

OBITUARY: C. N. Johns



Cedric Norman ('Dick') Johns was born on October 14th 1904; after completing his education at Cambridge, in the twenties of this century he went out as a young man to Palestine to teach in the Anglican Cathedral School of St George's in Jerusalem. This was an adventurous start in life but it soon led to another, (then) even more out of the way occupation. Through a spare time interest and participation in local archaeological activities Johns was soon able to transfer from teaching to a career in archaeology. When Richmond was building up the Department of Antiquities in Jerusalem, Johns was offered a position on the staff and thus found himself in the company of Illiffe, Hamilton, Lankaster Harding etc.

Dick Johns was well and rewardingly occupied for 20 years as a field archaeologist in the Palestinian Mandate Department of Antiquities. His principal work was in Jerusalem itself; at Pilgrims Castle (Chastel Pelerin) on the coast south of Haifa; and at Ajlun in Transjordan. On all these sites Johns produced substantial reports which were published in *QDAP*, the journal of the Department. In addition he wrote some of the small guide-books issued by the Department.

It may be of interest to give a little detail of Johns' concerns during this period as an indication of opportunities available in that 'Palestinian Summer' where Jew, Muslim and Christian were able to work together to great advantage. At Ajlun where he began Johns was concerned with the picturesque Islamic castle and thus marked out the centre of his interest and competence. He possessed a good command of the historical background to the monuments of Crusader Period Palestine and equally of the architectural studies relating to them. At Jerusalem he was occupied for many years on the Citadel, and again at the Abbey of St Mary in the Kedron Valley. He also investigated ancient street levels in the Tyropoaeon Valley. However it was at Athlit where Johns showed himself most active and versatile. He dealt with the defences of Pilgrims Castle and with the interesting stables and the unfinished Crusader church in the 'suburb'. And here he wrote on the mediaeval slip

ware. However at Athlit his investigations led him down into the remains underlying the mediaeval site so that he excavated the ancient tell and a cemetery with cremated burials of Phoenician origin. Thus he wrote interestingly on various matters then somewhat out of the way but all now become stock in trade for different phalanxes of specialists. Moreover his reports were always wide ranging in their documentation. In sum Johns was primarily concerned in monumental archaeology — clearing, investigating, explaining and refurbishing standing masonry structures. With changes in interests such work was not to stand at the centre of British field archaeology during the subsequent generation, and this explains why Johns' name dropped out of the general picture somewhat in later days.

Because of temporary absences of personnel Johns found himself acting head of the Antiquities Department during part of the anxious period when the Mandate was breaking up. And when all was over he returned to the UK; but was immediately called for to be Controller of Antiquities in the new state of Libya, then under British Military Administration. This was indeed a momentous change since it included three enormous provinces, Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and the Fezzan — each separated by tracts of the Sahara desert. Furthermore the Antiquities Service had been a pillar of the Italian regime in Libya, and to continue in the responsibility for the upkeep of the great monumental sites so spectacularly restored with a rump establishment was daunting. This was precisely where John's exceptional character came to the fore, with its fixed strength of purpose. Other men may well have got rattled under this burden where Johns carried on impeturbably doing what he could in his own time — so that he was able to keep together what may well have come apart.

One other rather significant task befell Johns in Libya and here he was not blessed. Wartime aerial photographs had revealed the site of the westernmost Greek city of the Pentapolis, Euhesperides. It lay just outside modern Benghazi; it was still accessible but threatened by possible industrial development. Its investigation was thus a priority and this was arranged by the Antiquities Service in conjunction with the Ashmolean Museum. Johns was in charge of the work for two seasons before he left Libya and the discoveries — historical and in architecture and town planning and in pottery — were considerable. Unfortunately the excavation was for the most part 'mud brick in dirt' archaeology where Johns was not so much at home. Thus for one reason or another the quite significant results of the excavation have never been published.

Then in 1954 Johns definitively left the Middle East and returned to his native Wales to take up a position with the RCAM at Aberystwyth as Principal Investigator. These latter days were blessed with great success. Johns had the good fortune to investigate several of the famous Welsh castles: Caernarvon, Caerphilly, and Bishops Castle at Llandaf etc. It was work at which he excelled and he produced five technical reports in the 'Inventory' volumes, together with popular guide books. As a fitting recognition of the merits of this work he was awarded the G. T. Clark Memorial Prize in the year of his retirement, 1969.

However this chronicle of distinguished service is not that for which C. N. Johns is remembered by men of all races who crossed his path. They remember him for his singular, strong character. Indeed one might say 'characters'. Johns was always able to surprise anyone who took him for granted. And he was perhaps not the only one who acquired a different character with a different language. The following personal reminiscences may evoke something of all this.

When the work began at Euhesperides (now over 40 years ago) Cyrenaica was a limbo — financial resources were meagre and most facilities were still derelict from war damage. In this taxing situation Johns was provided with the services as excavation assistants of three young men, each as difficult and self opinionated as you can imagine. According to all appearances we should have driven him out of his senses. We did nothing of the sort; this result was anything but the case and none of us has forgotten the experience.

At that time the history of the Sanusi regime and its resistance to the Italian government was still fresh in mind. Indeed the resistance hero Omar Mukhtar was buried at Sidi Abeid cemetery which occupied much of the ancient site on which we worked. The remarks of the Grand Sanusi, 'If we had three men like Omar we should not have needed more', were well known. At the time I often thought how aptly that applied to Dick Johns. During the period of illegal immigration into Palestine Johns was seconded to controlling the arrival of these immigrant vessels. If there had been three others like him, this immigration would have been greatly retarded, if not thwarted. Another aspect of Johns' personality was his excellent address in Arabic. He spoke the language beautifully; moreover he was the despair of Arabs on their own ground when it came to anticipating the time scale inherent in his words. His name has adorned many a tale.

G. R. H. Wright
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