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In Memoriam

A Man of his Land: Amnon Assaf (1928–2018)

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Amnon was a family man, a Zionist, a dedicated Kibbutz member and an enthusiastic collector of archaeological artifacts, in this order. He was in the habit of claiming that he was destined to be a collector given the meaning of his surname, Assaf (“he collected”/“he gathered” in Hebrew). And, indeed, he collected. For five decades he roamed the Hula Valley and the Golan Heights in search of prehistoric sites and ancient remains.

Amnon was not an easy man. All knowing and opinionated, he steered the museum he built, as he did all aspects of his life, on a straight and clear path that he defined according to his notion of “how it should be done”. When he faced disagreement or when others failed to meet his standards, he was peremptory and did not guard his tongue. His stubbornness and determination were as legendary as his original thinking and constant thirst for knowledge. Perhaps these aspects of his personality explain the mystery of how a farmer from the (almost) northernmost kibbutz in Israel, with no formal education beyond high school, founded and created a spectacular museum and one of the most important prehistoric collections in the world.

Amnon was born in Tel Aviv in 1928. At a very young age he joined the Palmach, the pre-state of Israel defense forces. Soon after, he was severely wounded in an accidental hand-grenade explosion. Amnon was on the verge of death and lost an eye. His son, Paz, said that Amnon died for the first time at the age of 17 and since then nothing truly scared him. After recovering, he rejoined his unit and participated in many heroic battles during the 1948 Israel War of Independence. His unit was



assigned to Kibbutz Kfar Gil’adi in the northern Hula Valley. The young kibbutz members were sent to clear stones for new agricultural fields at “Hamara” (reddish soil in Arabic) near the Israel-Lebanon international border. Out in the fields, Amnon noticed numerous large flint objects. He started collecting them and contacted Professor Moshe Stekelis of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who identified them as Acheulian handaxes. Thus began Amnon’s interest in prehistory that evolved into his passion and a source of endless interest and joy.

Collecting artifacts became a way of life for Amnon. Joined by his children and friends, he spent almost every weekend at one or more of the prehistoric sites he discovered in the Hula Valley, collecting artifacts from obsidian microliths to large basalt grinding stones. This collection, comprising today some 115,000 artifacts, formed the foundation for The Upper Galilee Museum of Prehistory at Kibbutz Ma’ayan Baruch. Such collecting activity is no longer acceptable in modern

archaeological research, yet times were different then. Amnon recorded locations of sites and finds. He also conducted archaeological excavations at burial caves in and around Kibbutz Ma'ayan Baruch and participated in an archaeological expedition to Iran, led by his friend, the late Jean Perrot. The archaeological collections of The Upper Galilee Museum of Prehistory are all registered and recorded in the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) national database and available to researchers.

SITES DISCOVERED

Amnon Assaf discovered many highly significant archaeological sites. His exceptional knowledge of the area around his kibbutz and his endless curiosity led

him to inspect every new field and trench in the valley. His reputation as the “archaeology person” of the region led people to report all regional news and discoveries to him. Figure 1 presents the primary Neolithic and Epipaleolithic sites of the Hula Valley. Many of these sites were discovered and first surveyed by Amnon. Among these, the most significant sites are:

‘Eynan (‘Ain Mallaha). In 1954, during construction work at ‘Ein Mallaha, the largest spring on the western edge of the Hula Valley, the Scottish engineer in charge of the project identified stone tools. He contacted Amnon, who was the first person to evaluate the importance of the site. Amnon contacted the late Jean Perrot, founder of the French Research Center in Jerusalem. Amnon participated in the excavation of ‘Eynan for many years.

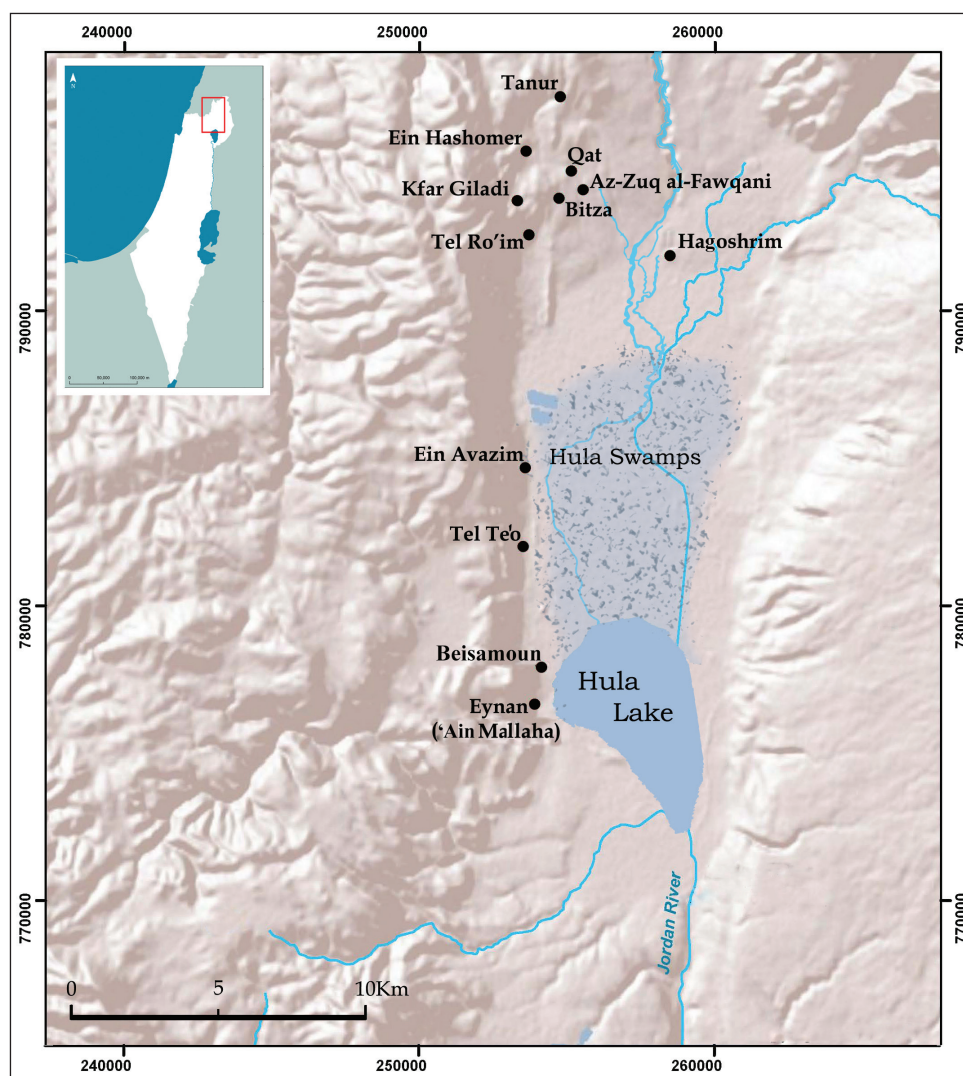


Figure 1. Hula Valley Epipaleolithic and Neolithic sites.

The site has since been recognized as one of the richest and most impressive Natufian settlements and The Upper Galilee Museum of Prehistory holds significant finds from these excavations.

Beisamoun. In 1972, Kibbutz Manara dried its fish ponds, located a kilometer northeast of 'Eynan. At the bottom of the dry ponds, Amnon found many tools and the remains of stone walls. The late Pre-Pottery Neolithic and Early Pottery Neolithic sites of Beisamoun are now known to spread over 400 dunams to the north and east of Eynan.

Hagoshrim. The large late Pre-Pottery Neolithic, Pottery Neolithic and Chalcolithic settlements of Hagoshrim lie today under the junction of the entrance to Kibbutz Hagoshrim, on Route 99 and the adjacent agricultural fields. Excavation by the IAA under the direction of Nimrod Getzov exposed a rich assemblage including the largest collection of obsidian objects in Israel. Amnon discovered the site and for decades collected thousands of surface artifacts.

Additional sites include Qat, Ein Hashomer, Biza, Tanur and many others (Fig. 1). Most of the sites are from later prehistoric periods and the finds are stored at the Upper Galilee Museum of Prehistory.

THE MUSEUM

As a young farmer, Amnon stored the thousands of artifacts he collected under his bed in his modest kibbutz room. The kibbutz later allocated a small shed where he established the museum. During the 1980s, Amnon, himself, designed and raised the money for the current, impressive museum building. Today, The Upper Galilee Museum of Prehistory at Kibbutz Ma'ayan Baruch has two major collections. The main collection is archaeological, dedicated to the prehistory of the Hula Valley. The second is a worldwide collection of ethnographic objects collected by Amnon and others, which demonstrates traditional ways of life and ancient technology.

Central to Amnon's design of the museum is a well-defined concept of how prehistory should be presented and exhibited to the public. His approach was minimalistic in the number of artifacts presented and in the amount of text provided to the visitor. The museum visit was built upon Amnon's unforgettable guided tours. Generations

of Israeli archaeology students underwent the "Amnon experience" as part of their education. Amnon's tour of the museum remained unchanged over the years and repeat visitors found it as interesting and exciting as those hearing it for the first time.

Given that only the most exceptional items were displayed publically, the vast majority of artifacts remain unseen in the small storage room adjacent to the museum. The finds are sorted according to site of origin and to gross typological categories (*e.g.* cores, blades, arrowheads). From 2008–2012, IAA Prehistory Curator Natalia Gubenko recorded the entire archaeological collection of The Upper Galilee Museum of Prehistory. All 114,990 artifacts are now registered as part of the IAA database, of which 1,148 items are on display at the museum. It took the IAA almost 40 years to convince Amnon to collaborate in this recording operation. Amnon was very possessive about his finds and stones and did not want other authorities interfering with his museum. But individuals, particularly students, interested in studying the artifacts were always encouraged to study the museum collections and received his full support and assistance. The result is a number of prehistoric archaeology PhD dissertations based, at least in part, on Amnon's collections (Barkai, 2000; Gilead, 1969; Lechevallier, 1978; Saragusti, 2005; Sharon, 2007; Stekelis and Gilead, 1966) as well as other academic publications (Gopher *et al.* 2001; Lister *et al.* 2013; Ronen *et al.* 1980; Rosenberg *et al.* 2006, 2008, 2010, 2015). Amnon only requested, in return, a copy of the publication, thesis, or dissertation.

FINAL WORDS

For those of us who knew Amnon Assaf during the later period of his life, he was an admirable, helpful, and enthusiastic role model for the study of prehistory and appreciation for the value of individual artifacts. Amnon visited the Prehistory Laboratory at Tel-Hai College when he was over 80 years-old and saw a magnificent handaxe collected from the banks of the Jordan River at Gesher Benot Ya'aqov (GBY). Even with tens of thousands of artifacts already stored in his museum, from that moment, Amnon knew no rest until the tool was on exhibit in the GBY vitrine at the museum. The artifacts Amnon collected were his and he was the sole person

responsible for them – he felt and acted like a “godfather” to the archaeology of the region. It seemed that Amnon’s source of energy was endless, which made his decision at the age of 85 to step down and turn over the museum to the next generation so remarkable.

Amnon died on January 28, 2018 and was buried at the peaceful cemetery of Kibbutz Ma’ayan Baruch, a short 400 meters from the museum he envisioned, built, and curated in the wonderful landscape of the Hula Valley, the valley he loved so much.

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The Upper Galilee Museum of Prehistory is managed by Amnon’s family and a steering committee of volunteers and it is directed by Y. Abukart-Klein. We would like to thank N. Getzov and N. Gubenko for their comments, A. Klein for editing the paper and U. Berger and A. Shapiro from the Israel Antiquities Authority for their help in preparing Figure 1.

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