



BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

OFER BAR-YOSEF

August 29, 1937–March 14, 2020

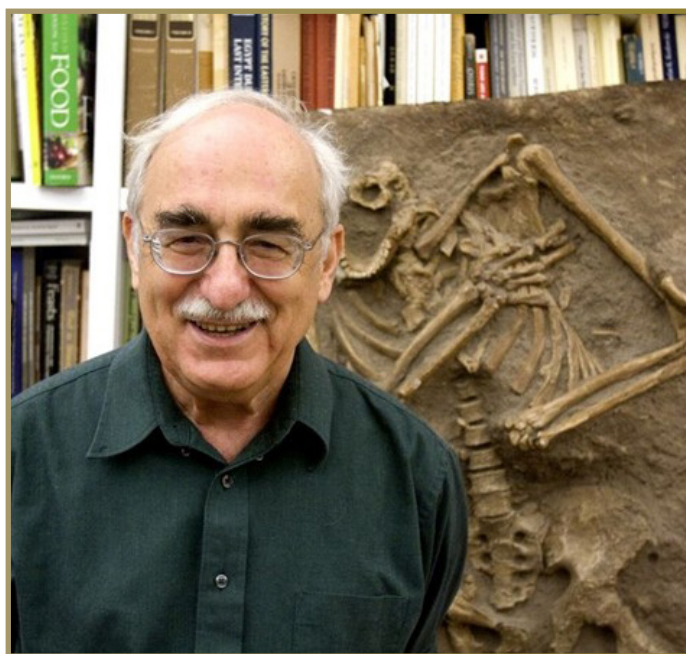
Elected to the NAS, 2001

A Biographical Memoir by Thomas E. Levy

OFER BAR-YOSEF WAS a leader in world prehistory whose quality and quantity of research was remarkable for its chronological depth and theoretical breadth. Ofer, as he was known to colleagues, students, and friends, was an active field archaeologist for more than six decades. Most of Ofer's fieldwork took place in his native Israel, where he started and ended his fieldwork. Over the years, Ofer carried out field projects in Turkey, the Republic of Georgia, the Czech Republic, and the People's Republic of China. These projects were driven by Ofer's commitment to solve many of the central issues of global prehistory, including: the early human exodus from Africa; the origins of anatomically modern humans; the chronology of the Levantine Middle Paleolithic; the beginning of sedentism and pastoralism; the domestication of plants and animals; and the rise of social complexity. He passed away peacefully at his home in Israel on March 14, 2020.

ISRAELI ROOTS

Ofer's birth and scholarly development was in Israel, the land bridge between Africa and Southwest Asia. Like France, this remarkable place on the planet is one of the hearth areas for the study of world prehistory. This happenstance of geography deeply influenced Ofer's scholarly trajectory to become one of the twentieth and early twenty-first century's premier world prehistorians. Ofer's father's family (originally Adhan) came from the town of Dimant at the foot of the Atlas Mountains, not far from Marrakesh in Morocco, and immigrated to Jerusalem in the middle of the nineteenth



Ofer Bar-Yosef in his Harvard University office with cast of a Middle Paleolithic Neanderthal burial discovered in 1983 at the Kebara Cave, Israel. Dating to ca. 55ka, Ofer nicknamed the skeleton "Moshe" after Moshe Stekelis, Ofer's professor. *Photo by Kris Snibbe, Harvard News Office.*

century with a group led by Rabbi David Ben Shimon (later known as the 'Tzuf Devash' and head of Jerusalem's North African Jewish community). They settled in the Mamilla area, not far from the Old City's Jaffa Gate. Like many Jewish families, after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Ofer's grandfather Hebraized their North African name to Bar-Yosef. Ofer's mother's family came to Palestine in 1892 as part of a group of immigrants from Riga, Latvia. Growing up in the rural Beit HaKerem neighborhood, young Bar-Yosef's imagination and interest in exploration was sparked by the abundant archaeological remains in the area. When Ofer was thirteen years old, he carried out his first archaeological survey—the investigation of the ridge in front of the family home that later became the Givat Ram campus of the Hebrew University, where he identified



several ancient tombs. Ofer wrote a letter to the Department of Antiquities (now the Israel Antiquities Authority) dutifully reporting his finds. To his surprise, Ruth Amiran, the district archaeologist of Jerusalem who later became the leading authority on ceramics of the Holy Land, came to Ofer's home to visit the tombs with him.¹

Ofer's interest in prehistory deepened during his compulsory military service in the Israel Defense Forces (1955–58). It was around the time of Operation Kadesh, during the Sinai War of October 1956, when Ofer's military outpost was established at Be'erotim near the Egyptian border next to a prehistoric site littered with flint tools. Two soldiers in the unit taught Ofer the basics of flint tool typology, igniting his passion for lithics (chipped stone tools) and exploration of the Negev and Sinai deserts.

PEDAGOGY AND THE FRENCH CONNECTION

During the last year of Ofer's military service, he joined a Nahal group, a form of Israeli community service that combines volunteerism and military service that was linked to the United Kibbutz movement. At this time, Israel was a socialist state and, following military service, Ofer's group joined a kibbutz (communal socialist settlement), where his job was to mentor new immigrant children. In 1957, while still in the army, Ofer had his first volunteer experience on a scientific excavation at the prehistoric Kebara Cave directed by Moshe Stekelis of the Hebrew University. Stekelis found the site in 1929 while working to help dry out the Kebara swamp along the Carmel Coast. Stekelis was a Russian-trained archaeologist who spent three years in exile in Siberia for his Zionist activities before immigrating to Palestine in 1928. Both Stekelis and the Kebara Cave would play key roles in Ofer's professional life. Other famous sites that Ofer excavated with Stekelis include Nahal Oren, Ein Gev 1, and 'Ubeidiya. By 1959, Ofer requested that the kibbutz collective allow him to study archaeology; instead, they insisted that he become a Bible and history teacher. This led Ofer and his first wife, Hadas, to leave the egalitarian utopia for the city. They raised two daughters, Ayelet and Netta.

Ofer earned all of his degrees at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem: B.A. in archaeology and geography in 1963; M.A. in prehistoric archaeology in 1965; and Ph.D. in prehistoric archaeology in 1970. His graduate work was supervised by Stekelis, who completed his Ph.D. with the famous French prehistorian Henri (Abbé) Breuil in the 1930s, becoming the first professor of prehistory at the Hebrew University. Guided by Stekelis and to facilitate his doctoral studies in Israel, Ofer received a scholarship in 1966 from the French government to study at the University of Bordeaux's Institut du Quaternaire with François Bordes, the leading expert on Old World lithic technologies and the Middle Paleolithic period.

Not only did Ofer gain expertise in lithic analyses in the Bordes lab, but he was also introduced to leading figures on archaeology's world stage, most notably Sally (née Rosen) and Lewis Binford, co-founders of the "New Archaeology." The Binfords were actively engaged in an international debate with Bordes concerning the interpretation of Middle Paleolithic tool assemblages and their relationship to Neanderthal and early modern humans centered on function vs cultural affiliations. According to Ofer, "François Bordes was the French professor of prehistory who spoke English and his work successfully combined geological research of sites, paleontological and palynological studies, together with the analyses of lithic assemblages, so his laboratory was a magnet for many Americans." Some of these scholars included Richard Klein, Leslie Freeman, and F. Clark Howell, who at that time was the leading scholar of human evolution and prehistoric cultures defined by lithic assemblages. In France, Ofer learned the importance of interdisciplinary research, international networking, and mastery of lithic analyses. The Bordeaux experience helped Ofer develop deep research collaborations and friendships throughout his career with French scholars, including Gilles Martin, Henri Laville, Bernard Vandermeersch, Liliane Meignen, Anne-Marie Tillier, and François Valla. This early French connection also instilled in Ofer a desire to make his research lab in Jerusalem, and later at the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, a magnet for international collaboration.

Stekelis's untimely death in March 1967 happened while Ofer was continuing his training in France and England and led to his rapid rise as an academic leader. The Hebrew University's Department of Archaeology, where Ofer had taken all his degrees, sent him a note that he must continue his training abroad to help him complete his Ph.D. Ofer shortened his stay in England and returned to Israel. The Israel Academy of Sciences (IAS), which funded Stekelis's excavations at the Lower Paleolithic site of 'Ubeidiya, asked graduate students Ofer and Eitan Tchernov, who would become Israel's leading paleontologist and zoologist, to take over the excavations that summer. The one condition from the IAS was that Louis and Mary Leakey, world famous early human prehistorians, supervise Ofer's and Eitan's work. On returning to the Hebrew University, department head Yigal Yadin (a chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, noted Biblical archaeologist, and later a statesman) told Ofer: "Finish your doctoral thesis and raise a new generation of prehistorians for us." In 1970, Ofer completed his doctoral thesis "The Epi-paleolithic Cultures of Palestine," in which he applied the French flint tool typological methods developed by François Bordes to his Southern Levant assemblages. This established Ofer early on as a remarkable synthesizer, sorting out the complex archaeological record spanning 20,000 to

6,000 years ago, when the first farming and herding societies evolved from hunter-foragers. Ofer quickly began an intense program of fieldwork from the Galilee to the Sinai Peninsula, training Israel's new generation of prehistorians. This effort would produce the "New Israeli Prehistory," with students that included Anna Belfer-Cohen, Isaac Gilead, Avi Gopher, Naama Goren-Inbar, Nigel Goring-Morris, Erella Hovers, and Leore Grosman, who Ofer mentored through their joint field work in the later part of his life.^{2,3} At the Hebrew University, Ofer became an associate professor in 1973 and a professor in 1979.

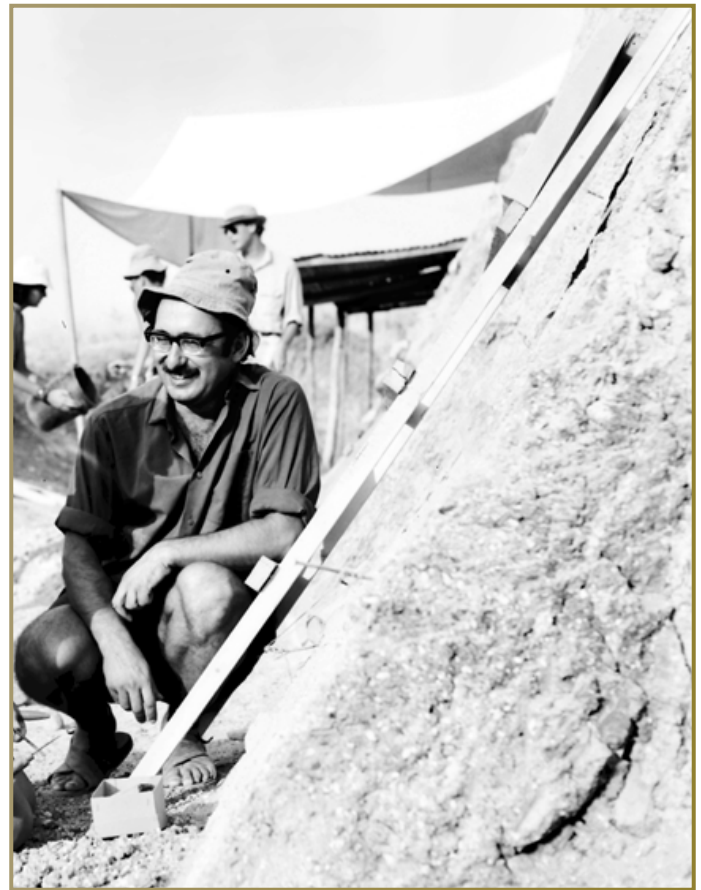
GOLDEN MEDINA: AMERICA

In 1988, Ofer joined Harvard University's Department of Anthropology as the George G. and Janet G. B. MacCurdy Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology and curator of Paleolithic archaeology at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, succeeding noted prehistorian Glynn Isaac. Ofer's wife, Daniella Bar-Yosef Mayer, joined him in Cambridge, where they raised their two daughters, Daphne and Avivit. At Harvard, Ofer continued his style of close mentorship of students, chairing and co-chairing ten doctoral committees. As in Israel, these students became well-known researchers. Eventually, Ofer became a naturalized United States citizen, complementing his Israeli citizenship.

During the Harvard years, up until retirement in 2013, Ofer continued an unprecedented amount of fieldwork in Israel and in many countries where it was possible to solve key problems in world prehistory. From 1989 to 1996, Ofer worked in southwestern Turkey at the Karain and Öküzini Caves directed by Işın Yalçinkaya of the University of Ankara and Marcel Otte of the University of Liège; from 2002 to 2004, Ofer worked at Mezra'a Tleilat, a Neolithic mound located in the Euphrates Valley in Turkey, with Mehmet Özdoğan, University of Istanbul; and from 2011 to 2014, he participated in excavations at Boncuklu Höyük, an early Neolithic site in central Anatolia, led by Douglas Baird of Liverpool University. In 1997 and 1998, Ofer worked with Jirí Svoboda of the Czech Academy of Sciences at the early modern human site at Stránská skála in Moravia, a series of Upper Paleolithic open-air sites on the loess plains outskirts of the Brno Basin in the Czech Republic. Ofer's position at Harvard enabled him to expand his geographic horizons and organize large-scale international projects in Israel, Georgia, and China that are described in more detail below.

On several occasions in Jerusalem, Ofer said, "there are archaeologists who read a lot, and those who write a lot." I followed the latter part of this observation without fully appreciating at the time that in fact, Ofer was a voracious reader. Ofer's command of the scientific literature, a remarkable ability to remember the detailed stratigraphy and lithic

typologies of prehistoric sites around the world, and an insatiable quest to carry out fieldwork to test hypotheses contributed to Ofer's unique ability to synthesize huge quantities of data from different periods and geographic regions and craft them into new theoretical perspectives. In this way, Ofer was like V. Gordon Childe, the great Australian prehistorian based at the University of Edinburgh and then the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, who synthesized Old World prehistory in the early twentieth century. Unlike Childe, however, Ofer was able to use an array of radiometric dating tools to confirm his models. The best way to appreciate Ofer's contribution to world prehistory is through his major field projects, which provided the data for more than twenty-four monographs and books and more than four hundred scientific papers in *Nature*, *Science*, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, and every major journal in the field.



Ofer Bar-Yosef at 'Ubeidiya (Jordan River Valley) in 1973 discussing the site's unique geological setting dating to ca. 1.5 million years ago. Photo by Douglas Campana.

OLDEST SITE OUTSIDE AFRICA? 'UBEIDIYA

One of the oldest sites in Southwest Asia, 'Ubeidiya, just south of the Sea of Galilee, is central for understanding Early Pleistocene biotic interchanges between Africa and

Eurasia, including the early adaptive radiation of early *Homo*.^{4,5,6} From 1960–66, Ofer worked for seven seasons as a student under Stekelis, followed by seven seasons (1967–74) with E. Tchernov, also from the Hebrew University, and later from 1992–94 establishing the site as a cornerstone for earliest world prehistory. The archaeological and paleontological expeditions revealed more than eighty layers of lithic and mostly faunal remains divided into fifteen archaeological horizons identified over large exposures. The ‘Ubeidiya formation represents one of the oldest *Homo erectus* sites outside of Africa.

THE ISRAELI CAVES: QAFZEH, KEBARA, AND HAYONIM

Another core contribution of Ofer was clarifying the origins of modern humans. Based on burial data from Qafzeh Cave, Ofer identified early *Homo sapiens* remains dated to around 90,000 years ago and found in association with Middle Paleolithic tools. At the time, it was assumed that only Neanderthal skeletons were associated with these tool kits. Stekelis and René Neuville began excavations in 1932, and Ofer resumed work intermittently between 1965 to 1979 with Bernard Vandermeersch of the University of Bordeaux.⁷ In 1988, the application of an innovative radiometric dating method to the hominid remains helped confirm observations on the lithic assemblage.⁸ The early anatomically modern humans found in Qafzeh Cave contained marine shells collected from the Mediterranean Sea shore, over 35 kilometers away, that show traces of ochre stains and that had been strung, providing additional evidence of modern human behavior.⁹

At Kebara Cave, Ofer and his colleagues recovered a nearly complete Neanderthal skeleton also associated with Middle Paleolithic tools dated to about 60,000 years ago, thus finally disproving the long-held notion that humans evolved from a Neanderthal ancestor.^{10,11,12} Nine seasons (1982–90)

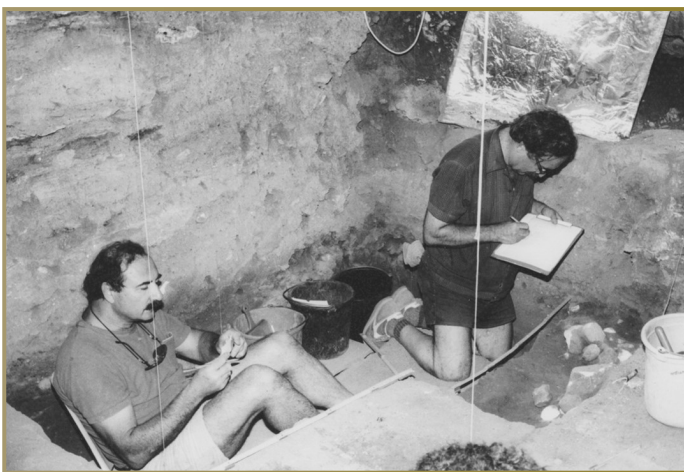


Ofer wet sieving deposits in front of the Hayonim Cave dating from Middle Paleolithic period, ca. 250–130 thousand years ago, from excavations in the 1990s. Photo by Kenneth Garrett.

of excavation were carried out with Vandermeersch, revealing intensive use of the cave by late Middle Paleolithic foragers spanning 65,000 to 48,000 years ago with rich evidence of fireplaces, ash deposits, stone tool assemblages, and carbonized plant remains.

Ofer carried out eleven seasons of excavations at Hayonim Cave in the western Galilee with Eitan Tchernov and Baruch Arensburg of Tel Aviv University from 1965 to 1979, and from 1992 to 2000, with Lilian Meignen of the Centre National Recherches Archéologiques (CNRS), Sophia-Antipolis (France), and Arensburg as co-directors. When compared with the famous Tabun Cave in the Carmel mountains, Ofer and Meignen demonstrated that the full sequence of late Lower Paleolithic is much longer than previously understood and that Neanderthals appear locally much later than anatomically modern humans.^{13,14}

While Ofer's interest focused on the cave at Hayonim, he kindly made François Valla of the Centre de Recherche Français à Jérusalem his de facto delegate to excavate the important terrace surrounding the cave in 1980–81 and 1985–89. The Hayonim Cave and terrace excavations shed new light on social, economic, and environmental aspects of



Ofer drawing a section in the Kebara Cave while Eitan Tchernov examines a bone, 1986. Photo by Jean-Pierre Parnaudaud.

the Natufian culture (15,000 to 11,500 BCE), strengthening observations that this unusual late Epipaleolithic culture supported a sedentary population—well before the advent of agriculture. This led Ofer and Valla to organize several international conferences that led to major syntheses.^{15,16} According to Valla, Ofer was an “open-minded person, ready to modify his opinion according to his observations. I remember him in a conference in Lyon making everybody laugh when, discussing a controversial issue, he declared: ‘Tout est négociable!’ In his last years, Ofer even abandoned his long-term confidence in the theory of climatic determinism of culture.”

LAND BRIDGE BETWEEN AFRICA AND ASIA:

SINAI EXPLORATIONS

Following the 1967 Six-Day War, the conquest of the Sinai Peninsula opened the region to Israeli archaeological research. For Israeli archaeologists like Ofer, the idea of conducting fieldwork in the Sinai, the location of much of the Israelite Exodus, was compelling and exciting. Ofer led expeditions in the eastern Sinai (1971–73), northern Sinai (1971–79), and southern Sinai (1976–79). The early work in northern Sinai was in Gebel Maghara and later around Qadesh Barnea.¹⁷ Field Museum prehistorian Jim Phillips first met Ofer in 1968 and recalls him as “his dearest friend and colleague.” Like Ofer, Phillips’s dissertation focused on the Epipaleolithic, but his work was based on sites from NAS member Fred Wendorf’s massive prehistory project in northeast Africa leading to their unique American-Israeli synergy of prehistoric research in northern Sinai.¹⁸ Surveys and excavations followed in the rugged mountains of southern Sinai.¹⁹ Work in the eastern Sinai focused on the largest of the enigmatic Chalcolithic burial fields known as Nawamis, carried out with Avner Goren.²⁰ As Ofer’s students point out, funding for the Sinai research was always scarce, and “Ofer was a master of juggling and stretching the meager available



Ofer in his tent at the expedition camp in Gebel Maghara, northern Sinai Peninsula, 1973. Photo by Nigel Goring-Morris.

funds, using ‘leftovers’ from one project to fund another, running them on shoestring budgets.”²¹ Ofer’s research in Sinai provided the first in-depth science-based prehistoric investigations spanning this key land bridge between Africa and Southwest Asia from the Upper Paleolithic to Chalcolithic periods.

NEOLITHIC REVOLUTION: NETIV HAGDUD, JORDAN VALLEY, AND NAHAL HEMAR CAVE, JUDEAN DESERT

Ofer’s expertise extended from earliest prehistory to its end with the Neolithic revolution, when agriculture, pastoralism, and sedentism crystallized into the Near Eastern agrarian villages and Mediterranean diet that characterize the region today.²² Ofer’s late prehistoric research deepened when he invited Avi Gopher, who had just completed his undergraduate studies, to partner with him in excavating the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN), a site of Netiv Hagdud in the Jordan Valley.²³ Netiv Hagdud joined a series of PPNA settlements in the Jordan Valley that include Gesher, Salibiya IX, Gilgal, and Jericho, providing innovative insights into one of the earliest farming communities in Southwest Asia. New



Ofer cleans living floor with fire hearth at an open-air Paleolithic site in the Sinai Desert, ca. 1972. Photo by Paul Goldberg.



Pre-Pottery Neolithic B mask (7th millennium BCE) made of limestone with paint and asphalt, from the Nahal Hemar Cave excavated by Ofer and David Alon, Judean Desert, Israel. Size: Height: 26.5 cm; Width: 15.5 cm. Photo by Nahum Slapak, Israel Museum.

botanical data demonstrated subsistence had combined cultivation of wild barley, foraging of wild fruits and nuts, trapping waterfowl, and hunting gazelles and other mammals. Based on plant remains and bones of migratory birds, site occupancy could be determined to the months of September through early June.²⁴ Based on the discovery of female figurines, Ofer's team identified changes from the Late Natufian to the Early Neolithic, when new rules of division of labor and gender roles emerged. During this period, Ofer made an ingenious reassessment of the stratigraphy of Tel Jericho, made famous by Kathleen Kenyon's PPNA and showing that the site was not surrounded by a defense wall (and thus, not the world's oldest city as Kenyon argued), but rather had a large terrace wall that protected the site from flash floods from the nearby Wadi el-Mafjar.²⁵

In late spring 1983, I was sitting with David Alon in his Kibbutz Mishmar HaNegev apartment when our Bedouin friend, Id al-Turi, arrived with a brown bag and a pistol in his belt. Inside the bag were beautiful PPN flint tools and large fragments of a stone mask he found that day in a Judean desert cave when he had interrupted grave robbers at work. When David assembled the pieces on the kitchen table, we gasped; it was remarkably like a stone mask possessed by renowned Israeli general and antiquities "collector" Moshe Dayan. David immediately picked up the phone and called Ofer, who soon made a trip to visit David at his Negev

settlement. Ofer immediately grasped the significance of the artifacts and within a week, he and David were excavating the Judean Desert cave they called Nahal Hemar (Hebrew for *asphalt*). To date, this is the largest of four PPN stone masks found in Israel and the only one in a secure archaeological context. Unique finds included PPNB figurines, rare perishable remains (cordage, basketry, fabrics, textiles), skulls modelled with a latticework of asphalt strips, and the mask. Thanks to Ofer taking scientific control of this unique opportunity, one of the richest early Neolithic Levantine ritual sites has been recorded and published.²⁶

GEORGIA ON OFER'S MIND

Ofer's quest to understand the dispersal of modern humans led him to establish a research project in the country of Georgia that lay at the intersection of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. Working in the Dzudzuana Cave in the western Caucasus foothills with Tengiz Meshveliani, of the National Museum of Georgia, and longtime colleague Anna Belfer-Cohen of the Hebrew University, they used high-precision radiocarbon dating to show that the Upper Paleolithic in western Georgia is relatively late when compared with the earliest Upper Paleolithic in the Near East and southern Europe.^{27,28} Ofer's guiding hand with the lithic analyses of the cave deposits showed that the Caucasus mountains served as a geographic barrier between two Middle Palaeolithic Neanderthal traditions—those north of the Caucasus and those of the Taurus tradition to the south. In the following early Upper Paleolithic, the assemblages on both sides of the Caucasus mountains are similar, demonstrating the dispersal of modern humans and their newfound resilience throughout the whole region. From 1993 until his passing, Ofer was a beloved colleague at the Georgian National Museum, whose staff was grateful that he brought so many leading international scientific institutions and laboratories to collaborate in the investigation of the prehistory of Georgia.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA

The Harvard position also opened opportunities for Ofer to work in China beginning in the mid-1990s, when the country's leaders became interested in establishing China's primacy in scientific archaeology. Ofer worked with Chinese and international colleagues at many sites, including the famous Lower Paleolithic site of Zhoukoudian, near Beijing, where the "Peking Man" *Homo erectus* fossils were discovered in 1921. There, with Steve Weiner of Israel's Weizmann Institute of Science, Boston University's Paul Goldberg, Xu Qinqi and Liu Jinyi of the Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology at Academia Sinica in Beijing, they re-examined the controversy concerning the earliest control of fire.²⁹ At Zhoukoudian, Goldberg remembers "the video



Ofer in 2009 at the Xianrendong Cave in Jiangxi, China. Second from left is radiocarbon dating expert Professor Xiaohong Wu from the School of Archaeology and Museology, Peking University, Beijing. The others are local and provincial politicians visiting the site, including the Deputy Governor of Jiangxi. *Photo by Paul Goldberg.*

camera that Ofer used daily for recording daily life, as well as research at this overwhelming site. He did the same at Hayonim, making an archive of human and scientific memories.” Working at the southern China site of Xianrendong Cave, Ofer’s team established evidence for some of the earliest pottery technology (18,000 years ago) preceding the emergence of agriculture by some 9,000 years.³⁰ This discovery effectively put pottery in the hands of prehistoric hunter-gatherers, predating the Neolithic revolution and challenging the long-held assumption that pottery technology had arisen to accompany the emergence of agriculture for surplus storage.

CONCLUSION

Ofer Bar-Yosef made many significant contributions to the study of Old World prehistory, including lithic analyses, out of Africa hypotheses for early human dispersals, Neanderthal-early modern human interaction, climate and cultural evolution, the origins of agriculture, and much more.^{31–34} What was Ofer’s secret for contributing so much over his more than sixty years of prehistoric research? For University of Toronto prehistorian Michael Chazan, who spent two seasons as a graduate student working at the Kebara Cave,³⁵

“Ofer had a charisma that drew people to him along with the uncanny ability to identify talent and to draw the full potential from people. My personal impression is that Ofer grew out of the culture of the early years of the State of Israel, which thrived on an egalitarian ethos where everyone, regardless of their position in the hierarchy, was expected to think for themselves to achieve results with

minimal resources. Ofer’s fieldwork was thus a collective effort, but a collectivity where he was quietly devising the strategy that pulled it all together. Ofer was a shrewd field strategist capable of thinking through objectives and how they could be most quickly attained.”

Ofer’s students whom he trained at the Hebrew University and Harvard are his legacy for decades to come. For world prehistory, Ofer’s numerous meticulous publications of the raw archaeological data he carefully retrieved and published from his many expeditions will continue to be studied for generations to come.

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Ofer and Paul Goldberg, Boston University, at work in 2009 on a stratigraphic section in the Xianrendong Cave, China. *Photo by David Cohen.*

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