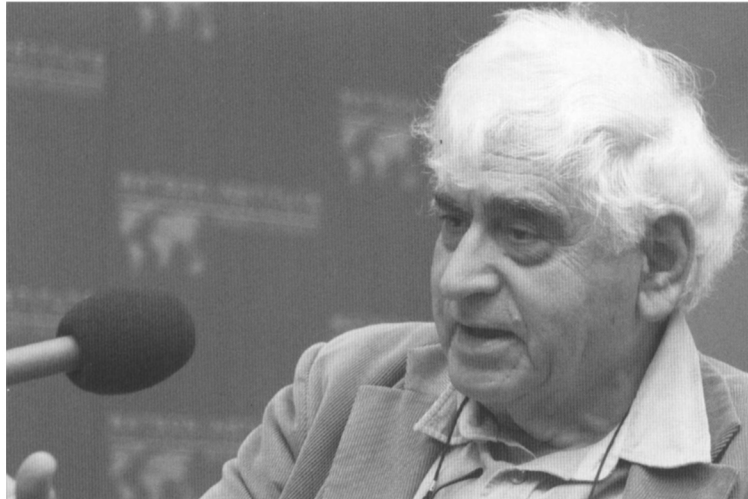


OBITUARY

BEHNAM ABU AL-SOOF, BA, PhD (1931–2012)



Photograph courtesy of the Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University

Behnam Abu al-Soof was the senior member of the second generation of Iraqi archaeologists. He came from a Christian family in Mosul, where he was raised and educated. His father was a stone mason, and Behnam went to the local schools. He completed his college education in Baghdad and, under the guidance of David Oates, was admitted to Trinity College and the University of Cambridge Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology in order to complete his formal education with a PhD in archaeology. I was his supervisor throughout his time in Cambridge, and he not only worked hard on his dissertation but also helped to look after his lively young family while they were in Cambridge. Much of his research was based on his own excavation reports but also, and to a greater extent, on unpublished material from both excavation and survey information in the extensive records of both the Baghdad and Mosul Departments of Antiquities.

Archaeology was clearly not part of his boyhood dreams, however, despite the presence of one of the world's greatest ancient cities just across the Tigris River from Mosul. For the young Behnam the life of an airline pilot or a ship's captain seemed far more appealing, despite or perhaps owing to his daily view of Nineveh. Only a chance meeting in Baghdad with two students who were already studying archaeology with great enthusiasm persuaded him to change his mind. Fortunately, he enjoyed the course, and in June 1955 graduated from the University of Baghdad with a BA in archaeology, a university course that at that time guaranteed a position in the offices of the Directorate-General of Antiquities.

His potential rapidly became clear to the senior officials in the Directorate-General. Indeed he was soon recognised as one of the most promising among the young Iraqi archaeologists, while his considerable physical height and deep voice reinforced his increasing authority. His first field work, following his graduation in 1955, was carried out under the guidance of Mohammed Ali Mustafa, at that time one of the most able field archaeologists in Iraq who, owing to family responsibilities, had been unable to accept the offer of a scholarship for a graduate course at the Chicago Oriental Institute.¹ Indeed at Nippur in the 1950s Mohammed Ali had worked as a senior member of the Oriental Institute excavation staff, and it was Mohammed Ali who was in charge of Behnam's first field season (1955), recording the sites that were to be flooded by the newly built Dokan dam.

¹ Both Fuad Safar and Taha Baqir accepted the Chicago offers and both subsequently, on their return to Baghdad, rose to well-deserved senior positions in the Directorate-General of Antiquities.

Basmusian

In 1955 Mohammed Ali together with Behnam also began excavation at the site of Basmusian, the largest of the mounds in the area to be flooded. In the preface to his most recent book, in which he re-published all his papers from *Sumer*, the official journal of the Directorate-General of Archaeology in Baghdad, Behnam wrote, "in spite of the extreme summer heat and some other obstacles such as an incident of fire in the expedition camp and an outbreak of smallpox in the Kurdish village of Basmusian (the main source of their workmen), these early projects were quite successful." Another of the larger tells, Shemshara, later excavated by a Danish expedition (trained with the Nimrud expedition during the 1957 season), was another of the many sites recorded at that time by Iraqi archaeologists for the records of the Directorate-General in Baghdad (the five mounds they recommended for excavation were Kamarian, ed-Dem, Qarashina, Basmusian and Shemshara, the latter investigated by the Danish expedition trained at Nimrud).

Restoration at Nimrud

In 1956 the Department of Antiquities decided to restore and protect the northern façade of Assur-nasir-pal's throne room, towards which the British Museum sent a copy of one of the many stone slabs removed by Layard. In 1959 and 1960, following the 1958 revolution, Behnam was in charge of this work. At that time he also decided to excavate the very large throne room itself, something that Mallowan had been reluctant to do. As with all his field work, Behnam immediately published his work in *Sumer* (vol. XIX, 1963). Since then of course much more restoration has been carried out, both for the protection of the ancient building but also for purposes of tourism. This work has more recently been carried out by several younger and very competent Iraqi archaeologists, in particular Muzahim Mahmud Hussein² who has produced an excellent book on the Nimrud tombs, tombs which Mallowan never lived to see.³

Tell es-Sawwan and Tell Qalinj Agha

Perhaps the most important site excavated in the 1960s by Behnam, together with a number of other young Iraqi archaeologists (Walid Yasin, Ghanim Wahida, Rabia al Qaisi, Tariq en-Naimi, Khalid al Adhaimi, Yasin Rashid), was an early site on the edge of the cliff on the eastern edge of the Tigris plain just south of Samarra. Its most unusual feature was an extraordinary, indeed unique, early cemetery with remarkable alabaster figures in many of the graves. More than 400 graves were excavated, and there remain many more. Over 70 per cent of the graves contained infants and, unusually, many of these contained the beautiful alabaster objects that are virtually unique to the site. A total of 1,341 of these beautiful alabaster objects have been found, of which 243 were small alabaster statuettes. This early and remarkable seventh millennium cemetery is up to now unique. Tell es-Sawwan clearly remains the most important of the new sites excavated in Iraq, and Behnam was much involved in its excavation.

Early in 1966 Behnam and Ismail Hijara excavated several soundings at Tell Qalinj Agha, a site within the outskirts of Erbil. Three seasons were carried out here, and the site is now legally protected to allow both tourists and local visitors to wander about in it; indeed a small group from the Cambridge McDonald Institute were taken to inspect the site last year. And of course there remains the possibility for archaeologists to return and excavate more areas of the site. The pottery seems to have been largely fourth millennium, including both red and grey wares, reflecting the focus of Behnam's dissertation, "A Study of Uruk Pottery, its origins and distribution," a major work covering a very great number of unpublished sites that had been recorded in the Mosul Museum.

² Very unfortunately, during the war the best of the Nimrud ivories had, for protection, been kept in a bank vault on Bank Street near the Tigris. This area was among the many heavily bombed, and the bank vault lay open both to the rain and to water from the Tigris. The greatest disaster, however, has been the post-war lack of reliable electricity for controlling the drying atmosphere essential to control the drying of the ivories. Regrettably, this has meant that the most splendid ivories, i.e. those 'protected' by the bank vault,

have become impossible to restore, despite the great efforts to protect them.

³ The one well that Mallowan realised was so dangerous that even he could not attempt to excavate it (in the AJ courtyard of the Northwest Palace), was very capably excavated by an Iraqi team. Unfortunately many of the extraordinary ivories found here have also not survived the recent war.

Indeed Behnam spent much time examining these archaeological records as a part of his Cambridge dissertation.

In his later years Behnam became a very well-known figure in Iraq, largely owing to his many appearances on both radio and television. He had a very impressive deep voice as well as a large and impressive figure that led to his being featured in many television and radio programmes. He lectured in Archaeology and Ancient Cultures and History at both Iraqi universities and at the Arab Institute for Higher Studies. In his later years he played many roles. He was President of the Alwiyah Club (the former British club that was taken over in 1958) and Head of the International School in Baghdad. One of his many extraneous duties was teaching diplomats how they should behave when they went abroad.

David and I last saw Behnam in 2001, when he had arranged a table for dinner on the outer lawn of the Alwiyah Club in a position that had been carefully assessed in relation to any possible unwanted microphones. It was a lovely evening, not only with Behnam but with two other old friends, Tariq Madhloum, a brilliant artist and sculptor who had been our Representative at Nimrud in the 1950s and had later been a pupil of Max Mallowan in London, and Abdul Qader al Tikriti, who was by then a very senior figure in the Antiquities Department.

Behnam left Iraq only a few years ago, and was of course already well known to the Iraqis in Jordan. On his death a nice gesture of the Iraqi Embassy in Jordan and an indication of his high standing was an offer to take his body back to Baghdad for burial, but his family was now living largely in Amman and wished to be able to continue to visit his grave. He was a man of great stature, and we shall miss him.

Joan Oates

Publications by Behnam Abu Al-Soof

- 1963 Further Investigations in Assur-nasir-pal's Palace, *Sumer* 19, 66–68.
- 1965 The Excavations at Tell es-Sawwan, First Preliminary Report (1964), *Sumer* 21, 17–32, pls. I–XXXVI. (with Faisal el-Wailly)
- 1966 Short Sounding at Tell Qalinj Agha, *Sumer* 22, 77–82.
- 1967 Tell Qalinj Agha, *Sumer* 23, 69–75 (with Shah es-Siwwani).
- 1968 Tell es-Sawwan Excavation (Fourth Season), *Sumer* 24, 3–16.
- 1969 Excavations at Qalinj Agha (Erbil), *Sumer* 25, 3–42.
- 1970 Mounds in the Rania Plain and Excavations at Tell Basmusian (1956). *Sumer* 26, 65–104.
- 2012 *30 Years of Archaeological Studies*. Behnam Abu Al-Soof.