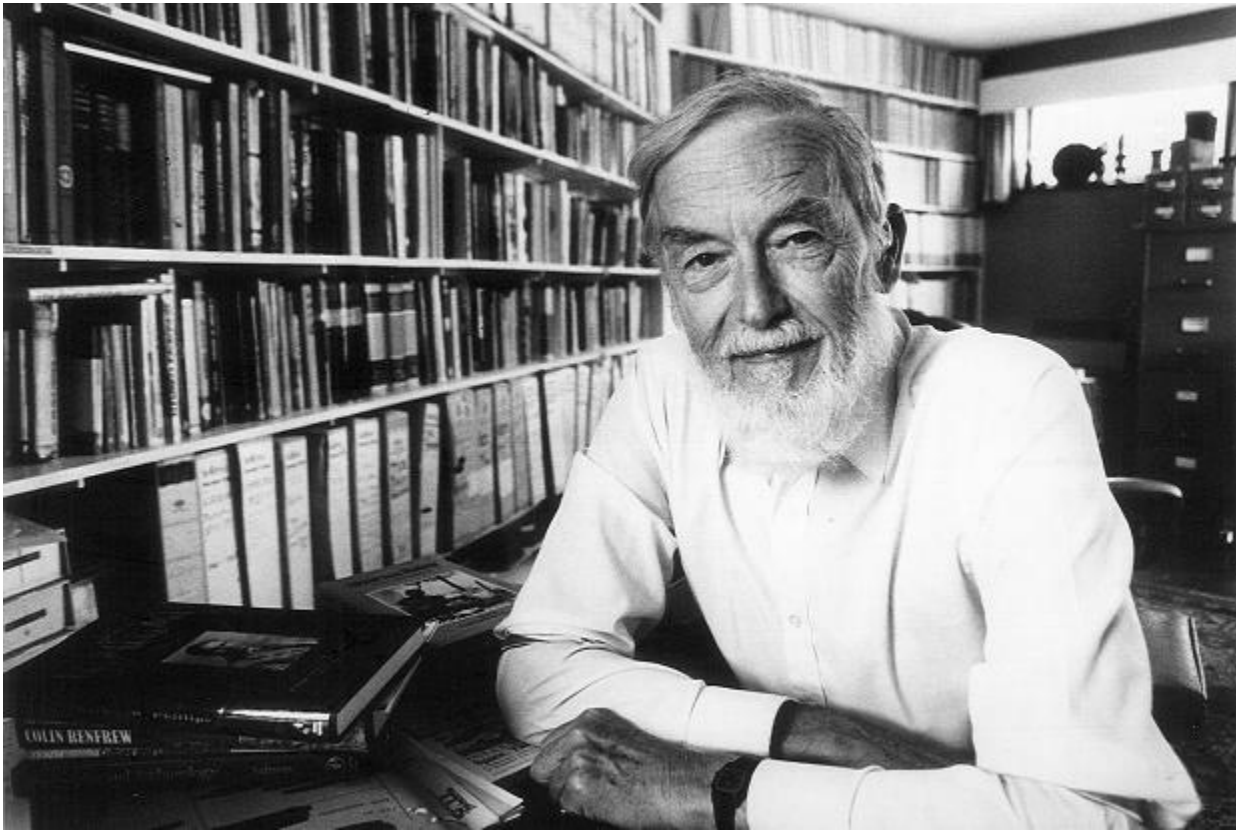


THE  TIMES

Professor Thurstan Shaw



Professor Thurstan Shaw: he set up excavations using methods being developed in Britain

Published 1 minute ago

Archaeologist whose pioneering work on the prehistory of West Africa laid firm foundations for the subject

Thurstan Shaw was probably the only man to have occupied both an African university chair in archaeology and the ceremonial throne of a Nigerian tribal chief. He was the first trained archaeologist to work in what was then British West Africa, and he devoted his long career and equally long retirement to teaching and research of the region's prehistory. West African archaeology is, to a large extent, Thurstan Shaw's creation, and it is certainly his legacy.

Born in Devon in 1914 and educated at Blundell's School, Tiverton, and Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, Charles Thurstan Shaw read classics before taking a first in archaeology and anthropology. In 1937 he went out to the Gold Coast (now Ghana) to teach at Achimota College in Accra. Achimota was in those days, when there were no universities anywhere between north and south Africa, the most important centre for higher education in black Africa.

Shaw rapidly set up a museum, and carried out a number of excavations using new methods then being developed in Britain: these, long before the development of radiocarbon dating, began to show the deep timescale and pronounced local characteristics of West Africa's ancient societies, and the fallacy of the strongly held migrationist views of his contemporaries.

Those theories, which argued that West African agriculture, metallurgy and civilisation derived from Mediterranean North Africa, had dominated discussion of African prehistory in the absence of evidence from local research.

Another result of Shaw's early work was the eventual establishment in 1957 of a department of archaeology in the new University of Ghana, the first in a black African university, and the establishment of a Ghanaian national commission to safeguard antiquities.

When Shaw returned to England in 1945, his wife having been invalided home, he taught at the Cambridge Institute of Education. He continued to work on his Ghanaian material, publishing an important monograph on Dawu, a site with more than eight metres (25 feet) of stratified deposits that had yielded more than half a million potsherds. A memorandum for the International African Institute on "the Study of Africa's past" stressed the need for increasing awareness of the archaeological heritage in the continent and was widely influential.

In 1958 Shaw was invited to direct excavations at the important site of Igbo-Ukwu in the forests of southeastern Nigeria. The site featured a royal burial with cast bronzes of great technical skill and artistic beauty dated to the tenth century AD, long antedating the better-known bronzes of Ife and Benin.

These works of art and other evidence from Igbo-Ukwu demonstrated that highly sophisticated indigenous craft traditions had developed in the tropical forests during the first millennium AD, long before any Arab or European influence. Shaw's two-volume monograph on the site, followed by the more popular *Unearthing Igbo-Ukwu* in 1977 and his magisterial synopsis of Nigerian archaeology for Thames & Hudson's *Ancient Peoples and Places* series in 1978 laid the foundations for knowledge of the country's prehistory, with the parallel efforts of Bernard Fagg in the north of Nigeria around Jos.

With the establishment of a university in Nigeria at Ibadan, Shaw joined its institute of African studies in 1960 as the first teacher of archaeology, and went on to establish a department of archaeology in the faculty of science, where he found a sympathetic understanding of the aims of the discipline. He was professor of archaeology from 1963 until his retirement at the age of 60 in 1974, and the department's laboratory, photographic and draughting facilities, teaching collections and well-utilised field equipment made him especially proud: it was one of the best centres for archaeology in Africa.

His former students joined the staff of the Federal Department of Antiquities, the National Museum, and the new archaeology departments in universities at Ife, Zaria, Nsukka and Port Harcourt, providing Nigeria with the best-trained cadre of archaeologists of any of the new African states.

Nigeria's recognition of Shaw's role was marked by an international conference held on his 75th birthday at Ibadan in 1989, when he was also made a tribal chief as Onuna Ekwulu Nri and as Onyafuonka of Igboland. The range of research being carried out by Nigerian archaeologists showed how deeply the concept of studying the African past through survey and excavation had been planted, and how the autochthonous beginnings of West African agriculture and metallurgy were being unearthed. Much of this research was reported in the *West African Archaeological Newsletter*, which Shaw had founded in 1964, and which he continued to edit as the *West African Journal of Archaeology* until 1975, when it continued in other hands.

After his retirement to Cambridge (where he became director of studies at Magdalene and continued teaching), Shaw took up a project which had fascinated him since his schooldays, the reopening of the Icknield Way, the great prehistoric route from Norfolk to Wiltshire, as a long-distance path. Two stretches, the Peddars Way in Norfolk and the Ridgeway path, had long been open, but the central section, notably in Cambridgeshire, lacked an easy route and permissions. Shaw founded the Icknield Way Association, produced the first walker's guide to the route and saw the scheme increasingly supported by the public, the county councils and eventually the Countryside Commission.

Shaw worked hard for, as well as in, archaeology: he was president of the Prehistoric Society from 1986 to 1990, and held both honorific and substantive office in numerous international bodies, including the Pan African Congress for Prehistory and the Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences. He became a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries at the early age of 33, and was awarded its gold medal in 1990. The following year he was elected a senior Fellow of the British Academy and also made Olokun-Ayala of Ife.

At his 96th birthday party in 2010 he held court on a scarlet throne in the chiefly

robes of an Onuna-ekwulu Ora or “the man through whom the history of the Igbo people speak”, while many Nigerian and other African scholars lauded him in the company of Cambridge’s archaeological establishment. The sultry atmosphere generated by 150 people, and the background clamour in the hotel of others watching England’s World Cup defeat by Germany, added a tropical ambience to the event.

His last professional public appearance, at the age of 98, was at a conference on African archaeology of recent millennia and the historic period in September 2012. Confined to a wheelchair, he held court at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge, with delegates from Africa and other parts of the world queuing to greet him and kneeling beside him to have their photographs taken.

His wife, Ione, whom he married in 1939, died in 1992: they had five children. In 2004 he married Dr Pamela Jane Smith, an historian of archaeology. She, his two sons and three daughters survive him.

Professor Thurstan Shaw, CBE, archaeologist, was born on June 27, 1914. He died on March 8, 2013, aged 98

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