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Obituary: Nicholas Neocles Ambraseys 1929-2012

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Obituary for SECED newsletter



Nicholas Neocles Ambraseys 1929-2012

Nicholas (Nick) Ambraseys was born in Athens on 19th January 1929 and died peacefully at his home in Putney on 28th December 2012 at the age of 83.

Nick Ambraseys attended the National Technical University of Athens, receiving his diploma in Rural Engineering in 1952. Following this and service in the Royal Hellenic Navy, he moved to Imperial College to study for his Diploma of Imperial College and later his PhD, which he was awarded in 1958. Following a few years at universities in Greece and in the United States of America (working with Nathan Newmark, one of the fathers of earthquake engineering) he returned to Imperial College and remained there until his death. He became Professor of Engineering Seismology in 1974. In 1968 he established the Engineering Seismology Section in the Department of Civil Engineering and from 1971 to 1994 he led this section. In 1994 he officially retired from this position but he remained very active as an Emeritus Professor. Even during the last few months of his life he continued working and collaborating on various research topics, including the stability of ancient Greek columns.

His research covered many problems connected with earthquakes and their effects on the ground, structures and populations. His PhD and early articles were concerned with the response of earth dams to earthquakes, in connection with the construction of large dams in the Himalayas (e.g. at Mangla). However, early on in his career he began studying historical accounts of earthquakes, particularly those occurring in the eastern Mediterranean region, and it is in this field where he arguably made his greatest contributions. His meticulous study of historical documents on earthquakes that occurred in the eastern Mediterranean and elsewhere (e.g. Central America and north-western Europe) is second-to-none and he published many dozens of articles and books on this painstaking work. In 2009 his *magnum opus* on eastern Mediterranean seismicity (entitled 'Earthquakes in the Mediterranean and Middle East: a multidisciplinary study of seismicity up to 1900'), comprising almost 1000 pages, was published by Cambridge University Press.

Nick Ambraseys's contributions to earthquake engineering in the UK were varied. In addition, to his teaching and research supervision of generations of students at Imperial College, from the mid-1960s until the early 1970s he was chairman of the British National Committee for Earthquake Engineering, until the mid-1980s he was the UK National Delegate of the European Association for Earthquake Engineering and for many years he filled the same role for the International Association for Earthquake Engineering (later he became a honorary life member of both of these associations). He also served on various engineering and scientific committees and advisory boards in the UK and overseas. He was one of the founders of SECED and was an honorary life member. In the 1980s Nick undertook (with others,

including Charles Melville and James Jackson) an extensive study of the seismicity of the British Isles and surrounding areas, which culminated in a series of publications including two articles in the Proceedings of the SECED Conference on the Seismicity of the UK in 1985.

In all his works he sought to act as a bridge between earth sciences and engineering and between research and practice. These studies were enlightened by the knowledge and insights he gained during dozens of post-earthquake field missions in various parts of the world, many of which were under the aegis of UNESCO. These missions led to a series of reports that had an impact on the reconstruction of the cities affected (e.g. Skopje and Managua). He was awarded in 1998 the Freedom of the City of Skopje in recognition of the field work that he undertook in the aftermath of the devastating 1963 Skopje earthquake and the advice that he provided to the local authorities.

In recognition of his lifetime of achievements he was given numerous awards (e.g. Harry Fielding Reid Medal of the Seismological Society of America, 2006), and fellowships from prestigious institutions in the UK and overseas, for example: the Royal Academy of Engineering, the Institution of Civil Engineers, the Geological Society and the Royal Geographical Society. From his election in 2003, he was an active member of the First Section of the Academy of Athens and he divided his time between London and Athens.

Nick Ambraseys contributions to engineering seismology and earthquake engineering were immense, wide-ranging and spanned almost 60 years. The worldwide community in these fields owe him a great debt and he will be greatly missed. He is survived by his wife, Xenia.