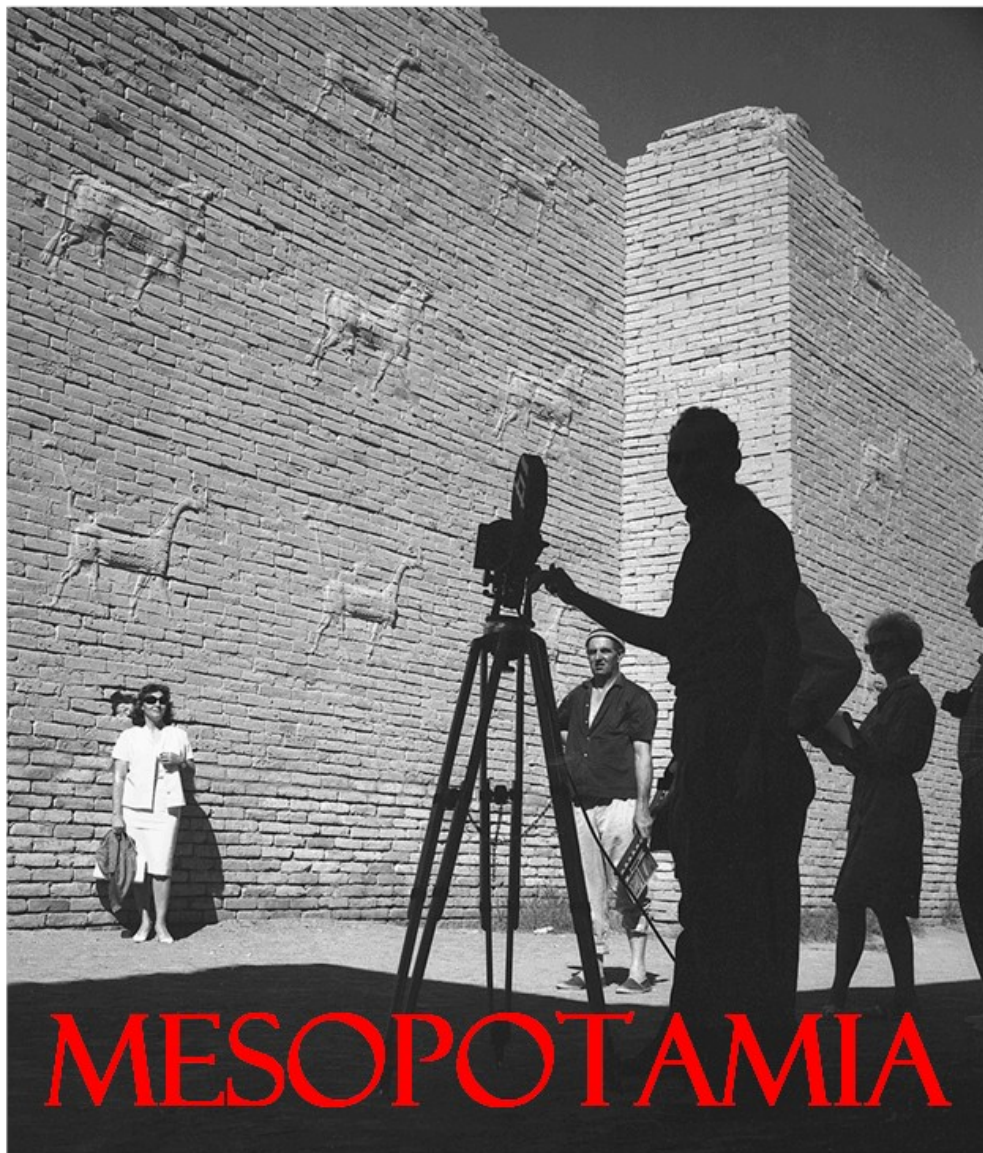


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# TOWER<sub>AND</sub>TOWN

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**MESOPOTAMIA**

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MAY 2022

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# TOWER<sup>AND</sup>TOWN

THE MAGAZINE OF MARLBOROUGH'S COMMUNITY AND CHURCHES

NUMBER 725 MAY 2022



## MESOPOTAMIA 2

I trust that you will find elements of wonder in this issue which is a follow up to Mesopotamia (May 2021). Take for example the fascinating article on Babylonian banking by Nasrat Adamo in which he charts the rise of two financial dynasties, and the insightful text on Syriac prayer amulets by the scholar Erica Hunter. In addition, those of you who are interested in early 20th century British history in Mesopotamia will not be disappointed. Ghanim Alsheikh has given us again another rare gem, the story of the tragedy of the British nurses in WWI Basra in southern Mesopotamia.

The emergence of a new nation is a fascinating topic; and in the case of Iraq the circumstances were exceptional indeed. Rich in heritage and natural resources, Iraq was constrained for some time by the impositions of the dying age of empire. Even so, many Iraqis were determined to write their own script. This is illustrated in the excellent article by the historian of modern art Nada Shabout, which I have complemented by my piece, outlining the local, regional, and international contexts. Moreover, the cover image depicts a scene when Iraqi modernism was at its zenith.

I would like to express my gratitude to the authors who imaginatively supported this Tower & Town endeavour; plus the local contributors, and the T&T team.

**Raik Jarjis, Editor**

(An illustrated extended Mesopotamia 2 edition is available on the T&T website)

Front cover: Latif Al-Ani (Filming at Babylon 1962) The Arab Image Foundation

Compiler: Peter Noble

Proof readers: Julia Peel and Jenny Noble

The history of thoughts, movements, transmissions, ideas, inventions, and migration could offer insights into the development dynamics that shape our world. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century Iraq lends itself to this by virtue of being at a juncture in history when transmission of modernism from the west inspired indigenous ingenuity. By modernism I am here referring to style or movement that aims to depart significantly from classical and traditional thoughts or forms. And it is in this context that this year, 2022, is truly symbolic in that it is in fact the centenary for the birth of western modernism in art and literature, when the barely two year old state of Iraq was aspiring for independence and modernity.

## **Ferment of the Iraqi Modern Mind-Set**

On 11 November 1920 the Ottoman provinces in Mesopotamia were brought together as the state of Iraq under British rule according to a League of Nations mandate. In the following year, 1921, the Hashemite Emir Faisal from Mecca was proclaimed king of Iraq signalling departure from Ottoman decay and embrace of western methods. Regretfully, seeds of instability were sewn as only nominal independence was granted at the end of the mandate in 1932.

The fledgling new nation of Iraq endured turmoil and challenges; on the other hand, the discovery in 1927 of vast oil fields in the region of Kirkuk brought economic improvements that facilitated the rolling out of modernisation plans. This included a revitalised national educational programme centred on Arabic language and history using European education methods. This was spearheaded by the Director General of Education, **Sati' Al-Husri** (1880-1968). Al-Husri was the intellectual prophet of Arab secular nationalism who was sympathetic to the German theory of the nation and an ardent opponent of imperialism. This proved to be invaluable for both the masses and the elites sector which was emboldened by the Mesopotamian diversity, the western outlook, and the newly found Pan-Arab fraternity.

## **Paris 1922**

1922 is considered a stellar year, which the poet **Ezra Pound** (1885-1972) described as year one of modernism because of the constellation of pioneering talents that gathered in Paris during the year. After all, It was in 1922 that the expatriate Irish writer **James Joyce** (1882-1941) published in Paris his ground breaking *Ulysses*, and **T.S. Eliot** (1888-1965) published *The Waste Land*. And it was on the night of 18 May 1922 that these two figures joined the other giant of literary modernism, **Marcel Proust** (1871-1922), the creative cubist **Pablo Picasso** (1881-

1973), and **Igor Stravinsky** (1882-19710, whose musical compositions are touchstones of modernism, for what is now considered to be the fabled modernism dinner at a grand hotel in Paris, the Majestic.

### Of Iraqi Vision and Verse

Just over a year after the modernism gathering at the Majestic a special girl was born in Baghdad. **Nazik al-Malaika** (1923–2007), was educated at the University of Baghdad and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (USA), and was among the first Arab poets to expound “*Shuar Hur*” (free verse) after the Iraqi pioneer **Badr Shakir al-Sayyab** (1926–1964). She wrote poetry at a very young age and published in 1947 what critics describe as a revolution in Arabic poetry, "The Cholera". One of her contemporaries, the artist, architect and scholar **Issam al-Said** (1938-1988), immortalised her poem, *City of Love (Medinat al Hub)*, in a 1963 painting. This case of Iraqi modernism illustrates maturity and fluidity in fusing different art forms and combining both traditional and modern techniques through employing Arabic calligraphy and heritage references. It is also interesting to add that Issam Al-Said was actually the architect for the Central Mosque in London. In addition, it is

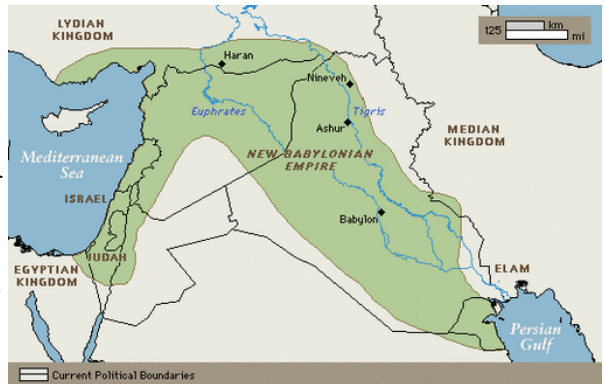
worthwhile pointing out that the theme of bridging the gap between modernity and heritage was the hallmark of many Iraqi artists from that era, including the pioneers **Faiq Hassan** (1914 -1992) and **Jawad Saleem** (1919-1961). One of the notable works of this genre was Saleem’s *Nasb al-Hurriyah (Monument to Freedom)*, in which Iraqi independence was commemorated by incorporating elements from the ancient Iraqi and Arabic heritages within modern sculpture. Saleem met his future wife Lorna at the Slade School of Fine Arts, London. **Lorna Saleem** (1928-2021) relocated to Baghdad in 1950 as an artist and educator in Iraqi modernism. Unfortunately the march of the modernists faded away some three decades later when the dark clouds of war engulfed Iraq, leaving mostly yearnings in diaspora.



# Êigibi and Murašû: First Bankers and Business Managers Firms in the World

Nasrat Adamo

The flourishing civilization of *New Babylonia* was located in lower Mesopotamia in the 6<sup>th</sup> century before Christ. The Babylonians had already climbed an ascending ladder of development throughout the earlier fourteen centuries since the decline of the Sumerian city states which had dug complex networks of irrigation canals and established the first comprehensive agricultural farming system in the world.



Hard working and intelligent Babylonians managed to maintain this heritage with diligence and added to it. As a result, Babylon enjoyed an accumulating wealth and prosperity: its influence spread all over the near east to the west as well as the Indus valley to the east through trading activities and commerce.

The thriving economy had to have legal and commercial frameworks to support it and make it work. This involved collecting taxes and duties levied on the use of irrigation canals, crop yields, imports and exports. Moreover, commercial transactions such as selling and purchasing, renting of lands and execution of contracts needed to be regulated. Add to all this the major activity of arranging and recovering loans. To do these not simple tasks, two families seem to have excelled in these works. They were the ‘House of Êigibi’ and the ‘House of Murašû’, the first two banking and business managers in the history of the world. The work of these families extended over almost five hundred years, making them early prototypes of the “House of Rothschild” and the Notary Public of our day.

The story of the ‘Êigibi Family’ was revealed to us by sheer luck when the secret archive of a family which has been called ‘The Banking House of Êigibi’ was discovered in 1874. It was found on examination that they were documents recording all sorts of commercial and pecuniary transactions, and bearing the names of the contracting parties and of witnesses. Among these names, either as principal or witness, more often the former, always figured the name of some son, or grandson, or descendant of a certain Êigibi, evidently the founder of a firm possessed of im-

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mense wealth and influence, and which, through many generations, indeed several centuries, transacted money affairs of every sort and magnitude, from the loan of a few *manehs* to that of many *talents*, from witnessing a private will or a contract of sale or partnership between modest citizens of Babylon or some neighboring city, to the collecting of taxes from whole provinces farmed out to the house by the government.

As these documents, which come under the class known as "contract tablets", are carefully dated, giving the day and month and the year of the reigning king, it has been found possible to make out a genealogical table of the firm, the head of which, it appears, generally took his sons into partnership in his own lifetime. This table shows that the founder, Êigibi, was probably at the head of the house in the reign of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, about 685 B.C.

Studies of some of the tablets concluded that the name Êigibi is the equivalent to the Hebrew YakÛb (Jacob), from which it has been inferred that the great banker must have been a Jew, probably one of those carried into captivity by the Assyrian king Sargon II (705- 721B.C.) out of Samaria. Many of the tablets had unmistakably Jewish names inscribed on them. If this point is established, it would be curious to note at how early a date the blessing uttered on the race in Deuteronomy (28. 12): "Thou shalt lend unto many nations and thou shalt not borrow" began to take effect. Whatever is the case, the finds revealed that "Êigibi and Sons " had reached its climax of wealth and power under the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 BC ), a century after its foundation, having weathered the storms of the two Assyrian sieges, under Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal, as they were to pass unscathed through several more similar political crises, protected by their exceptional position, which made them too useful, indeed too necessary, to be injured.

But the family "Êigibi and Sons" were not the only family in Babylonia which had practised banking and business management. Historical evidence, based on the archeological findings dating to 1893 from the ruins of Nippur, revealed the existence of another family like the "House of Êigibi", which was practising similar work during the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The texts were identified as late Babylonian records of a business house which was dubbed "Murašû Sons of Nippur", after the ancestor of the firm's chief members. This was the "House of Murašû" family, Jewish descendants of the Babylonian Exile and captivity, but which was one of the many Jewish families who opted to stay in Babylonia after the capture of Babylon by the Persian king Cyrus the Great in 539 B.C, and allowed to help finance the return of Jews to Judea with the Edict of Cyrus in 538 BC.

A large proportion of the archaeological evidence on the family was salvaged from a house in Nippur, found within the remains of a twenty by ten foot room of the building and it consisted of about 800 clay tablets comprising the "Murašû Ar-

chives". The fact that the banking house "Murašû & Sons" conducted business with many clients including Jews who decided to remain in Nippur rather than return to Judea suggests that life in Persian controlled Nippur was at least somewhat tolerable for Jews. The family was identified as bankers, brokers, real estate operators who conducted prosperous business, and were engaged in money lending and trading operations in southern and central Babylonia for a period of 50 years from the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Being a care taking and responsible house, they had the tablets which recorded their operations made of especially pure clay, neatly inscribed in cuneiform characters, and stored for future reference. The chief members of the firm were descendants of the Archive's eponym, Murašû, and the texts documented four generations of his family.

The legal documentation of the archives included matters concerning the less wealthy of Nippur living in the outer areas of the city, and also related to the interests of the Royal Palace, that consisted of renting of agricultural lands and collection of various taxes, in addition to those officials associated with the government, and the aristocracy within their estates. The firm, at first, father and sons and later the sons alone, were very shrewd and their clients were Persians, Greeks, Medes, Judeans Sabians, Edomites and other individuals who in all represented the cosmopolitan character of Babylonia at that time. The business was as miscellaneous as the crowd. A jewelry firm guarantees that an emerald they have set in a gold ring for a gentleman will not fall out for twenty years. A brick maker agrees to deliver 25,240 bricks within a given time. Three brothers hire some oxen for three years and agree to become severally liable for the debt. A lessee agrees to pay 25 loads of dates, 60 bags of flour, a lamb, and a jar of the best date wine for the rent of a field and stable. In conclusion, Babylonia was the centre of the civilized world, enjoying the most advanced economic and commercial status. Secondly, the economy and commerce during the golden times of Babylonia were run by families such as the "Êigibi" and the "Murašû" clans, who worked efficiently for generations. Thirdly, the uncovering of the archives of those two families does not preclude the possibility of discovering many other families who are similar to them.

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***Nasrat Adamo** is the former Director General of Dams and Reservoir Organization in Iraq. Based in Sweden, he has authored several volumes on Mesopotamian irrigation and dam safety.*

# The Tragedy of the “Mercy Angels” in Mesopotamia

Ghanim Alsheikh

In November 1914, the war on the west Asian front escalated when the British forces marched toward Mesopotamia and landed in Basra. The British now aimed to control Mesopotamia to secure the route to Baghdad as a way station to the Russian army already stationed in northern Iran and to establish a line of defence against incursions by the Central Powers in central and south Asia. Additionally, the British wanted to secure the flow of oil from Persia, which had evolved as a cornerstone of their geopolitical and military strategy. Khuzestan’s oilfields and the Abadan Oil Refinery were a mere sixty kilometres from Basra, and only the Shat al -Arab River separated Khuzestan from Ottoman Mesopotamia.

During the summer months of 1917, as a consequence of the sinking of many hospital ships, five of the Maltese hospitals were transferred to Salonika. Nurses, among other medical staff, moved there in July 1917, experiencing even worse conditions with extremes of temperature and a high incidence of malaria. Hospital admissions alone during 1917 were numbered in tens of thousands. The Gallipoli Campaign of 1915-16, also known as the Battle of Gallipoli or the Dardanelles Campaign, was an unsuccessful attempt by the Allied Powers to control the sea route from Europe to Russia.

Afterwards, the move of 12 nurses to Basra on 8 January 1918, after some six months in Salonika, must have come as a considerable relief as long as Basra was a flourishing strong base of the British army and many hundreds of miles away from the battle front up the Tigris. However, Basra proved to be far from a pleasant place. The young girls were attached to Number 3 British General Hospital established in the big Ashar’s palace of Sheikh Khazaal, Emir of the Arab Emirate of Arabistan (now Khuzestan, Iran.)



*Figure (1): The Nurses Club on top of the main post office  
in “The Strand” in 1917*

Again, these girls were unfortunate and they were assigned to the extensions of the hospital comprising long prefabricated huts each with between 32 and 36 beds. It was prone to fierce winds carrying sand over and into everything, extremes of temperature and the source of countless diseases. There was little vegetation apart from date palm trees, dry sandy soil and a few decrepit buildings. It was close to Shat-Al-Arab waterway and travel locally was often by irrigation canals or the waterway itself.

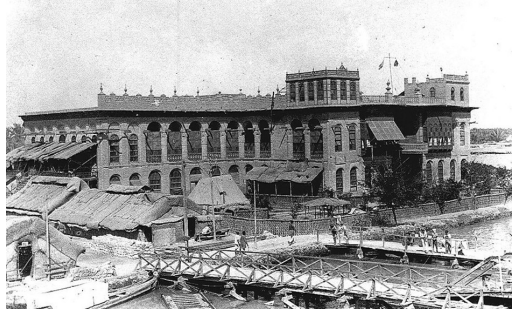


Figure (2): The No. 3 British General Hospital, Basra Ashar showing extensions made of huts.  
 Figure (3): A ward in No. 3 British general Hospital, Basra Ashar. Source: IWM.

Miss Marjery Swynnerton, a nurse also serving at the same hospital, wrote “Just less than two weeks after their arrival, a terrible tragedy occurred. A boat full of real VADs [Voluntary Aid Detachment] and their Matron (13 of them in all) had just arrived. They had been at Salonika where they had had a very horrible time after the Dardanelles fiasco. The ones I saw were jolly, pretty girls and everyone was out to invite them to parties and to make a great fuss of them and they had invitations en bloc to all sorts of things. On the evening of the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 1918, they were all invited to a big dinner party down the river at a place called Mohammerah (c. 20 miles) and a motor launch was sent to fetch them. They never arrived. Their launch was cut in two by another boat in the dark and most of them were drowned. It was my unfortunate task to sit with the half-demented Matron who had been rescued, as the sodden piles of clothing were brought in for identification”. The investigations revealed: “*A collision at Basra, shortly after sunset, between a Steam Tug and a Motor Launch containing a party of Nurses on duty.*” Four members of them died. The body of one (Miss Tindal) was recovered around the time of the accident and found that the cause of death being: “*Suffocation by submersion and skull fracture*” while the other three were reported missing, presumed drowned. The body of Florence Compton was found two weeks after the accident on 29th January, and buried the same afternoon in the Basra War Makina Cemetry, Ashar. The result of the Court of Enquiry was accidental death, due to: “*An error of judgement on the part of the steersman of the launch.*”



Hospital, Basra 1917

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The victims were: Sister Florence D'Oyly Compton, Sister Alice Welford, Sister Fanny Tindall, and Sister Florence Mary Faithfull.

Preparing material for my book on medical service in Basra, I asked an old uncle of mine KO EL-Saleh

three years before his death (1930-2020) about the tragedy. He told me what he had heard from his father who was an engineer with the Ottoman army and served in the Gallipoli war before he sought refuge and lived in Mohammerah after escaping from the army. The motor launch that the nurses took was crewed by two locals: the skipper sat on the back end and was the steersman and the other man sat at the front end with a paraffin lamp raised by hand to warn and light the way ahead. The early night of that Monday 15<sup>th</sup> of January 1918 must have been one of the darkest nights as it was the 22nd day in the lunar month. At such a stage in the lunar cycle, the nights will be dark especially over water for the following 4-5 days. The Shat-Al-Arab waterway connecting Basra and Mohammerah is c. 20 miles long. The waterway could have been at its peak high tide making speeding vessels down the canal slower. At a dangerous junction just 2 miles before reaching their destination, the steersman must pass by a tributary canal and at the same time cross the waterway to approach the east coast on which their destination is located. Crossing a side-canal, crossing the whole width of the waterway, high tide slowing the launch speed, darkness, and a party of celebrating young girls on board... all these conditions contributed to the unfortunate collision and the deaths of the four “angels of mercy” as Iraqis call nurses.

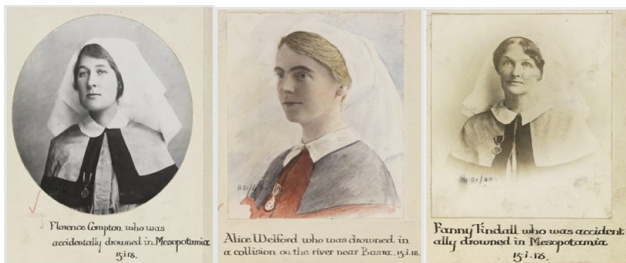
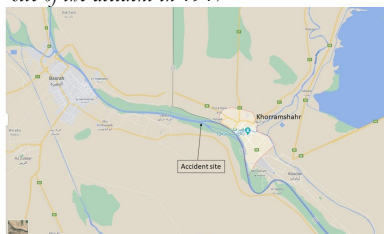


Figure (4): Sisters Compton, Welford, and Tindal (Source IWM)



Figure (5): The building of the No. 3 British General Hospital as it appeared in 2003

Figure (6): Map of Basra and expected site of the accident in 1917



**Ghanim 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. He is an associate at Imperial College London WHO Collaborating Centre and lives in Brighton.

Iraqi artists of the mid twentieth century thought of modern art as an active space of shared humanity within which they were able to negotiate their contribution to building a new nation with a distinctive culture and to the notion of international art. The newly gained independence and formation of the Iraqi nation allowed Iraqi artists the freedom to create a new structure and art tradition. Faced with long years of cultural stagnation and discontinuity, a new tradition needed to be invented to express Iraq's new aspirations. Their conscious desire to understand and participate in building the new Iraqi nation as a coherent whole resulted in the creation of an iconography that is recognized until this day as distinctly Iraqi, in both form and content.

Following the philosophy and spirit of modernity and its concept of the nation-state, the visual language they created was based on a specific negotiation (selection and synthesis) of what they believed constituted the "Iraqiness" of the various and multiple factions of society. These elements were then merged into a multifaceted identity capable, as they perceived it, of representing the pluralistic whole. At the same time, the establishment of the Iraqi National Museum and a growing popular interest in antiquities helped to introduce and encourage young artists to study ancient Iraqi and Islamic art through direct involvement in the Museum's various preservation projects, thus instigating new developments in style and concepts.

Thus, Iraqi visual artists embarked on the task of visually constructing and performing their conception of an Iraqi culture during the 1950s. Work developed in the 1950s, however, certainly has its roots in an important number of experiments starting at the turn of the twentieth century. Of the 1940s artist Jewad Selim wrote: "During these four years [in reference to WWII], Paris and Europe stopped producing beautiful work but Baghdad did not. It worked slowly and quietly. It was poor and uneducated but it worked hard during these 4 to 5 years. The first Art Institute was established [1941/43], as well as the first official atelier and the first strong movement in the theatre and music. They were few who faced danger from all sides, from their creative work to preparing the public to appreciate and understand it."

The work of the pioneer artist Abdul-Qadir al-Rassam, one of the first modern Iraqi artists and art educators, connected art with nationalistic sentiments through localizing his subject matter, and producing romantic representations of the environment of Baghdad. As a former soldier trained in Ottoman modern military schools in Istanbul, his military training included a topography curriculum, and offered courses in drawing, painting and perspective. Upon his retirement after

World War I and return to Baghdad, he utilized his art training to produce works endowed with nationalistic symbolism through landscape.

During and following the years of WWII, artists took a more active role in their use of symbolic styles and choice of subject matter. Generally speaking, works of art before the 1950s touched Iraqis through their subject matter: like images of the desert by Faiq Hassan and Iraqi nature in Atta Sabri's paintings. In the absence of a tradition of representation, Iraqis were shocked by the familiar of their lives that they have perhaps forgotten on canvas. Two of the most popular and considered influential in the history of modern Iraqi art were Faiq Hassan and Jewad Selim. Hassan's and Selim's works exemplified the anxious search for a form that could express their content without contradiction. It is in fact this tension between form and content that gave their work its creative rhythm. Hassan's subdued studies of brute facial expressions (studies of individualism) were attempts to construct new features for the 'Iraqi individual', which interestingly were dynamically opposed to his vibrant oil portraiture. The notion of certain features of an 'Iraqi' character was widespread in Iraqi literature of the 1950s. However, the result of their search was materialized in distinct ways. Hassan's work came to embody what could be termed an 'Iraqi spirit'. Selim on the other hand was not satisfied with expressing the spirit but wanted to forge, with high passion, a vocabulary visually capable of interpreting this spirit. The mid twentieth century was an age of optimism and possibilities. During the 1950s, three main and extremely active art groups, each formed around and by a noted artist that embodied artists' struggles to carve a socially accepted space for their local and world vision, shaped the period: *al-Rumad* led by Faiq Hassan, the Baghdad Group of Modern Art, *Jama't Baghdad lil Fan al-Hadith*, led by Jewad Selim and Shakir Hassan Al Said, and the *Impressionists* (most of whom experimented with post-impressionist and cubist styles) led by Hafidh al-Doroubi. The three groups consisted of about 50 artists (painters and sculptors) who, while not necessarily always acting collectively as groups, remained very active individually. With the return of students from abroad and the increasing number of graduates from the Fine Arts Institute and the Art Academy, the number of art groups only multiplied during the 1960s.

Most influential in promoting new ideals were the members of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art. What this group of artists initiated were visual cultural rhythms through Iraqi art. Through their work they established methodologies that opened the doors for analytical and critical deconstruction of history and tradition and their reconstruction into cultural icons loaded with the symbolism of identity. They probed the wealth of historical iconography and left a long-lasting epistemological imprint. Moreover, members of the Baghdad Group of Modern

continued p. 16

# What's On in May

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## **2<sup>nd</sup> (Monday) Bank Holiday**

11am-3pm Bushton Manor Plant Fair and Open Gardens SN4 7PX. Plants, crafts, food stalls, BBQ and refreshments. Entry £3, children and car parking free. *See page 27*

## **5<sup>th</sup> (Thursday)**

7pm-9pm St Peter's Church. The Merchant's House. An illustrated talk by Tim Craven: 'Capture The Castle: The Story of Castles through Artists' Eyes'. Tickets £15, Friends of MH £12 from [www.themerchantshouse.co.uk/events](http://www.themerchantshouse.co.uk/events)

## **6<sup>th</sup> (Friday)**

Marlborough College: Exeat starts (to Sunday 8<sup>th</sup>)

## **11<sup>th</sup> (Wednesday)**

10am St Peter's Church. The Merchant's House. Relaxing Piano Classics – a chance to enjoy some wonderful classical piano music while you enjoy a cuppa. Tickets can be bought in advance or on the door. Full details and booking via the website: [www.the.merchantshouse.co.uk/events](http://www.the.merchantshouse.co.uk/events)

## **19<sup>th</sup> (Thursday)**

7.30pm St Peter's Church. Marlborough History Society lecture by Oliver Everett (previously the Librarian of the Royal Library at Windsor Castle) 'How the Queen entertains at Windsor Castle: Treasures and Curiosities for the Royal Library'. Guests welcome, £5 entry

## **20<sup>th</sup> (Friday)**

5.30pm St Peter's Church. The Merchant's House. Piano and Prosecco. Relaxing piano music served with a glass of prosecco in this beautiful church setting. Tickets and details on the website: [www.themerchantshouse.co.uk/events](http://www.themerchantshouse.co.uk/events)

## **22<sup>nd</sup> (Sunday)**

7.30pm St Peter's Church. Brilliant Young International Musicians Concert. Findlay Spence (cello) and Anna Han (piano) play three cello sonatas by Beethoven, Britten and Franck. Tickets £13 (£9 for St P members) from the White Horse Bookshop, online at [www.stpetersmarlborough.org.uk](http://www.stpetersmarlborough.org.uk) or on the door



### **23<sup>rd</sup> (Monday)**

3.45pm-4.45pm (Doors open at 3.30pm) Wesley Hall, Oxford Street. A monthly kids' club for school years Reception to Year 2. Games, snacks and Bible stories. For more information, or to join, please email [sparklers@emmanuelmarlborough.org](mailto:sparklers@emmanuelmarlborough.org)

### **27<sup>th</sup> (Friday)**

St John's: Term 5 ends (to Monday 6<sup>th</sup> June)

St Mary's: Term 5 ends (to Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> June)

### **27<sup>th</sup> (Friday) to 29<sup>th</sup> (Sunday)**

10am-4pm St Peter's Church. Marlborough Artists Exhibition. Marlborough Artists was founded in 1949 and has held an Annual Exhibition in Marlborough since that time. This exhibition is in support of the Wiltshire Air Ambulance and Ukraine. It also holds additional informal exhibitions in Avebury two or three times a year

### **28<sup>th</sup> (Saturday)**

Marlborough College: Half term starts (to Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> June)

### **31<sup>st</sup> (Tuesday)**

1.45pm-3.45pm Assembly Room, Marlborough Town Hall. The Merchant's House. Talk by Jo Badger 'Queen Victoria's Fashion' charts the development of women's fashion during Queen Victoria's reign, with an emphasis on the clothing worn by Victoria and her descendants. Tickets £15, Friends of MH £12, from [www.themerchantshouse.co.uk](http://www.themerchantshouse.co.uk) or on the door

### **3<sup>rd</sup> June (Friday)**

3pm Marlborough Youth and Community Centre. Queen's Platinum Jubilee Afternoon Tea. More details on the website, [www.emmanuelmarlborough.org](http://www.emmanuelmarlborough.org)

### **9<sup>th</sup> June (Thursday)**

2pm Mildenhall Village Hall. Marlborough Floral Club. Martina Coleman: Anything Goes. Treat yourselves to an enjoyable afternoon out on the first Thursday of each month (NB no meeting in May, and held on second Thursday in June due to Jubilee celebrations). There is a Guest Demonstrator and the arrangements are raffled at the end of the demonstration. For more information, please call Micky Graham 01672 514301

continued from p.13

Art widened the search beyond visual patrimony to encompass visual interpretations and transformations of historical literary and folk inheritance. In their efforts they not only asserted their visual distinctiveness but also they contributed to the formation of modern Iraqi identities. These experiments were continued by subsequent generations, allowing for Iraqi cultural identities to incessantly evolve.

**(“A Century of Iraqi Art” is published in full ,(up to 21st century), in the extended May 2022 on-line Mesopotamia + edition of Tower & Town)**

*Nada Shabout is a Regent Professor of Art History and the Coordinator of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Initiative at the University of North Texas,*

## **Traversing Time and Territory: Syriac prayer-amulets from northern Mesopotamia** Erica Hunter

---

The Christians who dwelt in the villages of northern Mesopotamia until the opening decades of the twentieth century inhabited a triangular area roughly corresponding to the Hakkari mountains south of lake Van in Turkey, the Azerbaijani plains in Iran and the foothills north of Mosul in Iraq. In these remote regions, religion played a major role in the traditional, largely



rural societies, with the priest acting in many different capacities beyond his liturgical and pastoral duties. Priests wrote prayer-amulets for their parishioners to protect them from various ailments. Churches functioned as asylums and places of healing. Lunatics were incarcerated at the famous monastery of Rabban Hormizd, near Alkosh north of Mosul. [Fig. 1] The relics of saints or holy men were also believed to be efficacious. In the 1840s, James (Philip) Fletcher saw pilgrims at the monastery of Mar Behnam, near Nimrud, taking away parcels of dust from the martyrs' graves that were 'esteemed a specific for all kinds of diseases'. These practices of course had ancient origins and were not confined just to the Christian tradition. Jewish and Muslim communities also engaged in similar practices and often there was a kind of 'inter-faith' dialogue at the vernacular level, where people sought help outside their own religious tradition.

Prayer-amulets were part of the daily life of the communities. Apart from their

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medical application, they were used in a wide range of situations: the blessing of crops and assistance in political feuds, in short for every conceivable problem that might occur. Written in classical Syriac (a dialect of Biblical Aramaic), the prayer-amulets also included many loan-words from Arabic and Persian that had been absorbed into Sureth (vernacular Syriac) spoken by the communities. As products emanating from the societies in which they were used, the prayer-amulets are a rich expression of how the Christians who had lived in northern Mesopotamia for millennia until they were forced to leave more than a century ago coped with the everyday problems that confronted them. The prayer-amulets were heir to an ancient tradition rooted in Mesopotamia that transgressed time and territory, having links to the terminology of incantation bowls that were in widespread usage during the sixth-seventh centuries, particularly in the Babylon region. At Turfan in western China where the Church of the East had dioceses until the medieval period, fragments of prayer-amulets, the forerunners to those used in northern Mesopotamia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have also been found.

European visitors to the communities in the nineteenth century noted, often disparagingly, that the clergy wrote and sold prayer-amulets. Justin Perkins, an American Presbyterian missionary, described the commissioning of such an item. He was dining with a priest, when a Moslem villager came asking for an amulet to cure his sick cow. The priest immediately recited a prayer over some salt (that was to be fed to the beast) and was recompensed for his labor with a small sum of money by his grateful client. This possibly formed a lucrative sideline to his meagre livings. On this occasion he recited the prayer, but in other circumstances he might have written the prayer-amulet on a piece of paper, a 'scroll' which his client would have rolled or folded up. Few exemplars of these individually tailored items have survived due to the fragility of their fabric (paper) as well as deterioration through their everyday, practical usage. Although people

were reluctant to part with an item that they believed had potency and could offer protection, a handful of these personal scroll prayer-amulets have made their way to institutions in Europe, North America and the Caucasus (Georgia and Armenia). In the case of the request for the cow, the priest recited from memory the prayer-amulet



for his Muslim client. On other occasions he might have consulted a codex handbook, consisting of various prayer-amulets that could be used for a whole range of complaints. These small pocket-sized codices are more common and quite a few have found their way into various libraries in Europe and north America. In recent

years, a sizeable collection has come to light in Armenia and Georgia; they were brought by refugees who relocated from northern Mesopotamia to the Caucasus in the vicissitudes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the prayer-amulets were illustrated with miniatures of varying subject matter. A particularly popular motif is that of the “rider-saint” i.e. a mounted saint slaying a demonic beast. ‘St. George and the Dragon’ [Fig. 2] was especially favoured. Illustrations of the four apostles were common, and the wide-ranging subject-matter also includes images of weapons; as well as scorpions and snakes.

Protection was the prayer-amulets’ main purpose. The codex handbooks termed themselves ‘books of protection’ and would conventionally call on the name of Jesus, typically beginning “by the power of our Lord Jesus Christ we begin to write the book of protection from all kinds of evil”. Thereafter a series of prayers formed a Prologue to the miscellany of amulets.

*Erica C.D. Hunter* is Senior Lecturer in Eastern Christianity (Emerita), SOAS

## A Good Read

Debby Guest

---

The following article is utterly unscientific, packed with personal prejudice (and aggravating alliteration) and reaches no real conclusion. Don't say I didn't warn you.

It's not a regular thing, but it happens often enough for me to heave a sigh. Some man will come into the shop and gaze at the new publications table before saying, in mildly aggressive tones, “There seem to be an awful lot of books by *women*.” I'm never sure how to reply “ I *know*, Sir, it's awful, you gave us the vote and we just ran amok, *writing stuff*.”? Less often, but not unknown, are women who gaze around plaintively murmuring, “It's all very *male*, isn't it?” (Sister, I feel your pain, but the patriarchy has a 5,000 year head start on us, what to do?)

I did a quick scan round the shop, and I concede Grumpy Man may have a point – the new paperback fiction table was about 75% female authors. Non-fiction redresses the balance a bit, though occasionally women nudge ahead there too. However, that does vary, and sometimes there are many more books by men especially on the non-fiction table. Moving on to 'genre fiction' the crime section is about 50/50 male/female authors, and in Sci-Fi and Fantasy male writers (and readers) are streets ahead. Studies show (don't ask me which studies, I did say this article was unscientific, see above) that more women than men read fiction, and women are more likely to read books by men than vice versa.

continued overleaf

## A Good Read continued

As a useless example, I (xx chromosome), happily read the fat WW2 volumes, while Angus is comatose with boredom at the sight of them.

Which proves precisely zero of course, and as booksellers we stock what we know our particular market (that's you) wants. We don't always get it right, but as booksellers we'd also say Take a Chance, you might be pleasantly surprised. Because really, what does it matter if the book's good?

If you're still hoping for actual recommendations, I've loved *The Hummingbird* by Sandro Veronesi, a time-shifting mosaic of a novel, chronicling the loves, mistakes and griefs of one man, warm, funny and insightful. (And it took me a while to realise that *Sandro* is a man.) I've just finished and enjoyed a study of natural regeneration in places humans have deserted, *Islands of Abandonment* by Cal Flynn, whom I didn't at first clock was a woman. Just goes to show. Not sure what exactly.

## The Aerial Feeders

Robin Nelson

---

By early May, with plenty of insects on the wing, all our “aerial feeders” have returned, including the swift, the swallow and the two martins. First to arrive is the dainty sand martin, as early as mid-March: it has sandy-brown upper parts, a dark underwing and a white breast with a brown necklace, details that are not that easy to spot as you track them with your binoculars as they flicker and flutter over lakes and gravel pits. They nest in burrows in traditional colonies: in Wiltshire the Cotswold Water Park and the quarries in Calne attract the largest numbers. Recently, in response to a drop in U.K. breeding numbers, artificial sand banks have been created in reserves such as Minsmere and the London Wetland Centre, with spectacular success

It was once thought that our swallows hibernate in mud banks and reed beds in the winter months: even Gilbert White, author of *The Natural History of Selbourne*, was confused as to the truth of the matter. Barn swallows, those much-loved harbingers of spring, are broad-front migrants arriving from early April from southern Africa and staying with us until September, sometimes later. The nest is open at the top, on a ledge or beam inside a barn or a shed. Swallows are often double-brooded, in good years even stretching to a third brood. The most glamorous of the hirundines, distinctive features include the blue upperparts, rufous forehead, chin and throat, and the long, pointed tail streamers.

A few years ago house martins created a nest on a ledge above our garage doors, and they have returned every year since to entertain us with their comings and goings. They zip down our lane flashing their white rumps and calling with excited “prip-prip” sounds. It is particularly pleasing as the season moves on to see the heads of the youngsters peeking out from the nest.

### Swifts early evening flight

In the first week of May, sitting in my office in what was the Old Music School, I used to hear a welcome sound: the ringing screams of newly arrived swifts circling the St Peter’s Church tower.

I discovered recently that their calls have been recorded, dropped in pitch and slowed down, after which the screams convert into a pleasing, ghostly warble!

Swifts eat, mate and even sleep on the wing. Be careful if you pick up a grounded one: you’ll soon find fleas and lice crawling over your hands.

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| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>FROM THE REGISTERS</b></p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Records for March will be reported next month</p> |
|---|

Watching the news at the moment is like watching a trailer of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The stories and images are awful and we feel fear, anger and worry. This emotional response can have a significant impact on us: did you know that worry is derived from the old Anglo-Saxon word for ‘to choke’? One famous psychologist asserted “fear is the most disintegrating enemy of human personality”. Another psychiatrist said, “Anxiety is the great modern plague.”. But we don’t need to be victims of worry. At its simplest worry is an unhealthy and destructive habit. As none of us was born with this habit and only acquired it, this means we can change it. The moment to begin breaking the worry habit is today. There are many books and prayer techniques to help us conquer worry but here are a few ideas, which I’ve found helpful.

1 Say to yourself: ‘Worry is just a very bad mental habit and I can change any habit with God’s help’. It might sound odd but sometimes we have to tell ourselves the truth.

2 If we practise worry, we will become a worrier. If we practise and exercise faith it can become the stronger habit. How do we do this? Each day begin by affirming your faith by repeating out loud: ‘Lord, I believe in you’.

3 Take some Scriptures and speak them out in faith over the day ahead. My favourite: ‘This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it’ Ps 118:24. I know many others love Gabriel’s comment to Mary: ‘For nothing is impossible with God’ Luke 1:37.

4 Avoid worry conversations. A group of people talking pessimistically can infect everyone in the group with negativism. If you can talk things up, you can drive off the depressing atmosphere for everyone.

5 Watch the news less often and earlier in the evening. St Paul encourages us to focus on ‘whatever is noble...right...pure...lovely...admirable...excellent or praiseworthy’ Phil 4:8. Switch to watching at 6pm and read something uplifting before bed time.

6 Cultivate friendships with hopeful people. Churches are full of people who smile and who are full of faith and creativity. This will keep you restimulated with an attitude of trust.

7 See if you can help others overcome their worry habit. In helping others, we often help ourselves.

continued overleaf



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Clergy letter continued....

I don't think believers are meant to be weighed down with fear and anxiety. God wants to help you to break the destructive habits of worry. It is possible and many can testify to how they have let God replace negative patterns with faith. Sometimes as ministers we encourage people to imagine Jesus being beside us. If he was really there would we be fearful or worried? I don't think so, so treasure some of Jesus' last words on earth: 'I am with you always' Matt 28:20.

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## Family News and Comments

People like to know what's going on in our town and district so if you have family news or news of forthcoming events that you would like to share with our readers, do please contact Jessy Pomfret or the relevant compiler as listed on page 28.

Also if you would like to comment, commend or complain about anything we publish (or fail to publish) do contact the chairman.

# News from the Churches

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## Marlborough Methodists are Moving.

The article in the Gazette has prompted this clarification. As the dynamic of our congregation changes, God has led us to move away from the site and chapel in which we have worshipped for over one hundred years. Under the exploration we call 'Milk & Honey' we are seeking a more sustainable way of remaining a congregation and Methodist witness in Marlborough. In an act of faith, we are asking permission of Methodist Synod for the current chapel to cease to be a place of Methodist worship and we have begun the process of finding a new home. Our **'Milk & Honey'** team are actively seeking to understand our current and future needs as a congregation and to find a new place to worship. As the managing trustees of Christchurch, we do not actually own the title of the building and its sale has to be approved by the Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, who deal with all Methodist property. Our **'Exodus'** team continues to support the professionals who have been engaged to enact the sale. We seek your prayers and support as we go on this journey of faith.



From 8<sup>th</sup> May, Rev Stephen Skinner will be on Sabbatical, and spending time reflecting on Rembrandt and his spirituality and use of religion in his art. We look forward to his reflections on his return.

## Women's Fellowship

meets on **Tuesdays 3<sup>rd</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> & 31<sup>st</sup> May** at Christchurch, New Road at 2.45pm for tea, coffee and chat.

## Marlborough Churches Together Fraternal

meets at The Manse, 18 Priorsfield on Wednesday **4<sup>th</sup> May**, 12.30pm.



## Marlborough Area Poverty Action Group

**Meet** on Monday **9<sup>th</sup> May** at 5 pm. This will be a hybrid meeting, some on zoom, at some at Friends Meeting House. For zoom link please contact [rachelrosed1@gmail.com](mailto:rachelrosed1@gmail.com).

## Aldersgate Sunday

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John Wesley, the founding father of Methodism, experienced confirmation of his salvation, by the grace of God, in a meeting room in Aldersgate Street, London, in 1738. His conversion is celebrated on 22nd May.

## Emmanuel

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We are grateful to meet for a weekly Sunday service at 4pm at Christchurch, New Road, with crèche and Sunday School groups. All are welcome to stay afterwards for refreshments and a sandwich tea for children. Mid-week we are also delighted to offer a variety of activities including homegroups meeting in Marlborough, Pewsey and Ogbourne St George and community groups as detailed below:



**Little Friends Toddler Group**, Thursdays, 10-11:30am at the Marlborough Community and Youth Centre. Come and enjoy free play, singing and story time, snacks for children and refreshments for carers.

**Sparklers 23rd May** 3:45-4:45pm (Doors open at 3:30pm) at the Wesley Hall, Oxford Street, Marlborough. A monthly kids' club for school years Reception to Year 2. Games, Snacks and Bible Stories! For more information or to join, please email [sparklers@emmanuelmarlborough.org](mailto:sparklers@emmanuelmarlborough.org)

**Explorers**, Fridays, 6-7:15pm at the Wesley Hall, Oxford Street, Marlborough. Our kids club for school years 3-6. Fun, games, tuck and a short Bible talk (bring 50p for tuck)

**Youth Club, Fridays**, 7:30-9pm at the Wesley Hall, Oxford Street, Marlborough, for school years 7-11. Friends, fun & faith – everyone welcome!

**Hope Explored** A 3 session short introduction to Christianity, from Luke's Gospel. All welcome to come and ask any question or just listen! For more details, email [office@emmanuelmarlborough.org](mailto:office@emmanuelmarlborough.org)



## Clyffe Pypard Plant Fair and Open Garden

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Within the lovely grounds of this 18<sup>th</sup> century Manor House there will be some 30 stalls with plants, crafts, food and other related products as well as the ever popular bacon butty BBQ and homemade refreshments. A plant crèche enables people to stroll around without having to carry purchases.

For the younger people there will be outside games to keep them occupied.

Entrance £3. Children and car parking free. Dogs on leads are allowed.

Money raised will go towards the St Peter's Church Roof Fund, a Grade 1 listed building in Clyffe Pypard.

# Tower and Town staff

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## Every Month

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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 10th May 2022 please.

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