

Transcription: Interview with Joe Cribb conducted on 24th June, 2024

Initials:

SG: Shreya Gupta

JC: Joe Cribb

SG: So I'm going to start with the first question, which is what sparked your interest in numismatics, and especially of studying coins from South Asia?

JC (0:15): Okay. Well, after I graduated, I did a degree in Latin and Greek. It wasn't classics, as it was slightly more Latin than Greek, and a bit of ancient history. I was looking for a job, and I saw the job in the coin department (at the British Museum) advertised and applied for it and was successful. And I think part of why I was successful was because I knew more about Chinese coins than the people on the (selection) board.

SG: Yeah, I can imagine.

JC (0:58): And I knew about Chinese coins because my older brother was a collector. He was in a wheelchair, so I used to go with him to lots of coin dealers, and when he met up with other collectors, so I picked up quite a lot about Chinese coins at that point. When I started at the museum, my role there was as a research assistant, and the purpose of my appointment was to relieve the curatorial staff of routine inquiries. So part of my time was answering routine inquiries. And because I got really interested in Chinese coins through my brother, I started looking at the Chinese collection. And nobody had seriously looked at it since the 1890s. And in the collection, there was a very large collection which, but at that point, I didn't know where it came from, but came into the museum in 1874. And that but it proved to be a Japanese collection of Chinese, and Japanese coins, and Korean and Vietnamese coins. There were also two collections put together by British officials working in China, which came in [to the Museum] in the 1880s. So it was a very rich collection and for the next period, I was working on the collection, and I started learning some Chinese. And I suppose most of my effort was in trying to get the collection into good order. One of the things I did was remove all the forgeries from the collection, put them into a separate cabinet. And for the early period, there were a lot of forgeries. And one day I think it was probably in the summer [of 1971], an Indian scholar came and sat on the opposite side of my desk. His name was A.K. Narain, at that time he was based in the States. I already knew he'd done a book on Indo Greeks and so I was learning from him. He was there for about a month. And from talking to him, I learned about Indo Greeks. And then he asked me if I would look at a group of coins from Chinese Central Asia, which had Kharoshthi inscriptions on one side and Chinese inscriptions on the other side. He wanted me to join him in putting together a conference presentation on these coins [looking at them] from the Chinese perspective and the Indian perspective and we did that. And then because the biggest collection of these coins at that time was in the British Museum, from Aurel Stein, and so I carried on looking at them after the conference and was feeling not very impressed by what he'd done on the Indian side. So, I started to look at the Kharoshthi inscriptions

and trying to understand where the imagery from these coins was coming from. They always had a horse or a camel on them and which led me into looking at Indo-Scythian, Kushan, Indo-Parthian (coins), looking at the publications on them, I realised that they haven't been very well served either. The South Asian, Central Asian and East Asian parts of the collection part of the collection had only been really looked at in recent times by Islamicists. And the last person who looked at ancient Indian coins was Allan, John Allan in the 1930s. John Allan wasn't an Indologist. So a lot of things had to be done. And that got me looking at some more central Asian and Indian [coins]. Then it became clear to me that it was a lot easier to engage academically by looking at Central Asia and South Asia, because there was only one other person working on East Asia, in the West. So there was a very small audience, whereas South Asia and Central Asia [had a bigger audience], and it became clear that I could go to conferences and give presentations [more easily]. So I gave one on the origins of India coinage, another one on the Buddha image on Kanishka's coins, and that pushed me further and further to work on Central and South Asia. And also a bit on Southeast Asia as well.

SG: Right

JC: So it goes full circle, because I'm now doing slightly more work on East Asia again.

SG (6:57): Yeah, that's really interesting, how you started off looking into them. So many things here are dictated by place the coincidence that you were working at the museum when you met somebody else working on Indian coins and how that sparked your interest.

JC I know. I mean, it's quite interesting. Many people working in museums are coming in through doing postgraduate studies. I never did any postgraduate studies. I just came straight from my first degree. What I've noticed with people working, it's not true of everybody, but quite often, the PhD topic determines what they do for the rest of their career, and they don't stray. And it's, I think, working on both South, Central, South East and East Asia, opens up lots more models of how coinage works. And also having to also at the same time work as a generalist answering queries. I also gained insights into how British numismatics, European numismatics, Roman numismatic, Greek numismatics work.

SG: And differs from South Asian or East Asian as well.

JC: So it all feeds into getting a broader picture of the specifics. When looking at a particular topic, I've got in my head all these other series of coins. So, in the Numismatic Chronicle, I wrote four papers on the generality of numismatics, they're called "Money as Metaphor". And there I could put Roman coins and Chinese coins alongside each other. What are the commonalities? What are the differences?

SG: Yeah, those are very interesting to read as well. I have one follow up from this, which is that you said that you studied classics, but not in the traditional sense of classics.

JC: Classics in most universities means you do Latin and Greek alongside each other. Most of my degree was Latin. And the Greek was a small part of it. And you know it was just how it was done at London University at that time.

SG: But, you know, all the colonial officials working in India, most of them were Classicists. And of course, that education really influenced the way they looked at South Asian coins.

JC: Well, I think, you know, they didn't necessarily go on into undergraduate [and post-graduate] studies or anything like that in classics, but at school, it was a big part of teaching then

SG: and also their civil service training. Okay. That was really interesting. Next question is what kind of Indian coins were you interested in studying? Which I think you've answered a little bit as well

JC (10:31): Yes, I think my main interest is trying to solve problems. So I can see the (puzzles), for example, of punch-mark coins. I looked at the main publications that existed on them, in the 70s and 80s. And P L Gupta was the dominant scholar. And I examined the logic of the chronology. And that made me think this problem is not solved by the methods that have been used so far. And that the evidential basis for creating a chronology was partly through a couple of hoards that had Western material alongside punch-mark coins, and also a construction of the history drawn from the Puranas, and from Jain texts and Buddhist texts as well etc. So that it was a chronology based on a mythology. And so I started to look at how would one go about creating a chronology that just used firm pieces of evidence,

SG: Right.

JC: And the solution I came up with, meant that the [earliest] Indian coins were much later than P L Gupta proposed. And I also think that the impetus to make coinage in the early period, was coming from the Iranian world. So the Iranian empire penetrated as far as what is now Pakistan. And within that area, they were using silver money. And then India started using silver money. Whereas if you look in the texts, there's no evidence before the Mauryan period that silver was being used as money at all. Gold and cattle were the forms of money. So I thought, it seemed to me logical to argue that way. But of course, one of my favourite quotes is that "the logic of history and the logic of historians rarely coincide".

SG: That's a really good quote, yeah. It makes a lot of sense

JC (13:25): But I think that my methodology is always to try and start from the evidence, rather than to start from a theoretical basis.

SG: Right. And you think that numismatics in particular is definitely very well suited for this kind of an approach? Because considering how the discipline works, and how you

build on previous knowledge, etc, serves nicely to starting from the object itself. And then,

JC: Yes that's right. Yes, I think you can't do analysis of numismatic data without looking at the coins.

SG: Exactly. Exactly.

JC (14:10): I mean, that the other big area that I've worked on is Kushans and coming into the Kushan world through the material from Central Asia, I started to look at coins with Kharoshthi on and then trying to understand what's going on with the early Kushan period. Looking at this period because that seemed to me [it was in] this period when these coins in Central Asia were being issued in Xinjiang. Then you run into the problem of Kushan chronology. And so I suppose quite a motive with much of my research was to try and put together evidence to show how the chronology was constructed and question the strongest misconception about Kushana chronology i.e that the era of Kanishka has to match a historical era. So when the question was first asked, they thought it was the Vikrama era, and put Kanishka in the first century BC. And then a consensus emerged on putting it with the Shaka era. And looking from my perspective, looking at coins, that didn't make sense. And I was gradually trying to piece together the evidence to show that an early second century AD date was better for Kanishka. And Harry Falk, found [a date by reexamining] a Sanskrit text, which suggested a specific date. Since then, going back then looking through the evidence, [I can show that Falk's] specific date seems to be plausible

SG: Of course, that's been that's been a big issue ever since the 20th century, that finally resolved a lot with your contributions so

JC: Well, I think it's very interesting that the balance (rests) between people going back and re examining the evidence, and people who are almost religiously attached to one date.

SG: Yeah

JC: And then when that counter evidence is put to them, they try to explain away the counter evidence, rather than question their own belief.

SG: Yeah. And it becomes a lot more about your personal opinions in some ways as opposed to trying to understand and come together collaboratively to put together an answer.

JC: Yeah. I think one of the most interesting things I read recently was Ranabir Chakravarti's essay [on the Kushans] in the big history of India.

SG: Oh I haven't seen that. Okay

JC: In this volume [*History of Ancient Indian* vol. 4 edited by D.K. Chakrabarti and M Lal, New Delhi 2014], because he's a good scholar, he's aware of all the more recent literature, but he's also a disciple of B N Mukherjee. So he doesn't question B N Mukherjee's analysis. And so he's trying to juggle how one can explain away all the contradictory evidence.

SG (18:29): Well, thanks for that. I didn't know about the book. I'll look it up. Yeah. Um, okay. So I think you've mentioned this a little bit earlier as well but when you were working as a curator at the British Museum, what kind of coins were you specifically looking at? You said, you started answering out with queries.

JC: Well, I started on Chinese coins. And then also, I was looking at then Sino-Kharoshthi coins from Xinjiang. And then that led me into looking at Indo-Scythian, Indo-Parthian and Indo-Greek, etc., and of course Kushan. I also looked at the early coins in Southeast Asia, to try and make sense of what people were saying about them and I suggested an alternative chronology, which I now think is probably too extreme. But there's still a lot of misconceptions about that. One of the things that is very clear in numismatics is that a lot of the scholarship is done by people who are collectors rather than academics. And they always want their coins to be important. So they do tend to stray away from some of the proper methodology. And (I'll admit) that because I am also almost self trained in terms of research, I do get criticised for similar things. Yesterday, I was reading a thing by Gerard Fussman, a French scholar, who is now dead. He was one of the leading experts on the Kushans and on Kharoshthi inscriptions, etc. He did a survey of recent publications and negatively critiqued every one of my publications.

SG: Okay, well.

JC: Probably because he [Fussman] was, like BN Mukherjee, a firm believer in 78 AD for Kanishka and I was questioning that, so he didn't like what I had to say. I said that there were overstrikes, which show a connection between the Sassanian and the Kushan world, and I drew some conclusions from that, but he just dismissed it saying, 'I can't see what he's talking about.'

SG: Like you said, you know, especially I mean, this, now the discipline has changed. And there are a lot more institutional avenues to become a numismatist, or pursue museum studies, things like that. But, for instance, in the time period that I'm looking at, of course, all of these are collectors who are writing about coins, and they're responsible for some of the earliest research and publication and catalogues that have come out on coins.

JC: Yes, exactly.

SG (22:04): Yeah. And it's interesting, because in a lot of their writings, for instance, in Whitehead's, he really privileges his position as a collector, to argue for the validity of his, you know, ideas and his arguments that as a collector who's been in Punjab and who has worked there, I have more experience than XYZ person who has never visited

India, and it's not a collector. Yeah. And I mean, it's interesting how things have changed, because now you almost perhaps don't have to visit collections.

JC: I've never been to South Asia. In fact in 1982, I flew to America. And after that, I decided I never wanted to fly again. Travelling to South Asia or East Asia is not something I'm going to ever do. It is an interesting [aspect of collectors], I think the most recent person like Whitehead is R C Senior. Senior collected extensively in Pakistan, and India, and built a huge collection of Indo-Scythian coins and Indo-Parthian coins, and his cataloguing of them is outstanding. But he also has opinions on the chronology of these coins and how they should be studied, which I find very difficult to give credence to. And, you know, somethings by him are well argued, but sometimes it's his determination to avoid other forms of evidence that is hard to grip. He's a firm believer in 78 AD [as the date of Kanishka].

SG: I see

JC: Things have been pointed out to him. If you have it like this, then [it must follow like that], and so he had to start to question the dating of the Gupta era. And

SG: Yeah. unfolds the whole Pandora's Box.

JC: Yes, So the construction of chronology is a very difficult thing anyway, but what is very good about collectors is that they build this body of material that enables research to take place. One can't now do any research on Indo-Scythians and Indo-Parthians without reference to Senior's work. Yeah, it is an outstanding contribution to the subject.

SG: Yeah

JC (25:03): And it is like what Michael Mitchiner was doing earlier. His book on Indo Greeks, Indo Scythians, Indo-Parthians, is also a great monument to his abilities in as a collector. They are the base from which one can do much.

SG: Yeah, no, that's I guess that's the true spirit of the discipline to build on.

JC: I do find, it's surprising that so many modern scholars in numismatics, have contempt for collectors.

SG: Yeah

JC: They don't like to be in contact with collectors or the trade or anything. And without coin collectors and coin dealers, we wouldn't have any collections to study.

SG (26:05): Definitely not. Actually, that lends itself to something that I've been thinking about while doing these interviews. And something also that relates to the next question about your time as a curator at the British Museum which is that this distance between the trade and the academic discipline has only become wider and wider in some ways.

In the sense that modern ethics dictate that you shouldn't be too involved in the art trade, that you shouldn't be having these dealings with dealers, whereas in the early 20th century, so many coins came from dealers, if not directly under,

JC (26:40): I think the UNESCO Convention, and the decision by the British government to sign up to it in 1995, has had a profound change in the way certain numismatic collections have developed. And, you know, I think it's a very fraught question as to what is the right thing to do about this? Because, I see, part of my role is to preserve heritage. And not participating in what's going on in the coin trade, means, huge amounts of heritage are being destroyed.

SG: Yeah

JC: So [for example], I was looking at one coin [type of the Western Turk] period in Afghanistan. And there are only one or two coins of this type in the British Museum so I start looking online to see if I could find anything. And I discovered that there was a hoard of the series of coins I was looking for, which had been sold two or three at a time over the last 10 years. And you could see that the counter marks on the coins were consistent. [Academically] the coinage was only known from a few solitary specimens, but it must be over 100 of them have been sold in auction. One can quite often see that hoards have been dealt with in this way. The big hoard of coins from Afghanistan, from the period just after Alexander and before the Bactrian kingdom was established, went through auctions. They said in the auction catalogue was said that it came from a collection that had been in out of Afghanistan since the 1960s, you can take that statement with pinch of salt. That important hoard was not published as a hoard because of the illegal trade.

SG: Yeah, because it was..

JC: 30 or 40 years ago, dealers probably would have consulted the British Museum before they started marketing and the hoard would have been recorded.

SG: Yeah, because they were in touch with them. Definitely.

JC: An inventory of the hoard would have been made

SG: would have been useful. Yeah.

JC: So that that piece of information has been damaged

SG: and lost now.

JC (29:44): The hoard is coming from Afghanistan. And that creates all sorts of problems because there isn't sufficient authority within Afghanistan to protect their own heritage, and no financial resources. And so, you can compare it with what's happening in Britain with the Portable Antiquities Scheme and the Treasure Act etc. [Here] there is a system

in place that ensures that such information is not lost. Whereas for this hoard, it has been lost.

SG: Yeah. The implications are, are yeah quite profound for numismatic studies. But when, for instance, how did these ethical considerations influence the way you were acquiring coins for the museum? Was it solely through public auctions? Was it through bequests?

JC (30:50): I would say the whole range of things. There were some dealers who we were in contact with who would regularly turn up with material which needed to be recorded. We would, sometimes, if it seemed the right thing to do, acquire the whole group, sometimes we would record the whole group and select from it. [But] once we decided that we would no longer acquire things without a provenance before 1970 those contacts disappeared completely. So the flow of materials still continued, but we didn't see it, except when it went into auction catalogues, and we could detect that it was from a hoard.

SG: so essentially

JC: Some of the material that we acquired were priced something like 50 p each, [i.e.] totally trivial material, if it wasn't for the coin trade, which would have been melted down. By the time they got to Europe, they were only worth 50 Pence each. So the person who found it was paid a tiny amount, but a little bit more than they would have got if they sold it to a metal merchant, for pots or whatever. So the coin trade was what was preserving that piece of evidence.

SG: Yeah

JC: Going back to Charles Masson in the 1830s. That's exactly what he did. Because he thought, [that] by collecting all the coins that turned up at the site of Begram, you could get some idea of the history of Begram. The coins that had previously been brought from the site came to the metal merchants, as it was a good source of copper.

SG: Definitely

JC: Well preserved

SG: Yeah. Yeah, I guess that is one way in which being at the site or the location of a particular ruler, dynasties, etc, has really helped in the early 20th 19th century to know more about...

JC: So I don't know how this situation will be resolved. Because my impression is that many of the people who make the most noise about preserving heritage are not interested in heritage. They're interested in their own political careers. I've been to UNESCO meetings, lectures by people from UNESCO. And when Afghanistan was invaded by the Americans and the British there was a UNESCO red list created and I just

thought this, this is almost pointless. It's not doing what's needed. The work of preserving Afghanistan's heritage has to be done in a different way.

SG: Yeah. And it often has to depend on some local contribution as well. Otherwise, the top-down approach never really works as well.

JC: Yeah, well, I mean there were, good people working in Afghanistan and there are still some [effective] people there. But the extent to which they're able to do things is very limited.

SG: It's unfortunate.

JC: It's unfortunate but such an important cultural region, but is so badly served.

SG: Yeah, definitely.

Okay, so. I'm just trying to go back, we don't steer.

Okay. So, as I was saying, coming coming back to, at your time at the British Museum, of course, you were curating these collections and with the new Money Gallery, and a major exhibition, etc. But coins, for instance, are much more difficult to display as opposed to

JC: Yes they are

SG: Rather bigger items like sculptures or paintings, etc have their own challenges. But coins, given how small they are, are particularly challenging to curate [for display]. So what was your approach and in trying to put them on display, what were you trying to achieve with your..

JC (35:50): Well, I think presenting coins in a way that people can have an intimate engagement with them is really important. Putting coins into exhibitions where you have an exhibition about all sorts of other things, [there are problems with including] a few coins, because often the coins are badly lit and too far back from the viewer to actually engage with them. If the coins are going to be in that context, they have to be handled very carefully. In displays where the main focus is coins, it's obviously easier because the people are in that space, because they want to look at these objects. But then again, you've got to do it in a way that creates that intimacy. And I always think a coin should be [displayed in a position close to where it would be if you were holding it in your hand in front of a window or similar source of light].

SG: about eye level

JC: Yeah, in the same way, as you would hold it in your hand to look at it. And so creating a short distance between the glass at the front of the case, and putting the coins at an angle, where you would hold them to catch the light. You know, so often you see vertical displays of coins, which means that the light doesn't fall on them properly. You've got to tilt them back a bit. And you need to put them within the normal eye range; you can't have coins, too high or too low. And all those sorts of things have to be addressed. And

you've got to also take care of people in wheelchairs and children [by not putting coins too high]. And so again, you've got to restrict things.[It is also important to remember] 'less is more', it's important that you don't overwhelm people, so they don't know where to look. So I think, displaying coins is really important, because they are part of the evidence of history but you've got to do it with a lot of thought as to how you present them

SG: seems like a very intricate practice.

JC: Yeah. So, the Ashmolean, and the displays there, learnt a lot from the way we've done it in the British Museum.

SG: I see

JC: One of the things in the British Museum [displays] was the importance of presenting coins within a frame that allowed people to understand what they were looking at. Within the British Museum [Money Gallery], we did it in within the frame of money. We put into the display money that people were actually using themselves so that they would understand when you show them an ancient Chinese knife coin, that it's in the same frame as a five pound note.

SG: Yeah

JC: You're saying there is some equivalence here, which enables people to pass through that barrier to comprehend.

SG: It really comes out in the gallery, [through showing] the evolution of money and how the modern parts relate to [the experience of] modern day users. So you can use your understanding to make sense of the previous forms [of money]as well. That's important. But so, Robert Bracey was really kind to share with me the proofs of your upcoming catalogue.

JC: Oh yes

SG : Yes, So I was reading through the introduction, and you've mentioned how this was part of the, the time when the gallery was inaugurated, I guess, was also a part of this engagement of understanding coins more as money as opposed to looking them as just as coins.

JC: Yes.

SG (41:33): So was that what was dictating our approach towards having a gallery, which is not about just a particular type of coins or looking at imagery and symbolism as opposed to tracing its history through time, right up to the present?

JC: I think my motivation began with the exhibition in 1986, called *Money: from Cowrie Shells to Credit Cards*. And I think that's flowing out of my engagement with East Asian

coinage. It's impossible to understand the history of money in in China, just through coins, because coins were just one element of their monetary system. And the monetary system included paper money, included ingots, at times it included silk. And so that alerted me to not just looking at coins. So, whenever I was looking at coins, it's always thinking about their functionality as money. And so when, in 1986, the department decided they were going to have an exhibition and I thought it would be a really good idea [to frame a display featuring] coinage within [the concept of] money. The dominant idea of the Money Gallery at the time was to show the treasures of the British Museum coin collection [in the display].

SG: Of course,

JC: which will not interest anybody other than the numismatists.

SG: Yeah

JC: Fortunately, [my idea about money as a frame] was able to win again. I think that this also influenced the way other members of the department engaged with the collections.

SG: Yeah, no, that's quite, that's quite an interesting vision. And I mean, it's clearly stood the test of time, in some ways that it still holds on it.

JC: Well, I think it's been very influential. I think a lot of other museums adopted that approach.

SG: Yeah, yeah.

JC: It all began with the exhibition in 86

SG: That's great. That's great. Okay. So, I now want to investigate a little bit more about the engagement people have had with the Indian coins in the collection.

JC: Yes.

SG (44:12): So, what I am trying to, for instance understanding is was there an interest in them from museums in India? Were museums in India borrowing these coins for exhibitions, they're, of course, you know, with coins, considering the fact that they are not singular pieces and you can often have similar items in different collections, perhaps you don't need them as much except for some rare pieces. But I just want to understand the engagement and collaboration between British Museum and museums in India in terms of

JC (45:00): I think it's quite interesting that there is a steady flow of coins, and has been for a long time to exhibitions elsewhere, [both within the UK and abroad].

SG: Okay

JC: I would say India has not really been a big participator of that, I think largely because they have their own collections.

SG: Yes

JC: And also, because the people who work in India museums are generally not academics.

SG: No

JC: So they don't really have an interest in the current climate of numismatic research. So they still churn out displays which reflect the scholarship of Cunningham and people like that.

SG: Yes, I know what you mean.

JC: And, you know, I can't say this is their fault. It's just the way that Indian museums are administered. And it's a heritage of British rule.

SG: Yeah, definitely.

JC: It's the British [who] setup the museums and they became fossilised.

SG: In colonial taxonomies and classification systems

JC: I mean, currently, the Lahore Museum, which was the Punjab Museum, the coin collection is sealed at the moment, and has been for about three years and it's because they have this audit process, which has frozen the collection. Somebody, the previous curator retired, and when she retired, they sealed the collection and the person who had been appointed to succeed her, is still at the museum but doesn't have access to the collection.

SG: It's really unfortunate because it's a great collection

JC: before the previous person retired, there was a Pakistani scholar working on cataloguing their ancient collection for a new publication. And that work has stopped and it is a really important collection, on a par with the collection in the Indian Museum.

SG: Absolutely, yeah. No, the Lahore museum collection is definitely very good.

JC: You know, I think there's a sort of management by paranoia. When [a colleague at the British Museum working on Indian coins] went to the Indian Museum to look at coins and they could only show him a handful of coins. They couldn't let him see anymore.

SG: Yeah, well, it's difficult or even when I've been doing research, you hardly, ever I've hardly ever seen any of the collections inside the museums.

JC: It's always displays, but not [access to the reserve collection which is what academics need to study].

SG: Yeah, exactly. Looking at the displays,

JC: research reserves are the most important.

SG: Yeah. You know, British Museum has always been known for, or I guess one of the claims to fame, is that it's an accessible collection, that anybody can come see it

JC (48:10): It is it is. Yeah I was gonna say something about that. I mentioned [Shailendra Bhandare] worked at the British Museum. When Shailendra came first to the UK, he came at the invitation of the Fitzwilliam Museum.

SG: Yes.

JC: They encouraged him to work on their collections. And I met him during that period. And I managed to get some funding to invite him to come and work at the British Museum. And that was just part of a bigger picture of enabling people from the countries of origin of the collection to study the collections here because I'm conscious of the limitations of studying coins in India and Pakistan, etc. So I was also able to get funding from a Japanese foundation to invite people to come and spend a 10 month internship in the coin department and the, it was under the title of [The Hirayama] Silk Road Coins Curator traineeship.

SG: I see

JC: And so we had people from Sri Lanka, from India, from China, from Pakistan and from Russia

SG (50:04): Yeah.

JC: Just trying to think if I've missed anyone. So overall, we had about 10 traineeships, and one of them we split, so that somebody from France could take part in one of the years because they were working on Indo-Scythian coins, [which are particularly well represented in the British Museum]. It was good opportunity for them. And many of those relationships continue.

SG: Yeah.

JC: So, one of the people who participated in that will be coming in August to work at BM and also at the Ashmolean

SG: really built lasting relationships from these.

JC: I also was able to get money from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. There was some project that, they were handing out money to museums [to encourage partnerships]. So I said, Why don't we invite people to come and help us with the documentation of, of the collection. And it also gives them an opportunity to spend a couple of months studying a series of coins deeply. And we have people from Nasik, from Hyderabad, from Pakistan and two people from Calcutta. That's right, so, five people came, and that was the sense that we are looking after these collections, not for ourselves, but for everybody, and giving people opportunities to come. And so I set up funds at the Royal Numismatic Society, the intention of these were just to enable people to come [to the UK to study the collections we are holding]. [This year] there are two people [will be funded to come] from Calcutta to work in the British Museum [and one from Pakistan and next year we have two people coming from China and one from Tajikistan]. And I just recently organised another grant fund for the RNS specifically to invite people from Asia [thanks to a Canadian collector and his wife].

SG: Yeah, I remember. Yeah, that's quite amazing.

JC: So it is, I think, the responsibility of those looking after these collections, which were part of the Imperial process of building knowledge about the colonies and the Empire by collecting artefacts, so we have a responsibility then to share them,

SG: Share it back. Yeah. And enable different kinds of knowledge exchange.

JC: For them, they learn from us and we learn from them.

SG (53:16): Yeah, no, that's quite great. That's quite good to know there's been so much initiative. You were we were we were briefly, you mentioned catalogues, which which brings me to the next question, which is, of course, a lot of the collection of the museum is available on Collections Online through a public facing database. But I'm trying to understand more about how equipped the databases for instance, to capture knowledge about coins, particularly from South Asia. For instance, this is just a different example but a friend who, a colleague who works on women collectors of South Asian material at the British Museum. She realised how you know, it's not very well equipped to record women's contribution because they're always listed as Mrs. so and so and you can hardly find the first name etc etc. And yeah, I'm trying to understand more about what you think of, of the coins that are on there and how, how useful the catalogue, the online catalogue has been for people researching.

JC (54:25): It depends what you're using it for. And also to what extent it's populated. At the moment, the database has been in construction for about 20 odd years. And when it started, there was a lot of negativity about it. And the then head of department seemed determined to make it as difficult as possible to populate it, because he didn't like the idea. And gradually over time, it's become clear that it is useful and more positive attitudes to it [developed]. When I left [the Museum], which was 14 years ago, it was incredibly difficult to upload data to it, but we were just getting to the point where we

could create spreadsheets and then the spreadsheets will be uploaded. And that seems quite a good step forward, [but still the data being uploaded was fairly basic].

SG: Basic

JC: The nuances that come from academic work are not there. Now there's also information about the collectors being added. But again, it's often [still quite basic], so it'll just say 'coin collector'. So [there is still a lot of] information to be added, but it all requires resources, i.e. people who know what they're doing, people who care that that information is there, and then the infrastructure to enable it to be done. So every coin should have an image and every coin should have some sort of reference so that people have [what they need], that all takes time to do and you know, if you're doing a large group of coins, then sometimes the bulk simplifies the work. Every so often you encounter something where you need to spend an hour putting in the entry in rather than a few minutes and so, you know so it's very resource heavy.

SG: Yeah.

JC: And you do need experts

SG: Yeah, you need experts who have all different kinds of technical skills. You need photographers, and those who understand the system and the way the computer part of it works.

JC: Yeah, and you also need a good search engine. Well, you know, it's good to see the Ashmolean putting lots of coins up, but the search engine doesn't work. I've been using it to access the Senior collection and you can get it to display almost all the Senior collection, but then you've got to plough through pages and pages and pages, [in order] to find the things you're after. It isn't always put up in the order that you want to use it. It's very frustrating. The British Museum database now has got a good search engine, so you can pull things out much more effectively.

SG: Yeah you know, it's been useful to me as well of course, the information is not always comprehensive, like it would show say 10 coins when somebody has donated 15. That's quite possible but at least you can find who donated it, the year and perhaps one basic, two or three sentences about that person which is not a lot but at least a starting point.

JC (59:04): Yeah, there's Lady Sale and Emily Eden. Two really important early collectors

SG: Yeah.

JC: Both of whom are are well documented in other places.

SG: Yeah. Yeah, no, those are a very, have got information on them on the database ..

JC: Have you read Emily's novels?

SG: I haven't read the novels. But

JC: It's like latter day Jane Austen. Quite entertaining. You don't have to [even read them,] as you can listen to them online now.

SG: There's an audio book. Nice.

JC: There is Librivox, which is

SG: Okay.

JC: An amateur audible.

SG: Oh, I see. I didn't know about this.

JC: LibriVox

The role of collectors is always very interesting [that was revealed] while doing the Kushan catalogue. I don't know, whether Robert shared with you the chapter on the collection,

SG: I haven't got to that chapter yet. I just read the introduction

JC (01:00:16): Yeah, it's got lots of information about all these different collectors, and some of them took quite a lot of searching [down]to work out who they were.

SG: Yeah. I can imagine.

JC: There is the name Jacomb [attached to several coins in the collection] and she's the daughter of a British General. So by working out who she was, I could say where the coins came from, i.e. the location of collecting because her father was involved in the campaigns in the Northwest.

And so, it is interesting to try and track all these people down.

SG: Yeah. Another interesting one that I came across was, I mean, of course, Da Cunha, Jose Gerson da Cunha's collection came together after one auction. But then a few of his coins were donated by his daughter, which I didn't realise until very late was his daughter, because in the in the index, and also on the database, her name is listed as Da Costa. That's her name after she got married. And then you have to connect the dots to know that it's the same woman whose name was Da Cunha before she got married, and then realised that the collection was probably her father's. And, yeah, it was just a very random way that I came across it otherwise, I wouldn't have realised

JC: I know. There was a Chinese student, came earlier this year. He came to look at coins of the Qing Dynasty. And in the British Museum, we have got some really good collections. When I came with him to Oxford for a day we found that one of the collections [there matched one] that is in the British Museum, so part of the collection

didn't get donated [to the BM], but was kept by the collector. And then his son in law, gave it to the Ashmolean and the Ashmolean then gave part of it to the Fitzwilliam.

SG: So, it's in three collections

JC: So, his collections are in three different places, but that was something I was completely unaware of. Suddenly, seeing the tickets under the ones in the Ashmolean I realised it and then I was looking at the Fitzwilliam website and realised that the same donor's [material had also been] passed on.

SG: Yeah, it's interesting when you cross compare these collections, a lot of patterns.

JC: When I joined the British Museum in 1970, there was interest in the provenance of certain sorts of coins. So there was a lot of people who collected Anglo Saxon coins and the people who studied them were trying to track them back to 19th century collections, but in other parts of the collection, nobody cared. [Some coins with known provenances in the collection got exchanged without regard to their origins]. And at a time when we didn't have good photography to record the exchanged coins.

SG: Yeah. Do you think that attitude has changed now with..

JC (01:03:53): Yes, definitely. When Andrew Burnett became keeper, and I became his deputy, we discussed exchanges and decided that no more exchanges would ever take place again. It's in the British Museum Act that duplicates can be exchanged. Working on the Masson collection with Elizabeth Errington brought it home to me just how important these issues were. And looking at Prinsep's collection, which is really important. And Indrajī's collection. Yes, both of which were damaged by exchanges.

SG: Yes, yeah.

JC: It's a real tragedy.

SG: Yeah, it it and I was reading the bequest. I don't, I mean, not the original bequest Indrajī gave. But in the sense that his letters about the bequest, and that he decided that he specifically asked for the collection to be kept together and separately, and to record his name under it. But a lot of it has been, unfortunately exchanged.

JC: Oh yes, we don't really have a good sense of what's left.

SG: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. So in terms of, again, in terms of accessing the collections, you were saying that you answered in your role as curator, and before a lot of queries online queries etc. So was that interest from people in India? You mentioned already, all of these research projects.

JC: Yeah. I would say, it wasn't remarkable. There was interest, right, from the Indian collectors. I wouldn't say it was remarkable.

SG (01:05:45): Some people who are not academics as well, from the general public, for instance?

JC: Yeah. It's the level of inquiries. I think it has tailed off now because of change of policy. But there was a continual stream of inquiry, both at the door, and also in through post, and then online, but in about 2012, I think, there was a decision that no coins [brought by the public] would be looked at unless they had a legitimate provenance. And so somebody turns up at the door, or sends in post, an Indian coin, they won't answer the inquiry, because it might be illegally traded. And I think that's seems to me a bizarre decision because until you look at it, [you wouldn't know how it arrived here?] You can't conduct that bit of diligence without having looked at the coin and talked to the person. So, you know, you're already limiting what you see. And, and I think it's better to engage with the person and say, well, this is a coin, blah, blah, blah. And did you realise that by bringing it out of India or Pakistan, or whatever, you've broken the law. Maybe you should think about returning it. And some people will, you know respond to that.

SG: Yeah. But you need to talk to them essentially. Interesting

JC: And if it is a coin of great historical importance, then you've missed that opportunity, of at least recording information. And it's always a problem. I would say, there are about five collectors that I'm regularly in contact with. And I learned so much from them.

SG: I'm sure, yeah.

JC: And two of them are Indian, both living in the States. And one is Pakistani, and lives in Dubai. Another Indian, who lives in Bombay. And then the other collector is German, he lives in Germany. But you know, they are a constant source of information about coins.

SG: Yeah, I'm sure it's very important to sort of keep up to date with this information.

JC: Yes

SG: Yes, and it again, it brings me to my next question, which is, who were some of the people from India that you've been collaborating with?

JC: Well, I can tell you that I made a list of them

SG: Oh, amazing thank you

JC: Sutapa Sinha in Calcutta University, who is a professor in the history, medieval history department. She is one of the leading experts on Sultanate coins

SG: Yes I was just reading her work

JC: and then Susmita Basu Majumdar, who is again in Calcutta University, and she's professor in the ancient history department. She works on she works on early coins.

And then, Suchandra Ghosh who was in Calcutta University, but is now in Hyderabad and is one of the leading ancient historians. And of course, A K Narain I mentioned, and some contact with P L Gupta, but not a huge amount.

SG: What about? I mean, I'm trying to understand, because I'm looking at an early period, India, including like Pakistan, etc. So in Lahore, for instance, yeah

JC: Yeah I have just got this couple of other people in India, Amiteshawara Jha who was at Nasik Institute.

SG: Yeah yeah yeah

JC: And K K Maheshwari, who was the founder of the Nasik Institute. And there's lots of collectors. You know, I'm continually receiving emails from them asking me questions. And that I used to get, I decided, earlier this year that I would stop having a Facebook presence numismatically. Before that I was continually being asked.

SG: Okay.

JC: And there's Sanjeev Kumar, who lives in America. He has written a big book on Gupta coins, and he consults me weekly.

SG: That's a lot of exchange.

JC: Yeah. In Pakistan, the two main contacts I have are with Gul Rahim Khan and with Naseem Khan, who was his teacher, and is now in China at the moment, working in an Institute of Art History.

SG: Oh, interesting.

JC: And then, collectors, you know, I get emails and I used to get Facebook queries.

SG: So, I mean, of course, you're working with them via email, etc, electronically. You must meet them in conferences.

JC: Gul Rahim and Nasim I've met and [then a collector] in Dubai. Every time they come to the UK, I meet them.

SG: You meet them, of course

JC: And this collector in Pakistan, who comes to UK quite often and I meet with him. He is based in Northern Gandhara. I just published an article in the ONS journal, which using part of his collection and part of ur Rahman's collection.

SG: Okay, wow, yeah.

So, um, I was going to ask whether the ONS has been a good forum

JC: Yes, yeah, I mean, the ONS is part of that picture.

SG: To collaborate with these people.

JC: There is a very big collector community in India. But like many collectors, they only want to spend their money on coins. Joining organisations costs money.

SG: It does.

JC: And so there seems to be some overlap. And so there are some people through that route.

SG: Do you think that these societies are also more built for academics rather than collectors. (1:15:00)

JC: No, the ONS was, was started by collectors.

SG: Right.

JC: And we're very keen to maintain that, the current head is a collector. His predecessor was a collector, then there was me, and then the two people who were head of the society before him were both collectors. So, you know we're very keen on that tradition.

SG: That's quite nice.

JC: It's a mix of collectors, academics, and dealers, so we don't exclude anybody. But we do have dilemmas if somebody is saying, here's a hoard of coins that I've just bought from Afghanistan, so what do we do about that?

SG: And, of course, opinions don't match there.

JC: So we've one article, we've been having quite a lot of discussion, whether we publish it or not, because it's very explicitly an Afghan hoard and my feeling is that we can't stop the coin trade.

SG: No, definitely.

JC: But we should be seeking to preserve knowledge of the history of these countries. I've also had contacts in Central Asia as well, currently, working with coin curators in Tajikistan. And part of this funding that I've raised for the RNS will mean that they get invited to come to some extent for understanding the numismatic world, to see the collections here and to meet people who are working on them.

SG: Yeah, no, that's great. I mean, I think I'm, it's more and more people who come and see the collection and look at it. I think it only increases interest and curiosity both ways, which is, which is quite useful.

JC: Yes. Yeah.

SG: Yeah.

JC: And, you know, the RNS funds are there to be spent. If you have something that you think it'd be really useful for you to do that cost money, do apply?

Sg: Yes. So I mean, of course, you're you're researching sort of outside the British Museum in some ways, and officially, if not unofficially. But are you aware of is there more progress towards certain more decolonizing initiatives? However, you might want to see them? I know that it's really tough way to define.

JC: I think to me it's a very interesting topic, as you've probably understood from what I've been doing.

SG: Yes, yeah.

JC: I always felt that, as a British Museum [curator], we have a responsibility, to be honest about the sources of our collections and to enable people from all around the world to access them.

SG: Yes

JC: So those are things that I've been active in since soon after I joined the museum. The collection happens to be in Britain, but it's not a collection that is exclusively for British people, and exclusively for the curators. And I'd say certainly when I joined, there was a lot of that sort of attitude still there: 'We don't really want other people to come and look at our coins, because we're looking at them'.

SG: Yeah. The exclusivity of the community in some ways.

JC: I mean, when doing the Kushan catalogue, I said to Robert, now, you should go to Paris and photograph all the Kushan coins in Paris, so that we don't miss anything that they've got, but he wasn't allowed to. Because somebody else was supposed to be publishing the catalogue. So they didn't want anybody to photograph them. Fortunately, I had [some] access, as I'd been there [previously] and done some photography, long before this other project.. And also, Robert Göbl, photographed quite a lot of the Paris coin, so his record cards in Vienna also recorded [Paris coins]. So we were able to access some of the collection in that way. It's just that sort of mindset.

SG: It's the exclusive preserve

JC: 'It's ours, and you can't have them.' And I would say certainly, when I joined the Museum some of my colleagues had a similar attitude. The coin displays in the British Museum before 1986 were, quite often, electrotypes of coins, not the actual coins, because the curators didn't want to let them out of their keeping. And there was quite a hostility towards the general public. Again, the opening up of the collection [to the

public] really waited for that previous generation to disappear. And now it's been closed down again, you can only see things in the British Museum three days a week. It was five and a half days a week in the 70s and 80s.

SG: It's only two days a week now, I think.

JC: No, it is three days a week but you have to book long in advance. I was gonna come in July.

JC: Yeah.

SG: And when I contacted the department in July, there were only three days available. yeah, well, I guess in some ways that that indicates that there's a lot of interest but but of course, accessibility needs to

JC: And in the Ashmolean, you can only see the collection when a curator is available to show it to you.

JC: Yeah so the infrastructure that allowed people to come at any time. It's gone and Shailendra has been working on his exhibition.

SG: Yeah.

JC: That has limited access, limited time as well.

SG: Yeah, absolutely.

Um, so a related to that question about decolonizing. So how has there been more research in the history of collecting? I know, I mean, for instance, of course, my project is obviously a very direct outcome of that interest. But people who work in the museum, itself, for people that you are in touch with your numismatic community, so to say that they're more interested now in finding out

JC: Yes, they're more aware of this issue, and Robert Bracey is very committed to such issue. But I think it is a puzzling concept.

SG: Yeah, it is.

JC: Because India was not a colony. The Indian Raj was Empire not a colony. So to use the term decolonization [in relation to India is misleading], as the only real colonies were South Africa, Australia, Canada, most of the other parts of the empire were Imperial possession and exploitation. They weren't colonies as such. So I think the terminology is quite misplaced. Because Australia and Canada were marginal to the deprecation of the British Empire's officials and so there's a slight mismatch. And I think to me, it's all about honesty. Being open, not trying to pretend that empire was a good thing and that the Indian population was very lucky to have British rule for so long, which is quite a common attitudes still.

SG: It is, unfortunately, or surprisingly or not so surprisingly. But I was going to ask whether, I mean, I understand that the terminology is difficult and I for certain know that, but as you were saying the the impetus behind it, the rationale behind it as to promote access is to promote honest, honest ideas about where these collections came from etc. And I'm guessing I'm not, I think that, like, for instance, the catalogue that you're publishing, or for ensuring that this collection is documented representing online is part of that process, leading to that process, if not, of course, achieving it in full ways, I don't know how that can in any way.

JC (1:25:00): Because Robert was made redundant, the process of putting all the collection in the catalogue online was halted. Now, hopefully, it will be completed. The purpose of the catalogue is to present this material in a way that makes it accessible, but also to give people who are going to access Kushan coins, as a topic, a clearer understanding of what that material represents, how it can be used. And by putting it into a catalogue, which will then go online at some point, and also to put all the material on the database is making it as accessible as possible. And it means that, you know, anybody coming from abroad to work on the collection, also has a ready reference to how to use it. So access is key. It was certainly something that observing my older colleagues and the way they behaved [provided me with] a very good negative lesson.

SG: Well, a lesson learned still a useful lesson.

JC: Yes, exactly.

[Have removed this bit:

JC: You know, I mean, well, one of this is off topic of

SG: I'm going to now end the recording anyway, because I have I think I'm just going to check again and yes, I think I've asked whatever I needed to ask thanks so much, again, for answering so much in depth, and for sharing your your thoughts on this. I'm just gonna stop the recording now.]