

OFER BAR-YOSEF

1937–2020

On Saturday, March 14, 2020, Ofer Bar-Yosef passed away at his home in Kfar Saba, Israel. Following his military service, Ofer attended the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, studying with prehistorian Moshe Stekelis and earning his doctoral degree there in 1970. Between 1967 and 1988, he ascended Hebrew University's academic ranks, becoming a professor of prehistoric archaeology in 1979. In 1988, he became the George G. and Janet G. B. MacCurdy Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology at Harvard University and the curator of Paleolithic archaeology at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. At the time of his death, Ofer was a professor emeritus at Harvard and held honorary degrees from Ben Gurion University and the University of Bordeaux (the picture of Ofer included here shows Ofer at his honorary degree ceremony at that institution). Holding dual citizenship in Israel and the United States, Ofer was a member of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and, since 1973, the Society for American Archaeology. SAA members of a certain age will likely recall Ofer, dashing around the annual meetings, backpack on his shoulder, trailed by students eager to meet archaeology's "man for all seasons." His wife, Daniella Bar-Yosef Mayer, survives him, as do his four daughters, Daphne, Avivit, Ayelet, and Netta.

Ofer's engagement with archaeology began as a child in Jerusalem, where he and playmates excavated a Byzantine cistern. His professional excavations spanned the entirety of Israeli prehistory, from the Lower Paleolithic to the Neolithic periods. The lion's share of his voluminous publications focused on the transition from hunters-gatherers to farmers-herders in Southwest Asia. Prominent among that work was his developing a hypothesis that the prolonged residential sedentism during the early Holocene set the stage for the adoption of agriculture and pastoralism in the Levant. After 1988, his work diversified geographically, taking him to excavations in the Republic of Georgia, Turkey, the Czech Republic, and the People's Republic of China. Ofer's publications run to more than 25 authored or edited books and more than 400 papers on diverse subjects with dozens of collaborators and coauthors. He was the dissertation advisor for 16 students, most of whom went on to become professors of archaeology and anthropology themselves.

Ofer's investigations with Eitan Tchernov at 'Ubeidiya revealed traces of early Pleistocene hominin activities comparable to those from Olduvai Gorge and other Eastern African sites dating to around 1.4 million years ago, one of the three oldest sites outside of Africa.

The 1970s–1990s saw Ofer leading excavations with Bernard Vandermeersch, Lilliane Meignen, Anna Belfer-Cohen, Yoel



(Photograph courtesy of the University of Bordeaux.)

Rak, Anne-Marie Tillier, Baruch Arensburg, Eitan Tchernov, Paul Goldberg, and others at Qafzeh, Kebara, and Hayonim Caves. Together these caves reveal a complex succession of later Pleistocene *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthal fossils and archaeological remains. These excavations have provided paleoanthropology's next generation with rich evidence with which to test hypotheses about what happened when humans, Neanderthals, and other hominins bumped into one another.

Ofer's dissertation, "The Epipaleolithic Cultures of Palestine" (1970), remains a seminal work to this day. Over the years, he enlarged our understanding of that period through excavations at 'Ein Gev I, El Wad Terrace, and Hayonim Cave (in Israel) and by survey and excavation carried out with James Phillips in the Sinai Peninsula (then occupied by Israel).

In his work on the Neolithic Period, Ofer directed excavations at the Preceramic Neolithic sites of Netiv Hagdud and Nahal Hemar cave as well as Neolithic hunter-gatherer sites in Southern Sinai. Upon decades of received wisdom about warfare and agricultural origins, Ofer proposed that the Jericho's residents built their massive Neolithic wall to deflect floods rather than to dissuade attackers.

In the classroom and in his published works, Ofer was a fountain of provocative ideas, including (occasionally) mutually contradictory arguments in the same paper! In print and in life, Ofer thrived on argument and strove to teach his students how to argue well. A typical lunch in his Stone Age Lab at the Peabody Museum would see him tossing out a notion about the origins of agriculture, early hominin dispersals, or some other issue. Then, as we, his students, had at one another over the issue, Ofer would take a bite out of his sandwich, "Hmm" contentedly, and smile.

A Reminiscence

I met Ofer in 1984, on the first day of my first year in graduate school. I was at Harvard to study African prehistoric archaeology with Glynn Isaac. Ofer was there working on a book about Levantine prehistory. We bonded over a mutual interest in stone tools and disagreements over their value for paleoanthropology. (I was an optimist, he a pessimist.) At year's end, Glynn and Ofer arranged for me to spend the summer in Jerusalem examining Paleolithic stone artifact collections at Hebrew University. There, I discovered my hosts on the prehistory faculty were all Ofer's former and current doctoral students. This hotbed of prehistoric research, one that punched so far above its weight in global archaeology, was literally "the house that Ofer built."

A year later, I was about to quit graduate school. Glynn Isaac had died, and I met with our department chair to tell him I was leaving. He urged me not to do so, saying that Ofer had agreed to supervise my doctoral training from Israel. (Several years later, Harvard hired Ofer as MacCurdy Chair.) I learned much from Ofer at Harvard and excavating with him and his colleagues at Kebara Cave. His most enduring and inspiring lesson, however, was one he taught me on the streets of West Philadelphia.

Back in the early 1990s, determining what was or was not a "Levallois" artifact had become an issue in Pleistocene

archaeology. Ofer jumped right into the debate, co-organizing with Harold Dibble a workshop on the issue at the University of Pennsylvania. I was one among a small number of younger scholars attending. After a very long day of podium presentations showcasing the occurrences of Levallois tools worldwide, one was eager to get to the matter at hand. I proposed pulling a few dozen Middle Paleolithic tools from the Penn Museum collections, asking individual workshop participants to count up Levallois/non-Levallois identifications, and then comparing the results. This seemed a reasonable way to gauge variation in Levallois identifications and the magnitude of the problem we were supposed to be debating. Senior scholars thought differently. They viewed my proposal as an insult, a challenge to their authority and expertise. They rebuked me for proposing this and complained vociferously to Ofer and Harold. Early that evening, I went for a head-clearing stroll. After a short while, I bumped into Ofer. Walking together back to the conference dinner, I asked why he had not come to my defense during my public "spanking." He had held back, he said, so that I would learn to argue for myself and that when I recklessly picked a fight with thin-skinned colleagues, I should not expect a rescue mission. "Tough love" perhaps, but good advice. Thank you, Chief.

—John J. Shea, Stony Brook University



CALENDAR

APRIL 15, 2020

Submissions System Opened for SAA's 86th Annual Meeting in San Francisco, CA

MAY 19, 2020

Online Seminar: Knowledge Series: Archaeoastronomy, Blackfoot Narratives, and Antiquity on the Northern Plains with Eldon Yellowhorn
3:00–4:00 p.m.
FREE and for SAA Members Only

MAY 26, 2020

Online Seminar: Integrating Drones into Archaeological Fieldwork
12:00–2:00 p.m.

SEPTEMBER 2, 2020

Online Seminar: Magnetometer Survey for Archaeology
2:00–4:00 p.m.

SEPTEMBER 10, 2020

3:00 p.m. EST
Submissions Close for SAA's 86th Annual Meeting in San Francisco, CA

To learn more about the Online Seminars and to register, visit www.saa.org/OnlineSeminars.

Submit and learn about the submission process at <https://www.saa.org/annual-meeting/submissions>.