

## OBITUARY



DR NAJÎ AL-AŞÎL

**D**R NAJÎ AL-AŞÎL, Director-General of the Iraq Antiquities Department from 1944 to 1958, died in Baghdad, at the age of 66, on the sixteenth of February 1963. This news will have been heard with profound regret by scholars in many different countries, for in the world of learning and of diplomacy he had many personal friends who admired the achievements of a varied and distinguished career.

Born in Baghdad in 1897 he was educated at the Rushdiya and Nedhamiya schools, and subsequently studied both at Istanbul and at the Medical College of the American University of Beirut where he graduated at the age of twenty. He was in private practice as a doctor for two years in Baghdad, but his interest in history and diplomacy diverted him from pursuing a medical career and in 1921 he was posted to London by King Hussein of the Hejaz as Plenipotentiary, and two years later as spokesman for Arab interests, which he represented for Iraq at the Lausanne Conference.

On his return to Baghdad in 1925 he became a founder member of the University of al-Bayt where he taught ancient history and Islamic philosophy for which he had a natural bent, and this led to his appointment in 1930 as the first Dean of the Higher Teachers' Training Institute where the foundations were laid for the establishment of the existing College of Higher Education.

After this excursion to the University he was in 1932 transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of which he became Director-General in 1934. In the course of the next three years he served successively as Iraqi Minister in

Iran, as Master of Ceremonies at the court of King Ghazi, and as Foreign Minister in the Cabinet of Hikmat Sulaiman. As Foreign Minister he negotiated and signed the Islamic Pact of Sa'dabad between Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan. In spite of these services he was retired in 1937, on a minimal pension of twenty dinars a month.

After seven years in the political wilderness he was appointed in 1944 to the office of Director-General of Antiquities, and then embarked on the most fruitful and successful stage of his career. He immediately set out to solicit help for the development of a library, which is now a boon to orientalists and archaeologists, and at the same time instituted the periodical *Sumer* which, thanks to his early enthusiasm, has continued to appear annually with remarkable regularity, and owes much to his perspicacity for insisting that contributors to it were at least paid a modest fee—a remarkable contrast to the parsimony of most learned journals in the occident. Articles were written, and continue to be written in Arabic, in English, and in other languages, and this periodical has in consequence enjoyed a wide circulation in many countries.

Whilst in office in the Antiquities Department, Najī al-Aṣīl was closely concerned with the Iraq Academy, Baghdad, of which he became a Founder member in 1951, President in 1954 and again in 1961. As always, when he was connected with an institution, he infused vitality into it. His multifarious activities during this period included visits to Europe, representing Iraq at the UNESCO Conference in 1946, and at a 'Palestinian Issue' Conference in 1948. It was largely owing to his energy that in 1952 a Congress was organised in Baghdad to celebrate the Millenary of Avicenna. Scholars were invited from many different countries; were taken on conducted tours to see work in progress at archaeological sites; a guide to the history of Iraq and an account of archaeological developments was written and produced for their benefit; and a special exhibition was prepared in the museums in Baghdad and in Mosul. All this was achieved in a remarkably short space of time, for Najī al-Aṣīl had the gift of galvanising others with energy and enthusiasm, and could thus lead them to achieve things that the unimaginative would have believed to be impossible.

Outstanding among his contributions to the Antiquities Department was the vigour with which he prosecuted the work of excavating a series of major and minor sites, judiciously selected throughout the country, and embracing the widest possible variety of interests which ranged from the prehistoric to the Islamic periods. Aply supported by an efficiently trained technical staff, he directed the members of his Department to undertake excavations of which amongst the most important were those at Eridu, Harmal, al Kufa and Hatra. It was probably the success of the mission to the last-named site of which he was most proud, for in the art and architecture of the Hatrene civilisation the skilfully directed operations of his excavating staff revealed statuary, temples, and dated inscriptions which were a unique revelation of a little known phase in the history of Iraq. The impressive and individualistic monuments revealed

by these excavations came into being nearly two thousand years ago at a time when the country was touched by a variety of influences which stemmed from the impact of Hellenism, of Rome and of Parthia, underlying a much older oriental tradition. Here was a new addition to the Art History of the ancient world with ramifications as far as Afghanistan on the one hand, Palmyra and a more distant west on the other.

The excavations which Naji al-Aşil sponsored at major sites were supplemented by many others, especially on ground which was destined for modern development, and he was quick to seize opportunities before new buildings obscured ancient landmarks. In this way the Department made many important discoveries: at the Nebi Yunus, the ancient arsenal of Assyrian Nineveh; at prehistoric and other centres dating back to the second millennium B.C. in the area destined to be flooded by the Dokan dam; in the immediate neighbourhood of Baghdad as ribbon development extended from the centre.

All of this work required an increased Government contribution to finance the Department's budget, and it was largely owing to Naji al-Aşil's drive, the wide circle of his friends, and to his ability to persuade those in office that excavation and conservation of these world famous monuments were a national responsibility, that he succeeded in obtaining the funds required for these purposes. He was moreover able to secure the confidence of those in a position to support him both because he had a persuasive manner, and because he had invariably sought the best possible technical advice, either in the country itself or abroad, to support his claims.

Concurrently with the excavations it became the Department's policy to arrange seasonal exhibitions in the old Museum, and these, besides attracting the public, also drew Ministerial attention to the importance of the Department's activities. Moreover Naji al Aşil had another end in view; even before he came into office it had been realised that the old Museum had become altogether inadequate to house the growing collections of antiquities and monuments which it had to contain within its walls. He therefore spared no effort to display the objects which were being year by year wrested from the soil, in order to bring to fruition the plans for a new and worthy Museum, which has now been completed, and is likely to become one of Baghdad's greatest attractions to visitors.

In addition to the Department's own excavations there were missions from abroad which included British, American, German, and Japanese excavations, at Nimrud, Nippur, Warka, and in the Jebel Sinjar, as well as at other centres. To all these expeditions Naji al-Aşil and his staff gave encouragement and lent scientific aid wherever possible. The Department's liberal treatment was in accord with the wise provisions of an Antiquities Law which allows an expedition from abroad to receive a half share of duplicate objects after those that are unique have been set aside for the Iraq Museum. Of this policy Naji al-Aşil fully approved, and it was through his liberal and fair-minded attitude that the

Department was able to acquire for the new Museum its unique historical and archaeological additions, and at the same time to set aside for the foreign excavator a sufficiency of material to enable him to secure funds for the continuation of his work.

One other task to which Najī al-Aṣīl gave unprecedented impetus was the conservation of national monuments throughout the country, at Hatra, at Ur, and elsewhere, and after strenuous efforts he succeeded in increasing the financial allocation under this head, and it is an item so costly that no amount of money can ever be adequate.

In 1958, when he retired from the Directorate, he left behind him an able successor, besides a body of single-minded and conscientious heads of departments who were themselves training a younger generation of Iraqi archaeologists for the future. The legacy which he left was one of inspiring energy.

Najī al-Aṣīl himself would have recognised that at the outset he had taken over a Department second to none in efficiency, thanks to the work of his predecessors, but he wisely grafted his projects on to theirs, and through his own efforts often reaped where they had sown. In this way he prepared the ground for his successors, who continued to emulate his example. He was never office-bound, though always ready to shoulder official duties. He was happiest when travelling around the country accompanied by members of his staff, visiting excavations. When he devoted himself to the Iraq Academy he never lost touch with his old Department, nor with his friends at home and abroad. His achievements were widely recognised abroad by the award of academic honours; he was made Honorary Foreign Member of the Spanish Royal Academy of History; Member of the German Archaeological Institute; and Honorary Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, London.

His last effort was to organise the Al Kindi millenary celebrations, and he was instrumental in inviting scholars from east and west to share in a generous hospitality, to exchange information on early Islamic contributions to knowledge, and to celebrate the foundation of Baghdad as a seat of learning. By that time he was a sick man and the effort proved too great a strain on his health, which subsequent political shocks finally undermined.

Najī al-Aṣīl was a man of natural charm, with an urbane and courteous manner, an easy conversationalist, an attentive listener, and a good friend. He will be sadly missed, as will be his youngest son who died but a month after his father, an additional shock to his family, to whom we extend our sincere sympathy.

It would be extremely interesting if some member of the family would write the biography in detail of this remarkable man, who played so active a part in the fluctuating fortunes of Iraq's development over the last fifty years. He has left the greater part of him behind in the Department which he served so well, and in the new Museum where much of the work which he directed will

be enshrined. We wish his successors a full measure of his liberal spirit, and trust that the Department, which in his time attained its present heights, will never diminish in stature.

Naji al-Aşil died, as he had lived, firmly convinced that the great hope for a better future lay in friendship between scholars and scientists who, no matter where they happened to be, could transcend political barriers, and by seeking guidance from the past could approach the future with greater wisdom and confidence.