

OBITUARY

LAMIA AL-GAILANI WERR (1938–2019)



The British Institute for the Study of Iraq has lost one of its staunchest allies and most persuasive advocates with the passing of Dr Lamia al-Gailani Werr, who died in Amman in Jordan on 18th January 2019 at the age of 80.¹ Throughout her career she was a loyal and much-valued supporter of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq (later BISI) and was its only honorary lifetime member. She contributed to many BISI initiatives, projects and conferences and in 2009 was awarded its Gertrude Bell Memorial Medal “for outstanding services to Mesopotamian archaeology”. It was an indication of the esteem and affection in which she was held that on 3rd April 2019, BISI organized a memorial event at the British Academy in which nine colleagues and friends and Mr Nazar Mirjan Mohammed of the Iraqi Embassy reminisced about Lamia and delivered warm personal tributes.

Lamia was in every way the doyenne of Iraqi archaeologists and experts in ancient Mesopotamia. For much of her life she lived in Britain but made frequent visits to Iraq, and she was the main point of contact between museum and university colleagues there and their counterparts in the UK. Her knowledge of what was happening in Iraq, particularly in the antiquities department, was unparalleled, and she was widely consulted not only by academic colleagues intending to visit or work in Iraq, but also by journalists and reporters. In spite of her considerable knowledge and learning, and her social and academic status, there was not a trace of snobbery about her, she

¹ This obituary is an expanded version of an obituary that appeared in *The Art Newspaper* for March 2019.

never stood on her dignity, and was unfailingly courteous, helpful and generous with information. She was friendly and welcoming with everybody with whom she came into contact and was universally liked and admired. It was typical of her generosity of spirit that when in the last year of her life she was accidentally knocked down by a drunken vagrant near her home and broke her leg she never once complained or held any kind of grievance. She had a wide circle of friends, Iraqi, British and international, and kept in touch with the latter through frequent attendance at international conferences such as the *Rencontre Assyriologique*.

Lamia was born in Baghdad on 8th March 1938 into a distinguished Iraqi family that traces its descent from Abdul Qadir al-Gailani (Jilani), a 12th century mystic who founded a Sufi religious order. His mausoleum in Baghdad, which is now at the centre of a religious complex that includes a mosque and a library, was badly damaged by a car bomb attack in 2007. Another ancestor (Abd al-Rahman al-Gailani) was the first prime minister of Iraq (1920–1922). Lamia studied first in the University of Baghdad, and has described her introduction to archaeology in the early 1960s as follows: - “As a newly graduate(d) archaeologist, my ambition was to go out digging, but being a woman was an obstacle in conservative Iraq. Being a first, I need to convince the authorities I could do it. (The) then Director of Antiquities Taha Baqir, being true to his liberal policies, agreed to let me go into the field as long as I excavated within the vicinity of Baghdad. My family was happy about that, because it meant that I would still be living at home”.

The site in question was Tell al-Dhibai on the outskirts of Baghdad, where a town of the 2nd millennium B.C. had been discovered. In the event, Lamia was the first of a stream of Iraqi women who enjoyed distinguished careers in archaeology. After Baghdad, she studied at the Universities of Cambridge (BA) and Edinburgh (MA), before finally writing a PhD thesis at the Institute of Archaeology in London University, completed in 1977, on ‘Studies in the Chronology and Regional Style of Old Babylonian Cylinder Seals’.

This thesis was published in 1988 in Malibu, California, and describes the cylinder seals from six different Old Babylonian sites and, in a ground-breaking approach, identifies different regional styles as well as developing a chronological framework for Old Babylonian seals. This interest in cylinder seals continued for the rest of her life, and she worked closely with other luminaries on the subject such as Edith Porada, Barbara Parker (later Lady Mallowan) and Dominique Collon. Much of her subsequent work was about seals. For example, she edited a volume about Old Babylonian seals from the Hamrin that was published in 1992 and she contributed an article on ancient Iraqi furniture as represented in seal designs to Georgina Herrmann’s volume on *The Furniture of Western Asia* (Mainz 1996). At the international Nimrud conference held at the British Museum in 2002, a year before the 2nd Gulf War, she read a paper about seals found at Nimrud, particularly those from the queens’ tombs. This was subsequently published in the proceedings of the conference, and she was one of four editors of *New Light on Nimrud* (London 2008).

Apart from cylinder seals, Lamia published widely in English and Arabic on different aspects of ancient Mesopotamia, and she even prepared a series of volumes (EDUBBA) that were largely intended to make available to western scholars important primary material that had been published in Arabic. These appeared under the imprint of Nabu Publications that Lamia herself established, and among other volumes published by Nabu was the *Festschrift* for David Oates entitled *Of Pots and Plans* (2002). Lamia was one of the six editors of this volume.

In view of Lamia’s interest in seals, it was a particular disappointment to her that the Iraq Museum’s entire collection of more than 5,000 seals was stolen during the ransacking of the museum at the beginning of the 2nd Gulf War in 2003, and only a small number have since been recovered. After that she worked tirelessly to rebuild morale in the Iraq Museum, to organize training for the staff, and to coordinate efforts to retrieve the stolen antiquities. She participated in many international conferences to address the problems, including those organized by UNESCO, and gave many interviews. This brought her international recognition, and she was the first port of call for many journalists seeking information about the damage to Iraq’s cultural heritage.

Latterly she was an honorary research associate at University College London and then the School of Oriental and African Studies, and from September 2016 until July 2017 she was a visiting fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, writing a history of the Iraq Museum. This was a

subject that had intrigued her for many years, and she had assembled a great deal of basic information on the subject, including many documents and photographs. Her command of the Arabic and English sources, plus the fact that she once worked in the museum, and latterly was a frequent visitor, meant that she was in a unique position to undertake this task, and it is a matter of great regret that at the time of her death this project was unfinished. It is to be hoped that the manuscript is in a sufficiently advanced state for somebody else to complete the work. In the meantime, we will have to be content with three different articles in which Lamia addressed the question of the origin and development of the Iraq Museum. These were published in *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq* (Woodbridge 2008, edited by Peter Stone and Joanne Farchakh Bajjaly), *The Looting of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad* (New York 2005, edited by Milbry Polk and Angela Schuster) and *Gertrude Bell and Iraq: A Legacy* (London 2017, edited by Paul Collins and Charles Tripp).

For the last ten years of her life, Lamia was much involved in the project to establish a new museum for Basrah. There had previously been a museum in Basrah, in an attractive courtyard house on Ashar Creek, but it had been looted in the aftermath of the 1st Gulf War, and about half the contents were stolen. The remainder was transferred to Baghdad, and the museum closed in 1991. By 2008, when Basrah was occupied by the British army, it was in a dilapidated state, and the army, in consultation with the Director of Basrah Museum, Qahtan Alabeed, suggested that a former palace of Saddam Hussein on the outskirts of Basrah on the banks of the Shatt al Arab River, should be converted to become a new museum. This was one of the many palaces built by Saddam throughout Iraq, but most were looted and badly damaged after the 2nd Gulf War. When the army withdrew in early 2009, the funding for this project was still not in place, but following a top-level Iraqi decision that the so-called Lakeside Palace should become the new museum for Basrah, a steering committee, soon to become a charity known as the Friends of Basrah Museum, was established in London to raise the funds for this project and channel them to Iraq. From its inception, Lamia was a key member of this group. The project had an early boost with a generous donation from BP, and with this and other funds raised in the UK it was possible to renovate the building and install an exhibition in one of the galleries, dedicated to the history of the Basrah region. This opened on 27th September 2016. Subsequently, the charity secured a grant from the Cultural Protection Fund that enabled the three remaining galleries to be fitted out, and the entire museum was opened on 19th March 2019. Throughout, Lamia's role was crucial, visiting Basrah, working closely with Qahtan Alabeed and liaising with authorities in Baghdad. Indeed, at the time of her death she was returning to the UK via Amman from Baghdad, where she had been selecting objects for Basrah Museum and arranging for them to be recorded and packed prior to transportation to Basrah. It is a tragedy that she did not live long enough to see the fruition of her work, but at the opening ceremony a life-size photograph of Lamia was placed next to the lectern from which a succession of speeches was delivered. In addition, it is intended that Lamia's major contribution to the project will be suitably commemorated in the museum. It is also gratifying that the library of the old British School of Archaeology in Iraq, with which Lamia was so closely associated, will in due course be donated to Basrah Museum.

Lamia was twice married, first to her second cousin, Abd al-Rahman al-Gailani, a sculptor and Islamic art historian, and secondly to George Werr, a London-based Jordanian businessman. George, who died in 2003, supported her interests and was a hospitable host to the many British and Iraqi colleagues who visited their house. Lamia is survived by two daughters from her first marriage, Dr Noorah al-Gailani, who is Curator of Islamic Civilizations at Glasgow Museums, and Azza al-Gailani, and by one daughter from her second marriage, Hesn Werr. BISI extends deepest condolences to all of them. After she had died Lamia's body was taken from Amman to Baghdad, where there was a ceremony in the Iraq Museum following which, most appropriately, she was laid to rest in the Gailani shrine.

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