

OBITUARY

Yoram Tsafirir

(1938 – 2015)

Prof. Yoram Tsafirir, emeritus of the Institute of Archaeology at the Hebrew University, was undoubtedly the leading scholar in Israel in the field of Classical Archaeology. Already in 1954, as a young boy, he participated in the survey of Masada conducted by Shmarya Gutmann and in the 1956 survey of the Judean Desert caves headed by Yohanan Aharoni. As a young student he took part in several extensive archaeological projects and campaigns: research of the Judean Desert caves, Masada, Arad, Ramat Rahel, Megiddo and Ramlah – all landmarks of Israeli archaeology. Born in the village of Kfar Azar, he graduated from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (B.A., 1964; M.A., 1968; Ph.D, 1976). Prof. Tsafirir set himself a unique course of study and research that combines archaeology with history.

Due to his achievements, Tsafirir was awarded the Frensd Medal by The Society of Antiquaries of London for his outstanding contribution to research of the Early Church, and in 2001 was elected a member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. Tsafirir, renowned as a book lover and also the author of a few volumes of *belles lettres* (under the pseudonym Yoram Avi-Tamar), served as director of the Jewish National and University Library (today the National Library of Israel), in 2001–2005. In 1976 he was awarded the Yitzhak Sadeh Prize for literature for his book *Injury* (in Hebrew), in which he recorded his being heavily wounded in the Six Day War and how he contended with his injury in its aftermath. He was a valued lecturer at many conferences and a research fellow at the Institute for Byzantine Studies at Harvard University's Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC, and also served on many national and international committees.

Teaching

For 36 years (1969–2005) Prof. Tsafirir taught in the Institute of Archaeology at the Hebrew University, serving as head of the institute from 1989 to 1992. He created the syllabi for several introductory courses and was the author of a fundamental textbook on the archaeology of the Land of Israel from the destruction of the Second Temple until the Muslim conquest. Yoram Tsafirir was an admired and inspiring teacher, much loved by his many students. The doctoral candidates whose theses he supervised include some of the leading archaeologists in various universities and in the Israel Antiquities Authority. Even after his retirement, he continued to supervise students at the M.A. and Ph.D levels. Many sites about which he was teaching were actually visited by him, despite physical difficulties and pains (he walked with crutches since being wounded in 1967, during the Six Day War). These encompassed the entire Roman world, from Morocco and the Straits of Gibraltar in the west, to the Eastern desert of Jordan and eastern Turkey; from Aswan and the Thebais in the South to the Germanic and Britanic *Limes* in the north, including Italy, Greece, Sicily, the Balkans and the states along the Adriatic coast.

Prof. Tsafirir won international acclaim in several fields, focusing mainly on the Late Roman and Byzantine periods. It is no exaggeration to say that he was the most respected scholar throughout the world in the archaeology of the Land of Israel during these periods. One may enumerate four major areas of research in which Prof. Tsafirir made outstanding achievements, areas which have made a significant contribution to archaeological research in Israel and its promotion there and abroad:

1) Jerusalem (especially in the Roman and Byzantine Periods)

Prof. Tsafirir wrote his Ph.D thesis on this subject, which gave rise to many publications. His great contribution was the outstanding synthesis that combines findings from the many archaeological explorations — conducted from the nineteenth century to the early 1970s — with the many literary sources that relate to Roman and Byzantine Jerusalem. Such rational use of diverse sources of data inspired other studies, serving as a new point of departure for understanding the urban development of Jerusalem during these periods, and also for evaluation of findings from excavations conducted later by many archaeologists. The three chapters written by Tsafirir (the last together with Dr. Leah Di Segni) in *The History of Jerusalem: the Roman and Byzantine Period*, which he co-edited with the late Prof. Shmuel Safrai, are basic studies for this field. Other important studies dealt with the walls erected by Nehemiah and the Seleucid Akra.

2) Churches in the Land of Israel

Prof. Tsafirir uncovered several churches in his archaeological excavations in Rehovot-in-the-Negev, Horvat Berakhot, and Horvat Beit Loya. His publications on these churches include detailed reports of the excavations, but also studies dealing with archaeological and historical issues related to a specific church, such as the Nea Church in Jerusalem. He was commissioned to write an article for the *Cambridge World History of Religious Architecture*, published by the prestigious Cambridge University Press, indicative of Prof. Tsafirir's status as an internationally acclaimed expert in this field.

3) Historical Geography of the Land of Israel

Prof. Tsafirir was for many long years at the forefront of the creation of an exhaustive *Onomasticon of Iudaea Palaestina and Arabia in the Greek and Latin Sources* that comprises geographical names and terms in the Land of Israel mentioned in all the Greek and Latin written sources relevant to the period from the conquest of the country by Alexander of Macedon until the Muslim conquest. This is not merely a listing. Each entry includes the full text of the sources in the original language and in translation; the information is then complemented by a summation and topographical identification. Prof. Tsafirir, who had been conducting this project since 1974 in cooperation with Leah Di Segni and Judith Green, made untiring efforts to assure funding for the lengthy project, conducted under the auspices of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. The first volume appeared a week before his unexpected death. It includes introductory essays, selected texts mentioning many sites, an annotated listing of the sources, and more. Volumes 2-3 contain all sites beginning with the letter A (much more numerous than for any other letter), including "Arabia, Arabs, and Nabataeans", which by itself accounts for about 350 pages, are in the very final stages of indexing. It goes without saying that they — and those volumes that will follow, which are in an advanced stage of preparation — will be the ultimate reference work for the historical geography of the Land of Israel. This status has already been achieved by the *Tabula Imperii Romani: Iudaea • Palaestina: Eretz Israel in the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Periods — Maps and Gazetteer*, by the same authors, published in 1994 by the Union Académique Internationale and the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, which are actually the first fruits of research for the *Onomasticon*.

4) Urbanization in the Land of Israel

Prof. Tsafirir had conducted large-scale excavations at Beit She'an / Scythopolis during the campaigns of 1980-1981 and 1986-2003, in conjunction with Prof. Gideon Foerster, Benjamin Arubas, and many additional team members, as is usual with archaeological excavations. This excavation, together with an adjacent one under the auspices of the Israel Antiquities Authority, was the most extensive archaeological project conducted in Israel in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Scythopolis was the capital of the province Palaestina Secunda during the Byzantine period. Prof. Tsafirir's team excavated the civic center and the amphitheater — two areas of cardinal importance for understanding the urban development of this important city in the Roman, Byzantine, and early Muslim periods. Architectonic and other finds present a clear and dynamic picture of urban development, including destruction and restoration, over a period of several centuries. The finds are also relevant for understanding the cities of the Decapolis east of the Jordan River, and not only for Beit She'an. Even before publication of the final reports, Prof. Tsafirir published many articles and delivered numerous lectures on the subject in diverse forums. By this he acquired international recognition as an expert on urbanization in the Land of Israel, and also beyond its borders, in these periods. To date, two volumes of the final reports have been published: on the lamps and on glass vessels. Two additional volumes, devoted to the Street of the Monuments, were approved for publication by the editorial board of the series of Qedem Reports as Vol. III A –III B. They are in the final stages of editorial work. The first volume includes a long introductory chapter on Scythopolis and its excavations, by Tsafirir.

Other noteworthy excavations by Prof. Tsafirir were conducted at Rehovot-in-the Negev (churches, dwellings, a caravansary, and cemeteries), at Horvat Berakhot (a pilgrim church, together with the late Prof. Yizhar Hirschfeld), and at Horvat Beit Loya (a church, olive oil press, and burial complex, together with Prof. Joseph Patrich). In addition, he carried out further surveys and excavations in the Judean Desert and the Negev: the Hasmonean-Herodian fortress at Alexandrion / Sartaba (with Dr. Yitzhak Magen), the caves at 'Ayn 'Arrub, survey of the road from Avdat to Sha'ar Ramon (with Prof. Ze'ev Meshel), and more.

His scientific publications, which reflect his widespread research in the fields of archaeology, historical geography, and history, include ten books. *Eretz Israel from the Destruction of the Second Temple to the Muslim Conquest: Archeology and Art* (in Hebrew), despite having been published in 1985, is still a basic textbook on the subject to this day. An updated English version, comprising about 600 pages, is in the editing stage. Prof. Tsafirir also edited 10 collections of articles, some of them with co-editors. In addition, he published about 175 articles, some of them both in Hebrew and in English, in scholarly journals, *Festschriften*, or memorial volumes, and has written chapters in textbooks, entries in encyclopedias, book reviews, and more.

Involvement in Academics in Israel

Prof. Tsafirir served for many years on the editorial board of two leading scholarly journals devoted to the archaeology and history of the Land of Israel: *Qadmoniot*, published by the Israel Exploration Society (26 years, 1968–1994), and *Cathedra*, published by Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi (8 years, 1978–1986). For 21 years (1989–2010) he was also a member of the Archaeological Council and its Licensing Committee. From 1976 until 1986 he was a member of the directorate of the Survey of Israel. These were years in which the Israel Defense Forces withdrew from Sinai to the Negev and elsewhere in Israel, and also years of much construction in the country, a state of affairs that mandated intensive surveying activities. Through his involvement in all these frameworks, in addition to the Hebrew University, Prof. Tsafirir greatly influenced archaeological activity in Israel. For the past four years, he headed the committee to examine the condition of

archaeological research in Israel established by the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. The report was submitted early in 2015, and attracted publicity in the media.¹

Joseph Patrich and Rina Talgam

¹ The obituary was translated into English from Hebrew by Mr. Yohai Goell, a dear friend of Prof. Yoram Tsafir, to whom we are grateful.