

OBITUARY  
JOAN LOUISE OATES (LINES)  
(1928–2023)



Dr. Joan Oates, one of the most important researchers of Mesopotamian archaeology, died on 3 February 2023 in Cambridge, UK. She was 94. Those who were lucky to have spent time in the field with her will remember and miss her animated debates in the sherd-yard at sunset, her support of new research and innovations while adamantly insisting on traditional canvas tents at Tell Brak, her love of a glass of arak before dinner, and her extraordinary knowledge of Mesopotamia from south to north.

Joan was born in Watertown, New York, on 6 May 1928. She completed a BA in Chemistry at Syracuse University in 1950. She then came to the UK on a Fulbright Scholarship and was awarded a PhD from the University of Cambridge, Girton College, in 1953. Her PhD was on the Ubaid period in southern Mesopotamia, *The al-'Ubaid Period in Mesopotamia and Its Persian Affinities*, a subject that continued to hold much of her attention through the 2000s. Between 1953 and 1956, Joan was an Assistant Curator at the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Antiquities of the Metropolitan Museum, New York. However, from 1952, Joan joined the excavation team of Max Mallowan at Nimrud, Iraq, to focus on categorising and publishing the pottery. It was at Nimrud that she met David Oates, and they married in 1956, after which she moved permanently to the UK. Joan and David lived in Baghdad from 1965 to 1969, while David was Director of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq. On their return to the UK, Joan became a Tutor and then College Lecturer at Girton College at the University of Cambridge from 1971 to 1995, and she was a University Lecturer in the Department of Archaeology and (former) Faculty of Oriental

Studies at the University of Cambridge from 1989 to 1995. She was a key member of the Department of Archaeology at the foundation of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, so impressing the donor (Dr. D. M. McDonald) that a corner office was assigned to her research project in the original plans for the new institute building (simply titled, 'the Brak Room'). She remained a Fellow of the McDonald Institute until her death. Joan was elected to the British Academy in 2004 and was awarded the Academy's Graham Clarke Medal for Prehistoric Archaeology in 2014 (the first woman to receive this award).

Joan is best known for her research at Choga Mami, Iraq, and at Tell Brak, Syria. In 1966–67, Joan was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for a survey on the eastern frontier of Iraq, which led to identification of some of Mesopotamia's earliest known irrigation canals (c. 6000 BCE) and the site of Choga Mami. The excavations at Choga Mami uncovered evidence for an important era in the prehistory of Iraq, between the Samarran and Ubaid periods and geographically between alluvial Mesopotamia and highland Iran. Joan coined the term 'Choga Mami Transitional' to represent this temporal and spatial frontier.

From 1978, Joan and David worked together at Tell Brak, in the Khabur region of northeast Syria. The Oates' excavations at Brak are foundational to our understanding of northern Mesopotamia during the 4<sup>th</sup> through 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BCE. In her final research-active years, Joan's primary focus was on issues surrounding northern Mesopotamian pristine urbanism, which rivalled that of Uruk in the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE. At Brak, Joan's powerful understanding of material culture, especially ceramics, complemented David's interest and expertise in architecture. After David's death in 2004, Joan became the permit holder for the Brak excavations and for the Brak Sustaining Area survey, an extensive survey of the site's hinterland. A series of Field Directors supported the excavations at Brak from 1994 onwards (Roger Matthews, 1994–1996; Geoff Emberling, 1998–2002; Helen McDonald, 1998–2004; Augusta McMahon, 2006–2011).

Among Joan's most important publications are *Babylon* (1985, 2005 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Thames and Hudson), a comprehensive survey of southern Mesopotamian developments that remains a solid source textbook even today. Monographs on the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE and 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE occupations at Brak (together with David Oates and Helen McDonald), and on the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE ceramics from Tell al Rimah (with David Oates and Caroline Postgate), are key references for anyone working in these periods in northern Mesopotamia and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Her many journal articles and book chapters cover everything from Samarran period figurines; Ubaid period ceramics, religion and gulf trade; Uruk/Late Chalcolithic ceramics; Neo-Assyrian pottery and ivories; to Hellenistic and Roman settlements in north Iraq and Syria. Joan published materials from both surveys and excavations and synthetic works on chronology, urbanism, settlement patterns, irrigation, administration, environment and land use, a wide range that few other scholars can match. Her deep knowledge of both Southern and Northern Mesopotamian archaeology made her one of only a few researchers who could easily see trends and ruptures in the ancient socio-cultural history of the region.

Joan was a staunch supporter of women in archaeology and advised and supported a number of Iraqi and Syrian students both at Cambridge and in the field, many of whom went on to become leading specialists. She had a great appreciation of the history and contemporary cultures of the Middle East and cultivated scholarly collaborations and friendships with many Syrian and Iraqi archaeologists. Among them was the late Dr. Adnan al-Bounni, the Director of Excavations and Archaeological Research in Syria, who often consulted with Joan and David on strategic decisions.

Joan's vivid memories of her life in Baghdad and stories of past field seasons at Tell Brak and Nimrud, including anecdotes about Agatha Christie, were legendary. She often joked that the only site she asked David not to request a permit for was Tell Brak in Syria. Ironically, she later fell in love with Brak, and it is this site with which the Oates's name later became synonymous. She loved birds, her children and grandchildren, swimming, and above all travel and new experiences. Her last field season was at Brak in the spring of 2011, and she remained as resolute as ever to return, even through the start of the Syrian civil war and the extraordinarily bad weather, including horizontal hail and lightning strikes. She is survived by her son and younger daughter, her grandchildren, and her many protégés, colleagues and friends who hope, as she did

up until the end, for the return of stability in the region, and to be able to go back to Tell Brak again and again, come hail or lightning!

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