

Pioneers, Power, and Prehistory: Colonial-Era Scholarship in Prehistoric Archaeology

K.V.J. Koshalee, Senior Lecturer in Archaeology, Department of Archaeology, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka and Doctoral Student, University of Otago, New Zealand. koshaleekaku@gmail.com

Chandima Bogahawatta, Professor in Archaeology, Department of Archaeology, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. dr.chandima@kln.ac.lk

Tharindu Pieris, Research Officer, Archaeo Boffins Consultants Services (ABCS), Pannipitiya, Sri Lanka. ptmperis@gmail.com

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Abstract

European administrators, missionaries, explorers, and scholars played a formative role in shaping prehistoric archaeology across Asia, Africa, and other regions during the colonial era. Their efforts in discovering, documenting, and interpreting sites laid early foundations for the discipline, while also reflecting colonial ideologies and Eurocentric frameworks. Today, in an academic landscape increasingly concerned with decolonising archaeology, it is timely to revisit these contributions—not simply to critique them, but to assess their complex legacies and continuing relevance.

This session invites papers that explore the role of colonial-era pioneers in shaping the study of prehistory worldwide. We welcome case studies examining how their interpretations, methodologies, and institutional structures influenced the development of research, as well as critical reflections on the biases, omissions, and power relations embedded in their work. We also seek contributions that consider the interplay between colonial scholarship and local knowledge systems, indigenous expertise, and regional intellectual traditions, highlighting both tensions and collaborations.

To guide discussion, contributors are encouraged to reflect on the following questions:

1. How did colonial-era pioneers shape the discovery, documentation, and interpretation of prehistoric archaeology across regions?
2. In what ways did colonial ideologies and Eurocentric perspectives influence narratives of human antiquity that emerged during this period?
3. How did local knowledge, indigenous expertise, and regional traditions interact with—or become marginalised by—colonial scholarship?
4. What are the implications of reassessing colonial contributions for current debates on decolonising archaeology and rethinking global prehistory?
5. How have colonial-era interpretations of prehistory been adapted, reinterpreted, or mobilised for political agendas in postcolonial contexts?

Through comparative perspectives and critical engagement, this session aims to foster dialogue on how colonial frameworks shaped modern understandings of prehistory and how these legacies may be reinterpreted, challenged, or integrated within contemporary archaeological practice.