



John L. Cotter Award in Historical Archaeology: Natascha Mehler

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Established in 1998, the John L. Cotter Award is named in honor of John Lambert Cotter (1911–1999), a pioneer educator and advocate for the discipline. The award recognizes outstanding achievement by an individual at the start of a career in historical archaeology. Awardees may either be in training as undergraduate or graduate students, or professionals at the beginning of their career. The award can be given for a single achievement that is truly outstanding in its respective category, or for a combination of early career accomplishments that, taken together, are significant. In January 2020, at the 53rd Conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology held in Boston, Massachusetts, the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) presented this award to Dr. Natascha Mehler (Fig. 1) in recognition of the cumulative impact of her internationally significant work in and on behalf of historical archaeology in Central Europe and the North Atlantic across the first decade of her career.

Historical archaeology is now more than 50 years old in North America, the United Kingdom, and Australasia. The era of pioneers, such as J. C. Harrington, Ivor Noël Hume, Ken Barton, David Crossley, Judy Birmingham, Graham Connah, and, indeed, John L. Cotter, is largely over, and the opportunities to have a foundational impact on the discipline are now few and far between. Historical archaeology as a subdiscipline is essentially secure, and its foundations fairly strong. The same is not true in many other parts of the world, where historical archaeology is



Fig. 1 Natascha Mehler.

still a new or emerging discipline, and where pioneering figures can still have a foundational impact. Dr. Natascha Mehler is one of those pioneers. She is one of the premier historical archaeologists in the German-speaking world, and her positive influence on the discipline has not just brought historical archaeology to greater prominence in her region, but has also helped to bring Central European historical archaeology to greater attention in North America.

From the beginning of her career, Dr. Mehler has focused on historical archaeology—despite a lack of established German precedents—and her research has been internationally engaged. Her doctorate, awarded by the University of Kiel in 2008, was on clay pipes in Bavaria from ca. 1600 to 1745. This was the first study of this category of material culture by a German archaeologist, and the resulting published monograph (Mehler 2010) was only the second book on historical

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archaeology published in Germany. She has continued to promote the archaeology of the postmedieval period across Germany and Austria via her teaching posts at the University of Vienna, her research-group leader post at the German Maritime Museum in Bremerhaven, and other roles. However, her interest in the archaeology of the North Atlantic has led her to engage far beyond her native Bavaria, the rest of Germany, and Austria. The North Atlantic has been a particular focus of her research, and she has undertaken fieldwork on early postmedieval fishing communities and German trading stations in Iceland, the Faeroe Islands, and Shetland. This work has been internationally engaged, and she has undertaken research collaborations with the University of Bergen (Norway), Bates College (Maine), the University of Iceland, and Trinity College, Dublin. She is also a visiting reader with the Institute for Northern Studies at the University of the Highlands and Islands (Scotland, UK).

The quality of her research has been amply demonstrated by significant career accolades, most notably the 2017 Caroline von Humboldt Prize. This is one of Germany's top cross-disciplinary academic prizes for female researchers. Dr. Mehler was not only the first historical archaeologist to be granted this prestigious award, but the first archaeologist of any kind. This was therefore an unprecedented achievement for a German female archaeologist, and a strong indication of the recognition of the quality of her pioneering work within her own country.

Yet the significance of her work extends beyond her own impressive research record. From the very beginning of her career, Dr. Mehler has played a transformative role in both promoting historical archaeology in her home region and in bringing Central European historical archaeology to broader attention. In 2009, just a year after her Ph.D. was awarded, she was the cofounder (and remains coeditor) of the open-access peer-reviewed academic journal *Historische Archäologie*, the first, and still the only, dedicated German-language journal for the discipline. She has published widely in English-language media, including SHA's journal *Historical Archaeology* (Mehler 2013a, 2018). Most notably, her 2013 edited volume, *Historical Archaeology in Central Europe*, was published by the Society for Historical Archaeology as part of the SHA Special Publications series (Mehler 2013b). This volume, with contributions from, for example, Germany, Slovenia, Hungary, and Poland, was the first major publication to cover the growing and internationally significant work of the region for an Anglophone audience; it remains the only English-language volume on its subject.

Her commitment to promoting this work with international audiences is demonstrated by her range of editorial advisory positions. She is currently an associate editor for *Historical Archaeology*, an editorial advisory board member for *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, and sits on the editorial board of the North Atlantic World series published by Brepols. She has served with distinction as the Continental Europe Current Research Coordinator for the *SHA Newsletter* since 2009. She has regularly promoted the work of her region at English-language conferences, including SHA conferences. Dr. Mehler has also had personal success in convincing German archaeologists to engage with British colleagues, encouraging and co-organizing the 2017 “New Directions in Late Medieval and Post-Medieval Archaeology in Britain and Germany” joint conference of the UK-based Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Archäologie des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit (DGAMN) at the German Maritime Museum in Bremerhaven.

These successes have come in the face of significant career challenges. German academia is profoundly conservative, deeply hierarchical, and frequently patriarchal. There is still no German professional society that deals solely with archaeology of the period after A.D. 1500. Until late 2019, there was no German archaeology research institute that covered archaeology dating after A.D. 1000; and while the Lower Saxony Institute for Historic Coastal Research in Wilhelmshaven has now hired a single individual covering the entire 2nd millennium A.D., it remains largely focused on prehistoric and early medieval sites. This lack of institutional support for postmedieval research is despite the fact that, according to figures from Dr. Mehler's own research on German archaeology, up to 50% of recent cultural resource management excavations in Germany have been on medieval and postmedieval sites (Mehler [2020a]).

It is functionally impossible to gain a permanent position in German-speaking academia (including both Germany and Austria) without a *Habilitation*, a qualification with no real equivalent in the English-speaking world, which requires the submission and defense of a second book of equal size to a Ph.D. dissertation, and with the broader implication that the holder is a fully qualified academic able to hold a professorial position. Dr. Mehler was granted her *Habilitation* (by the University of Vienna) in 2014. Of the 56 full professors of archaeology in Germany, 44 are professors of prehistory, 7 are professors of Roman archaeology, 5 are professors of medieval archaeology, and none are

postmedievalists. Only 17% of the prehistorians are women (Gutsmiedl-Schümann 2016), and all of the medieval archaeology professors are men (Mehler 2020b). Dr. Mehler’s recently awarded research professorship—a position that she created herself and which will begin in the second half of 2020—therefore continues her groundbreaking path.

It has taken extraordinary tenacity on Dr. Mehler’s part to carve out such an internationally influential career given the challenges faced by historical archaeology in Germany and Austria, and it is a testament to both the quality of her research and her leadership that she has succeeded. The cumulative impact of her own research and her support for the research of others have made Dr. Mehler the premier promoter of Central European historical archaeology and a leading international pioneer in this discipline—and this in only a decade since being awarded her doctorate.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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