

In Memoriam
John Basil Hennessy
(1925 - 2013)

Alan Walmsley

John Basil Hennessy, universally known to family, friends and colleagues as Basil Hennessy, was a pillar of Jordanian archaeology and a passionate supporter of the country and its people. Australian by birth, Basil spent most of his academic life as a lecturer and later professor at the University of Sydney. A highly respected scholar of Middle Eastern archaeology, especially the Chalcolithic and Bronze ages, he was a meticulous excavator, inspiring educator, and a skilled mentor. A sports champion, he was well known for his openness, warm nature and good humour. Basil was the recipient of numerous honours during his lifetime, notably his appointment as an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 1990.

Basil was born on the 10th of February 1925 in Horsham, Victoria, Australia. He was the eldest son of Thomas Hennessy and his wife, Nell (nee Poultney). He was educated at Villa Maria and St Patrick's College in Ballarat, during which time his life-long interest in sports was fostered, becoming a school athletics champion especially in shot-put and hammer-throw, and later at university a keen player of Australian Rules football.

Basil's education was delayed by the Second World War, during which in 1942 at just 17 he was deployed to New Guinea and, after the war, to the Northern Territory capital of Darwin as a navy radio and radar technician. After he was demobilized in 1946 and, like many of his generation, inspired by the pioneering and progressive Australian archaeologist Vere Gordon Childe, he enrolled in Anthropology at the University of Sydney on a returned soldier's scholarship, commencing his studies in 1947. In the following year Basil became one of the first under-



1. Basil on the veranda of the Pella dig house, early 1980s. Photograph by the late David Balderstone (courtesy of Sue Balderstone).

graduate students in the then newly established Department of Archaeology headed by Dale Trendall and James Stewart, the latter a specialist in Cypriot archaeology.

Following graduation in 1950, Basil headed to the Middle East, becoming the inaugural student scholar at the then newly established British School of Archaeology in Ankara. So began his life-long engagement with the archaeology, people, and places of the east Mediterranean and Middle East. Yet, unlike many before him, Basil's interests in the region transcended the mere functional and academic. In addition to his passionate love of archaeology, he also became a loyal and understanding friend of the diverse peoples who live there, and by which he set a high standard that his students were to envy and try to emulate.

Basil's early travels in the 1950s sharpened his archaeological skills and expanded his interests. He joined the excavations at Myrtou-

Pighades (Cyprus) under the direction of Joan du Plat Taylor, and then was to direct the excavations at the Bronze-Age cemetery site of Stephania (Hennessy 1964). Both excavations received substantial funding from the Australian Institute of Archaeology, based in Melbourne. In 1952, new opportunities presented themselves when he joined the late Dame Kathleen Kenyon on the first season of her seminal excavations at Jericho, which turned out to be a profoundly life-changing experience. In a vigorous intellectual and professional environment, and tutored by the Kenyon-trained “Jericho pickmen” (Palestine’s equivalent to the skilled excavators from Quft in Egypt), Basil’s life-long commitment to the archaeology of Jordan and Palestine was nurtured. After an academic disagreement with Kathleen Kenyon, Basil was to trek some 20 kms from Jericho to the critically important Chalcolithic site of Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl on the east bank of the Jordan River with the sole intention of returning with evidence in support of a cultural transition between the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods – a view not shared by Dame Kathleen. Find that evidence he did, and out of this instance of Basil’s driving determination and a strong belief in the overriding value of hard archaeological evidence was born his keen interest in Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl. The large-scale excavations he subsequently led in 1967, 1975, and 1977 (two seasons) were to transform not only our understanding of the site, but the origins and development of the Chalcolithic period more generally.

Returning to Australia, Basil joined the Department of Archaeology at the University of Sydney, firstly as temporary lecturer (1954-55, 1957) before his appointment as a full-time lecturer (1958-61). Among the students at Sydney were Kay Prag (Wright) and David O’Connor, and to them he was “revealing a whole new world to Australian students; not just an academic discipline, but a social landscape. He was a model of clarity in his presentations, spoken, written and graphic” (Prag 2001). During this time he was to marry Ruth Shannon and start a family of son David and daughters Sarah and Linda; henceforth the family become a defining part of his life.

As the post-WW2 age saw the rise of the professional archaeologist, rather than those

of private means, academic qualifications became increasingly necessary. At the suggestion of Dame Kathleen Kenyon, Basil and his family moved to England in 1962 so he could study for his doctorate at Magdalen College Oxford under Dame Kathleen’s supervision, graduating DPhil in 1964. His thesis, inspired by the Jericho work, was published in a highly regarded book, *The Foreign Relations of Palestine during the Early Bronze Age* (Hennessy 1967). Shortly after completing his doctorate, Basil and the family moved to Jerusalem, then under Jordanian administration, where he became Assistant Director and then Director (in 1966) of the British School of Archaeology. Under his directorship the British School moved to a stateily building in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, where it is still located today (although appropriately renamed the Kenyon Institute). While director Basil ran an active field program. He continued the major, multi-period excavations at the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem, begun by Crystal Bennett in 1964 at the request of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan (Wightman, Hennessy, and Bennett 1989); undertook his own project at the Late Bronze Age temple at (the old) Amman Airport, Marka, that after an unpromising start turned up trumps (Hennessy 1966, 1985, 1989; Prag 2001); and in January to March of 1967 led his first season at Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl (Hennessy 1969). After the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem and the West Bank in June 1967, Basil found a way to conduct limited excavations at Samaria/Sabastiyah in the following year after complex negotiations with all parties.

Given the complexities of the situation on the West Bank after occupation, and with Australia calling, Basil departed Jerusalem in 1970 to return to the University of Sydney, firstly as the Edwin Cuthbert Hall Visiting Professor in Near Eastern Archaeology and, from 1973 until his retirement in 1990, as incumbent of the fully-endowed chair dedicated to, under the terms of the bequest, the study of the “Archaeology and Mythology in the Ancient Middle East, namely, Palestine, Egypt and Asia Minor” (which was taken to include Cyprus). Middle Eastern archaeology at Sydney had fallen into the doldrums with the unexpected death in 1962 of Jim Stewart, the founding professor, leaving Basil the massive task of rebuilding Australia’s sole

centre of teaching and research in the archaeology of the Middle East.

For Basil, the Sydney position opened up the option of returning to Jordan and continuing the work at Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl, brought to a sudden end by the June War of 1967. His primary intention was to probe the site with deep trenches down to sterile base levels where the earliest – and hopefully late Neolithic deposits – would be found. Also on the agenda were excavations at a large ceremonial centre (which had only just avoided being incorporated into a mine field that truncated the west third of the site, laid after the June 1967 War), and the opening of long strip trenches between two of the low mounds that characterized the site with the intention of identifying possible changes in the landscape (publications: Lovell 2001; Seaton 2008). The real challenge, however, lay in how to restart work at the site in 1975. In the mid-1970s, the south Jordan Valley was a remote, barely occupied area still under military control due to the tensions that followed the June 1967 War, and setting up and supplying a dig camp at Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl near the north shore of the Dead Sea posed major logistical challenges – water, food, and shelter all needed to be brought to the site from a great distance. In the 1975 season, the small team commuted daily from Amman, but this greatly impeded progress. As a result, a decision was made to set up camp at the site. Through Basil's close friendship with staff in the Department of Antiquities, fostered since his Jerusalem days, and the active support of the then Crown Prince of Jordan, HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal, seemingly insurmountable obstacles were overcome one by one. The two 1977 seasons saw the team happily encamped at Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl, with a pack of cards, the stars, and the lights of Jericho as nightly companions. The once a week luxury was Friday night in Amman at the building of the British School near the University of Jordan, which served as a branch office of the Jerusalem School under the direction of Crystal Bennett. With Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl, Basil demonstrated the absolute importance of networking with and gaining the confidence of local authorities and international teams alike, at which he was a skilled master.

Joining Basil at Ghassul in 1977 was Anthony (Tony) McNicoll, a fellow Australian

known to Basil from the Jerusalem days, who had recently been appointed to a lectureship at Sydney University with the task of broadening the spectrum of archaeology subjects taught there. While Tony's primary interest lay in the Classical and Medieval periods in the Middle East, he also brought knowledge of the many new approaches increasingly expected in archaeology, and had already applied these to his work in Turkey and Afghanistan. There was a natural, infectious rapport between them and, while they did not always agree, out of this bond there grew in the wide salt plains of Ghassul a visionary archaeological project, a project both multi-disciplinary and multi-period in scope focussing on the expansive site of Tabaqat Fahl (Pella) in the north Jordan Valley. A field trip in early 1977 to Tabaqat Fahl on a cold and overcast day during the Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl season confirmed that the site was ideal in every way for a project intended to span from Neolithic times to the Middle Ages; one that had every possibility of building a continuous social, economic, and cultural sequence from the earliest of human settlement to the beginnings of modern times in the southern Levant.

Beginning with the enormously challenging first field season during the northern hemisphere winter of 1978-1979, which would have never happened without the unwavering support of the former Director-General of Antiquities Dr Adnan Hadidi, Pella quickly grew into Australia's premier archaeological project in Jordan. In scale and scope the Pella excavations, undertaken in the early years in partnership with Wooster College in the USA, were many times that of



2. Basil and the Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl team inspecting Pella, probably February 1977.

Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl, and kept growing. Spurred on by Basil, the research expanded almost exponentially to address an almost infinite number of cultural, economic and historical questions, many barely addressed at the time work started at Pella. Similar to Jericho, the large archaeological mound at the centre of the site had, at its southeast base, a perennial spring that gushed out wonderfully fresh water into a valley below. It was at this location Basil chose to position a deep trench to cut into the side of the mound with the intention of capturing, in one major location, a representative cross-section of Pella's significant archaeological periods. In its original manifestation the deep cut did not identify all of Pella's phases, but it was a strategic start, uncovering major features such as a section of a massive multi-phase Bronze Age mud-brick circuit wall, part of a Late Bronze Age administrative building and a major domestic quarter spanning Byzantine and early Islamic times, dramatically destroyed in an earthquake of 749 AD. Of the finds from the cut, the ivory-panelled Pella Lion Box stands out as one of the finest Bronze-Age objects ever found in Jordan. From the outset work also extended to the cemetery fields around Pella that produced outstanding Bronze Age, Roman and Byzantine finds, the pride of which now grace the museums of Jordan. In this work during the 1980s the Department of Antiquities representatives took a leading role, especially the then Chief Inspector of Antiquities in Irbid Mr Sultan Al Shreideh who discovered many tombs including the extraordinarily rich Tomb 62 (some 2,000 objects) while assisting the project in countless other ways. As the number and ambitions of the Sydney University students at Pella expanded during the eighties, Basil and Tony gave the most promising students the opportunity to build their careers by incorporating other promising areas in the Pella project: the densely occupied summit of Tall al-Ḥuṣn and a spectacular Natufian site near Wādī Ḥammah (Edwards 2013), for example. Work also began in earnest on the specialist collections, such as glass and coins (Sheedy, Carson and Walmsley 2001).

Together, Basil and Tony ran a dig that was the envy of other missions in Jordan. At the meal table in an expanding dig house, snippets of conversations could be heard on widely di-

verse topics such as geomorphology, the beginnings of agriculture, archaeozoology, Greeks and Hellenism, coins, Bronze Age architecture and cuneiform libraries, radiocarbon dating, Byzantium and early Christian churches, archaeobotany, pottery (a lot of that), Iron Age temples, stratigraphy and context, Romans and urbanism, flint tools, settlement in Islamic times, glass and stonework – to name only some of them. The atmosphere was eclectic and electric. As already noted, it took a much larger team to tackle this myriad of research topics, an expansion made possible by adequate funding from Australian government research bodies and the Australian National Gallery in Canberra. While the work was hard and the pressures intense (at times), the stars and card games still entertained us, now upgraded with evenings of song with Tony on the guitar. Sadly, the sing-a-longs barely survived the early death of Tony in 1985. Basil was left with a huge project, enormous commitments in Jordan and, notably, a growing band of young archaeologists whose future careers relied upon its continuation; yet, he did not flinch in assuming responsibility for the Pella project even if it meant months in Jordan, year on year, until his retirement.

Not just in the esoteric field of archaeology, but also in other realms, the Australian presence was rapidly growing in Jordan during the 1980s, with Basil putting his considerable diplomatic skills to good use when meeting ambassadors, politicians, government officials, academics and businessmen of Jordanian, Australian and other nationalities. Australians based in Amman were generous in their support, such as the Balderstones (David, a prominent Australian journalist, and Sue, an architect most adept in archaeological planning) as well as successive ambassadors at the newly established Australian Embassy in Amman, such as Richard Gate, the first resident ambassador to Jordan (1982-1985), and Bob Bowker (1989-1992). Basil's stately persona allowed him to mix freely with the top levels of the social and political elite, resulting in numerous high-level visitors to the Pella excavations including HRH Prince El Hassan and, on the 25th of January 1987, Australia's then Prime Minister Bob Hawke who remarked that it was "extremely satisfying to me Basil, to see here in such a practical way a group of Australians

is working in association with the Jordanian Government and people to do work which is, I think, immeasurable in its value” (Hawke 1987). He pledged \$30,000 a year to support research, and vegemite (a savoury Australian spread) for the team.

An inspiring teacher and critical researcher in both a university and field environment, Basil instilled in his students, and those of others, the utmost importance of questioning and contesting even core beliefs in Middle Eastern archaeology. For the unavoidable friction Sydney students were to experience in openly questioning the views of senior colleagues, Basil ensured his charges were well prepared through a rigorous program of lectures, seminars and assignments at Sydney. Then when matters did come to a head, he was unwavering in his support. Basil also recognized the importance of attracting funds to assist students in their studies, especially as access to British sources dried up during the 1970s. To that end, Basil was instrumental in setting up The Near Eastern Archaeology Foundation at the University in 1986, which today offers public outreach programs and, through generous bequests and private donations, travel grants to worthy postgraduate students.

Basil was the recipient of a number of prestigious awards and honours during his lifetime. He was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries London, elected as Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities in 1982, was appointed Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) on Australian Day (26 January) 1990 for “service to archaeology and to international relations”, appointed as Emeritus Professor by the University of Sydney in the same year, and was honoured by the Senate of the University with the degree of Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*), conferred at a ceremony in 1993. On New Year’s Day in 2001, Basil was awarded the Centenary Medal “for service to Australian society and the humanities in the study of prehistory and archaeology”. A Festschrift in honour of Basil was published in 1995 (Bourke and Descoedres 1995), and a volume of studies by Australian scholars was dedicated to Basil and the people of Jordan on the occasion of Sydney University’s hosting of the Eighth International Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan in July 2001 (Walmsley 2001). Basil’s life has been

remembered in obituaries and tributes, including an obituary written by his children and published simultaneously in *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* (D. Hennessy and L. Hennessy 2014), a tribute by Linda Hennessy (2013) in the *Journal of the Australian Institute of Archaeology*, an obituary in *The Times* newspaper (Anon. 30 November 2013), an obituary in the journal *Levant* by Stephen Bourke (Bourke 2014) and an appreciation by Craig Barker in Sydney University’s *Muse* (Barker 2014). On the 18th of February 2014 a service in memory of Basil’s achievements was held in the Great Hall of the University of Sydney in the presence of HE Mrs Rima Ahmad Alaadeen, Jordan’s Ambassador to Australia. Family, friends and colleagues attended and, along with other speeches, they heard a heart-felt eulogy delivered by Dr Bob Bowker, Australia’s former Ambassador to Jordan. Of Basil, Bob said “His natural graciousness, honesty and kindness; his respect for others and his down to earth approach represented values which strengthened Australia’s reputation wherever he worked. He was genuinely admired, respected and valued among the Jordanian people, from the palace to the villagers with whom he mixed. His honesty, his sense of fair dealing, and his complete professionalism were his trademarks”.

Basil Hennessy is survived by his wife Ruth and children David, Sarah, and Linda.

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