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Amnon Ben-Tor (1935–2023) In Memoriam



AMNON BEN-TOR, Professor Emeritus at the Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and long-time excavator of Hazor, passed away on August 22, 2023, at the age of 87.

Amnon was born in 1935 and raised in Jerusalem. He was part of the generation that built the new state of Israel from his childhood when he was involved in the robbery of arms from the British Mandate headquarters, through agricultural training of the new “Olim,” and his military service. He belonged to the first generation of Israeli archaeologists trained in the young State of Israel. He began his studies in 1955 and obtained his bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees from The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His Ph.D. dissertation focused on the Early Bronze Age II–III. Following the dissertation, he published a monograph on seal impressions from that period.

Between 1963 and 1965, he participated in Yadin’s excavations at Masada, which he described as the most beautiful years of his life. He used to say that

he would have chosen to study Masada and the Roman period in another life. Eventually, he wrote a popular book about the site and his experience, *Back to Masada*, published by the Israel Exploration Society.

In 1969, after completing his studies, Amnon was appointed lecturer at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a position he held until his retirement in 2003. Following his retirement, Amnon continued to teach voluntarily so that generations of students continued to benefit from his broad knowledge, clear explanations, healthy common sense, and biting sense of humor. Amnon would open each lesson with one of his famous quizzes, asking four questions on the previous lesson's material: What is it? Where does it come from? To what period does it belong? What is the importance of the artifact? This approach kept the students on their toes, engaged, and proud of being able to answer him correctly (or chagrined if not).

The crowning jewel of Amnon's illustrious career was the excavation of Hazor. He first became acquainted with the site during his undergraduate study excavation in 1955. At that time, he met two figures who greatly influenced him academically – Yigael Yadin and Ruth Amiran. In 1968, when he was an area supervisor at Hazor, he met his wife Daphna, then a student, who would become a prominent Egyptologist and publish many of the Egyptian finds from Hazor. The late Prof. Yadin endowed him Hazor in his will and, in 1990, Amnon renewed the excavations. Since then, and until 2023, Amnon excavated at Hazor every summer, except for the Covid outbreak in 2020 and 2021. The project produced exceptional finds from the Bronze and Iron Ages, many of which changed our understanding of the culture and history of these periods. The Hazor excavations were a prime 'laboratory' where Amnon trained a generation of field archaeologists, many of whom became prominent scholars in universities, museums, and the Israel Antiquities Authority.

The Selz Foundation Hazor Excavations, at their apex, were a large international project with teams of volunteers from Spain, the United States, Germany, Sweden, Canada, South Africa, France, and many other countries, all of whom arrived in Hazor, fell in love with the site and Amnon's charismatic leadership, and became part of the Hazor family. Amnon believed that the finds of the Hazor expedition did not belong only to the scholarly world but also to the general public. He, therefore, invested considerable efforts in conserving the excavated structures and their presentation to the public. As a prodigal lecturer and writer, Amnon disseminated the insights gained from the excavations in numerous public lectures, publications in journals, and a popular book about Hazor, *Hazor Canaanite Metropolis, Israelite City* whose updated edition was published just two weeks before his death.

Amnon's greatness as a scholar and teacher is evident in his openness to new ideas and ability to cooperate with scholars who disagreed with his views. He was happy to engage in scholarly debate and welcomed studies concerning his

excavations, particularly Hazor, that voiced different views. Perhaps one of the most well-known is the debate over the identity of the monumental Late Bronze Age Building 7050 at Hazor, whether a temple or palace. Amnon was a firm advocate of his own assessment while, at the same time, acknowledging and engaging the alternative view in a passionate yet objective and scholarly manner. Amnon was known for his more maximalist opinions on the interface between archaeology and the bible, advocating that the archaeological finds can shed light on the historical depictions of ancient Israel in the biblical narrative.

From a scientific perspective, Amnon was an innovator; he was the first to conduct a regional study in the Western Jezreel Valley that included a survey and an excavation of a major site, Tel Yoqne'am, and the two smaller sites, Tell Qiri and Tel Qashish. In this sense, he stressed the importance of understanding a region as a whole, an approach adopted in many other projects since then. He was among the few Israeli archaeologists to excavate abroad at Athienou in Cyprus (together with Trude Dothan). Amnon had an impressive breadth of research, encompassing the time from the Early Bronze Age to the end of the Iron Age, placing the findings from the Levant in the broader context of the entire ancient Near East, from Egypt to Anatolia and Mesopotamia. Along with his research of the broad picture, he was actively involved in the detailed study of many aspects of material culture, including architecture, pottery, and iconography.

From a scholarly and ethical perspective, Amnon felt obliged to publish his excavations. He completed the publication of Yadin's excavations at Hazor (Hazor III-IV and V) and two monumental volumes of his excavations (Hazor VI and VII), in addition to publishing reports on all his excavations at other sites. Amnon was fully invested in the work on the eighth volume of Hazor until his last weeks.

Amnon was never concerned only with himself or with the Hazor excavations but always felt that he had a debt to the public, the scholarly community, and, especially, the Institute of Archaeology of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he served as its head from 1992–1996. He sat on the boards of the Israel Exploration Society, the Archaeological Council, the Bible Lands Museum, and other important public institutions. He was a laureate of the prestigious Israel Prize in 2019 for his contributions to archaeological research.

Amnon was a true Renaissance man. He loved to read literature and go to the cinema; he was interested in art and enjoyed Nordic television series. The vibrant Sunday staff lunches at the Hebrew University Faculty Club, where we discussed current events, art, politics, and the concern about the future of the country that Amnon loved so much, remain a cherished memory in our minds and hearts.

Amnon Ben-Tor was a formidable personality, brilliant scholar, dedicated teacher, devoted family man, and involved citizen. His legacy lives on through his students, numerous publications, and the future excavations of Hazor.