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In Memoriam

From North to South, From Ancient to Recent: Avraham Ronen (1935–2018) and his Research of Israeli Prehistory

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“The control of fire and the awareness of death are the two poles of human cognition: while fire made humans the mightiest creatures on earth, the awareness of death revealed their inherent weakness. Simultaneously almighty and weak, there lies the human paradox...”

(Ronen 2012: 559)

Professor Avraham Ronen (Figs. 1, 2), an archaeologist and a humanist in his profession and soul, passed away in December 2018 at the age of 83. Avraham had a major role in shaping the prehistoric research of Israel by excavating key sites from various periods and by supervising and mentoring research students who now occupy key positions in the field.

Avraham was born in Jerusalem in 1935. He studied archaeology and geography at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, receiving his BA degree in 1959. He then completed his Ph.D. studies at the University of Bordeaux under the supervision of François Bordes in 1963, acquiring a wide perspective on the prehistory of the old world. Upon returning to Israel, Avraham taught in Tel Aviv University until he moved to the University of Haifa in 1975, where he played a central role in founding the Department of Archaeology and the Zinman Institute of Archaeology. He also served as head of the Zinman Institute for many years and as dean of the Faculty of Humanities.

Step by step, Avraham established his significant contribution to the research of human evolution by conducting a series of excavations in key Paleolithic and Neolithic sites all over Israel (Fig. 3), greatly contributing to our understanding of the material culture, paleoenvironments and developments of human behavior. He took a great interest in the Lower Paleolithic and the early waves of dispersals out of Africa (Ronen 2006). Avraham reported finding flint artifacts under a

2.4-million-years-old basalt layer in the Yir'on region, Upper Galilee (Ronen et al. 1980; Ronen 1992). This suggestion, predating by far the common dating of the earliest human occurrence out of Africa, is yet to be verified. He systematically investigated early Pleistocene



Figure 1: Avraham Ronen, 1964, Mount Carmel survey (from A. Ronen family archive).

archaeology at the sites of Evron Quarry (Ronen 1991; Porat and Ronen 2002; Ron et al. 2003) in the northern Coastal Plain (Ronen 1991; Porat and Ronen 2002; Ron et al. 2003) and Bizat Ruhama in the southern Coastal Plain (Ronen et al. 1998; Burdukiewicz and Ronen 2000; Laukhin et al. 2001). Within these sites he unearthed abundant flint assemblages and faunal remains, shedding light on early human presence and adaptations in the Levant. Bizat Ruhama was later reinvestigated by Yossi Zaidner, then Avraham's Ph.D. student, who described this outstanding small tool industry (Zaidner et al. 2003; Zaidner 2014). A similar view was provided by Chazan (2013) who studied the tool assemblage from Evron and emphasized its unique nature.

Avraham's research included a series of Middle Pleistocene Lower Paleolithic sites. He conducted a survey in the Kissufim region of the southern Coastal Plain, establishing the remarkable late Acheulian presence in the area (Ronen et al. 1972). He excavated the open-air site of Eyal 23 which contributes to the known repertoire of late Acheulian sites of west-central Israel

(Ronen and Winter 1997). His work at Tirat HaCarmel also added to the few occurrences on Mount Carmel in which Lower Paleolithic evidence was detected (Ronen 1974). His most long-term project was the excavations he directed in Tabun Cave, Mount Carmel, in 1975–2003. Together with several persistent collaborators, such as the Haifa geoarchaeologist Alexander Tsatskin, Avraham focused on the Lower Paleolithic sequence of the cave in layers correlating with Garrod's Layers E-G. Among the numerous contributions of his work at the site (e.g. Ronen and Tsatskin 1995; Tsatskin et al. 1995; Verri et al. 2004; Zviely and Ronen 2004; Gisis and Ronen 2006; Ronen et al. 2011) was the verification of the antiquity of the Acheulo-Yabrudian complex in Tabun, and its dating to ca. 400 ka in two different localities (Mercier et al. 2000; Rink et al. 2004). Another major contribution lies in excavating the early part of the cave sequence—the portion that is placed below the area excavated by Jelinek and constitutes the lowest six meters of the sediments (Ronen et al. 2000; Shifroni and Ronen 2000). The ample materials from his project highlights the contested nature



Fig. 2: Avraham Ronen, 2011, Tabun Cave (photo by R. Shimelmitz).

of the transition between the Acheulian and the Acheulo-Yabrudian. Tabun is still the only site where this issue can be further researched. The data from his excavation are being analyzed today as part of a larger project, aiming to integrate his results and those of Jelinek into a single database (e.g. Shimelmitz et al. 2014a, b, 2016).

Avraham's interest in the Middle Paleolithic period led to his excavation of the open-air site of Tirat HaCarmel (Mount Carmel), resulting in a monograph (Ronen 1974). This, together with his surveys and soundings of Paleolithic and Neolithic sites all along the Mount Carmel ridge, some with Yaakov Olami, are testimony to the numerous prehistoric sites of the Carmel that no longer exist due to intensive construction activities starting in the 1950s (Ronen 1977; Ronen et al. 1999; Olami et al. 2003). Avraham's goal was not just to document the Paleolithic sites throughout the landscape, but also to understand their paleoenvironmental setting (e.g. Farrand and Ronen 1974; Engelmann et al. 2001; Frechen et al. 2001; Ronen et al. 2005). Together with a number of colleagues from Israel and abroad, he documented several Middle Paleolithic find-spots along the Israeli Coastal Plain, attributing them to the high sea stand of MIS 5, a chronological episode of great significance in the dispersal of *Homo sapiens* out of Africa (e.g. Galili et al. 2007; Ronen et al. 2007, 2008; Porat et al. 2018). This research integrated the archaeology of the period with the paleo-landscape, as exemplified in the case of the Coastal Plain *hamra* sites (e.g. Tsatskin and Ronen 1999; Tsatskin et al. 2008; Ronen 2018).

A Middle Paleolithic occupation was also found by Avraham in the cave of Sefunim, western Mount Carmel, the scene of one of his major projects. His work on the site during the 1960s unveiled mainly rich Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic remains. This project, culminating in a multidisciplinary book detailing the excavation results and the landscape (Ronen 1984), contributed to understanding the Aurignacian of the Levant. This site was recently revisited by Ron Shimelmitz and Andrew Kandel (Shimelmitz et al. 2018). Additionally, Avraham also contributed to our understanding of the variability of the Levantine Upper Paleolithic in his pioneering study of the Upper Paleolithic lithics from Qafzeh Cave (Lower Galilee), suggesting that they do not conform to the "Aurignacian" but rather to a different, as-yet

undefined facies (Ronen and Vandermeersch 1972). Later, this observation on the variability of the Early Upper Paleolithic of the Levant contributed to defining the Ahmarian and Levantine Aurignacian traditions (e.g. Gilead 1991).

Avraham's investigations also contributed to a better understanding of Epipaleolithic societies. His research (with Daniel Kaufman) in the Nahal Hadera area revealed a series of Kebaran and Geometric Kebaran occupations (Ronen and Kaufman 1976; Fuchs et al. 1977), the

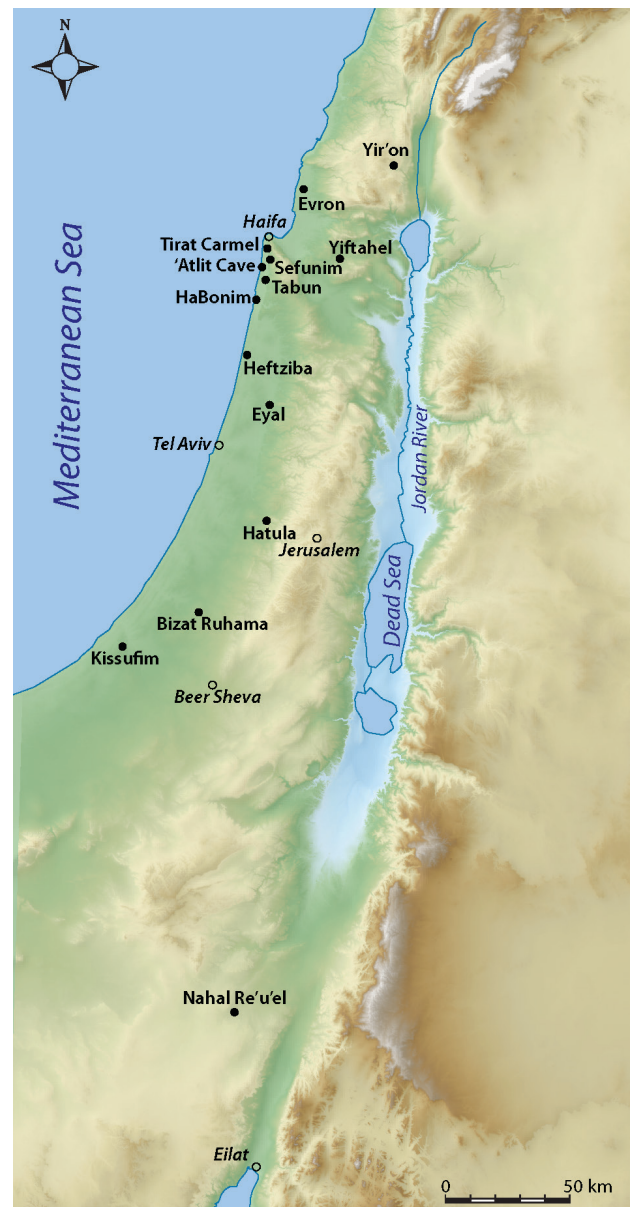


Figure 3: A map of Israel showing the main locations of Ronen's fieldwork.

best known of which is Hefzibah, a site with extensive deposits, abundant lithics, large faunal assemblages and some ground stone artifacts (Ronen et al. 1975). He was also involved in studying additional Epipaleolithic occurrences such as ‘Ein Qedem in Mount Carmel and Neve David, with Kaufman (Kaufman and Ronen 1987; Bocquentin et al. 2011; Rosenberg et al. 2011). The sites of Hefzibah and Neve David, later reinvestigated by Zackheim and Bar-Oz (1999) and Yeshurun et al. (2015) respectively, are still among the very rare middle Epipaleolithic open-air sites in the Mediterranean zone of the Levant. Their well-preserved faunal remains are essential for studying the subsistence and behavior in final Pleistocene landscapes (e.g. Bar-Oz 2004). Avraham contributed to the research of the late Epipaleolithic by excavating the Natufian-PPNA transitional site of Hatula with Monique Lechevallier (Lechevallier and Ronen 1994).

Lastly for this far-from-complete review, Avraham worked in several Neolithic sites (e.g. Rosenberg et al. 2009), including the major PPNB village of Yiftah’el in the lower Galilee, with Modi Lamdan and Moshe Davies (Lamdan and Davies 1983; Gubenko and Ronen 2014), the upper layers of Sefunim Cave (Ronen 1984) and the Nahal Reu’el camp in the southern Negev. Yiftah’el was later further investigated, reaffirming its role as one of the most important PPN sites in Israel (e.g. Milevski et al. 2008; Garfinkel et al. 2012).

Avraham also wrote numerous synthetic works discussing general aspects of Paleolithic archaeology (e.g. Ronen 1975, 1979) and promoted international conferences (e.g. Ronen 1982). Until his last days, Avraham was active in research and publications (e.g. Ronen 2018). We, as many others of the Israeli prehistoric community, will always remember his vivid presence in the annual conferences, department colloquia and other events, visits to ongoing excavations and especially reminisce his persistent passion to prehistoric archaeology, from the minute details of lithic analyses to the “big questions” of human evolution. He continuously attempted to frame the Paleolithic remains within a wider anthropological framework, as best exemplified by his investigation of early fire use and burials (e.g. Ronen 1998, 2004, 2012). We will miss his refreshing approach and endless enthusiasm for prehistory.

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