



ROBERT HAMILTON

Robert William Hamilton 1905–1995

It is the persons of an ancient society even more than its works and art that can enlighten and reward the curiosity of an archaeologist.¹

ROBERT HAMILTON was the least well known of a remarkable trio of Oxford contemporaries who, in the 1920s, more by accident than by contrivance, entered upon careers in Near Eastern archaeology through which they were to define the British contribution to it for a generation. In background, character and achievement they were very different, though they were to be lifelong friends. Sir Max Mallowan (1904–76)² and Dame Kathleen Kenyon (1906–76)³ became public figures, whilst Robert Hamilton, by preference, remained a private man, though his contributions to the subject were no less fundamental for being less spectacular. They were field archaeologists in the grand manner, he was an imperial civil servant and museum administrator by profession, a scholar and an architect *manqué* by inclination. ‘I find architects are nearly always interesting and there is always something to say to them’.⁴

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¹ Robert Hamilton, *Walid and his Friends: An Umayyad Tragedy* (Oxford Studies in Islamic Art VI, Oxford, 1988; hereafter *Walid*), p. 9.

² David Oates, ‘Max Edgar Lucien Mallowan, 1904–1978’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 80 (1991), 499–511.

³ A. D. Tushingham, ‘Kathleen Mary Kenyon, 1906–1978’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 71 (1985), pp. 555–82.

⁴ R. W. Hamilton, *Letters from the Middle East by an Occasional Archaeologist* (The Pentland Press Limited; Edinburgh, Cambridge and Durham, 1992; hereafter *Letters*), p. 77.

Ancestry, Education, and Archaeological Apprenticeship,
1905–31

He was born on 26 November 1905 and died on 25 September 1995 within sight of his ninetieth birthday, alert in mind and active in body until almost the end, true to the Scottish ancestry in which he took such quiet pride, not least his paternal great grandfather. Sir William (Stirling) Hamilton (1788–1856) was Professor of Logic and Metaphysics in Edinburgh University from 1836 until his death, a man memorably recalled in Carlyle's briefest *Reminiscence*.⁵ To anyone who knew Robert Hamilton, phrase after phrase in this masterly sketch bridges the generations:

. . . his ancestor, Hamilton of Preston, was leader of the Cameronians at Bothwell Brig, and had stood by the Covenant and Cause of Scotland in that old time and form A fine firm figure of middle height; one of the finest cheerfully-serious human faces, of square, solid, and yet rather *aquiline* typeHe was finely social and human Honesty, frankness and friendly veracity . . . a strong, carelessly-melodious, tenor voice, the sound of it betokening seriousness and cheerfulness; occasionally something of slightly remonstrative was in the undertones, indicating, well in the background, possibilities of virtuous wrath and fire.

In a chance encounter in Teheran in 1961 with an Iranian studying in Edinburgh he assured him that the city was 'indeed the Athens of the North, partly made so by the erudition of my own great-grandfather'.⁶

His father, William Stirling Hamilton, had been born in Edinburgh. Like his son, he was a scholar of Winchester and a demy of Magdalen College, Oxford, where he took a first in Greats in 1892, passing second in the Indian Civil Service list in the same year. He served his time in the Punjab. His mother was born in Aberdeen, daughter of G. R. Elsmie, who had a distinguished career in the judiciary of the Indian Civil Service. 'She was a good artist in water colour and other media and also a good player of the violin and piano.'⁷ It was to her that Robert Hamilton owed his talent as a draughtsman and his lifelong love of music, both as listener and as performer.

He began his education at the tender age of four at Girton Hall

⁵ Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, ed. Charles Eliot Norton (Everyman University Library, 1972), pp. 381–6.

⁶ *Letters*, p. 205.

⁷ All quotations without attribution are taken from brief handwritten notes about his life deposited by R. W. Hamilton with the British Academy in November 1990.

School, Torquay, ‘accompanied by a nurse, my parents being then in India’. From 1911–12 he himself spent a year in India, where his father was then Director of Agriculture, briefly experiencing as a young child the life of the Raj both on duty in the plains at Lahore and relaxing in the highlands at Simla. Throughout the First World War he was a boarder in Cophthorne School at Crawley in Sussex, ‘of which the founder and headmaster was Bernard Rendall, a classicist of Cambridge, brother of Montague Rendall, of Winchester; former Corinthian footballer and formidable martinet. Conditions at Cophthorne during the First World War were austere in the extreme, discipline severe, but the teaching of football, Latin and Greek both intensive and successful.’ His love and mastery of the classics were lifelong and his rigorous training in them was for ever reflected in the clarity and concision of his English prose style. To his early drilling on the football field he owed his physical resilience and his enduringly trim physique.

In 1919 he went on to Winchester, ‘where life and company in the semi-monastic chambers and hall of College appeared luxurious and delightful after the deprivation of all comforts and agreeable diet at Cophthorne’. When he returned to Oxford a generation later a number of his contemporaries at Winchester, such as C. F. C. Hawkes, William Hayter, J. N. L. Myres, John Sparrow, and C. E. (‘Tom Brown’) Stevens, were once again to be of the company, from time to time engaging in verbal sparring that had the edge of old fires rekindled. In 1924 he went up to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he was to be elected a fellow in 1959, as a demy. He was an outstanding classical scholar, gaining Firsts in Mods. and Greats. When the time came to go down in 1928 he had no clear idea of a future career. His father, who believed that the end of British rule in India was in sight, advised him not to follow in his footsteps. As fate would have it he was to choose another branch of the Imperial Civil Service that was to survive barely a year longer.

‘Influenced by Leonard Woolley’s entertaining accounts of archaeological work in the Middle East I joined the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, with a Senior Demyship from Magdalen.’ It was his father who had called his attention to Woolley’s *Dead Towns and Living Men: Being Pages from an Antiquary’s Notebook* (1920) at an opportune moment. Within a very short period of time he was now to be brought into contact with the small group of people who were to forward his career, to serve with and under him, and to stimulate his research interests over the next twenty years in Palestine. His association

with the British School was to be lifelong as a trustee, council member, and editorial adviser.

In 1929 and again in 1930 he joined the joint Yale University and British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem excavations at Jerash in Jordan, organised by J. W. Crowfoot, Director of the School. This dig resulted in Hamilton's first published report, in collaboration with Crowfoot, in the *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement* (1929), recounting the discovery of the remains of synagogue, with interesting mosaic pavements, beneath the remains of a church built in AD 530–1. It briefly anticipated the best of his later work. His archaeological apprenticeship was then varied by serving as a 'volunteer', from 24 June to 10 July 1929, at Megiddo, where P. L. O. Guy was directing the Chicago University excavations on some of the now renowned Iron Age buildings. From November 1929 until April 1930 he excavated for the first and only time in his career in Egypt, at Meydum, where the Eckley B. Coxe Expedition from the University Museum, Philadelphia, directed by Alan Rowe, was working in the area of the famous IVth Dynasty pyramid, first seriously studied by Petrie in 1891. His colleague as 'archaeological assistant' was C. N. Johns, soon to become a very close friend, sharing his interests in the history of architecture, particularly of the Crusader period.

Hamilton's archaeological career began in earnest in 1930–1, when for six months he 'accompanied R. Campbell Thomson as sole assistant for excavations at Nineveh, travelling to Iraq by the Oriental Express, six days in the train from Calais to Nisibin (terminus at that time)'. At Nineveh he was in charge of processing the pottery and whatever classical inscriptions might be found. He was also closely involved with the supervision of numerous untrained Arabic-speaking workmen with whom, according to Mallowan's later report, he was a 'regular little spitfire.' In such a forcing house his command of colloquial Arabic rapidly improved. It was to become remarkable, though little used after 1948, except at Nimrud, but he was an amateur student of classical Arabic until the end of his life, with a deep love of the language and its early literature. Although wholly out of sympathy in later years with what he regarded as an excessive attention to pottery in conventional archaeological practice and publication, he still spoke with pleasure over thirty years later of drawing the painted and incised late prehistoric pottery found at Nineveh. These drawings, published in the *Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* (1932), are among the earliest and best published examples of his skills with pen and pencil.

The Years in Palestine, 1931–48

Hamilton greatly impressed Campbell Thompson, whose warm recommendation carried great weight in 1931 when he applied for a post in Palestine under the British Mandatory administration. Although still well under thirty years of age, he was duly appointed Chief Inspector of Antiquities. As G. R. Driver, who had been his Lit.Hum. tutor at Magdalen a few years earlier, recorded in his reference for Hamilton's application for the Keepership of Antiquities in the Ashmolean Museum in 1956, 'he made his mark by his wide knowledge, keenness and efficiency . . . His career was meteoric . . . in 1938 (he was made) Director of Antiquities at the age of 32 or 33 years. The fact is that he was in a different class to any other available candidate—and there were several.'⁸ This period of his life allowed him to exercise his special talents in an environment which he found wholly congenial and which gave him the responsibility and scope to develop simultaneously as an administrator, as a field archaeologist and as a scholar.

Professionally this was for him his golden age, always recalled with affection and not a little regret that he had been forced at the end to abandon it. It was also memorable for his marriage in 1935 to Eileen Hetty Lowick, by whom he had a daughter and two sons before the Second World War, and a son and a daughter after it. In 1992 he dedicated his *Letters from the Middle East* thus: 'These old letters are rededicated now, with all the love left unexpressed in this revival, to her who received most of them originally.' As Oleg Grabar⁹ has remarked, 'He was too, a family man who could hardly be dissociated from his wife Hetty and his children.'

Much of his life in the Mandate Department of Antiquities was a round of routine administrative duties, but it was at this time that he first established his credentials as a potential museum curator and undertook the excavations and building surveys upon which his academic legacy was based. When he was appointed to the Ashmolean Museum's staff in 1956, his immediate grasp of its needs, architectural and curatorial, was such as to lead many to assume that in Palestine he had been a professional museum curator. It was an excusable misapprehension since the Palestine Archaeological Museum, later to be known as the Rockefeller Museum, after the donor of the funds to create it in 1927, was the modern building to which he was most attached. He always

⁸ Archives of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford: R. W. Hamilton: Personal File.

⁹ Obituary in the *Independent*, 6 October 1995, 22.

referred to it with great respect as his ideal design for a museum. The offices of the Department of Antiquities were an integral part of the museum. It had been inaugurated by Ernest T. Richmond, his predecessor as Director of Antiquities and designed by Austin S. B. Harrison, with monumental lettering in the galleries by Eric Gill. The curator was J. H. Iliffe.

In G. R. Driver's words,¹⁰ 'it was Mr Hamilton who built it up into its position as a Museum known all over the world. He made the bulk of the collections, organised their arrangement, got together and trained a staff, partly English, and partly Palestinian. I know the Museum well and can say that, although its collections are as yet small as compared with those in European Museums, it is (or was) one of the best kept and best arranged of all museums known to me, thanks almost entirely to Mr Hamilton, who is a master of the technique.' It was opened to the public in 1938. Hamilton's concern extended to its garden, often mentioned in his letters home as the Mandate came to an end, with an appreciation that reveals his enduring love of gardening. In recalling Jerash as late as 1993, what he remembered was that 'in the springtime it was covered with cyclamen, asphodels, lovely wild flowers'.¹¹

The future of the museum particularly concerned him by the close of 1947, as his term as Director of Antiquities came to an end with the Mandate. He was always fiercely critical of British policy at this time; but he managed to steer the museum tenaciously and successfully into the hands of an international board of trustees endorsed by the United Nations Commission. 'You know, making the plans for establishing the Museum independently is subtly undermining my resolution to leave it . . .'.¹² Ironically his last visit to Jerusalem, in November 1966, coincided by chance with the nationalisation of the museum by the Jordanian authorities. 'There is a sort of feeling that my apparition and lecture and so forth might be a factor somehow lubricating and tidying over the transition of the Museum—however I think that it is confined to the minds of the British. The Arabs have no misgivings, except only Aref (the Director elect), who knows himself to know nothing of museums of antiquities, and wants technical advice'.¹³ Within a year the museum had passed, with East Jerusalem, under Israel's control.

¹⁰ See above, n. 8 for source.

¹¹ Interview in the *East Anglian Daily Times*, 20 February 1993, 30.

¹² *Letters*, p. 53.

¹³ *Letters*, p. 211.

Hamilton was that relative rarity in the archaeological world, not only a rapid publisher of exemplary concise reports on his excavations, but also a perceptive and persistent interrogator of his evidence and its significance in human terms. His publications are distinguished by acute observation and careful study combined with continual comparison and deduction. He never shirked debate, indeed he encouraged it to the point where one sometimes wondered in his later works how far his tongue was into his cheek. Oleg Grabar, who as a young man collaborated on the study of Khirbat al Mafjar, notably of its paintings, remembered 'the quality of the notes he (and others) had left in the archives of the Palestine Archaeological Museum, in Jerusalem In albums and boxes there were . . . stored drawings, photographs, observations of all sorts on Mafjar and on many other Palestinian remains by a man of intelligent devotion to his task.'¹⁴

One of his first tasks in Palestine was a rescue excavation at Tell Abu Hawam in 1932–3, the last in a series initiated by the Department of Antiquities a decade earlier. His report on rather less than six months' work is a forgotten landmark in archaeological reporting in the Near East. It set standards new to the region for work on a complex, if small, tell, that even now are not as commonly observed as they should be. His basic stratigraphic divisions were tested decades later by fresh work and found in the main to be sound, whilst his concise study of the pottery and small finds were models for the time.

His report contains a memorable statement of a fundamental principle of excavation:

The conventional use of 'strata' in the analysis of the formation of a mound suggests a history divisible into static phases in each of which the life and culture of the last are definitely superseded. The history of fact is not so divided. In Jerusalem today a twelfth-century building stands in good condition and in active use while its twentieth-century neighbour, already a rubbish heap, will soon be a ruin. Similar conditions doubtless marked the evolution of an ancient site, and a certain complexity in the structural remains, is the result. Stratigraphy is the attempt to simplify or schematize that complexity so that it may be used to co-ordinate intelligibly the associated material. Where the architecture has little intrinsic merit the plans are still necessary as the framework within which the essential historical relations of one object to another are preserved. The main purpose of what immediately follows is to define, with greater precision than plans and levels alone can convey, the degree to which the stratification may be trusted as a true index of chronological relations amongst the excavated material.¹⁵

¹⁴ Obituary in the *Independent*, 6 October 1995, 22.

¹⁵ R. W. Hamilton, 'Excavations at Tell Abu Hawam', *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine*, 4 (1935), 1.

Although retrospectively criticised as a 'strange definition of stratigraphy',¹⁶ it is in fact a classic statement, unmatched elsewhere even by Reisner for its brevity and clarity, of how the so-called 'architect-archaeologists' in Palestine conceived their purpose. It was a method to be superseded twenty years later, when Kathleen Kenyon demonstrated at Jericho the rather different and more effective methods of stratigraphic excavation pioneered by Mortimer Wheeler. But Hamilton from the outset in Palestine had mastered the best procedures of his day, technically far better than anything done at Nineveh.

Throughout his Directorship he undertook rescue excavations from time to time, usually reporting them briefly in the *Quarterly* of the Department, to the same consistently professional standard. None compares in significance to the work at Tell Abu Hawam, but his excavations against the north wall of Jerusalem in 1937–8 (reported in 1944) are enduringly relevant to the contentious question of the line of the northern wall of the City in the first century AD. They were reported with his customary precision, greatly easing the task of Hennessy in 1964–6, when he undertook a follow-up rescue excavation in the same area.¹⁷

Restoration and preservation work usually involving some minor excavation, reported in the *Quarterly*, was to lead to the two most notable of his publications apart from *Khirbat al Mafjar*. Both exemplify his primary scholarly achievement, the description and analysis of individual major buildings. *The Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem* (1947) might well have been no more memorable than his *Guide to Samaria-Sabaste* (1944), workman-like but routine, were it not for an outstanding discussion of the mosaics, printed in a smaller script so as not to distract the tourist into what he regarded as essential, if technical, controversies. Accepting that his views were new and thus at times debatable, he presented the case on the basis of the evidence as he knew it first hand so others might judge for themselves as they stood with the book in hand in the Church itself.

Structural History of the Aqsa Mosque (1949) is, by contrast, an enduring major monograph stimulated by the demolition and reconstruction of the middle and eastern aisles of the Aqsa, and related work

¹⁶ H. J. Franken and C. A. Franken-Battershill, *A Primer of Old Testament Archaeology* (Leiden, 1963), p. 26.

¹⁷ J. B. Hennessy, 'Preliminary Report on Excavations at the Damascus Gate, 1964–6', *Levant*, 2 (1970), 22–27.

by the Department, in 1938–42. This is a building no less remarkable than the Church of the Nativity, but of renowned architectural complexity as the result of frequent rebuilding over the centuries. Once more the strength of the book is in the detail, in the description and analysis, which endures, allowing readers in subsequent generations to use his meticulous, step by step dissection of the structure, for different reconstructions of the sequence of work and new chronological phasing. It has been overshadowed by the more monumental *Khirbat al Mafjar* and the associated publications, but in many ways it is a better basis for assessment of his special contribution to the archaeological and historical study of architecture. The Aqsa, however intricate its history, is a standing monument; Khirbat al Mafjar is the dismembered skeleton of one, where the quest for the creator almost came to eclipse the reconstruction of his creation in Hamilton's study of it. But that belonged to the next phase of his career.

Nimrud and Oxford, 1948–56

The end of the British Mandate was a watershed in Hamilton's career, abruptly separating him from a world he loved and way of life in which his special talents had been exercised to the full. He was rescued through the good offices of Mallowan from 'minding geese and hens and a garden'¹⁸ in Suffolk by the offer of a fellowship of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq combined with the post of Secretary Librarian of the School, founded in 1932 as a memorial to Gertrude Bell. His first duty was to provide the School with the physical base in Baghdad that it had so far been without. He left England for Iraq late in October 1948, just over six months after his enforced departure from Jerusalem. He had a number of friends and acquaintances in Baghdad, not least Seton Lloyd, then Technical Adviser to the Inspectorate General of Antiquities and his wife Hydie, who helped him to establish the school in a fine old Turkish house in the centre of the city. All was ready in time to receive Max Mallowan, with his wife Agatha, for the first season of his renowned excavations at Nimrud in 1949, where Hamilton joined them.

G. R. Driver, now as Chairman of the Oriental Faculty Board at Oxford, had already inaugurated procedures for appointing Hamilton to

¹⁸ *Letters*, p. 64.

a personal lectureship in Near Eastern archaeology. This was not the first such possibility to be mooted, as Mallowan had earlier suggested to him a comparable appointment in the Institute of Archaeology in London University. He was then, and remained, surprisingly diffident about his competence to offer formal lecturing and teaching. 'I am *amateur* in archaeology; if I take the job (in London) I should have to masquerade as a *professional*. As Director here (in Palestine), it is quite all right to be an amateur—that is all Richmond was; but a lecturer must really know the stuff.'¹⁹ The London job went to Kathleen Kenyon. Driver, who knew his man better than he appeared to know himself, was not to be gainsaid. After the first season's excavation at Nimrud was over, Hamilton accepted the lectureship in Oxford offered a month earlier. 'My engagement with the Oriental Faculty required a certain amount of lecturing each year; but was so agreeably relaxed that I was able to accept a standing invitation from Max Mallowan to join his continuing excavations which took place year by year at Nimrud in the Spring'.²⁰

Hamilton's contribution to these excavations, about which he never wrote anything himself, was in every sense complementary to Mallowan's. 'I do some surveying and drawing as well as sharing with Max in the general supervision of the work'²¹ where his colloquial Arabic was an additional asset. In his *Memoirs*, some twenty years later, Mallowan recalled his old friend and colleague thus: 'I have rarely met a more modest, talented and self-effacing man. He was gifted for drawing, a surveyor, and kept the architectural record A natural recluse, he was by nature a philosopher and I think would have been equally happy as a metaphysician and gardener. Although ready to be sociable his friendship had to be excavated and he was possessed as it seemed of a deep inner melancholy'.²²

This perhaps too closely reflects the circumstances at Nimrud in which the two men were most often together for extended periods. In the community and *en famille* a warmer and more open personality was evident. However, he rarely wasted words, on paper or in speech, and this could be misleading as those of his letters written in a relaxed mood, published and unpublished, make clear. 'Digging (at Nimrud) is

¹⁹ *Letters*, p. 54.

²⁰ *Letters*, p. 105.

²¹ *Letters*, p. 95.

²² M. E. L. Mallowan, *Mallowan's Memoirs: the Autobiography of Max Mallowan* (London, 1977), p. 246.

the one thing that can transport me back to my youth, and I almost (not quite) recover the feeling of sunshine, and freedom, and absence of worry, and interest, which I had at Jerash and those places in 1929.²³

Despite the fact that he was ‘filled with dismay at the prospect of having to lecture in learned circles about archaeology’,²⁴ he gave his first two courses at Oxford in 1950. In the seven years during which he was a University Lecturer he gave twelve courses in all, usually two a year, save for one a year in 1952–3 and three in 1951. Three themes recur: the material evidence for the religion of Canaan and Israel, the Phoenicians, and early Muslim architecture. He also gave single courses on Early Christian archaeology in Palestine (1956) and on the art of the Caravan Cities (1952). The lectures on aspects of Old Testament archaeology provided for undergraduates reading Hebrew or theology; but the attention he gave to the Near Eastern architecture in the first millennium AD were not directed to any syllabus requirement, but opened up new areas of archaeology in Oxford, closely related to his own research in these years as he prepared his major work on Khirbat al Mafjar. His lectures, combining sober thought with sound scholarship, were always delivered with clarity and fluency, spiced with irony and wit. Anyone who heard him in a lecture hall must regret that he never got round in these years to writing the general books on the Umayyads and on Jerusalem, which he lightly referred to in later years as passing fancies.

Formal university teaching, particularly at a time when there was little demand for what he had to offer, never really suited him. It was not then surprising when, early in September 1956, he applied for the Keepership of the Department of Antiquities in the Ashmolean Museum, about to fall vacant when Donald Harden moved to the London Museum. He was supported by strong testimonials from G. R. Driver;²⁵ from C. J. Gadd, a former colleague at Nimrud, then Professor of Assyriology in London University, who noted that ‘his ability as an organiser and as a director of workmen was very evident’; and from Mallowan, who pointed out that ‘here we have a man of rare and exceptional talents of which the University is at present making insufficient use.’²⁶

²³ *Letters*, p. 95.

²⁴ *Letters*, p. 99.

²⁵ See above, p. 495.

²⁶ See above, n. 8.

He took up the Keepership in the Michaelmas Term 1956. He was to remain at the Ashmolean until his retirement in 1972. In October 1962, on the retirement of Sir Karl Parker, he succeeded as the senior departmental keeper to the Keepership of the whole museum. He was the last holder of this post, created in 1683. On his retirement Sir David Piper was appointed to the newly created office of Director. In 1960 he became a Fellow of the British Academy.

Although his major work *Khirbat al Mafjar: an Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley* was not published until 1959, when he was well established in the Ashmolean, its production really belongs to the years of his lectureship, when he returned three times briefly to Jerusalem, in 1949, 1952 and 1953, to work on the finds from the site. By 1949 Gerald Harding, as Director of Antiquities in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, 'had already, before the time of my visit, secured from America a promise of finance and had invited me to work on publication of the site and its remains. The money was to serve not only for the costs of printing and publication but also for restoration and photography and for draughtsmanship'; he was to secure more funding from Rockefeller later.²⁷

Recurrent plundering of the site for stones attractive to builders had originally called attention to the group of ruins in the Jordan Valley near Jericho known as Khirbat al Mafjar. The ornamentation of some of the stonework, particularly, had caught the eye of archaeologists. The Department of Antiquities initiated excavations in 1934, directed in the field by Dimitri Baramki, one of the four Palestinian Inspectors of Antiquities in the Department, who also published the preliminary reports. He was later to take a doctorate at London University and to be Professor of Archaeology in the American University in Beirut. Hamilton's priority in 1948 before he had to leave Palestine, apart from the Museum, was 'to finish the dig at Mafjar and get as much of the record completed as possible.'²⁸ By the end there was friction between him and Baramki, which he much regretted. It was almost inevitable. The differences in ability, education and status were far too great to be the basis for a continuing partnership in research; the more so when their lives developed so differently after 1948 and their temperaments were so different. 'What is important is that Khirbat al Mafjar is the only true early Islamic palace to be published, but that

²⁷ *Letters*, p. 103

²⁸ *Letters*, p. 33.

Hamilton never ended his affair with it.²⁹ For over half a century it was a recurrent preoccupation.

Four major articles complement the final volume as they deal with various parts of this remarkable building—the baths, the sculpture, the mosaics, and the carved plaster—in ways not wholly superseded by the final volume. They sum up the work he undertook during his rapid trips to Jerusalem and Jericho from 1949–53 whilst firsthand study was still possible for him. The monograph *Khirbat al Mafjar* (1959), in his own words, ‘became an indispensable source for the study of the earliest Islamic art and architecture’. The judgement stands, not least since description and reconstruction may easily be separated from interpretation as in all his major works.

This study is a masterpiece of reconstruction in three dimensions of earthquake debris in four media—stone, plaster, mosaic, and paint—which had provided the original structure and extremely elaborate decoration of the building. As he acknowledged, many others had contributed over the years, not least G. U. S. Corbett, architect to the Department of Antiquities, who had taken part in the final stages of the excavation. He had provided not only most of the often remarkable drawings for the volume, but also ‘the help which it has been to ponder and argue with him many elusive but, as they have often proved, not insoluble problems.’³⁰ Oleg Grabar contributed the chapter on the paintings. Hamilton drew it all together with clarity and style.

It remains true that:

The variety of materials represented, and the wealth of detail in construction and ornament which time and chance have preserved, place the ruins of Khirbat al Mafjar amongst the richest of available sources for the secular architecture of Palestine at a critical and fleeting moment: a moment when the reviving stimulus of religion and empire, of wealth and passionate will, under the Umayyad Caliphs seemed about to transform, by a new synthesis of Greek and Asiatic genius, the millennial art of Hellenistic Syria.³¹

Debate and controversy enters in with Hamilton’s enduring conviction that, although an inscription fixed construction in Hisham’s caliphate, the whole nature of the building was entirely out of keeping with what is historically known of his character. ‘It is the character and career of al Walid, the poet, the hunter, and the drinker, much more than Hisham,

²⁹ See above, n. 9.

³⁰ R. W. Hamilton, *Khirbat al Mafjar* (Oxford, 1959), preface.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

the censorious, the smasher of lutes, which can suggest and illuminate the origins of al Mafjar'.³² He argued the case with increasing conviction and ingenuity over the next thirty years, ever seeking new clues to resolve the question. For many the case remains open; but, whatever the final answer may be, it may not be doubted that affirmation or contradiction will depend largely upon data provided by Hamilton in his occasional papers and in this monograph.

The Ashmolean Years, 1956–72

The most revealing episode in the last decade or so of his working life was a visit to Iran in January 1961, after just over three years in the Ashmolean, with the prospect of securing appointment as Director of the Antiquities Service there. Until then this post had been held by French citizens. Now the Iranians sought a British candidate for an appointment which had to be endorsed by the Iranian Parliament. They hoped to secure financial sponsorship from the United Nations for the post. 'I have had three very hectic days and am pretty well exhausted with talking to innumerable elegant and civilized gentlemen, and hearing how many **uncivilized** and **ungentlemanly** gentlemen have a hand in my affairs . . . this is a task which will try me out in my own estimation in a degree which neither Palestine nor the Ashmolean could.'³³ In the event negotiations collapsed when he refused to accept a clause in his contract, inserted by the UN bureaucracy, which 'subjected the person appointed to the superior authority of Persian officialdom'.³⁴

He was to return briefly to Iran in 1970–1 on the eve of his retirement, when Mallowan persuaded him to join the British excavations at Siraf directed by David Whitehouse. There he combined surveying ruins in the vicinity of the excavated areas with overseeing 'excavation of a large destroyed building which looks like a custom's shed, or wharf or warehouse . . . this is a very large empty building, full of chunks of its own structure thrown about by an earthquake'.³⁵ Fortunately, a few of his workmen spoke Arabic; but on the whole it was not a rewarding experience. Neither his expertise nor his interests

³² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

³³ *Letters*, p. 204.

³⁴ *Letters*, p. 207.

³⁵ *Letters*, p. 230.

were fully engaged by the work on this his last field trip, indeed his last visit to the Near East.

He wrote relatively little in these years and then normally only essays for volumes in honour of old friends. Publication of his season excavating in the Great Mosque at Harran in 1959 with David Storm Rice, establishing its plan and largely Ayyubid date of construction, was aborted by the director's premature death. His specially commissioned report in English and French on the state of the Islamic monuments in Algeria, undertaken in 1968, remains an unpublished government document, presented to the Minister on his final day in the country. '(He) was introduced to me as (*mirabile dictu*) unable (presumably in fact unwilling) to speak any language but Arabic. Confronted with this emergency, my mind made the desperate switch from French to very rusty Arabic, in which my scrambled compliments were rewarded by my overhearing (as I truly believed) one of my audience expressing a preference for my manner of speech—I supposed he meant a Palestinian accent—over that of “the Egyptians”!’³⁶

In the Ashmolean he always took a controlling interest in the acquisition of objects for the Department of Antiquities, enjoying visits to the major London showrooms, where he executed wonderfully rapid sketches of desirable objects in a notebook, and relaxed conversations over lunch with his colleagues about what was or was not to be pursued in the forthcoming auction, followed by library research. These were the days when such an acquisitions policy was not frowned upon and keepers still had a free hand. The publication of objects, however, rarely appealed to him and an editorial request from a friend was usually needed to secure one. It is not surprising then that the most characteristic and important paper of these years was *Jerusalem: Patterns of Holiness* written in honour of Kathleen Kenyon,³⁷ in which he explored the motives which impelled first a Jew (Solomon), then a Christian (Constantine) and then a Muslim ('Abdul Malik) to establish shrines in Jerusalem. In many ways it is to be regretted that in retirement he did not pursue the lines of thought he opened up here into the major study of Jerusalem he was so well equipped to write, for his heart remained there and his firsthand knowledge of its monuments and the literature about it was almost unrivalled at the time.

³⁶ *Letters*, p. 218.

³⁷ P. R. S. Moorey and P. J. Parr (eds.), *Archaeology in the Levant: Essays for Kathleen Kenyon* (London, 1978), pp. 194–201.

Constitutionally his Keepership of the Ashmolean Museum was in many ways the most eventful decade in its history since Arthur Evans had virtually refounded it on the Beaumont Street site some sixty years earlier. It began with the implementation of a newly revised statute governing the museum, which formally created two new departments, of Coins and of Eastern Art, to add to the existing Antiquities (and Cast Gallery) and Western Art departments and concluded with university legislation enshrining the recommendations of the *Brunt Report* (1967). That had been significantly modified in some respects by his vigorous and forcefully argued opposition to the proposed new policy of internal centralisation and unification at the expense of traditional departmental autonomy.

The new plan rests on the theory that the Ashmolean is one, and should be administered as a unity. The old principle was that archaeology and the study of fine arts are distinct disciplines, applying different methods and aims to their subjects and calling for specialized direction The University should not be hypnotized by cant of 'Unity'; nor by stale analogies from municipal and government museum bureaucracies. The working ties between each Ashmolean department and the Ashmolean library are far closer than any that link the departments themselves. Yet no-one has preached 'unity' at the library or opposed its separation from the museum. The unity of the Ashmolean is true of its building; it is true of the library and its collections; but when cited of the collections themselves it is an academic catchword and no more.³⁸

His firm conviction, clearly based on his personal experience, that the roles of a museum curator and a university lecturer were distinct, requiring different aptitudes, experience and training engaged him in a long-standing debate in Oxford which continues. Pragmatic as ever, he argued in respect of proposals in the *Brunt Report* that: 'If curators were to undertake regular teaching then **either** the Museum must appoint more staff **or** the reorganization and cataloguing of the collections (which enable scholars to use them) and their eventual publication, together with any revival of fieldwork (entailing more publication), would be indefinitely delayed.'³⁹ To choose this second alternative, in his view, would be a deplorable reversal of policy in the museum.

In the event, the museum's purpose was formally redefined from 'to facilitate and assist study' of its collections to 'to assist in relevant teaching and research within the University'. At this stage archaeology

³⁸ Archives of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford: The Brunt Report: Keeper's File 1966–8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

and art-history were still struggling for recognition within the university's curricula, at most taught at diploma level, despite powerful advocacy by the holders of newly founded professorships. The subsequent emergence of fully-fledged degree courses, at a time of severe economies in staffing, has accentuated the dilemma which Hamilton had so acutely appreciated.

He also had to cope with the first real signs of the gradual emergence of the Ashmolean from the closed world of the university into the public arena. In the museum's relations with the city and the county, Hamilton, drawing on his long experience as a government official, was both constructive and dutiful. He appreciated and forwarded attempts to create new institutions, the Oxford City Museum and the County Museum at Woodstock (originally joint) and the local Oxford Archaeological Unit (originally the Oxford Excavation Committee), a pioneering enterprise. These were to satisfy fresh and growing demands for the independent promotion and proper development of local archaeology and history which had long been under the museum's wing. 'My recollection of him is of a member who made valuable contributions to the various matters to be expected on the creation of a new Museum Service from scratch and was well liked, which is confirmed by the warmth of the Committee's minute on receiving his resignation on 11.10.1972 . . . unlike the usual terse note.'⁴⁰

Hamilton always seemed to know instinctively when it was best to stand back and when best to fight for what he saw as the museum's best interests. In a crisis, internal or external, he was a tower of strength, pragmatic and direct. If he offered support, he could be relied upon to carry it through; if he could not, he told you so. Once his mind was made up on the merits of a case, he was a staunch advocate or a redoubtable opponent, as the case might be. On committee he said little, but rarely without noticeable effect. Many were surprised, in view of his quiet manner in public and his economy with words at meetings, to discover how well-informed he usually was as much about the official as about the unofficial activities of his staff of whatever rank.

The Suffolk Years, 1972–95

Retirement to Suffolk, where his family had spent the Second World War and where he joined them briefly in 1948, came easily to him. He

⁴⁰ Ashmolean Museum Archives: R. W. Hamilton: Personal File: Letter from John Edwards, former Deputy Town Clerk of Oxford, dated 17 December 1995.

was by then out of tune with the museum policies he was obliged to pursue, disenchanted by current trends in archaeology and saddened by the continuing strife in the Near East. He turned to music and gardening, reading and writing for recreation. Whether it be playing the piano, wielding a garden instrument, pen, or pencil, he always enjoyed doing things with his hands. Although it had been his greatest academic achievement to make Khirbat al Mafjar the best known of all Umayyad buildings through his meticulous record and analysis and reconstruction of the material remains of its structure and remarkable decoration, he still sought to convince his learned colleagues that its creator was not the Caliph Hisham, but rather Walid ibn Yazid, whose libertine lifestyle in his view better explained the idiosyncrasies of the building as he had reconstructed it. In a final monograph, *Walid and his Friends: An Umayyad Tragedy* (1988) he combined early Arabic literary and poetical accounts including Walid's own, which he read and translated with occasional help from A. F. L. Beeston, to recreate the daily life of Khirbat al Mafjar as he imagined it. As his editor Julian Raby noted, in apologising for 'Walid's fleshy appetites' as revealed by Hamilton, 'This is a tale not only of physical and emotional excess, but of gross religious irreverence. Let those who are offended read this as a moral tale. It begins with a tragedy—an earthquake which ruins Walid's palace—and ends with a tragedy—Walid's own assassination. Let these tragedies be viewed as the twin vengeance of God and man.'⁴¹ 'To which I might add', Hamilton remarked in a letter accompanying a presentation copy, 'my own for one or two slightly vulgar bits in the text, which you might think could well have been omitted—however, the Arabs in those days were not so sensitive.'⁴² The debate about Khirbat al Mafjar will continue with the implicit tribute that without Hamilton's fine published documentation in the first place, as in other cases, it could never be sustained.

Hamilton's career was of its time. It is inconceivable sixty years later. It is now fashionable to denigrate imperial archaeology which at its best, as exemplified in Hamilton's work in Palestine, was based on a common purpose shared between the expatriate administrators and their

⁴¹ *Walid*, p. 8.

⁴² Personal letter, 7 December 1988.

local assistants, who so often went on to be their successors. By great good fortune he found from the outset a career equal to his talents and demanding of them in a region famously rich in the monuments of antiquity and early modern times. He took them, the people, their language and heritage, to heart. He did as much as anyone in his time and place to see that the legacy with which he had been briefly entrusted was passed on not only in better repair, but also better known. In the Department of Antiquities of Palestine and later in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, he was a remarkable steward, decisive, dedicated and direct.

P. R. S. MOOREY
Fellow of the Academy

Note. In this memoir I have drawn heavily on close personal acquaintance with Robert Hamilton, as a junior member of his department in the Ashmolean Museum from 1961–72 and on occasional conversations and letters in his years of retirement. All other debts are acknowledged in the footnotes.

