

OBITUARY

David Asheri

1 November 1925 – 3 February 2000

David Asheri was known to readers of the *SCI* as one of the most distinguished ancient Greek historians of our time. His death was felt as a grievous loss by friends, colleagues, pupils and historians all over the world.

Born in Florence to a well-to-do old Jewish family, David attended the Jewish primary school and the Michelangelo general gymnasium. Following the publication of the anti-Jewish statutes in 1938 he was barred from the gymnasium and for the next year attended a makeshift school set up by the Jewish community. His father, Enzo Bonaventura, an intellectual with Zionist leanings, was at the same time dismissed from the Chair of Psychology at the University of Florence. A short visit to Palestine sufficed, however, to secure him an appointment at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 1939 the whole family settled in Palestine.

In Jerusalem David attended first the Ma'aleh religious school and then a teachers' seminary. After the war he joined the Haganah and was involved in skirmishes in the Jerusalem corridor. Following the declaration of the State of Israel he joined the Moriah, the tenth battalion of the Palmach, serving as the commander of a small reconnaissance unit. Before the end of the War of Independence he was commissioned, together with a group of friends and ex-soldiers, to lay the foundations of Kibbutz Yir'on in Upper Galilee. In 1952 a rift divided Mapam (the United Workers' Party), and David was dismissed from the kibbutz when the leftist group led by Moshe Sneh, in which he was active, split from the party. At about the same time his father was killed in the ambush of a convoy of doctors and nurses to Mount Scopus.

David's mother became a teacher at the Hebrew University's Department of Roman Studies. David himself became a librarian at the National and University Library, but soon enrolled as an undergraduate in History and Greek philosophy at the Hebrew University. He had originally intended to study mathematics, but decided that at 27 he was too old. He excelled nonetheless in the fields he had now chosen and was eventually drawn to specialise in ancient history. He concluded his M.A. studies by submitting a paper on Athenian social life whose source material was the speeches of Demosthenes. His doctoral thesis, written under the supervision of the late Professor Alexander Fuks, was a small masterpiece.¹ Published in book form in 1966 by the Accademia delle Scienze in Torino, *Distribuzioni di terre nell'antica*

¹ 'Juridical and Ideological Aspects of Land Distribution in Ancient Greece', approved in 1962.

Grecia was rapidly recognised by the academic community as a starting point for all subsequent studies of landed property in ancient Greece.

David Asheri was a prolific writer whose research encompassed a wide variety of subjects. While working on his dissertation he became interested in the legal and social problems of the Greek city-state. This led to the publication of a book — *Leggi greche sul problema dei debiti* (Pisa, 1969) — and a series of penetrating articles dealing with landed property, agriculture, loans and inheritance.² The question of how land distribution was managed in the embryonic *polis* led him to the world of the Greek colonies from the eighth to the sixth century B.C. Working on the assumption that the colonists' practices retraced age-old patterns, he published a particularly impressive string of articles on the subject,³ expanding the topic of colonisation to embrace those of city building, urban life and the ideologies, myths and utopian ideals that were inherited from the distant past and manifested afresh in the workings of the city-states.⁴

During the late 1960s a new formative influence came to bear upon his work. Under the guidance of Arnaldo Momigliano, at that time the doyen of ancient history at the University of London, David became interested in historiography. His association with Momigliano also helped him to formulate in clear terms his credo as a historian. He came to believe that it is impossible ever to find out what really happened in ancient times and that the best we can do is analyse the ways in which contemporary and later historians perceived these events. We cannot, in other words, investigate history as minutely as we can historiography. He offered a graphic representation of this principle in an article published in the Hebrew journal *Eshkolot* (Jerusalem, 1976). He asserted that the historian can gain access to what happened only through the imperfect, partial and distorted reflections of the events in the sources: the events should be seen as having occurred in one place and the sources in a second, while the historian is doomed to perceive whatever happened from yet a third vantage point.

Apart from his spate of publications on historians whose works exist only in fragments,⁵ David Asheri had a life-long interest in Herodotus. He wrote a number of

² E.g. 'L'οίκος ἔρημος nel diritto successorio attico', *Arch. Giur.* 99 (1960), 3-20; 'Sulla legge di Epitadeo', *Athenaeum* 39 (1961), 45-68; 'Laws of inheritance, distribution of land and political constitutions in ancient Greece', *Historia* 12 (1963), 1-21.

³ E.g. 'Studio sulla storia della colonizzazione di Amfipoli sino alla conquista macedone', *RFIC* 95 (1967), 5-30; 'Note on the site of Brea', *AJPh* 90 (1969), 268-72; 'Supplementi colonari e condizione giuridica della terra', *RSA* 1 (1971), 77-91; 'Über die Frühgeschichte von Heraklea Pontike', *Forschungen an der Nordküste Kleinasiens* I, Oesterr. Akad.d.Wiss., Phil.-hist.Kl., Denkschriften 106 (Vienna 1971), 9-34.

⁴ E.g. 'Osservazioni sulle origini dell'urbanistica ippodamica', *RSI* 38 (1975), 5-16; 'Le città della Sicilia fra il III e il IV secolo d.C.', *Kokalos* 28-9 (1982-3), 461-76; 'Eracle, Eraclea e i Cylicranes. Mitologia e decolonizzazione nella Grecia del IV sec. a.C.', *AS* 6 (1975), 33-50; 'Tyrannie et mariage forcé. Essai d'histoire sociale grecque', *Annales E.S.C.* (1977), 21-48.

⁵ E.g. 'Ellanico, Jacoby e la "tradizione alcmeonida"', *Acme* 34 (1981), 15-31; 'Il millennio di Troia', *Saggi di letteratura e storiografia antiche* (Como, 1983), 53-98; 'The Art of

articles on him;⁶ two volumes of his commentaries on Herodotus were published during his lifetime⁷ and further volumes still await publication. His other major publications include key articles in volumes IV and V of the second edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History*⁸ and substantial chapters in the eight-volume enterprise published in Italy under the title *I Greci*, of which he was also a chief editor.⁹

In the later stages of his life David Asheri came to be interested in the relationships between the Greeks and the Persians and in the peoples who inhabited the Persian empire. His new interest led to a number of articles on the epigraphical and linguistic problems surrounding these subjects and to a book that opened up new paths of research.¹⁰

His intellectual achievements, coupled with his considerable teaching abilities and organisational talents, earned him an impressive array of appointments. The Hebrew University made him Senior Lecturer in Ancient History in 1965, Associate Professor in 1970 and full Professor in 1978. In 1971 he was elected Head of the Institute of History, Philosophy and Regional Studies. Between 1972 and 1975 he served as Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and between 1986 and 1988 as Head of the School of Graduate Studies. In 1991 he was made a member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. Throughout his life he lectured and taught extensively in Italy and elsewhere, earning in Italy the title of *Libero docente*.

David Asheri's reserved manner hid an extremely kind person who shared his knowledge generously with colleagues and students. As an administrator he was exacting, as a teacher a source of inspiration and encouragement. He devoted all his energies to work and research. At Oxford, where he used to toil in the libraries for incredibly long hours, scholars came to think of him almost as a distinguished old Oxonian. In Israel he will be remembered as one of the country's greatest historians of classical antiquity.¹¹

He leaves a wife, two daughters and three grandchildren.

Gabriel Herman

Synchronization in Greek Historiography: The Case of Timaeus of Tauromenium', *SCI* 9 (1991-2), 52-98.

⁶ E.g. 'Herodotus on Thracian Society and History', *Hérodote et les peuples non grecs* (Entretiens Fondation Hardt 35), Vandoeuvres-Genève 1990, 131-69; 'Divagazioni erodotee sulla Cilicia persiana', *Quaderni storici* 76 (1991), 35-65.

⁷ *Erodoto. Le Storie*, Vols. I and III (Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 1988, 1990).

⁸ 'Carthaginians and Greeks', *CAH* IV², Cambridge 1988, 738-80; 'Sicily, 478-431 B.C.', *CAH* V², Cambridge 1992, 149-70.

⁹ *I Greci*, Torino 1996.

¹⁰ *Fra ellenismo e iranismo. Studi sulla società e cultura di Xanthos nell'età achemenide*, Bologna 1983.

¹¹ The author is extremely grateful to Professor Dwora Gilula for providing important biographical and bibliographical details.