

Gwen Bennett

Gwen Bennett is an assistant professor in the departments of East Asian Studies and Anthropology at McGill University, Canada, where she was hired to start a program in East Asian historical archaeology. She has studied, worked, and done research in China for many years, and is currently Principal Investigator of the 'Khitan-Liao Archaeological Survey and History Project' (KLASH) in southeastern Inner Mongolia, which looks at the rise of the Liao Empire by integrating new data from archaeological fieldwork with historical data; and the 'Chengdu Plains Archaeological Survey Project' (CPAS) in Sichuan, which has finished fieldwork and is now in the writing up stage. She is also the Co-Principal Investigator and Director of Fieldwork for the 'Understanding Cities in the Premodern History of Northeast Asia (c. 200-1200) Project', being done in tandem with KLASH and which uses geophysical methods to examine the three walled Liao period settlements in the project area.



The Alumnus

I GOT OFF THE PLANE AT AMSTERDAM one Sunday morning in early September 2012 to take up my fellowship at IAS and found when I arrived in Leiden that, serendipitously, I had arrived in the city on Open Monuments Day. Once a year on this day, the Netherlands' historic buildings are open to visitors, and all of its museums are free. I had to wait until Monday to meet everyone at IAS, but even before then, in just one short day, I fell in love with Leiden. I wandered the city's maze of streets and went into all the historic buildings that I could; and I was enjoying the day so much that I didn't even notice my jet lag until I dragged myself back to my B&B and hurled myself into bed, exhausted but entranced with the city where I was to spend the next seven months.

On the next day, I went to IAS on the Rapenburg to get the keys to my lodgings, and found I was to live in a newly converted historic hospital building that also housed several other IAS fellows. My room overlooked Middelstegegracht, a lazy residential street that must have once been a narrow canal but was now filled in. The room itself was high ceilinged with a wall of tall arched windows overlooking a courtyard and fitted out with brightly colored Ikea furniture, and, what the IAS fellows living in this building soon came to call 'the cube': an ingenious plastic modular unit that provided modern facilities for each room in an old building that lacked them.

My days in Leiden were often spent reading at home in the mornings while I waited for the rain to pass, coming in to IAS to eat lunch with the other fellows, and then working for the afternoon at the desk I had on the third floor facing the Rapenburg. On my tea breaks, I enjoyed exploring the Institute's historic building as much as I did those on Open Monuments Day. Many adaptations have been made to modernize it, but the building still had many interesting features to discover, such as when a trip to the attic revealed the resemblance between the roof's wooden beams with those of a ship's hull. Since the Netherlands had been a country of shipbuilders, this construction had a certain logic.

Exploring Leiden's history by roaming its streets provided me with numerous enjoyable respites from the book project that was my motivation for being there. I am examining how the past is interpreted and presented in Chinese museums, and I came to this subject because I am an archaeologist who works in China. In my work, the objects that I find are almost always broken. This is not unexpected; the material remains of the past societies who lived in the region that has now become China are hidden beneath the ground's surface, sometimes for many millennia before they come to light by a farmer's plow, or economic development, or even through the annual freeze-thaw cycle that eventually heaves them up to the surface. Once there, they can lie in a farmer's field for many more years before an archaeologist might discover them. Many of the remains that archaeological survey, the type of archaeology that I do, provides for study are the broken remnants of pottery and porcelain vessels. To understand how they once might have appeared, I spend a lot of time in museums looking at examples of complete vessels, fitting together in my mind's eye the jigsaw puzzle of fragments that I've collected into the

cooking, storage and drinking vessels that they once were. Because I have been doing archaeological survey in China since 1995, I have spent a lot of time in museums. Sometime during all those visits, I realized that I was doing more than seeking archaeological exemplars; I was also analyzing the museums themselves and the messages about the past that they were conveying to their visitors.

Inner Mongolia, the autonomous region (equivalent to a province) where I work; and Liaoning, the neighboring province where I lived for several years in the 1980s, are home to a particular Neolithic culture that is being presented in the region's museums as having direct historical continuity, from the Neolithic past 5-6,000 years ago to the Chinese present. This society built large mounded stone tombs for their leaders that can be filled with extraordinary jade carvings, and the remains of structures have been found that contain human shaped pottery statuary. The fascinating claims surrounding these remains are intimately tied to how these two regions present themselves in the context of the present-day Peoples Republic of China, and form the basis for my writing, which incorporates ideas from theoretical work on museums, memory, identity formation, and nationalism. The Leiden University Library was an excellent resource for books on these ideas, and the opportunity to present my work at IAS' monthly noontime talks was also very valuable because of the audience's insightful questions and suggestions.

As I look back now, my time at IAS was intellectually stimulating beyond my expectations. Much of this was due to a rich and diverse cohort of scholars at IAS and the University who were working on fascinating projects themselves, and who were equally willing to explore ideas and learn from each other as I was. We often talked about each other's research at the Institute, but probably spent as much time doing it at the many dinners we shared with each other. Cooking became an international affair with shopping trips in Leiden and beyond to find the spices and foodstuffs to make Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Italian, and Austrian dishes to be served to friends, all paired with wine to make the thoughts flow, of course! These close interactions with colleagues over desks at the institute or over dinners gave me fresh perspectives on my own work and the chance to learn about areas of the world and areas of study I had not yet had exposure to. I came to Leiden to study China, but ended up learning just as much about India and Indology from my friends and their projects.

I came to IAS under its Asian Heritage research cluster, and the many activities that the Institute and University held around this theme meant that there was always something to attend. Some of the most interesting events were the roundtable discussions held by the Leiden Initiative on North Korea, organized by Prof. Remco Breuker. Experts from many venues and perspectives, which refreshingly included several non-academic professionals with deep experience in Korea, took this opportunity to strategize on how to make North Korea more visible both in and outside of the academy. I was also able to attend a five day intensive course for graduate students on Korea organized by Prof. Breuker and Dr. Koen

De Ceuster of Leiden University. This workshop had as its theme, *Margins and marginalization in the production of Korean histories*, with the goal of examining the margins of Korean history from different theoretical, methodological, geographical, political, or social perspectives. As the only archaeologist, and the only presenter to work outside the present day boundaries of the Korean states, I talked about the Liaoning Provincial Museum's use of material culture to present the PRC's perspective on events and entities in this border region, including the early Han Dynasty commanderies and the Koguryo and the Balhae Kingdoms. This workshop also included a visit to the University's Bibliotheca Thysiana, where we were introduced to its architecture and collections, and had the rare opportunity to very closely examine several of the rare books in its collection. Meetings with Dr. Ilona Bausch, the University's archaeologist of Japan, were also always very thought-provoking, and we always enjoyed 'talking shop' together.

One of the most enjoyable events I attended was the 1st annual UKNA roundtable on urban heritage policies held in November at TU in Delft. Many fascinating presentations by Dutch and Chinese experts were made that critically compared and contrasted planning approaches to heritage in the Netherlands and Western Europe with experiences in Asian cities. The highlight of the workshop was the walking tour around Delft with these experts during which they told us about the buildings and projects that we were seeing, and the history or considerations behind them. What I learned about Dutch history and architecture during this short two hour walk helped me to better appreciate the urban forms and architecture that I saw on all my other day trips to other cities in the Netherlands.

I left IAS at the beginning of March 2013 as the tulip fields were starting to color the landscape. I am back in Montreal at McGill University, but I keep in touch with the friends I made at the Institute and in Leiden, and I visit when I can. It was with great anticipation that I returned to take part in IAS's November 2013 'Patterns of Early Asian Urbanism' conference where I spoke about urbanism on the steppe and medieval period Liao urban centers, and where I was able to meet friends from the Institute and University again. I was also able to visit with the IAS staff that attended the AAS meetings in Philadelphia in 2014, and even got to man the booth to hand out their cloth bags and information!

This past September, as I attended the 2014 Association of European Archaeology meetings in Istanbul, I was able to re-experience the Netherlands' Open Monuments Day – while passing the Dutch Embassy on Istiklal Street I saw the 'Open Monuments' banner flying over its gate and knowing what it meant, I lined up for a guided visit and had one hour back on Netherlands territory as we explored the nooks and crags of this historic building. One hour in the Netherlands is not long enough for anyone, and I am fondly looking forward to my next visit!

Gwen Bennett, Assistant professor in the departments of East Asian Studies and Anthropology at McGill University, Canada. (gwen.bennett@mcgill.ca)