my move to Ireland in 2002, the main burden of running Accordia, organising its events, and preparing its publications, has been shouldered by Ruth and John. The work has been plentiful. There have been thirty lecture series, numerous seminar series, conferences, workshops, and exhibitions. On the publication side, to date there have been fifteen issues of the journal, four volumes of papers from the Fourth Conference of Italian Archaeology, and twenty-one volumes in the two Specialist Studies series.

Supporting younger scholars was a characteristic of John’s career and it has become part of Accordia’s guiding philosophy. There is now a whole generation of academics working on early Italy for whom Accordia has always been an essential part of the academic landscape. Many of the leading figures in the field, especially those based in the UK, published some of their earliest work with Accordia. For early career scholars giving papers to Accordia audiences, John could be demandingly rigorous in his critique of their work but he was simultaneously hugely encouraging and supportive.

Accordia gave John a vehicle to display and develop some of his other talents. He was quick to take up personal computing, once desktop machines became available and affordable. This led him to an interest in computing that has underpinned Accordia’s desktop publishing activities. He also created and maintained the databases that are used to record memberships and book sales, as well as those that contribute to Accordia’s research agenda. Producing covers for books and posters for events brought out a flair for design that was so acute that it was widely believed that Accordia had a wealthy benefactor, a Mr Accordia, who paid for professional designers. In reality, the only Mr Accordia was John. His design skills undoubtedly relied on the same keen eye that made him such an accomplished photographer.

During the 1990s and into the 2000s, his attentions returned to the languages of ancient Italy, although he liked to style his interests as archaeolinguistics and not simply philology. He published a lengthy and provocative essay on the Iguvine Tables in *Territory, Time and State*, edited by Simon Stoddart and Caroline Malone. His chapter “Urban Language Ritual” in *Approaches to the Study of Ritual*, which he edited himself, has begun to garner positive responses, suggesting that some of his ideas are still waiting for other scholarship to catch up.

He was also instrumental in ensuring that *Festschriften* were published for Ellen Macnamara and David and Francesca Ridgway, three leading figures in Italian archaeology. His renewed enthusiasm for the languages of early Italy led to the development of two AHRC-funded projects, based at UCL, both of which he co-directed with Ruth Whitehouse, viz. Developmental Literacy and the Establishment of Regional and State Identity in early Italy: research beyond Etruria, Greece and Rome (2002–2005) and Etruscan Literacy in its Social Context, 8th–5th centuries BC (2005–2008). The titles of the projects reflect the directions to which John’s interests had spread – state formation and identity and the social usage of writing. These projects will continue to produce affiliated publications in the years to come.

Over the course of his career, John received little in the way of official recognition from the academic world. He was promoted to Senior Lecturer in Classics and Archaeology at Queen Mary in 1990 but that was scant reward for his long service to and profound transformation of the Department. He was elected to the Fellowship of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1996 and he held the Balsdon Senior Fellowship at the British School at Rome in 1998 but no other recognition came his way. It did not bother him unduly. He was a scholar not a career academic. He did the things he wanted to do because they interested him and because he believed that they were of value. The outpouring of condolences that Ruth received from scholars across the world upon the announcement of his death shows that his achievements and efforts were deeply valued by his peers.
King Agesilaos II of Sparta reportedly refused to have any statues erected to him after his death, saying “If I have done anything noble, that will be a sufficient memorial; if not, all the statues in the world, the works of worthless men, will not preserve my memory”. (Plutarch, *Moralia*, 3.215 (79)). John needs no honours or memorials. He has Accordia.

John’s final years were blighted by ill-health. Diabetes restricted his mobility and memory loss served to diminish the fierce burning of his intellect. It was sad to see.

He died on the 8th of March 2017, less than two months before his 82nd birthday. He is survived by his partner, Ruth, his three children, Peter, Sheila and Gillian, and his grandchildren, Max and Alexander. He was also a father in all but name to Ruth’s children and grandfather to their children. He was immensely proud of all of them, although he was not one for boasting.

In addition to his academic talents, he was also a gifted musician, playing piano to concert standard. He wrote his own compositions and arrangements although he preferred to play for his own pleasure than for an audience. Unlike many intellectuals, he was an enormously practical man, able to turn his hand to any task. John believed that there was no skill that he could not learn and master and, in this as in much else, he was probably right.

To conclude with a personal note, John’s greatest gift to me was the opportunity to join his and Ruth’s excavation at Gravina-in-Puglia. From this all things flowed: a lifelong love of Italy and its archaeology, and my own primary research area.

John was many things to me: a teacher, a mentor, a colleague, a co-author, and, most important of all, a dear friend. His influence on my life has been so profound that I cannot imagine what it might have looked like had I never met him. He was a fantastic, funny, generous, gifted, and sensitive person. And I loved him.

Edward Herring
Galway
November 2018
John B. Wilkins: a life

Education
1946–1953 Bristol Grammar School

Degrees
1961 PhD Cambridge (Subject: ‘Studies towards a Formal-Contextual Analysis of Etruscan: the Etruscan numeral system’)
1958–1961 Rome Scholar, British School at Rome
Research with John Chadwick & Massimo Pallottino
1960 MA Cambridge
1957 BA Classics Part II, Class 1
1956 BA Classics Part I, Class 1

Appointments
1988–2017 Director (hon.), Accordia Research Institute, University of London
1984–1993 Head of Department, Dept. of Mediterranean Studies, QMUL. Retired 1996
1990 Senior Lecturer in Classics & Archaeology, Dept. of Mediterranean Studies, QMUL
1965–1989 Lecturer in Classics, Dept. of Mediterranean Studies, QMUL
1965–1968 Linguistic Consultant and co-author, Nuffield & Schools Council Latin Project, University of Cambridge. Published as Cambridge Latin Course, CUP
1961–1964 Lecturer in Latin, University of Cardiff

Fellowships/studentships
1998 Balsdon Senior Fellowship, British School at Rome
1957–1960 Sandys Studentship, University of Cambridge
Augustus Austen Leigh Studentship, Kings College, Cambridge
1957–1961 Major State Studentship for PhD research

Major Research Projects
2005–2008 Etruscan Literacy in its Social Context, 8th – 5th centuries BC (funded by the AHRC)
2002–2005 Developmental Literacy and the Establishment of Regional and State Identity in early Italy: research beyond Etruria, Greece and Rome (funded by the AHRB/C)

Field Research
1995–1997 Collaboration with excavation of Cova d’es Carritx, Menorca (Funded by the Consell Insular de Menorca, the Society of Antiquaries, Institute of Archaeology, UCL, the Autonomous University of Barcelona and University of Reading)
1987–1991 Joint director of Menorca monument survey project (funded by the Phyllis and Eileen Gibbs Travelling Research Fellowship, Newnham College, Cambridge, University of Lancaster and QMUL)
1986–1992 Joint director of the Alto-Medio Polesine – Basso Veronese Project (Anglo-Italian project with University of Padua concerned with surface archaeology in the Po Plain) (funded by the Regione del Veneto, British School at Rome, University of Lancaster and QMUL)
1981–1986 Joint director of post-excavation work on finds from Botromagno, Gravina-di-Puglia, funded by the British Academy, the British School at Rome, University of Lancaster and QMUL)
1979–1983 Joint director of excavations at Botromagno, Gravina-di-Puglia, funded by the British Academy, the British School at Rome, University of Lancaster and QMUL)

Accordia Research Institute, University of London
Founded 1988. Director until his death

Professional Organisation
Society of Antiquaries, Fellow (elected 1996)
SELECT PUBLICATIONS

BOOKS
1996  John Wilkins (ed.), *Approaches to the Study of Ritual*. Accordia Research Institute, London
2007  Kathryn Lomas, Ruth Whitehouse & John Wilkins (eds), *Literacy and the state in the ancient Mediterranean*. Accordia Research Institute, London

ARTICLES and BOOK CHAPTERS


1996  **John Wilkins** (ed.). *Approaches to the Study of Ritual*. Accordia Research Institute, London


*The items marked with an asterisk were originally published in Italian.