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Mesopotamia

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MESOPOTAMIA

It is easy to overlook the fact that Mesopotamia's 7,000 years legacy also has immediacy by being that of modern Iraq. This sets the background for the first two articles which share a critical perspective for developing and framing cultural heritage from the past in the service of the present. In "Mesopotamian Heritage and Hope" it is the period from antiquity to the Mongolian Sacking of Baghdad in 1258 AD that is in focus, consolidating the hope generated by the recent historical visit of Pope Francis to Iraq. In the second piece, "Owning the Past", Paul Collins develops this further by describing the actual experience of staging an exhibition in which museum culture is utilized to counter current Mesopotamian impasses. Suha Rassam echoes this in the third piece. Her passionate discourse includes early Christianity and the impending existential threats faced by Christianity in Iraq.

Needless to say, Britain has had long association with modern Iraq, and this is pointed out in the fascinating piece by Ghanim Alsheikh. Here we are presented with the case of the little known British monument near Basra. In addition, Hugh de Saram and John Osborne take us back in time to the Mesopotamian clay tablet records. Hugh highlights his journey of discovering the richness of Biblical Archaeology and John informs us about one of the most important discoveries in Nineveh, the Flood Tablet - literature in its infancy. This edition is further enhanced by the regular church and town contributions. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to the individual authors and members of the T&T team.

An illustrated extended Mesopotamia edition is now available on the T&T website.

Raik Jarjis, Editor
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Front cover: Raik Jarjis (The Lamassu replica at the Louvre 2012)

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Mesopotamia in a Nutshell

Raik Jarjis

Mesopotamia is derived from the ancient Greek word, Μεσοποταμία, used to describe the historical western-Asia land between the two great rivers, Tigris and Euphrates. It is widely recognised as the Cradle of Civilization and 'open' society (c 4000 BC) - the Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian Empires are credited with developing writing, agriculture, first cities and written laws. First century Christianity reached Mesopotamia, and it was here that Islamic Civilization reached its zenith (8th to 14th centuries AD) linking Greek and Western Civilizations.

The Ottomans ruled over Mesopotamia from the 16th century until the end of WWI when Modern Iraq was formed, constituting most of Mesopotamia. Iraq is a multi-faith, multi-ethnic and oil-rich country. With Baghdad as its capital, Iraq conjures fabled thoughts of the 'Arabian Nights' plus memories of such luminaries as T.E. Lawrence, Gertrude Bell, Freya Stark and Agatha Christie. It was at the archaeological sites of Ur, Nineveh and Nimrud that the mystery writer Agatha Christie assisted her archaeologist husband Max Mallowan and wrote several of her books. In recent history Iraq has been devastated by geopolitical conflicts, including the fateful western invasion of 2003. Pope Francis visited Iraq during March 2021.

Mesopotamian Heritage & Hope

Raik Jarjis

The location of Mesopotamia (Iraq) between the warring Persian and Byzantine empires, in proximity to the Holy Land, and its Christian and Islamic roots, shaped its destiny. Western interest was given momentum during the early part of the 19th century by those curious about the roots of Western Civilization and archaeological treasures. This continued well into the 20th century, when interest in another treasure, oil, was also ignited. Below is a highly selective overview of Mesopotamia's ancient and Islamic heritage aimed at making some sense of the aftermath of the fateful 2003 western invasion of Iraq . The text includes the recurring theme of the March 2021 visit to Iraq by Pope Francis - viewed here as a declaration of hope.

It was Neil MacGregor who, whilst at the helm of the British Museum in London, stated the following: "Modern cities everywhere have Mesopotamia in their DNA". After all, his reasoning is well supported by the archaeological evidence of developed urbanisation, including governance and administrative written records. In addition, Mr MacGregor went further by including several objects from Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) in his acclaimed radio broadcasts 'A History of the World in 100 Objects'. One of them is the Standard of Ur from 2600-2400 BC, a finely wrought wooden box inlaid with shells and lapis lazuli with panoramas depicting life in ancient Sumer. It was excavated at the Sumerian city of Ur which recently captured the international headlines. It was on Saturday 6 March 2021 that Pope Francis presided over an interreligious meeting at the Plain of Ur, birth place of Abraham, celebrating diversity in Iraq.

The Standard and the Ziggurat of Ur

A 3100–3000 BC clay writing tablet measuring 9x7 centimetres was also rightfully chosen by Neil MacGregor. This Lower Mesopotamian object is in fact one of the earliest examples we know of writing and how to use it to administer society. This prompts me to point out that as pictographic writing developed into cuneiform, the foundations of civilized society, resting on written language, came into being. Also around 2300 BC the Semitic Akkadians led by Sargon the Great, conquered much of Sumer. But in the 21st century BC the

Sumerians rose again under the third dynasty of Ur.

From this era thousands of documents have been excavated, including the earliest known written code of law, that of the Sumerian King Ur-Nammu. The other point which is worthy of our attention is that, with the flowering of the Babylonian and Assyrian empires during the second millennium BC, the tradition of recording on clay tablets was adopted further north.

In fact one of the greatest discoveries of cuneiform inscriptions was the first millennium BC library of Assurbanipal at Nineveh, the capital of Assyria near Mosul in northern Iraq, which was excavated in the 1850's by a British archaeological team. Its 25,000-odd tablets and fragments are inscribed in bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian texts that are literary and religious works, incantations and letters, as well as diverse astronomical, medical and lexicographical writings. The library was established in the seventh century BC by the Assyrian King Assurbanipal, and it contained among its tablets that of the Flood, which was rightfully included in 'History of the World in 100 Objects'. The Nineveh Plain is, of course, where the Assyrian colossus, a human headed winged bull, Lamassu, is traced.

Zoroastrianism from Persia plus the flourishing of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism from Babylonian-instigated exiles, first in 597 BC, and Christianity's arrival during its first century) have had direct effect on the course of Mesopotamian history. This cosmopolitanism proved to be significant in the aftermath of the Arab Muslim conquest of 636 AD. Native Christians and Jews played important roles during the golden age of Islam when the empire was ruled from Baghdad, founded by the Abbasid Caliph Mansur in 762 AD. The Abbasid court admired scholarship and noted relevant practices of the Sassanians in Iran and also of their caliph predecessors, the Umayyads in Damascus. They established in Baghdad Bayt Al-Hikma, (House of Wisdom), to which multi-lingual Christian scholars belonged, joined by converging thinkers from the Islamic empire in order to preserve the heritage of Greek knowledge and expand on it in mathematics, astronomy and medicine. It was under Al-Mansur, Al-Rashid and notably Al-Ma'mun (813–833 AD) that Arab scholarship, art and architecture reached their zenith, turning the period into yet another Mesopotamian epoch in human history. This, however, came crashing down when the terror from the Mongolian steppes of Central Asia finally arrived. Three armies of Hulegu, the grandson of Jingiz (Genghis), converged on Baghdad in 1258 AD, massacring its population and decimating its heritage.

The last two decades have been like Hulegu 2.0 for many Iraqis. However, the Pope's message is that hope should not fade away. (You can access the events of the Pope's visit to Iraq via the Travel section of the Vatican's website vatican.va).

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Owning the Past: From Mesopotamia to Iraq at the Ashmolean Museum

Paul Collin

The Ashmolean Museum at the University of Oxford is home to one of the UK's major collections from the Ancient Middle East. The material ranges from the earliest farming village communities like Jericho around 9000 BC, to cuneiform tablets such as the famous Sumerian King List (about 1800 BC) from Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), and stone fragments from Persepolis in Iran, centre of the great Achaemenid Persian Empire of the fifth century BC. These objects, along with many others, will be redisplayed as part of a refurbishment of the Museum's Ancient Middle East gallery, scheduled to open in June 2021. The new displays will focus on the lives of the ancient inhabitants of the region, providing context through the arrangement of objects with photographs and reconstructions.

A number of projects have taken place over the last few years to help develop and shape the narratives in the gallery. This includes a temporary exhibition called *Owning the Past: From Mesopotamia to Iraq* which explores the history of how ancient objects from Iraq came to the Ashmolean in more detail than will be possible in the permanent gallery. Crucially, it highlights the impact that these events have had and continue to have on the lives and identities of people from the Middle East. The approach is part of a museum-wide strategy designed to proactively address issues of equity and inclusion. Called 'Ashmolean for All', it aims to improve the way the Museum represents, works with, and includes diverse communities and individuals: existing visitors, potential visitors, staff, and volunteers. Part of this work involves rethinking our institutional history and the stories we tell in the galleries.

Fig.1Owning the Past (Sumerian Statue)

The exhibition was inspired by the attempts of so-called Islamic State or Daesh to eradicate the borders of Iraq and the lives of many of its peoples in the years 2014-17. The Ashmolean seemed the perfect place to consider the origins of these borders, especially in the context of the region's archaeology and heritage, as a number of the Museum's employees and Oxford alumni were instrumental in their creation as well as the formation of the University's ancient Middle East collection. To explore the impact of these events on people in the region, we involved local members of the Syrian, Iraqi, and Kurdish diaspora, with the help of paid Community Ambassadors, in the development of the exhibition.

Listening to their views about the events of 1914 to 1932 (when Iraq nominally gained independence from Britain), and what these meant to them as individuals as well as to their communities, we have sought to represent them in the exhibition. Together, in a series of workshops, we discussed whether archaeological objects were important in telling their stories and how their sense of identity and community has been maintained in a distant land. The exhibition is therefore an opportunity to highlight the long-lasting impact of the past on the present, explore what is meant by heritage, the role of museums, and introduce voices and stories of people not previously visible in displays devoted to the very histories and heritage of their homelands. To help make the exhibition as accessible as possible, it was decided that it should be dual language – Arabic and English.

The exhibition concludes with reflections on Iraq's heritage today and questions who should be making decisions about it, not least the heritage that now lies outside Iraq's borders. We highlight the Nahrein Network https://www.ucl.ac.uk/nahrein/ as a successful model for helping to support Iraqi researchers in reclaiming their own heritage as local history, putting it to constructive use for their communities.

Owning the Past: From Mesopotamia to Iraq runs until 16 May 2021 (discussions are currently underway which may allow for an extension of the closing date): https://www.ashmolean.org/event/owning-the-past For a BBC report on the exhibition see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgM7k34L-JI

Paul Collins, *BA, MA, PhD is Jaleh Hearn Curator of Ancient Near East in the Department of Antiquities at the Ashmolean and is currently a Hugh Price Fellow at Jesus College and holds a supernumerary Fellowship at Wolfson College. He has worked previously as a curator in the Middle East Department of the British Museum and the Ancient Near Eastern Art Department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. He is currently Chair of the British Institute for the Study of Iraq.*

Christianity in Iraq

Suha Rassam

Christianity was established in Mesopotamia during the first Christian century and emerged as a well-organized church by the end of the second century. It flourished despite resistance and persecution from the occupying Persians and became independent of other churches at the beginning of the fifth century (AD 424). This church was called 'The Church of the East' or 'The Persian Church'. The bishop of the capital of the Persian Empire, Celeuci Ctesiphone, became the Patriarch, the leader of this church. The remains of its famous cathedral 'Kokhe' can be found south west of Baghdad. The missionaries took their faith east to Iran, Central Asia, China, India, and south to the Arabian Peninsula, establishing prominent Christian centres of learning.

In the fifth century another denomination was established 'The Syrian Orthodox Church', with centres in Tikrit, Der Mar Mattai and Qaraqosh. When Mesopotamia came under Muslim rule in AD 637, Christians were allowed to practise their faith, but treated as second class citizens. During the first three centuries they contributed in various fields of learning, especially in medicine, education and translation. The latter was of vital importance, as the availability of Greek literature in Arabic was essential for the emergence of the Abbasid civilization. Christians were the only people who could do it because they were steeped in Greek learning, and knew Arabic well. They had already translated Greek works into their sacred language Syriac, which is similar to Arabic.

However, Abbasid tolerance ceased by the tenth century and Christians suffered discrimination and persecution which forced many to head for the mountains in the north.

Abbasid rule was ended by the Mongol Hulego in 1258, who favoured the Christians. But that lasted only a short period after which the Mongol Khan Kazan converted to Islam and persecuted the Christians. Mesopotamia was occupied by the Muslim Ottomans in 1534. They allowed the Christians to practise their faith but treated them as second class citizens. During World War I they inflicted atrocious massacre on the Armenians and Syriac Christians that amounted to genocide. The Syriac Christians, who lived in south Turkey bordering Iraq and Syria, lost their homes and about half a million individuals. Those who survived took refuge in Iraq and Syria.

After World War I the modern state of Iraq was established under the leadership of King Faysal I. Most Christians were concentrated in the city of Mosul and its environs and constituted about 30% of the population in these areas. Christians and other minorities were treated as equal citizens.

Christianity flourished despite changes of regime after the overthrow of the monarchy, the Kurdish uprising, the Iraqi Iranian war and the cruelty of the regime of Saddam Hussein. The situation changed dramatically after the occupation of Iraq by US and British forces in 2003. Islamic fundamentalists started to attack Christians and other minorities with abductions, extortions and killings. Twenty of the clergy were abducted and six were killed. Over fifty churches were burned or damaged. In one mainly Christian district of Baghdad, Christians were given the ultimatum: 'convert to Islam or leave your home, otherwise you will be killed'.

As a result of all these atrocities, Christians started to leave either to nearby countries with the intention of emigrating to western countries or to safer areas of Iraq, mainly Kurdistan. All this happened before the occupation of Mosul by the Islamic State in 2014. Abu Bakir al-Baghdadi occupied the city of Mosul on 9th of June 2014 and gave the ultimatum that Christians must leave Mosul within 24 hours. Soon after, the villages of the Nineveh Plain were threatened, forcing people to leave their homes. Thousands left in haste to Kurdistan, becoming refugees in their own country.

Although the Islamic state was defeated in July 2017, it took time to rebuild some of the destroyed homes and churches in Mosul and the Nineveh Plain and more Christians left the country with the intent of emigrating. It is estimated that since 2003 about a million Christian have emigrated, 70% of the original population. Those who are still there do not feel very safe since the political situation is still problematic, with corruption and the increasing influence of neighbouring Iran.

The recent visit of Pope Frances to Iraq gave a great impetus to the remaining Christians and everybody hopes that his message of peace and reconciliation in the Middle East will bear long term fruit.

Suha Rassam was born in Mosul, Iraq, to a medical family. She was an Assistant Professor of Medicine in the University of Baghdad and came to England in 1990 to do further research. She then worked at hospitals in London and studied Eastern Christianity at London University. Suha Rassam is the author of "Christianity in Iraq" (3rd edition , Gracewing Publishers in Leominster, Hertfordshire)

The Concealed British Mausoleum in Mesopotamia

Ghanim Alsheikh

Fig. 1 Basra Memorial 1938

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) cares for the 1.7 million men and women of the Commonwealth forces who died in the First and Second World Wars, ensuring they will never be forgotten. Funded by six member governments, its work began with building, and now maintaining, cemeteries and memorials at 23,000 locations all over the world.

In 1914, Mesopotamia was part of the Ottoman Empire. Mesopotamia was strategically important because of British oil interests in neighbouring Persia. A force was sent from India to Mesopotamia in late 1914, to secure the oil refineries at Abadan. It was designated Indian Expeditionary Force D (IEF D). Throughout the campaign, India would provide the majority of manpower and supplies. Capturing Basra was the first objective of the campaign and an early success of the whole campaign in the Middle eastern theatre of WWI (1914-1918), which was fought between the Allies, represented by the British Empire troops mainly from India, against the Central Powers, mostly from the Ottoman Empire.

The small force that arrived in 1914 was reinforced considerably by the end of March 1915 and secured the oil fields. British Indian forces continued to advance further north, spurred by this early success. In November 1915, the advance was finally halted at the Battle of Ctesiphon, resulting in heavy losses. Between January and April 1916, British and Indian troops fought up the River Tigris in an attempt to relieve the garrison at Kut. However, they failed to break through the Ottoman defences and ultimately lost more men than the number under siege at Kut. British and Indian forces suffered casualties of more than 85,000 killed, wounded and captured in Mesopotamia. It was a campaign fought largely by the Indian Army, often in challenging conditions with limited supplies and medical care. After the war, the Ottoman Empire was dismantled and its territories partitioned. Mesopotamia became modern day Iraq.

In 19 locations throughout Iraq, the CWGC commemorates more than 54,000 Commonwealth deaths in Iraq during the two world wars. Only in France, the United Kingdom, Belgium and India does the CWGC have a larger commitment. The British architect and archaeologist, Edward Warren (1856-1937) was appointed

'Principal Architect for Mesopotamia' in 1919, a difficult position in such a remote and inhospitable region. He designed the 'Memorial to the Missing' in Basra and the 'Tomb of General Maude' in Baghdad. The memorial of Basra recalls the more than 40,500 Commonwealth troops who were killed in operations in Mesopotamia from the Autumn of 1914 until the end of August 1921 and whose graves were unknown. The memorial was unveiled by Sir Gilbert Clayton on March 27th 1929. The Basra Memorial was built on the shores of the Shat Al-Arab waterway just south of the Basra Margil Port and close to the main offices of the British forces command headquarters. During the years, the memorial was the place for many ceremonies and events and was guarded and maintained by Iraqis employed by the CWCG via the British embassy.

Due to military conflicts with Iran, the then President of Iraq Saddam Hussein in 1997 established a special task force to dismantle the original memorial and transfer it to a safe location. The new location was identified to mark the Battle of Shaibah (12–14 April 1915), one of the fiercest battles between British-Indian and Ottoman armies about 10 miles west of current Basra. Shaibah is also the desert location where, in 1920, the British Royal Air Force established its 'RAF Station Shaibah' in a small airfield. When the British army occupied Basra in 2003, they renewed the desert-based memorial and built a protective wall around the site. After an enforced absence of more than 12 years, staff from the CWGC have made a historic return to Iraq. However, due to the current instability, alternative arrangements for commemoration have been implemented whereby a two-volume Roll of Honour is presently on display at the CWGC's Head Office in Maidenhead.

Ghanim Alsheikh, *MD, PhD (Lond), FFPH-RCP. Professor Alsheikh is a specialist in Neurosciences, Public Health and Medical Education. He was the founding dean of two medical schools in Iraq and Yemen (1988-2000) and served as WHO regional coordinator for the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Educated in Iraq and the UK, he currently holds an honorary post at Imperial College London WHO Collaborating Centre and lives in Brighton.*

Biblical Archaeology: Hugh de Saram

One of my first adventures on going up to Cambridge in 1965 to read Theology was being sent on a long bike ride down to the department of Oriental Languages for a class under the Regius Professor of Hebrew, David Winton Thomas. However, this was not a Hebrew class but an Introduction to Biblical Archaeology. It was indeed an adventure, introducing a whole new world, one of those great experiences where the mind is blown wide open and the horizon

expanded beyond all expectation. To this day, I treasure my well-thumbed copy of Winton Thomas's *Documents From Old Testament Times*. What was so fascinating? Well, it put the narrow world of Biblical Israel into a much wider context. And we discovered that the Middle East is literally littered with that most romantic of objects, the clay tablet.

We all know the story of Noah's Ark and the great flood that landed him eventually on Mt Ararat. What we discovered under Winton Thomas was that this story was most probably not originally an Israeli but a Mesopotamian story far older than its version in the Bible. Cuneiform clay tablets discovered in archaeological digs at Nineveh show it as part of a larger work, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and other, much earlier fragments of the same story have been discovered in similar digs elsewhere in Mesopotamia. There is even speculation – very speculative – that the story derives from the experience of populations fleeing the cataclysmic overflowing of the land bridge between Europe and Asia at the Bosphorus when sea levels rose at the end of the last ice-age and the freshwater lake that was the Black Sea was inundated with sea water from the Mediterranean.

The realisation that the Bible is not the last word on many, many things and has to be rigorously fact-checked against other sources was quite disruptive to us as believers. Yet this was a kindly introduction, given that the Mesopotamian original behind our beloved Flood Story is delightful in its own right. For example, where the Bible story ends with a rainbow, the original has a mother-goddess raising her jewelled necklace into the sky. None of this felt like a contradiction of the Bible, merely an extension, an expansion.

Moving on, however, we learned that the Biblical mention of camels in the Abrahamic era is an anachronism, a retro-fit by people writing much later, since the camel had yet to be domesticated in the time of Abraham. The clay tablets tell us of donkey caravaners but not camel caravaners. These semi-nomadic people, circulating around the edges of the Fertile Crescent and sometimes referred to in the tablets as *Habiru* or *Apiru*, often clashed with more settled people, whether over their herds trampling the crops in the fields or in more warlike encounters.

We are lucky to have visual evidence of what these people may have looked like from a tomb painting in Beni Hasan, central Egypt (*see p.21*). The colourful dress of the donkey caravaners, complete, it seems, with bellows for sustaining their fires (perhaps they traded in metal implements, the tinkers of their day) contrast sharply with the simple white dress of their Egyptian hosts. It is tempting to equate such scenes with Joseph's brothers seeking food in wealthy Egypt.

The Tel el Amarna letters (Egyptian clay tablets dating from the 14th century BC) is a collection of reports to the Pharaoh from governors in Canaan containing among other things complaints about attacks on their cities by *Apiru* who appear to

be disrupting settled life in Canaan. Were these the loosely organised bands that eventually elbowed the Canaanites aside and coalesced into the people of Israel? It seems likely that not all, perhaps not even many, of those who ended up as the twelve tribes in Israel came from the group that left Egypt in Moses' train: many were there already but not as settled inhabitants. The Bible, archaeology suggests, gives us a selective, over-dramatised version.

Another cause for reflection was the story of Jericho and Joshua's fabled tumbling of its walls. From 1952 to 1958 Dame Kathleen Kenyon led what has come to be regarded as an exemplary archaeological dig – at Jericho. The key thing we learned here was to do with dates. To cut a long story short, Kenyon found strong evidence that at the time when Joshua arrived before Jericho, its walls were probably already flat and had been so for some 200 years. So how come the discrepancy?

The answer to this question came when I attended a British Museum lecture by a prominent archaeologist speaking on Biblical Archaeology. He confirmed that there was now wide agreement among scholars that the Jewish Bible, our Old Testament, had largely been written and assembled during and after the Babylonian exile, thus 6th century BC and later. Not surprisingly, the accuracy of their data probably diminished the further their subject matter was from the time of writing. Fair enough, perfectly human – but that's the point, isn't it: the Bible was actually written by humans; normal, fallible humans.

The Story of Gilgamesh

John Osborne

The discovery of the story of Gilgamesh around 150 years ago in Mesopotamia was sensational. The most complete version was discovered by the British archaeologist Layard at Nineveh, inscribed on clay tablets dating from the 7th century BC.

But earlier sections of the same story, dating from between 1800 and 1300 BC, were discovered on tablets at other sites, thus making the epic the oldest literature known to us. Scholarly thinking reckons that an even earlier version existed before 2000 BC. Gilgamesh was the heroic King of Uruk, with some divine ancestry, but with an arrogant attitude towards the gods as well as towards his own people. With his best friend and companion, the wild man Enkidu, whom contact with women had civilized, Gilgamesh journeys to the forbidden Cedar Forest, where they kill the guardian and cut down several cedars. Angered, the goddess Ishtar sends the great Bull of Heaven against them and Gilgamesh's kingdom; they kill the bull, but in revenge for this Enkidu has to die.

Devastated by his friend's death, Gilgamesh sets out on a vast journey beyond the ends of the earth to seek wisdom from an old man reputed to have found everlasting life. After several adventures en route he finds the ferryman to take him across to the other side of the Ocean that surrounds the world – a journey not permitted to ordinary mortals - in order to meet the old man who is 'Faraway', Utnapishtim.

Utnapishtim entertains Gilgamesh on his arrival there to the story of the flood, in most essentials identical to the story of Noah's flood in Genesis: Utnapishtim was advised that the gods were angry with mankind, but that he and his family could be the sole survivors of the flood to come, saving themselves and 'the beasts of the field' by building a boat….. and so on, as in the Old Testament. This account, when it was translated and published in Victorian Britain, caused amazement. (The archaeologist and scholar who first publicized the Mesopotamian account of the flood is still referred to as 'Deluge' Smith.) Scholarly opinion has been divided about whether the account of the Noah flood in Genesis is based on this Mesopotamian version, and whether the latter is a reflection of the annual inundation of the Mesopotamian plain by the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates. But the flood story is really an interlude in the story of Gilgamesh's quest for eternal life. Utnapishtim challenges Gilgamesh to stay awake for a week; Gilgamesh inevitably fails this test, thus demonstrating that if man cannot overcome sleep it is not possible for him, a mere mortal, to overcome death. But for Gilgamesh's return journey across the Ocean, Utnapishtim tells him of the clue to eternal youth - a spiny rose, which grows on the seabed and which Gilgamesh must find and take with him.

Gilgamesh succeeds in this task and crosses back to his world. He comes to a spring, but while he is bathing in it a snake spots the rose, which Gilgamesh has left on the bank, swallows it and immediately sheds its skin, revealing a new one underneath. Gilgamesh, witnessing all this, is devastated, recognising immediately that the snake, not he, is now the possessor of the clue to life.

The impact of this poignant mythical story - part adventure and part allegory - does not come from Gilgamesh's return to Uruk, where he resumes his rule over his people and eventually dies. It is the failure of his quest that makes the point, as many a myth from around the world does, that however mighty a ruler and however brave a traveller Gilgamesh may be, and though 'he was wise, he saw mysteries and knew secret things', through human weakness and mischance he is unable to escape the fate of a mortal man.

There are two Penguin Classic editions of "The Epic of Gilgamesh", the older in prose, the more modern in verse; both are slim, readable and have excellent introductions.

May Blossoms

Robin Nelson

As April progresses into May the bare outlines of the countryside persisting in early spring are finally dispatched as the hawthorn or may tree begins to blossom and cow parsley creates white-walled lanes. The sprays of white blackthorn blossom have already appeared a month before- the term "blackthorn winter" referring to a spell of cold weather which sometimes coincides with their emergence in early April.

Once we see and smell the pink and white blossoms of the hawthorn along our hedgerows we know it is high spring. The flowers have an ambiguous perfume, musky and not entirely pleasant, and this combined with the aniseed-like scent from the luxuriating cow parsley can be intoxicating on a warm May morning. Cow parsley goes by various intriguing names: hedge parsley, Queen Anne's lace, fairy lace and mother-die.

50% of the world population of bluebells are to be found in the U.K. and to West Woods and other Wiltshire locations we make our annual pilgrimages. The tall beech trees, the heady scent of the flowers, the dappled sunlight falling on a sea of blue, it is all part of the magical experience on a May morning.

Some of us boast of secret locations, but things vary from year to year. One small wood was always a special one for my wife and me, until, left untended, the wild garlic became rampant and almost choked out everything else. It is against the law to intentionally pick, uproot or destroy bluebells: a colony takes a long time to establish - around 5-7 years from seed to flower. The Spanish form is another threat to our native species.

I begin to panic in mid-May as flowers disappear earlier than before and new ones sprout up before you can blink. Lady's smocks are already on the decline at the entrance to Savernake Forest and the beautiful snake's head fritillary is past its best on Cricklade's North Meadows, which houses the largest colony in the U.K.

In special meadows managed by the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust the first orchids appear amongst the abundant cowslips: green-winged and early purple, with the promise of rarer species yet to come. On a sunny day there may be marsh fritillaries on the wing and high above a skylark filling the air with song.

At such times Robert Browning's words still ring true:

"The lark's on the wing,
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in His heaven —
All's right with the world!"

A Good Read

Debbie Guest

You know when you really love something - a band, a TV series or a writer – and you're torn between wanting to tell the world about it and hugging it to yourself as a private pleasure? Then it becomes popular and you're even more torn, glad that everyone else now recognises whatever it is, but wanting to shout "I've always known it's good. I've been a fan for years!" That's me at the moment with Laurie Colwin, novelist and food writer (Home Cooking: A Writer in the Kitchen). Colwin's novels, perceptive, droll and emotionally complex stories of privileged lives in New England and Manhattan's Upper East Side have been among my favourites for over thirty years. An unusually intelligent publisher has reissued Happy All the Time, which is lucky for you. Enjoy. I'll be in the corner, glaring and muttering "I've been reading her forever, you band-wagon-jumping johnnie-come-latelys...." Don't mind me.

I've not read much that's 'new' lately, but new to me is The Lark by E. Nesbit, an adult novel, very much in the same vein as her children's books, a bit like a grown-up The Wouldbegoods. Orphaned cousins discover that the money held in trust for them has been embezzled by their trustee, and they're left with a small cottage, a modest sum of money, and their own wits to make their way in the (immediately post WW1) world. Be prepared to accept the attitudes of the time (though nothing too offensive to modern sensibilities), and the author (Fabian/ Arts and Crafts) but it's sparky light-hearted fun, just like the heroines.

You can't have missed the Reverend Richard Coles all over the papers, TV and radio talking about The Madness of Grief. I tend to sigh when yet another book appears chronicling 'My Great and Unique Sorrow', or offering 'Wise Words of Comfort in Your Time of Pain'. But there are always exceptions and this is articulate and unguarded about the stupefaction of the first days, then weeks and months, after the death of someone you love. Warm and fluent, Rev. Coles describes the kindness (and sadly, the occasional malevolence) he received from strangers, and the unexpected humour that pops up even in the first desolation of loss. Anyone who's been bereaved, which is of course everyone sooner or later, will find something in this book to remind them that they're not alone.

The Summer Holidays Gabriella Venus

The summer – you can almost taste it!

The arrival of spring, dreaming of those long, hazy summer days with the sun on your back is ripe, golden and delicious.

We all have different associations with what summer means to us. To me, it's a long list of happy memories, birthdays, holidays, adventures, late nights, music, dancing, sun-kissed skin and outrageous sunglasses to name but a few. One of the books I read last year was Ysenda Maxtone Graham's *British Summer Time: The School Summer Holidays 1930 – 1980.*

I've picked up on this because summer is edging nearer (hoorah), and, I have very recently been looking into the history of hop-picking as part of a group project on my Master's degree course.

Did any of you ever pack your bags and head off to the green fields of Kent with your families for the hop-picking season?

I have been working on a project with fellow students looking at a fabulous painting called *Hop-Picking Granny Knowles* (c.1938) by the undervalued, supremely talented artist, Dame Laura Knight (1877 – 1970).

Hop-Picking – Granny Knowles
by Dame Laura Knight.

The portrait of Granny Knowles depicts a Romany lady picking hops. Oil on canvas, the painting is part of the Canterbury Museums and Galleries collection. Dame Laura Knight was a very accomplished artist. The only British artist to cover the Nuremberg Trials, she was also commissioned as a war artist during both world wars. Orphaned at a young age, Knight became the first woman to be elected as a Royal Academician. As an impressionist artist, Knight was drawn to a variety of subjects, but some of her most famous and recognisable pieces are of marginalised communities, as well as life at the circus and ballet.

Studying this particular painting, I dug deep into the history of hop-picking, revisited accounts from Ysenda Maxtone Graham's book and watched fascinating British Pathé News footage of East Enders packing their trunks and heading out to

the Kent countryside. I came across dozens of accounts of people recalling their hop-picking days which were full of the warm, summer joy that I touched on earlier. 'opping weren't relaxing mind, no, this was a working holiday, not a 'put your feet-up mum' getaway.

I've found researching the history of hop-picking, Dame Laura Knight and people's memories of their summer holidays fascinating. Why? It's social history, a glimpse into the past, into other people's experiences. Furthermore, it has been wonderful to look closely at the work of this brilliant female artist.

Next time I have a cold beer, I'll raise a glass to those families in the fields, and to Dame Laura Knight, who so beautifully captured these characterful faces and kept these communities and stories alive.

Marlborough History Society

The Marlborough History Society, established in 2001, is happy to confirm that we have been presenting a full programme of talks during the pandemic. We have been offering very successful Zoom presentations during lockdown but are eager to return to St Peter's Church for live events as soon as Covid restrictions allow.

On 21 May we will have a further Zoom lecture by David Dawson, director of the Wiltshire Museum, on "Gold from the Time of Stone Henge." Guest tickets, at £5, can be obtained from the Membership Secretary at saraholden22@gmail.com.

For further information about the programme and membership please see our website (www.marlboroughhistorysociety.co.uk) and our Facebook page.

Save the Children

The Annual Gardeners' Fair

Wednesday 12th May 2021

9.00am – 2.00pm

The Shambles, Market Place, Devizes

Wide range of plants including unusual perennials,
shrubs,clematis, alpines and vegetable plants
Local growers and from Somerset, Dorset and Hampshire

What's On in May

7th (Friday)

Marlborough College Exeat (to Sunday 9th May)

12th (Wednesday)

9.00am – 2.00pm Save The Children Annual Gardeners' Fair, The Shambles, Market Place, Devizes

23rd (Sunday)

7.30pm St Peter's Church, 'Brilliant Young Musicians' concert, *The Enlightened Piano,* Louise Cournarie. Contact drnickmaurice@gmail.com for details re tickets

28th (Friday)

Marlborough College Half Term (to Sunday 6th June)

St John's Academy Term 5 ends (to Monday 7th June)

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A Quaker View

Rachel Rosedale

I was prompted to write this article by taking part in a Quaker webinar on the legacy of slavery prompted by a series of discussions that has been held since Black Lives Matter protests began. Throughout the last year there have been a lot of programmes on Black history which have stimulated more thought. I began to realise that underlying our whole society and institutions there was such a lot to learn from the fact that the wealth that enabled the industrial revolution was based on the slave trade and our empire, and the exploitation of the slaves that ran the sugar plantations, tobacco and rum industries. At the time, many people thought slavery was justified but they never addressed what it might have been like to be a slave.

We Quakers have a testimony to Equality and Truth. It is an aspiration rather than commandment but we are constantly reminded to reflect on it.

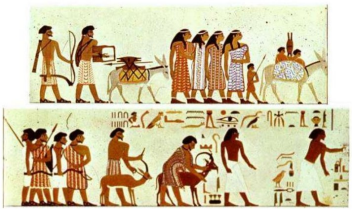
We are encouraged to look at the sense of equality of all people , not ignoring the huge diversity and variety of humanity , but recognising the worth, the value, the sacredness of mankind and respecting people's humanness, whether men or women, rich or poor, white or black, gay or straight, sinners or devout. George Fox summed it up for us saying 'there is that of God in everyone'. In a letter from prison in 1656 he wrote:

'Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world answering that of God in everyone.'

Although Quakers are often mentioned as important in the abolition of slavery, they also were slave owners and had to fight within their own communities to overcome it. Slaves had no control over their lives, they were in the charge of others.

As we begin to unlock from Covid restrictions there are many things on which we need to think, and reflect and take action to address; particularly the inequalities that exist in our society and why those ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented in the poorer areas of our society. We as a society need to reflect deeply and address the inconvenient truths that underlie the structure of our society. The poor have become poorer, the rich have become richer- so much for 'Levelling Up'.

Beni Hasan Painting



see Biblical Archaeology on page 12

Family News

Many thanks to Rev. Henry Pearson for the following information:

Doreen Marie Dunsby was born in 1937 and brought up in Devizes. She began her working life at T. H. White, aged 15, staying there until she married John in 1967. The couple met at the Devizes Carnival and their first date was an evening at the Marlborough Mop Fair. After 10 months of married life, they moved to Barrow Close.

Throughout her life, Doreen faced illness and disability. Her first admission to hospital took place at the age of eighteen months and during her life she would have eleven operations on her hips and knees, as well as other procedures. She faced every challenge with courage and determination. To quote a poem by her daughter, Claire,

"You never knew her pain or suffering inside
She never moaned or complained, it was always there to hide"

Doreen immersed herself in Marlborough life. She worked at the Methodist playgroup and was secretary to the Bishop of Ramsbury as well as to two Rectors of Marlborough, Jeremy Walsh and Wilfred Down. She was a longstanding member, helper and worshipper at St Mary's Church, Marlborough. Later on in life she worked at Amor and Ellis. She was volunteer secretary to the gardening club and the ladies' Phoenix club. She loved baking and giving parties. She taught children to cook at school and helped her own grandchildren win awards for their baking and painting. She relished the skills required for flower arranging, calligraphy and singing in a choir. She helped create the Barrow Close floats for the Marlborough Carnival which always came first. She had a keen sense of fun and loved playing games which endeared her to everyone.

Doreen and John moved back to Devizes in 2016. They celebrated their golden wedding anniversary in 2017 with a party at Bishops Cannings accompanied by a peal of bells from the nearby church. Altogether they were married for 54 years.

Doreen is succeeded by her husband, John, her two children, Mike and Claire, and her four granddaughters, Isabella, Daisy, Lotti and Abi.

News from the Churches

We look forward to the end of lockdown step 2 on 17th May, when church services and activities may change. Please check on your church website.

Deanery Ascension Day Service

The Ascension Day Service will be held in St Mary's, Marlborough on Thursday 13th May at 7.30pm with the Bishop of Ramsbury preaching.

Pentecost

Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit on the early followers of Jesus Christ and also recognizes the day that the church was established. This year Pentecost will be celebrated on 23rd May.

The Circle of Hope

The Circle of Hope outside St Mary's Church over Easter gave the people of Marlborough an opportunity to consider both the sadness and losses of the last year and their hopes for the future. White and orange tapes represented sadnesses; green and pink hopes and dreams. The church added yellow tapes which picked up the 'strapline' from the 1000 Angels project: 'God is with you; God is for you'. The message of Easter: "There is Hope …" was proclaimed on a large banner placed above the Circle. People of all ages added their thoughts including many passers-by. Easter reminds us the suffering does not have the last word. The Circle of Hope acknowledges our suffering, looks forward to our hopes and the message of the love of God is woven through both.

Christchurch http://christchurchmarlborough.org.uk/

Is currently open for worship on a Sunday morning with full social distancing and use of masks. All are welcome to join us at 10:30.

We did have a lovely Easter service with communion, in church, after many weeks of meeting by Zoom. Following the worship, we decorated the Cross in the garden with flowers to celebrate the Resurrection.

Marlborough Quakers http://www.marlboroughquakers.org.uk/

Continue to hold Meetings for Worship using Zoom. Please contact Rachel Rosedale (512205) for more details.

St Thomas More

https://marlboroughandpewseycatholics.org.uk/notice-board/

Worship services continue at St Thomas More with live services.

Emmanuel Marlborough https://www.emmanuelmarlborough.org/

Emmanuel continues to run regular Sunday afternoon services, with children's activities, and midweek groups for children and adults, either in person or online as the regulations allow. We are also planning a Christianity Explored course for enquirers to discover the person of Jesus in Mark's gospel (online or in person, as the regulations allow).

For more information, contact office@emmanuelmarlborough.org

Marlborough Anglican Team www.marlboroughanglicanteam.org.uk/

Social distancing, extra cleaning and our zoom service all remain in place for the foreseeable future; we will keep our interim pattern of worship until the end of Step 2 on May 16th (please refer to website for services after this date):

9am Weekly Zoom Service

9am Fortnightly Service at Minal (1st and 3rd Sunday of the month)

10:30am Weekly Services at St Mary's and St George's

5:30pm Fortnightly Informal Service at St Mary's (2nd and 4th Sunday of the month)

All three churches remain open for private prayer daily:

St Mary's 9am-4pm St George's 9am-6pm

St John the Baptist 9am-5.30pm

along with Prayer meetings on Wednesdays at 8am in St Mary's Church and in the afternoon via a zoom meeting at 5pm.

Prayer support is available for individuals or for your loved ones. Please contact the clergy, in confidence, see page 20. Please do be praying for our world and the church at this time.

Marlborough Churches Together Fraternal

The Fraternal will meet via Zoom Wed May 12 at 12.30pm . Please send any suggestions for discussion to Rachel Rosedale at rachelrosed1@gmail.com

Prince Philip

There is a Book of Condolence in the three Anglican team churches for your messages following the death of HRH Prince Philip.

St Non's Retreat

The annual visit to this delightful, quiet retreat centre, with its wonderful views of the lovely Pembrokeshire coast, will be from September 14th to 17th. As planned for last year, Lynne Busfield will lead our contemplations and there will be ample time to meditate and explore the fascinating coastline and the St David's locality. Those who booked for that Covid-cancelled retreat will have priority this year but should confirm their booking in good time. Details from Barney on 512205.

Open the Book

Our 'OtB' team first went into St Peter's and St Mary's Primary Schools in May 2011. As we 'celebrate' ten years of Open the Book, the team would like to thank the churches for praying for the venture and for their support. As we look to the future we would ask for your prayers to discern what should happen next.

FROM THE REGISTERS

Funerals - *we pray for the families of:*

8 March Doreen Marie Dunsby (84) Waterside Park, Devizes (formerly of Marlborough) *West Wiltshire Crematorium, Semington*

20 March Jean Lightowler (94) of The Priory, High Street, Marlborough *St Mary's, Marlborough*

Brilliant Young International Musicians at St Peter's

We are hoping to continue the 2021 and ninth series starting as below. Please contact Nick Maurice on drnickmaurice@gmail.com for details re tickets for any or all of the recitals you may be interested in attending.

Sunday 23 May
Louise Cournarie (piano)
"The Enlightened Piano"
Musique Française

Sunday 6 June
Altea Narici (cello)
Gianluca Papale (piano)

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Contributions and comments from readers are welcome.

Please send articles and letters to the Monthly Editor or the Chairman, other notices or announcements to the compiler. All items for the June issue by Tuesday 8th May please.

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