

OPEN LETTER TO DOMINIQUE COLLON FROM DAVID HAWKINS



Dominique Collon at work on the excavations at Babneat, 1985–86. Photo courtesy of John Curtis.

My dear Domi,

Much water has flowed under many bridges since we first met in October 1962 as students together at the then independent Institute of Archaeology. We were both studying for the Postgraduate Diploma in Western Asiatic Archaeology, along with Leri Glynne Davies, and, in other subjects, Kay Wright (now Prag), Georgina Thompson (now Hermann), and Clare Gough (now Hill), a goodly company. We were supervised by your uncle(-in-law) Seton Lloyd, who had just taken over the professorship from Max Mallowan, himself recently translated to All Souls College, Oxford. The Institute then, much smaller than now, was a very friendly place with an almost family feeling, and I remember my time there with pleasure. Seton had a wealth of experience to draw on from his work in Iraq and Turkey and, although teaching it for the first time was obviously demanding for him, he gave us a great introduction to the subject. Barbara Parker (later Lady Mallowan) taught the course on Mesopotamian art, including the seals, a matter of great significance for your future career.

Already during your time at the Institute you had gravitated to the Western Asiatic Antiquities Department of the British Museum, and after gaining the Diploma, you moved there as a special assistant to catalogue the seal collection, thus inaugurating your career of half a century which has seen your rise to your present eminence as a *Bēlet Kunukkāti* (“Mistress of Seals”). A decisive step was your study at Columbia University with Edith Porada, your “Doktor-Mutter” (if that is the right expression) and life-long friend, which resulted in your PhD, *The Seal Impressions of Tell Atchana/Alalakh*, gained in 1971 and published as AOAT 27 in 1975. This was only the first of a number of distinguished monographs on seals, including *First Impressions* (British Museum Publications, 1987) and your catalogue of *Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum: Cylinder Seals*, volumes II–V (1982, 1986, 2016, 2001), a monumental and on-going achievement, complemented by an awesome number of smaller contributions on glyptic subjects.

Now excavators from across the Middle East, from Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Israel and Turkey summon you to pronounce on their seals and impressions, and the note “With a contribution by Dominique Collon” (or its equivalent) in many an excavation report guarantees that they have consulted the best.

But though seals have been the main love and preoccupation of your academic career, your work here has been only part of your great contribution right across the field of the Ancient Near East, which has made you a well-known and popular figure here. After completing and publishing your PhD, you spent four years, 1973–1976, in Tunis to work on the mosaics of Utica and other sites, where you took part in the excavations and prepared the publications. Returning to England, you had a spell of varied activities: writing, researching, translating, teaching (at the Institute of Archaeology), and continuing at the British Museum as special assistant preparing the seal catalogues. In 1979 you joined me as co-editor of *IRAQ*, taking on the archaeological contributions and leaving me with the philological. We enjoyed 14 years of harmonious collaboration until in 1993 I handed over to Andrew George. You and he together put the editorial practices onto a more modern and business-like footing, and your 31 years in harness dwarfed my 25 years, (though neither of us approached Oliver Gurney’s record at *Anatolian Studies*, 42 years as sole editor).

In 1985–1989 your editorial skills were exercised in a big job, in charge of the Ancient Near East section of the Grove Dictionary of Art. I well remember the rather magnificent launch party held in the Banqueting Hall, Whitehall, under the Titian ceiling.

In 1988 you came properly home to the British Museum as curator in the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities, a post which you held until retirement in 2005. Your museum duties, though doubtless demanding, do not appear to have cramped your numerous other activities. You have spent much of your time as member of archaeological expeditions, drawn first to Turkey by your uncle’s work as Director of the British Institute at Ankara, to Kültepe with Tahsin Özgüç in 1964, then with Seton Lloyd and Charles Burney at Kayalıdere in 1965, which was also my own first experience of excavation. You have covered the Middle East pretty widely from Turkey (also Alalakh, Kilise Tepe), Iraq (Tell al-Rimah, Eski Mosul, Balawat), Syria (Apamea) and Tunisia (Utica), which has left you with many friends right across the map. Your out-going personality has made you a welcome member of expedition teams, as acknowledged by David Oates in an appropriate slip of the tongue in a lecture on Tell el-Rimah 1965: “Our thanks also to Dominique Collon, who helped us with the conversation — er, conservation”. Here your English-French bilingualism, also good Italian, has stood you in good stead. Fittingly you have served long stints on the councils of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, and a term on the Council of the British School in Jerusalem.

Your retirement from the British Museum was honoured in a memorable symposium organised by Dr Iz de Moor, whose doctoral thesis you had supervised, held in Magdalen College, Oxford, in June 2005. The programme of talks, themed naturally “seals”, consisted of contributions from a distinguished array of colleagues, and concluded with a strawberry tea and punting on the Cherwell.

So yours has been a productive and wide-ranging academic life extending well beyond purely glyptic studies. In fact, especially after a look at your daunting bibliography of articles in monographs, Festschriften, Gedenkschriften, conference papers, journals, encyclopedias and catalogues, one asks: “How has she fitted it all in?”. Nor in the ten years since your retirement has your pace slackened, quite the reverse. So I am delighted to have this opportunity along with other friends to thank you warmly for all this work, especially in this Journal, to which you have given so much.

I am sure we may all join with your son Gerard and extended family of brothers, nieces and nephews in wishing you many more active and rewarding years. Keep it up!

With love from
David