

# ON THE SPOT DAN HICKS

We ask 20 questions of leading historians on why their research matters, one book everyone should read and their views on Edward Gibbon ...



**Dan Hicks** is Professor of Contemporary Archaeology at the University of Oxford. His book *The Brutish Museums: the Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* will be published by Pluto in August 2020.

**Why are you a historian?**  
In fact, I'm a contemporary archaeologist with an anthropological sense of the past.

**What's the most important lesson history has taught you?**  
That anti-racism is more urgent than class war.

**Which history book has had the greatest influence on you?**  
Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*.

**What book in your field should everyone read?**  
No such book has yet been written or ever will be. I have dozens of books on the go at any one time, focusing a good deal on the index and bibliography. It's an approach I recommend to others.

**Which moment would you most like to go back to?**  
The opening of 'Room Nine' at the second Pitt-Rivers Museum, 1899, where the Benin Bronzes and Ivories were displayed before they were dispersed.

**Which historian has had the greatest influence on you?**  
William Edward Burghardt Du Bois.

**Which person in history would you most like to have met?**  
André Breton.

**How many languages do you have?**  
German and French, plus A-Level Latin and a grounding in Ancient Greek, for which I am grateful to Birmingham's Bishop Vesey Grammar School.

**What's the most exciting field in history today?**  
African Cultural Restitution.

**What historical topic have you changed your mind on?**  
Our work on the Calais 'Jungle' forced me to change my mind about freedom of movement.

**Which genre of history do you like least?**  
I mistrust 'Global History'.

**Is there a major historical text you have not read?**  
Georg Forster's *A Voyage round the World in His Britannic Majesty's Sloop Resolution*.

**What's your favourite archive?**  
The archaeologist O.G.S. Crawford's archive in Oxford.

**What's the best museum?**  
Regional museums are where it's at: Manchester, Glasgow, Leeds, Belfast, Birmingham.

**Normans or Anglo-Saxons?**  
Brummies.

**Rome or Athens?**  
No contest, Paris or Berlin.

**Braudel or Gibbon?**  
Hannah Arendt.

**Michelangelo or Frida Kahlo?**  
Majid Adin.

**What is the most common misconception about your field?**  
That archaeology works with frozen remnants of the past. It is the science of human duration.

**What will future generations judge us most harshly for?**  
For allowing BP to art-wash their disaster-capitalist project in the 'world culture' galleries of the British Museum. For not returning the Benin Bronzes. But above all for not seeing how these two failures connect.