

NEWS RELEASE

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Obituary

Robert Dyson, Emeritus Williams Director of Penn Museum

PHILADELPHIA – Robert H. Dyson, Jr., world-renowned Near Eastern archaeologist and emeritus director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Penn Museum) died peacefully at age 92 after a long illness on Friday, February 14 in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Born on August 2, 1927 in York, Pennsylvania, Robert Harris Dyson, Jr. was the only child of Robert and Harriet (Duck) Dyson. Honorably discharged in 1946 after two years of service in the U.S. Navy, he enrolled at Harvard University. A member of the Harvard Society of Fellows, he received his B.A. in 1950 and a Ph.D. in Anthropology in 1966, specializing in Near Eastern Archaeology.

Dyson first came to the University of Pennsylvania in 1954 as an assistant professor in the Anthropology Department and assistant curator in the Museum's Near East Section. After leading the Penn Museum's Tikal Project in Guatemala in 1962, he was promoted to Professor of Anthropology and became Head Curator of the Near East Section in 1967.

His most important contribution as a field archaeologist was as Director of the Penn Museum's Hasanlu (Iran) Expedition from 1956 to 1977 (jointly sponsored by the Iranian Archaeological Service and the Metropolitan Museum of Art and funded by the Hagop Kevorkian Fund).

Located in northwest Iran, Hasanlu was destroyed during the late 9th or early 8th century BCE by a sudden military attack. Dyson and his team excavated a series of large buildings, including a palace and a temple. More than 200 bodies were found in the ruins, along with more than 7,000 items, such as household tools, pottery, jewelry, weapons, armor, and "The Golden Bowl of Hasanlu" (1958)—for which his team garnered notoriety through a feature in LIFE magazine (1959). The "Bowl" (now in the National Museum of Iran) is a large decorated gold vessel that offers a key to understanding the belief systems in Iron Age Iran. For two decades, the Hasanlu Expedition was the premier training ground for archaeologists interested in ancient Iran.

Although a skilled excavator, Dyson was at his best when working one-on-one with students. He inspired multiple generations of art historians and archaeologists who went on to lead excavations at important sites throughout the Middle East and Asia.

In 1979, he was appointed Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Penn, until 1982 when he was named the Williams Director of the Penn Museum—a position he held until his retirement in 1994. He continued to hold the titles Williams Director Emeritus and Emeritus Professor of Anthropology.



During his years as Penn Museum Director, Dyson supported expeditions around the world, initiated structural improvements to the Museum building, and established new ties with the University's administration. He re-organized the Registrar's and Business Offices within the Museum to make its inventory more accessible to scholars and developed a solid foundation for the Museum's finances.

Along with Pater Paanakker and Jerome Byrne, Dyson founded the Louis J. Kolb Foundation and the Louis J. Kolb Society, which provide fellowships and financial aid to graduate students at Penn in disciplines related to the mission of the Penn Museum (primarily in the departments of Anthropology, Classical Studies, History of Art, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, and East Asian Languages in Civilizations).

The Robert H. Dyson chair appointments in the Department of Anthropology and Near East Section of the Penn Museum were established in his honor.

A memorial program is being planned for fall 2020 at the Penn Museum.

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Note: Photos are available [here](#).