

In memoriam

Professor Tony Wilkinson (1948–2014)



It is a great sadness to have to record that Tony Wilkinson died on 25 December 2014. Tony was well known to all of those working on the archaeology of Arabia where he was a significant figure. He was a leading expert on Middle Eastern landscapes and was said to have ‘revolutionized our understanding of the ancient landscapes of Mesopotamia and the broader Middle East’ (Gil Stein). Much of this wider body of work has made an indirect but notable contribution to our understanding of Arabian landscapes, but he also conducted fieldwork specifically in Arabia, principally in Yemen but also in Oman early in his career, and briefly in Saudi Arabia on the Darb Zubaydah survey.

Tony spent eight years as professor in the Archaeology Department at Durham University from 2006 to 2014 to which he came from Edinburgh University (2003–2006). He had previously been at the Oriental Institute at The University of Chicago (1992–2003) and Assistant Director at the British School of Archaeology in Iraq (1989–1992). Those of us fortunate enough to have worked with Tony will know what a superb colleague he was. He was widely read and always very well informed but also humble, helpful, supportive, and always extremely positive and encouraging. He was an excellent and enthusiastic lecturer and was certainly much appreciated by the Durham students to whom he

taught a variety of Middle Eastern and landscape topics. Tony's lecturing skills were last appreciated at the Seminar in 2007 when he gave a well-received MBI public lecture titled 'Green Arabia: Climate and Archaeology from Prehistory to the Incense Trade'.

Although, in the broader scope of things, Arabia was a relatively small part of Tony's extensive academic portfolio, it is a measure of his scholarly ability and insight that a number of the publications he has left behind have become seminal works in the region. In Oman his key contribution was the *Suhar Ancient Fields Project*, which was a survey around Suhar (Ṣuḥār) on the Batinah (al-Bāṭinah) coast of Oman where he worked between 1978 and 1984 (*Journal of Oman Studies* 1987). Reading this study one is impressed by the coherence, detail, clarity, and insight that it shows. Perhaps most importantly, in it Tony applied the technique he had developed to quantify sherd scatters as indices of agricultural intensity, thereby gaining important insights into the way that Suhar's agricultural hinterland had developed through time. It seems to have been an almost instinctive nature of Tony's to characterize immediately the geomorphology and taphonomy of an area and to devise fieldwork techniques that would bring out the best information in the most effective way. This was certainly a key part of his genius.

Tony's most significant work in Arabia, however, was focused on Yemen on a project that originated from the pioneering surveys conducted by McGuire Gibson of The University of Chicago with his student, Ray Tindell. With his move to Chicago's Oriental Institute in 1992, Tony assumed the practical direction of a challenging landscape project in the Dhamar (Dhamār) highlands, where preliminary Chicago work had included documentation of the much-pillaged remains of Zafar (Zafār), the Himyarite capital of the late antique period. Tony's work on this project greatly enlarged the scope and contextualization of highland civilizations, hitherto deemed archaeologically irretrievable. Dense modern Yemeni highland populations along with landscape reworkings through terracing hillsides and quarrying archaeological sites had discouraged previous archaeological work in an area where no intact sites were thought to exist. Tony's acute eye for geomorphological processes, his willingness to try new techniques such as satellite imagery and phytolith studies, and his encouragement of a generation of young scholars brought new energy to bear on the historical and pre-historic records. As Alessandro de Maigret's team defined a new Bronze Age in the arid desert margins, Tony's team, which included co-director Chris Edens and a number of Tony's students, began to populate the empty highlands prehistory with Bronze Age towns. It was Tony who was able to associate dams and terraces with these agricultural populations. This work identified some of the first agricultural installations in the Arabian Peninsula and set the stage for his seminal understanding of Bronze Age landscape transformations across the Near East. Tony's work in this area also helped to launch the careers of a number of young scholars of Arabia, among them Krista Lewis (University of Arkansas) and Lamya Khalidi (CNRS).

Tony was born and grew up in Essex. He initially studied geography at Birkbeck College in London and took a Master's degree at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada where he worked in the much chillier environment of the Canadian arctic. During his archaeological career he conducted fieldwork in many countries across the Middle East including Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Iran, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. He brought together a lot of this experience in his 2003 *Archaeological Landscapes of the Near East*, a book that has been widely influential and was honoured with the Society for American Archaeology Book Award in 2004. Tony's intellectual contribution to the field of landscape archaeology was recognized by his election as a Fellow of the British Academy in 2008 and by his being awarded the John Cole Medal for Landscape Archaeology by the British Academy in 2009.

Tony was an extremely courageous man. He faced a long and difficult battle with his illness but he never complained about it and only mentioned it when it was absolutely necessary. He certainly never let it get in the way of his work or of his support for his students and colleagues.

Tony has left an indelible mark on Arabian archaeology and on Middle Eastern archaeology more generally. His work will be read and cited long into the future. For those of us that knew him, he will be much missed as a scholar, colleague, and friend.

Derek Kennet & Joy McCorriston,
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