

OBITUARY  
 TONY WILKINSON  
 (1948–2014)



Tony Wilkinson in Istanbul, 2009

Professor Tony Wilkinson, of the Archaeology Department at the University of Durham (UK), passed away on December 25, 2014, after living many years with cancer. He was 66 years old. Tony is generally acknowledged to have been one of the world’s foremost experts in landscape archaeology, and as the theoretician, methodological innovator, and field archaeologist who revolutionized our understanding of the ancient landscapes of Mesopotamia and the broader Middle East.

Tony James Wilkinson was born August 14, 1948, and grew up in Essex. He trained as a geographer at the University of London-Birkbeck College, and received his Masters Degree at McMaster University (Ontario, Canada), studying the hydrology of overland water flow in the Canadian Arctic. Tony then shifted his intellectual focus to archaeology, and conducted innovative fieldwork projects of wet and dry landscape archaeology in the UK and across the Middle East in the varied and disparate terrains of Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. By combining the methodologies of geography, geomorphology, and archaeology in these projects, Tony was able to develop a nuanced and sophisticated approach to understanding the ways that

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providing me with a copy of Charles French’s 2014 article “Wilkinson, Tony James” in *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, ed. C. Smith. Copyright Springer Science and Business Media New York. For an in-depth 2013 interview with Tony Wilkinson, see: [http://wn.com/tony\\_wilkinson](http://wn.com/tony_wilkinson)

the interplay of environment and human culture shaped the historical development of landscapes and civilizations in Greater Mesopotamia and surrounding regions. Tony distilled these insights into his book *Archaeological Landscapes of the Near East* (University of Arizona Press, 2003), a classic synthesis that was honored with the Society for American Archaeology Book Award in 2004, and the James R. Wiseman Book Award of the Archaeological Institute of America in 2005. *Archaeological Landscapes* has had an enormous intellectual impact on students and professional researchers worldwide.

Tony served as the Assistant Director of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq from 1989 to 1992. After the first Gulf War, Tony came to the US, and from 1992 to 2003 was a Research Associate (Associate Professor) at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, where he founded the Center for Ancient Middle Eastern Landscapes (“CAMEL”) in the early 1990’s. At the CAMEL lab, Tony worked with his students to develop the protocols for using the newly declassified CORONA satellite images to map sites and relict ancient landscapes across Upper Mesopotamia. Returning to the UK in 2003, Tony was a Lecturer and then Professor at the University of Edinburgh. In 2006 he took a position as Professor in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Durham, where he taught and conducted research until his passing. At Chicago, Edinburgh and Durham, Tony trained several generations of students, many of whom have gone on to become major figures in their own right in landscape archaeology.

Many of Tony’s most important contributions to landscape archaeology derived from his long term research program exploring the complex inter-relationship of environmental instability, agricultural strategies, and the dynamics of urbanized state societies in the third millennium B.C. Early Bronze Age of Upper Mesopotamia. These city-states developed in what Tony liked to call the “zone of uncertainty” in the marginal environment on the edge of the rain-fed agriculture region of “Upper Mesopotamia”—the area that encompasses southeast Turkey, North Syria, and the northern Iraqi Jezira. Tony reconstructed the ancient landscapes of Upper Mesopotamian complex societies through a unique synthesis of methodologies that combined the documentation of field scatters of sherds (derived from ancient manuring practices), the mapping of ancient roads and shepherds’ paths (“hollow ways”), intensive archaeological site (and off-site) survey, palaeo-environmental reconstruction, satellite imagery, and agent-based computer simulation modeling. The synthetic approach that Tony developed has now become standard practice in Near Eastern landscape archaeology, and is one of his most important legacies. Tony’s intellectual contributions were 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.

One of Tony’s greatest strengths was his ability to embrace a range of different methodologies and weave them together into completely new synthetic approaches that yielded unexpected and powerful insights into the ways that human-environmental interrelations shaped the archaeological landscapes that in turn shaped the histories of ancient Near Eastern complex societies. Tony’s last two book length publications provide a wonderful window into his range as a scholar and the way he continued his lifelong arc of innovative and transformational research up to the end.

One of the best examples of this kind of innovation, and the new understandings it yielded, derives from Tony’s leadership role in developing and implementing the inter-disciplinary MASS (Modeling Ancient Settlement Systems) Project, in which Tony and his colleagues integrated excavation, regional survey, textual records, ethnographic studies, satellite imagery, diachronic environmental data, and agent-based computer modeling to generate a model of the ways that the incredibly complex interaction of pastoralism, village-based agriculture, and urban economy combined to form the economic systems of the third millennium B.C. city states in the rain-fed agricultural zone of “Upper Mesopotamia” (modern North Syria, Northern Iraq, and Southeast Turkey). Tony and his colleagues presented the results of this research in a series of publications, most notably the 2013 volume, T.J. Wilkinson, McG. Gibson and M. Widell (eds), *Models of Mesopotamian Landscapes: How Small-Scale Processes Contributed to the Growth of Early Civilizations*. BAR International series 2552, Oxford, Archaeopress.

In parallel with the MASS modeling project, Tony continued with detailed regional analyses of complex and poorly understood archaeological and hydrological landscapes such as the Gorgan

Wall in northeastern Iran—a complex system of walls, moats and forts constructed by the Sasanians in an effort to repel the Hephthalites (White Huns) and other Central Asian nomadic invaders. Tony and his colleagues published this research in the 2013 book E.W. Sauer, H.O. Rezaei, T.J. Wilkinson, and J. Nokandeh, *Persia's Imperial Power in Late Antiquity: The Great Wall of Gorgan and Frontier Landscapes of Sasanian Iran*. British Institute of Persian Studies Archaeological Monographs Series II, Oxford, Oxbow Books. This work provides an entirely new perspective on the last major pre-Islamic empire of the Near East.

As a researcher, Tony was especially admirable in always being open to new ideas, and for the way he never lapsed into dogmatism. I know of very few people who understood the interplay of culture and environment in such a sophisticated and nuanced way.

At a personal level, Tony had an enormous effect on my own career as an archaeologist. At Kurban Huyuk in southeast Turkey in 1982, he taught me archaeological survey in a kind of fieldwork practicum that I will never forget. When we walked through the tributary wadis and the terraces of the Euphrates valley, Tony taught me to look at them as components of a landscape with its own logic, and showed me how—if you understand the geomorphological processes—the sites jump out at the observer as anomalies. Tony taught me to revere burnt dung and manuring scatters as something as rich in archaeological potential as it is in soil nutrients. For more than thirty years, Tony has been my mentor, and one of the people I've respected and admired most in archaeology. Many of Tony's colleagues have had similar experiences of his transformative influence on their own intellectual development and careers.

He was that rare combination of being both a brilliant scholar and a truly nice person. Tony was also known to a fortunate few in his alter ego as a talented Blues harmonica player and onetime member of the Bamboo Beat Band.

Tony is survived by his wife, partner, and colleague Eleanor Barbanes Wilkinson. His numerous friends, colleagues, and students will miss him greatly.

GIL J. STEIN