

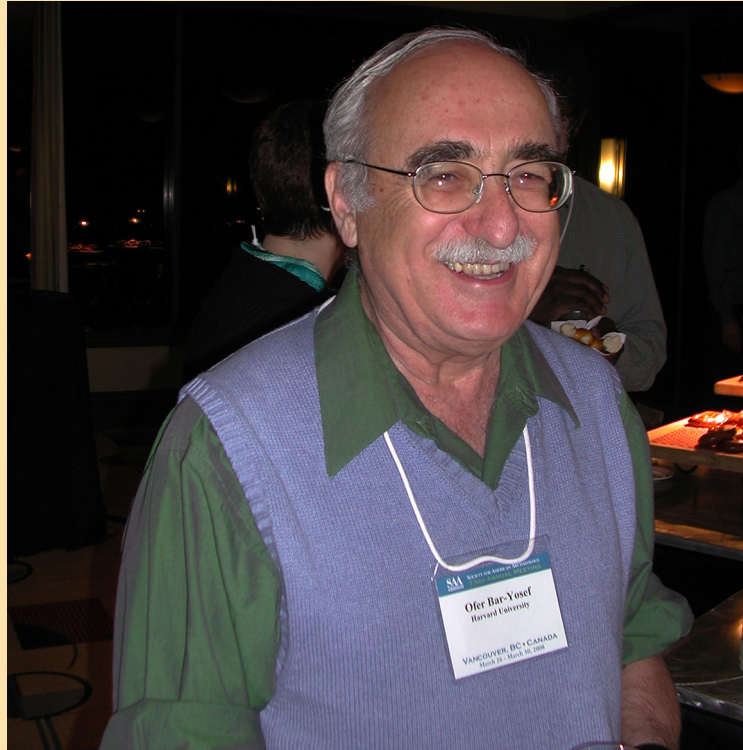
Ofer Bar-Yosef, Renowned Archaeologist 29 August 1937 – 14 March 2020

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OBITUARY



Ofer Bar-Yosef at the University of Michigan Reception during the 2008 SAA meeting in Vancouver (photo: Carla Sinopoli; original photo cropped for this publication)

On Saturday, 14 March 2020, Ofer Bar-Yosef passed away peacefully at his home in Kfar Saba near the Mediterranean coast in Israel, and archaeology lost one of its true giants. And with his passing many archaeologists the world over lost a dear friend. Ofer had a long and uniquely distinguished career, contributing to the discipline in countless ways, and influencing the lives of an untold number of students and professionals along the way.

I am deeply honored by having been invited to write this tribute for Ofer, but at the same time truly humbled. Ofer was a dear friend, but he knew, and was close to, so many people over his long career that my personal lens is simply not capable of capturing the breadth and depth of

that amazing life. No matter what I write it will inevitably seem flat, two-dimensional, hardly an adequate tribute to someone whose life, career, and personality were so vibrant, so constantly in motion, so three-dimensional. I certainly don't want what follows to be just a recap of his prodigious record of publication and the many accolades he received. Others have already done that and more are sure to come. I would be remiss, of course, if I didn't begin with a sketch of his remarkable career, given how truly amazing it was. But I want to go a step further and include some of my own personal reminiscences and memories, as well as a few aspects of his life, that otherwise are unlikely to be known by most others and, in that way, give people not

fortunate enough to have known him a glimpse of why he was such a special person.

Ofer was born in Jerusalem (then British-mandated Palestine) on 29 August 1937. He completed his compulsory service with the Israel Defense Forces in 1958, and in 1960 he enrolled as an undergraduate at Hebrew University in Jerusalem to begin his archaeological career, graduating in 1963 with a BA in Archaeology and Geography. Continuing at the same institution, he completed his MA in 1965 and PhD in 1970, both higher degrees focusing on Prehistoric Archaeology. His doctoral work, supervised by the eminent Israeli prehistorian Moshe Stekelis, culminated in a monumental study of the Epipaleolithic prehistory of Palestine.

While Ofer was still a graduate student, Stekelis sent him to Bordeaux (France) to train for half a year with François Bordes, and for another half year to London to study at the Institute of Archaeology. That year of total immersion in European archaeology, and especially in Paleolithic prehistory, had a major impact on his career from that point forward. The time he spent in France was particularly formative. He not only became intimately familiar with the classic French Paleolithic record, he also gained an understanding of archaeological method and theory as they were developing and being applied to the French Paleolithic. He also studied Middle and Upper Paleolithic stone tools under the tutelage of Bordes himself, the preeminent lithic specialist of the time. The study of stone tools (e.g., methods of typology and classification; Levallois technology; *chaînes opératoires*; tool function; cultural identity; spatial organization and discard patterns) remained among Ofer's abiding interests throughout his career, and came to the fore in many of his articles and edited volumes. And perhaps of greatest importance, his early European experience provided him with networks of contacts and deep friendships that he built upon in the years that followed. Many of his later projects, in fact, were collaborative efforts that frequently involved his French colleagues (e.g., Gilles Martin, Henri Laville, Bernard Vandermeersch, François Valla, Liliane Meignen, Anne-Marie Tillier, and others). Over the years his network continued to expand until it included archaeologists and other specialists from virtually every corner of the globe, a truly remarkable legacy indeed. Students who participated in his projects came from equally diverse backgrounds.

Stekelis died quite suddenly in 1967 while Ofer was still in France, creating a void in the training of new generations of Israeli prehistorians. Thus, his stay in the UK was cut short, and he was appointed to a Lectureship in Prehistoric Archaeology in Hebrew University's Institute of Archaeology despite not yet having completed his dissertation. Yigael Yadin, at the time head of the Institute, told him that, with the passing of Stekelis, his mission now was to train a new generation of Israeli prehistorians. And that is what he did. There are now over 50 members of the Israel Prehistoric Society who are "descendants" of Ofer's, and many of his former students and advisees went on to become world class prehistorians in their own right (e.g.,

Anna Belfer-Cohen, Isaac Gilead, Avraham (Avi) Gopher, Naama Goren-Inbar, Nigel Goring-Morris, and Erella Hovers). Ofer was promoted to Associate Professor in the same Institute in 1973 and became a Professor there in 1979. In 1988 he moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the United States, where he joined Harvard University's Department of Anthropology as George G. and Janet G.B. MacCurdy Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology and curator of Palaeolithic archaeology at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. While in the US he continued his close, personal mentorship of students, chairing and co-chairing 10 doctoral dissertation committees during his Harvard years (John Shea, Daniel Lieberman, Ian Kuijt, Shoh Yamada, Gilbert Tostevin, David J. Cohen, Daniel Adler, Carolina Mallo, Güner Coşkunsu and Bastein Varoutsikos). In this case too, his students became well known researchers. Ofer retired in 2013, shortly after he moved back to Israel, though he continued to travel widely, attend conferences, and maintain close ties with his many colleagues in Europe, the US, China, and elsewhere until 2018 when health problems began to make travel difficult.

Ofer's record of field work is truly legendary. He worked in virtually every corner of the Old World from Western Europe to China, directing many now classic excavations and actively participating in many others. He was also amazing in his chronological eclecticism, excavating sites dating from the Lower Paleolithic to the Neolithic and just about every period in between. Fairly early in his career he excavated at the famous 1.4 mya Jordan Valley site of 'Ubeidiya, the oldest Paleolithic occupation in Israel and at one time thought to be the oldest inhabited site outside of Africa. He is also justly famous for his excavations at several of Israel's preeminent Middle and Upper Paleolithic sites, among them Kebara, Hayonim, and Qafzeh. But he became equally well known for his excavations, analyses, and syntheses of a number of important Epipaleolithic sites, including occupations dating to the Kebaran and Natufian (e.g., Ein Gev I, Hayonim, Nahal Ein Gev II), as well as several remarkable Prepottery and early Neolithic sites (e.g., Netiv Hagdud, Gilgal, Nahal Hemar). His extensive survey and excavation in Sinai (now Egypt) at Ain Hudeirah, Gebel Maghara, the High Mountains of Sinai, and at Kadesh Barnea, work that spanned some seven seasons between 1971 and 1979, also stands among the most ambitious and important pioneering regional studies of Late Pleistocene and early Holocene occupations in the desert regions of the Southern Levant.

Ofer's work extended well beyond the boundaries of Israel. He participated in the excavations at Karain and Öküzini caves (Turkey), Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic occupations in Dzudzuana Cave (including evidence for very early use of wild flax fibers) and Kotias Klde (Republic of Georgia), at the transitional or early modern human site of Stránská skála (Czech Republic), and at a range of sites and time periods in China, including the classic Lower Paleolithic site of Zhoukoudian (re-evaluating evidence for early control of fire), Yuchanyan Cave (providing evidence for some of the world's earliest pottery), and others.

Ofer organized or co-organized and published conference proceedings on Southern Levantine prehistory, Levallois technology, the Aurignacian, the Natufian, pastoralism, the Neolithic demographic transition, seasonality and sedentism, Quaternary chronology and paleoenvironments, and modern human origins, to name but a few. His overall record of scholarly publication is truly astounding, with over 400 articles and at least 25 books and monographs. Moreover, he was a co-editor of *Geoarchaeology* and *Eurasian Prehistory*, and an editorial board member for a number of other major journals. In addition, he served on the scientific advisory board of various granting agencies and was instrumental in the creation of the Irene Levi Sala CARE Archaeological Foundation, which has been providing small grants for prehistoric research in Israel since the mid-1980s.

Ofer's accolades are also truly remarkable. In 2001 he became a Foreign Associate of the National Academy of Sciences in the USA and was elected to full membership in 2010. In 2003 he became a Foreign Fellow of the Academy of Science of the Republic of Georgia, and a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy in 2005. In 2013 he became the First Laureate of the Lloyd Cotsen Prize for Lifetime Achievement in World Archaeology, an honor bestowed by the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA. In 2013 he received an Honorary Doctorate from Ben-Gurion University in Israel. And most recently, just one month after he underwent major surgery, Ofer traveled once more to the University of Bordeaux to receive an Honorary Doctorate, a very special and moving tribute to him from the university and from his many French colleagues there with whom he had maintained such close ties for so many years (<https://www.f-tv.info/fr/ceremonie-honoris-causa.html>).

At this point I would like to turn to some reminiscences and memories of a more personal nature, just a few highlights of my own connections to this wonderful and amazing man. I first met Ofer during the 1981–1982 academic year when he and his fiancée (and soon to be second wife) Daniella (Danny) E. Bar-Yosef Mayer came to Ann Arbor, Michigan, to spend a year with the archaeologists in the Museum of Anthropology (since renamed the Museum of Anthropological Archaeology). That was an amazing year. The two of them bonded with the graduate students, office staff, and faculty in a way that I had never seen before, nor did I ever witness again. Many lifelong friendships were forged that year, a year spent “Krogering” (an expression coined by Ofer and Danny because they enjoyed shopping at Kroger, a large American supermarket chain), bowling, sitting in on graduate-level classes (especially Robert Whallon's course on theory, hunter-gatherers, and archaeology), and conducting his own mini-seminars with students as soon as the classes let out, and just hanging out with all of us. It was a wonderful year.

The fun for me continued in 1985 after the 50th Anniversary of the SAAs when Ofer, Danny, their young daughter Daphne, and I drove together from Denver to Tucson. Ofer and I debated every facet of archaeology imaginable—we argued about the importance of mobility and spatial

scale in the adaptations of “hunters-gatherers” (as he called them), juxtaposing his perception of geographic scale based on his work in the Levant and mine based on work in the western US. He envisioned Neanderthals wintering on the Levantine coast and summering in the mountains perhaps 40km or 50km inland, while I (mostly for the sake of making a point) tried to defend the position that those same coastal Neanderthals more likely would have summered somewhere in the Zagros! We fed the *chipmunks* in one of the many National Parks along the way, and watched with shared amusement as Daphne, a toddler at the time, imitated my flint knapping attempts. We explored Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon (New Mexico) and climbed to the overlook atop the cliffs behind the ruins, all the while with Daphne asleep in a carrier on Ofer's or Danny's back. In a restaurant somewhere along the way (I think in Zuni, New Mexico, of all places), Ofer started up a wonderful conversation with the owner, whom he spotted instantly to be Lebanese on the basis of what I'll never know. And we discussed why it was, or wasn't, that American archaeologists didn't believe in “culture,” a conversation that he and I loved to indulge in from that point forward. What was so amazing about Ofer in those discussions, and in so many others, was how much he could communicate with just his smile, always warm, sometimes mischievous, the subtle movements of his eyebrows and the twinkle in his eyes. He could forcefully argue a position, but he was always a great listener, and he remained open-minded, never mean-spirited, and ever curious.

Some of his favorite expressions stuck, and I find myself using them quite frequently. And I have noticed that some of my colleagues do likewise—“life, life” (usually accompanied by a sigh), “slowly, slowly,” “don't exaggerate” (a common response when someone complimented him), and “I'm just an ignorant Near Easterner” (said with a smile and twinkle in his eye, and used especially in contexts where he knew damned well someone like a university administrator was trying to pull the wool over his eyes).

Ofer had a very clear vision of the handicaps that came with being an archaeologist from a small country like Israel and using a language that few others could speak or read. He talked at length about two of those handicaps—linguistic and geographic isolation from the mainstream of theoretical thinking in archaeology. To circumvent the isolation, he was adamant that one had to publish in English in order to be read by the profession at large. His reasoning? English in his view was the *lingua franca* of science in the 20th and 21st century. His emphasis on English is clearly visible in his publications—more than 400 articles and book chapters and 25 books and monographs, the majority of them written in English.

In order to circumvent the geographic isolation, he felt he had to keep himself up to date by regularly and systematically attending meetings and conferences all over the globe, and to him that included, not just Central and Western Europe, but the US and Asia as well. And Ofer did just that. For example, I have no doubt that he attended more Society for American Archaeology meetings than I

did, even while he was living in Israel, and I suspect he knew more American archaeologists than I did, including those whose research was focused on the archaeology of the Americas. So, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that he knew intimately what theoretical bandwagons were coming in or going out of fashion in the States. He knew full well what was happening in the "New Archaeology" and the reactions against it with the emergence of "Post-Processualism." He knew about the function vs. style debate, the revisionist movement in hunter-gatherer studies, the contentious hunting-scavenging debate in zooarchaeology, the "ins" and "outs" of the modern human origins debate, and countless other theoretical trends that waxed and waned in North American archaeology and elsewhere. He also knew who was excavating what, when, and where, what interesting things they were finding, and what new methods and interpretive frameworks were coming in or going out of fashion. In short, he had his finger on the pulse of hunter-gatherer and Neolithic or "Formative" archaeology at a level that few others ever come close to. One would have to look long and hard to find an archaeologist in the United States who hasn't heard of Ofer Bar-Yosef and I suspect the same is true in much of the Old World.

Ofer had some very clear ideas about how archaeology should be conducted. First and foremost, he believed that one should pick the best-preserved sites, the ones that are ideal for answering the questions that lie at the heart of a particular domain of research (e.g., modern human origins or the origins of agriculture). He thought of the sites he chose as something akin to "libraries" (that's the term he actually used). In his view, such sites held the best possible record for resolving the questions of concern. Others were not worth wasting precious time and resources on. Second, he believed strongly in assembling interdisciplinary teams, with specialists who could tackle the important questions and issues. He viewed himself as "the librarian" (at other times, as "an earthworks contractor" ...; again, his terms, not mine), and he was explicit in feeling that the specialists were the ones who did "the real work"; hence, they were the ones who should be showcased in the publications. Third, the members of his teams, by choice, came from many different countries and diverse backgrounds, and, importantly, also included one or more scholars from the host country, not just the "foreigners." Fourth, he was content to let team members publish on the materials they knew best. Often, he would come aboard as a co-author, but he would also be content to step aside and simply say "go for it." He appreciated being asked if he wanted to be a co-author and he often said yes, but he often declined. Fifth, he was an effective organizer and things got done, often despite major obstacles. And finally, he was generous with his funds, helping students and others get to excavations, get access to collections, and attend conferences related to the research. He helped me out on many occasions, beginning with his initial invitation in the mid-1980s to come to Israel to work on Kebara Cave's Middle Paleolithic fauna. That invitation included the most amazing place to sleep—the balcony at Ofer and Danny's apartment on French Hill in

Jerusalem with a breathtaking view of the Dead Sea far below.

Ofer's contribution to our understanding of the Middle Paleolithic and the appearance of modern humans in Europe and Asia has been immense. His work at Kebara, Hayonim, and Qafzeh stand as monuments. He was unquestionably a master when it came to the archaeology of the Middle and Upper Paleolithic. Yet it is interesting to note that on my visit to Israel in the mid-1980s to begin working on the Kebara fauna, Ofer and Danny took me on a trip into the Jordan Valley to the famous site of Jericho. And standing there atop the tell looking down at Kathleen Kenyon's huge excavation, Ofer told me that his real love was the Neolithic, and that it was his lifelong dream to one day work at Jericho. Sadly, that never came to pass because of the volatile political situation in the area.

Ofer had artistic talents that few archaeologists know about. For example, he was a published poet. A copy of his poems, published in Hebrew in 1957, is held by the library system at Harvard. On occasion he also played the recorder, and he was quite an artist. He started as a young student in Stekelis' lab by drawing lithics, and he particularly loved drawing in pencil and pen. Occasionally on vacations he took a drawing block with him and did some sketches. In 2018, after his health began to decline, he took up watercolor painting. I was fortunate enough to see some of them during my visit to Kfar Saba in 2019, and they were marvelous.

One of my favorite stories was the ill-fated visit to Koobi Fora, the early hominin site in northern Kenya, in the summer of 1972 by an intrepid group of Israeli archaeologists, Ofer among them. This visit took place during the early days of research there, a time when getting into the area was no easy task. There were no formal roads, and no electricity, phones (including cell phones), gas stations, nor any other facilities for that matter. The group included Ofer, Yoel Rak, Naama Goren-Inbar, an Israeli kibbutz member (whose name, unfortunately, now eludes all involved), and Ronald Clarke, a South African physical anthropologist. To get to Koobi Fora, which is located near the Ethiopian border on the east side of Lake Turkana (Lake Rudolf in those days), the visitors had to cross the Chalbi Desert. And as fate would have it, their Land Rover broke down in the middle of nowhere. Knowing how isolated they were and having no way to communicate with the Koobi Fora base-camp, they decided to walk out. The sound of gunshots in the distance, possibly a sign of bandits in the area, only added to the sense of urgency. Because they were worried about running out of water, they headed directly toward the lake rather than toward Koobi Fora and, because of the intense desert heat during the day, they decided to walk at night, ignoring the ever-present danger of lions and hyenas. Not knowing whether Lake Turkana was fresh or saline, they decided to carry a heavy jerrycan of water using an improvised backpack. To save the back of the individual who had the onerous task of carrying the water, they padded the can with rolls of toilet paper—which just happened to be pink! Richard Leakey, flying over the area in a small

plane searching for the lost party, spotted the pink toilet paper, followed their “trail,” and dropped them a message with instructions of where they should meet so that he could land the plane. During my visit to Israel in 2019, Danny and Erella Hovers arranged two back-to-back evenings, when some of the original “Koobi Fora walkers” got together with Ofer and retold “the pink toilet paper caper.”

Everyone laughed a lot – both times. It was such a treat to watch Ofer grinning, and now and then injecting an important detail, as the tale was recounted and details of who did what when were debated. Those two evenings were truly lovely occasions.

And Ofer made the best humus on the planet!