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OBITUARIES

Gideon Foerster

1935-2020



Gideon Foerster was born in Afula in 1935, a year after his parents had immigrated from Germany to Mandatory Palestine. The family moved later to Nathania, where Gideon was an active member of the Israeli youth movement HaNoar HaOved. Already as a young boy, his curiosity drove Gideon to accompany his neighbor, Dr. Fritz Berger, who was an Antiquities Trustee, on many of his excursions to archaeological sites in the close vicinity, and it was already at this young age that Gideon had started to find great interest in this field.

Upon completing his army service, in 1955, Gideon came to study archaeology and Jewish history at the Hebrew University. After concluding his MA studies in archaeology at the same university, he served as the regional archaeologist of the northern district on behalf of the Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums (1963–1984). During this period, he has served in other important roles in major archaeological field projects as well. Among these roles, worthy of mention are his service as the chief assistant of Yigael Yadin at his excavations at Masada (1963–1965), and the excavations Gideon directed himself at Herodium (1968–1969). These field projects in two of the most important building projects of King Herod lay the foundation for Gideon's later significant contributions to the study of Herodian art and architecture. Unquestionably, the most important contribution in this field is his monumental study on the art and architecture of Masada that was published as the fifth volume of the Yigael Yadin

excavation report.¹ In this volume, Gideon analyzes the ground plan of the Herodian buildings at Masada, as well as their various forms of decoration: mosaic floors, wall paintings and stucco, and stone architectural decoration. His analysis has shown on the one hand the close familiarity of Herod's architects with current Italian fashions and perhaps even the import of Italian artisans that came to work at the site, but on the other hand it also pointed to the strong Hellenistic influence that still dominated the architectural and artistic designs at Masada.²

His excavations at Herodium have also manifested Gideon's great ability as a field archaeologist and his natural intuition that allowed him to arrive at encompassing conclusions based on limited scale excavations. Thus for example, despite the fact that his excavations inside the arched corridor leading into the Mountain Fortress Palace at Herodium were very limited, he reached the conclusion that Herod intentionally filled and sealed the corridor when he turned the mountain into a memorial before his entombment at the site. Based on a small check pit inside the triclinium at the same site, Gideon has reached the conclusion (in contrast to Corbo who excavated there before him) that Herod's triclinium was converted into a synagogue by the rebels during the First Revolt, at the same time that the synagogue at Masada was built. Both his assertions were proven right recently (45 years later) during the excavations of the Herodium Expedition (in memory of Ehud Netzer) led by Roi Porat, Yakov Kalman and Rachel Chachy.

After spending two years at the University of London to conduct research at its libraries, Gideon submitted his PhD dissertation in 1972 on the Galilean synagogues in the context of Hellenistic and Roman art and architecture, written under the supervision of the late Prof. Michael Avi-Yonah. Jewish art and architecture remained since then one of the major foci of his research. In his dissertation, as well as in the numerous articles that followed it, Gideon discussed the influence of Greco-Roman architecture and architectural decoration on the Jewish synagogues in Palestine and the diaspora from the second century BCE to the seventh century CE.³ He has also shown the linkage

¹ *Masada Vol. 5: The Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963–1965, Final Report: Art and Architecture*, Jerusalem 1995.

² See also: "Hellenistic and Roman Trends in the Herodian Architecture of Masada," in K.F.G. Fittschen and G. Foerster (eds.), *Judaea and the Greco-Roman World in the Time of Herod in the Light of Archaeological Evidence, Acts of a Symposium Organized by the Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Archaeological Institute, Georg-August-University of Göttingen at Jerusalem, Nov. 3rd–4th 1988*, Göttingen 1996, pp. 55–72.

³ See for example: "Art and Architecture in Palestine," in S. Safrai and M. Stern (eds.), *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions*, Vol. 2 [Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum Ad Novum Testamentum 2], Assen 1976, pp. 971–1006; "Synagogue Studies: Metrology and Excavations," *ZDPV* 105 (1989): 129–135; "Decorated Marble Chancel Screens in Sixth Century Synagogues in Palestine and Their Relation to Christian Art and Architecture," *Actes du Xie Congrès International d'Archéologie Chrétienne, Lyon, Genève et Aoste (21–28 Septembre 1986)*, Rome 1989, pp. 1809–1820; "The Ancient Synagogues of the Galilee" in I.L. Levine (ed.), *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*, New York and Jerusalem 1992, pp. 289–319.

of the inscriptions found in these ancient synagogues to Jewish prayers. Gideon's studies dealt with the origins and typology of the synagogue's structure, as well as with the interrelations between Jewish synagogues and Christian churches during the Byzantine period. Gideon has demonstrated that the architectural design, mosaic floors and marble furniture of synagogues and churches at this period drew from a similar world of imagery and motifs. Gideon participated in the excavations of several synagogues in Israel (Masada, Herodium, Hammat Gader, etc.), as well as at Saranda in southern Albania. At this coastal city he exposed, together with the late Prof. Ehud Netzer and a local team, a synagogue with a beautiful mosaic floor dated from the fourth to the sixth centuries CE.⁴

In 1973 Gideon was appointed a lecturer for Classical Archaeology at the Hebrew University, becoming a senior lecturer in 1982 after his post-doctoral studies at Oxford, an associate professor in 1991 and a full professor in 1998. He served as the head of the Institute of Archaeology at the Hebrew University between 1998 and 2002 and retired in 2003. During his academic career Gideon was a visiting professor at various universities and institutes, such as Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island and the German Institute of Archaeology in Rome. He also served as the representative of the Israeli academy at the international committee of *The Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (abbreviated LIMC), whose aim is to document the manifestations of Classical mythology in art of the Greco-Roman world.

Gideon's role as a teacher and staff member did not put a stop to his work as a field archaeologist. In 1973–1974 he led the excavations at Tiberias that exposed the southern City Gate dated to the first century CE and allowed him to draw the boundary between Tiberias and Hammat Tiberias to its south. The gate was nicely preserved, flanked by two round towers. Other important remains exposed in this excavation date to the Byzantine period until the Fatimid rule.⁵ After an accidental discovery of bronze pieces of a cuirassed statue of the Roman Emperor Hadrian by Tel Shalem, near Kibbutz Tirat Zvi, in the Beth Shean Valley, Gideon conducted three seasons of excavations at the site between 1976 and 1978, exposing remains of the Roman military camp used apparently first by a detachment of the Legio VI Ferrata and later by the ala VII Phrygum. The excavations revealed an impressive Latin inscription mentioning Hadrian that originated in a monumental gate that was erected in honor of the emperor, which he later published together with Werner Eck,⁶ allowing researchers to explore the question of the impact of the Bar Kokhba Revolt on the northern parts of Palestine. Gideon has studied and published the bronze statue of Hadrian⁷ focusing on the unique Greek style battle scene that decorates the cuirass breastplate, concluding that it manifests an allegory to the triumph of Hadrian over the Jews after extinguishing the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Gideon

⁴ (together with E. Netzer and K. Lako) "Synagogue Complex Revealed at Saranda, Albania," *Minerva* 15\1 (2004): 4–5; (together with E. Nallbani, M.-P. Raynaud, E. Netzer and K. Lako), "La synagogue antique d'Anchiasmos à Saranda, en Albanie," *L'archéologie du judaïsme en France et en Europe*, Paris 2011, pp. 63–74.

⁵ See: D.A. Stacey, *Excavations at Tiberias, 1973-1974: The Early Islamic Periods*, Jerusalem 2004 [IAA Reports 21].

⁶ (together with W. Eck), "Ein Triumphbogen für Hadrian im Tal von Beth Shean bei Tel Shalem," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 12 (1999): 294–314.

⁷ "A Cuirassed Bronze Statue of Hadrian," *Atiqot* XVII (1985): 139–159.

referred to the nude warriors on the breastplate as Phrygian, based on their characteristic caps. The recently discovered inscriptions at the site,⁸ attesting to the occupancy of the camp by the 7th Phrygian cavalry unit, suggest that the depiction of Phrygian warriors on the breastplate had been deliberate. This was the first in many other studies to follow that focused on Roman sculpture in the Southern Levant. Other publications of Gideon in this field were devoted to marble statues found at nearby Beth Shean,⁹ as well as to marble imported sarcophagi (found mainly at Caesarea Maritima and Beth Shearim) and their influence on the local sarcophagi industry and burial traditions.¹⁰

His greatest archaeological endeavor, however, is the excavations Gideon led together with his brother-in-law, the late Prof. Yoram Tsafrir, at Beth Shean. Since 1980 their team exposed the remains of the Roman city of Nyssa Scythopolis, one of the Decapolis Cities, that continued to flourish during the Byzantine period and was destroyed by an earthquake under Umayyad rule in January 749 CE (the date of which was confirmed due to the results of the excavations at Beth Shean¹¹). The excavations revealed the city center with a network of colonnaded streets, porticoes, a civic basilica, and other urban monuments, such as a temple, a bathhouse, and a nymphaeum. The publication of the latter monument based on Gideon's analysis and research is currently in final preparations for publication with the aid of Dr. Benjamin Arubas, who was a chief member of the Beth Shean expedition. The excavations also revealed numerous inscriptions, statues and other important finds that shed light on the history of ancient Beth Shean and the daily lives of its inhabitants. The importance of these excavations to the understanding of Roman urbanism in Palestine and the changes that occurred to the urban design in the Byzantine and Umayyad periods is invaluable.¹²

⁸ A. Ecker et al., "Capricorno Alae VII Phrygum ... (ii) Interim report on the inscriptions from the aedes of the fort near Tel Shalem," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 32 (2019): 214–222.

⁹ (together with Y. Tsafrir), "A statue of Dionysus as a Youth Recently Discovered at Beth She'an," *Qadmoniot* 23 (1990): 52–54 (in Hebrew); (together with Y. Tsafrir), "A Modest Aphrodite from Beth Shean," *Israel Museum Studies in Archaeology* 4 (2005): 3–15; "Marble Sculpture of the Roman Period in the Near East and its Hellenistic Origins," in Y.Z. Eliav, E.A. Friedland, and S. Herbert (eds.), *The Sculptural Environment of the Roman Near East: Reflections on Culture, Ideology, and Power*, Ann Arbor, Michigan 2008, pp. 69–90.

¹⁰ E.g.: "Sarcophagus Production in Jerusalem from the Beginning of the Common Era up to 70 CE," in G. Koch (ed.), *Sarkophag-Studien 1: Akten des Symposiums "125 Jahre Sarkophag-Corpus"*, Marburg 4–7 Oktober 1995, Mainz 1998, pp. 295–310; "The Production of Decorated Sarcophagi in Palestine and Their Relation to the Sarcophagi from Main Workshops of the Roman World," in L. Di Segni, Y. Hirschfeld, J. Patrich and R. Talgam (eds.), *Man near a Roman Arch: Studies Presented to Prof. Yoram Tsafrir*, Jerusalem 2009, pp. 82–87 (in Hebrew); "The Sarcophagi from the Mausoleum Unearthed at Herodium," in R. Porat, R. Chachy, and Y. Kalman (eds.), *Herodium Final Reports of the 1972–2010 Excavations Directed by Ehud Netzer Volume I: Herod's Tomb Precinct*, Jerusalem 2015, pp. 349–361.

¹¹ See: (with Y. Tsafrir) "The Dating of the Earthquake of the Sabbatical Year' of 749 C.E. in Palestine," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 55/2 (1992): 231–235.

¹² For publications on the excavations at Beth Shean, see: "Nysa-Scythopolis - A New Inscription and the Titles of the City on Its Coins," *INJ* 9 (1986–7): 53–58; "Nysa-Scythopolis in the Roman Period: 'A Greek City of Coele Syria' – Evidence from the

During the First Lebanon War (Operation Peace for Galilee), Gideon was appointed Archaeological Staff Officer in IDF held territories in south Lebanon (1982–1984). His job was to make sure that the IDF is avoiding from harming archaeological sites and museums during the clashes with the PLO militias. This gave Gideon a unique opportunity to tour around the country and visit archaeological sites, most notably the famous temples of Roman Baalbek\Heliopolis in the Beqaa Valley.

Gideon was a truly modest person, without the big ego that more than a few archaeologists possess. He was quite cynical in his approach to life and conversations with him were always spiced up with humour and jokes. As a teacher for Classical archaeology Gideon has raised several generations of students, who followed in his footsteps and specialized in various fields of Hellenistic, Roman and Jewish art and architecture, and this author feels privileged to have been one of these lucky students. Gideon was always helpful and welcoming as a mentor and a PhD supervisor. He was extremely knowledgeable and could advise and shed light not just on issues that were part of his specialty, but rather also on matters that were beyond the limits of his specific fields of study. This should be accredited to is immense curiosity that led him to read countless articles in a wide variety of fields.

During his BA studies in archaeology he met Nehama, who was also studying archaeology at the time and they later got married, celebrating their honeymoon in Turkey, exploring Greek and Roman monuments. Few years later, Nehama's brother, Yoram Tsafir, also became an archaeology student at the Hebrew University and they later cooperated in several projects and became good friends and colleagues. In his last years, despite his deteriorating health condition that made him move into an elderly home, Gideon continued to receive updates on recent archaeological discoveries, on which he gave talks in front of the residents of the elderly home, and also took part in several publications and projects.¹³ Gideon passed away on November 18, 2020. He is survived by his wife, three children and four grandchildren. With his passing a leading Classical archaeologist and art historian is lost. He will be missed by his family, friends and colleagues.

Orit Peleg-Barkat

Excavations at Bet Shean," *ARAM* 4 (1994): 117–138; (with Y. Tsafir) "From Scythopolis to Baysan - Changing Concepts of Urbanism" in G.R.D. King and A. Cameron (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, II: Land Use and Settlement Patterns* (Papers of the Second Workshop on Late Antiquity and Early Islam), Princeton 1994, pp. 95–115; (With Y.Tsafir) "Urbanism at Scythopolis-Bet Shean in the Fourth to Seventh Centuries," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1997): 85–146; (with Y.Tsafir) "The Basilica and an Altar to Dionysos at Nysa-Scythopolis", in: J.H. Humphrey (ed.), *The Roman and Byzantine Near East, 2, Some Recent Archaeological Research* (Journal of Roman Archaeology, Supp. 31), Rhode Island 1999, pp. 59–75.

¹³ In recent years Gideon has participated in the efforts of Roi Porat and the new expedition to Herodium to publish the finds from his excavations at Herodium. Several articles came out: (together with S. Amorai-Stark, M. HersHKovitz, Y. Kalman, R. Chachy, and R. Porat), "An Inscribed Copper-Alloy Finger Ring from Herodium Depicting a Krater," *IEJ* 68 (2018): 208–220; (together with N. Ahipaz, R. Chachy, Y. kalman and R. Porat), "The Coin Finds from the 1968–1969 Excavations at Herodium," *INR* 12 (2017): 121–134.