At Home on a No-Frills Tell

TELL BRAK, SYRIA—Most 70-somethings quietly retire. But not archaeologist Joan Oates. Oates, who leads one of Syria’s longest-standing and most productive excavations, is only now, as she nears 78, hitting her research stride. After raising three children while assisting her late husband David Oates with excavations during the past half-century, she is now returning to her original interest in the era prior to the invention of writing. Her ongoing dig of a 6000-year-old settlement is radically reshaping our understanding of early urbanism (see main text).

Oates is the prickly doyenne of Near Eastern archaeology, a dedicated excavator well into her third decade at the massive mound of Tell Brak, which dominates the Syrian plain. That effort, which she took over after the death of her husband in 2004, is now paying off. “Brak is an unusually large and early site, and we’re getting not only a very good record of a major tell but also an understanding of what is happening in the region,” says Tony Wilkinson, a landscape archaeologist at Durham University in the United Kingdom who has worked with Oates. “Joan has enabled that.”

Oates has patiently waited for decades to return to her interest in prehistoric archaeology. After abandoning a major in chemistry while studying at Syracuse University in New York in the 1940s, she focused on archaeology. Armed with a Fulbright scholarship to the University of Cambridge, the young American worked for a time on early human shelters in what is now Israel before moving to Iraq to work on her Ph.D. on the period before Mesopotamian cities began to flourish. There she met her future husband, as well as British archaeologist Max Mallowan and his author-wife Agatha Christie, who took her under their wing.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Oateses excavated at the Assyrian capital of Nimrud with Mallowan and then at Tell al Rimah just to the north—much later periods than those of Oates’s original interest. “I was a dutiful wife and did what was dictated by what David was doing,” she says. “I handled a lot of the records—drawing, writing, photographing.” At Nimrud, the Oateses found and cataloged a famed collection of delicate ivories from the 2nd millennium B.C.E., and at Tell al Rimah, they uncovered surprisingly sophisticated architecture in the little-known period at the start of the 1st millennium B.C.E. Whatever Oates says, colleagues insist that she was always far more than a dutiful wife; she evolved into a leading expert in Near Eastern ceramics and was instrumental in analyzing discoveries and publishing the results.

During a tumultuous era of Iraqi revolutions and Arab-Israeli wars, she also raised three children, partly in Baghdad, partly in London, and partly at excavations. David began work at Tell Brak in 1976, and Joan followed 2 years later. In 1981, she became intrigued with one area of the massive mound, which she believed could hide very early material. “I just kept bullying him,” she says, “arguing that the whole of the 4th millennium [B.C.E.] could be opened up.” With limited funds and other projects, David demurred. Finally, a decade later, he relented, and she has since focused her work at that spot.

When David died, Oates assumed his mantle, along with the lifetime excavation permit granted by the Syrian authorities. Life at Tell Brak was an unusually large and early site, and we’re getting not only a very good record of a major tell but also an understanding of what is happening in the region,” says Tony Wilkinson, a landscape archaeologist at Durham University in the United Kingdom who has worked with Oates. “Joan has enabled that.”

Oates has a reputation for maintaining strict control over a dig, eschewing change, and keeping a close eye on the dig purse, in contrast to the more relaxed and egalitarian approaches favored by other excavation chiefs. “She’s a tough woman, and you don’t want to cross her,” says one archaeologist who knows her well. Nevertheless, no one disputes that Oates has given several generations of students lessons in scientific rigor. “I keep people on their toes,” she says.

But despite her rough edges, Oates has learned how to win the respect of Syrian colleagues. “She knows that the only way to get access is to build good relationships with the local authorities and to be humble, helpful, and nice,” says Salam Al-Quntar, a Syrian archaeologist who works at Brak. “That’s her strategy, and it works.”

Although Oates intends to relinquish day-to-day control over the excavation in the coming season, she can’t see herself abandoning field life altogether. “I keep people on their toes,” she says. “But I don’t think I will so long as I can keep both feet on the ground.”

—A.L.