



TONY JAMES WILKINSON

# Tony James Wilkinson

## 1948–2014

TONY WILKINSON SADLY PASSED AWAY, after a long battle with cancer, on 25 December 2014, at a very youthful sixty-six years of age. He was born in Essex on 14 August 1948. He trained first as a geographer, studying for a BA at Birkbeck College, London University, from 1966 to 1969, then for his MSc in Canada, at McMaster University, from 1970 to 1972, where he studied the hydrology of overland water flow in the Canadian Arctic. Moving into a career in Archaeology, he always remained grounded in his geographical knowledge, specialising in Landscape Archaeology. His first employment as an archaeologist followed, excavating in the south of England, notably at the highly innovative excavations at Fengate with Francis Pryor, then with Geoffrey Wainwright and the English Heritage Central Excavation Unit. The reputation of both of those projects for hard work and hard drinking would not faze Tony, who was always wiry, athletic, sociable and possessed of a great sense of humour.

Early research into the development of the physical landscape and changing human settlement in his native Essex (see Wilkinson and Murphy, 1986) continued into the late 1980s, although the major final publications were to appear much later, after he had discontinued fieldwork in Britain (Wilkinson and Murphy, 1995; Wilkinson et al., 2012). In 1973 Tony began his first fieldwork season in the environment that he would make his very own—the Middle East—supporting David Whitehouse’s project in Siraf, southern Iran (the final publication being Whitehouse, Whitcomb and Wilkinson, 2009). Here from the start, and then in subsequent seasons working with similar field projects in Oman, in the Gulf and in Syria, he pioneered the detailed analysis of landforms,

landscape change, the patterning of human artefactual and architectural debris across the countryside and built-up settlements, and the changing modes of land-use, in ways never before conceived, but which would eventually become the accepted ideal for state-of-the-art landscape archaeology in the Middle East and the wider Mediterranean. Tony's home base was Lincoln, where he lived with his first wife, Judith O'Neil, an archaeologist and photographer.

In 1989 he was appointed Assistant Director of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, a post he held until 1992, but worsening political conditions had already closed that country for field research after 1991. Fortunately Tony gained a position as Research Associate, eventually achieving the rank of Associate Professor, at the prestigious Oriental Institute in Chicago (1992–2003), where he founded the Center for Ancient Middle Eastern Landscapes (CAMEL). In 1995 he married Eleanor Barbanes, an archaeologist who subsequently collaborated with Tony on many of his field projects as well as several publications (Wilkinson et al., 2005, 2007; Wilkinson and Barbanes, 2000; Wilkinson, Peltenburg and Barbanes Wilkinson, 2016; Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2016) From this Chicago base he relaunched his tireless walking and studying the landscapes for numerous archaeological expeditions in Turkey, Syria and Yemen.

In 2003 Tony moved to the University of Edinburgh as Lecturer, where his achievements were rapidly noted, leading to a Chair in 2005. He transferred to a Professorship at Durham University in 2006, where he remained until his very untimely death. Apart from his major contribution at Durham to teaching and research in Archaeology, Tony was a significant figure in the University's Institute of Advanced Study, where he served as one of its directors. Landmarks during this period included the Society of American Archaeology Book Award in 2004 and the James R. Wiseman Book Award of the Archaeological Institute of America, both for his 2003 masterpiece—*Archaeological Landscapes of the Near East*—as well as election as a Fellow of the British Academy in 2008 and the award in 2009 of the John Coles Medal for Landscape Archaeology.

If we turn to evaluate Tony's research trajectory, the early experience of the Canadian Arctic and then the semi-submerged landscapes of Essex already provide the hallmark of his career as an archaeological explorer of complex and often harsh environments. Despite concentrating on fieldwork for many high-profile projects in the Middle East, Tony did not forget his obligation to write up his early Essex landscape studies. The two much later volumes, written in collaboration with Peter Murphy, have lost

none of their significance through much-delayed publication (Wilkinson and Murphy, 1995; Wilkinson, 2012). Indeed their late appearance gave Tony time to incorporate insights gained in the Levant, discovering 'sunken ways' in Essex. Walking was both a hobby and a professional key to his approach to Archaeology. Whilst traditional excavation, especially in the Middle East, involved burying yourself ever deeper into vast tell mounds, Tony wanted to map and take apart the human-impacted landscapes around cities, villages and farms, where the traces of diverse land-uses still survived to as penetrating a scientific eye as his. In his first Middle Eastern field campaign at Siraf, Tony's alertness to signs of human presence in the landscape perceived a potential pattern of meaning in vast carpets of broken ceramics and other domestic debris radiating out from ancient settlements, seemingly not representing buildings or cemeteries. He was later to test his proposition that they were fossil marks of extensive manuring practices through mapping their shape and density and test-pitting below the soil surface. From this visual clue he could develop, as was customary with him, more elaborate structures of meaning: collecting numerous similar cases around the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond and dating their deposition convinced him that they were rare phenomena in time, and were especially to be associated with peaks of population and hence the need to increase food production (Wilkinson, 1989). Since then, large-scale landscape manuring carpets have been mapped and analysed in almost every country in Europe and the Mediterranean, with Tony's pioneering work always the original inspiration.

Equally innovative, and also due to his unique eye for detail in the landscape, was his discovery of radial depressions surrounding prehistoric and historic towns, especially in the semi-arid steppes of Syria. In analogy to the traditional pre-tarmac country paths and roads in England, he termed these 'hollow ways' and, sometimes in conjunction with manuring carpets, he was able to interpret these as fossil remnants of the major paths taken by ancient farmers out to their fields, and shepherds to out-field grazing, and hence indicative of the areas of most intense land-use around tell communities. Meanwhile, since so many of the fossil land-use features were clearest from the air, Tony pioneered the use of satellite photographs when he was working on the North Jazira Project, initially using the assistance of the British Petroleum company.

The move to Chicago initiated a phase in Tony's career where much greater funds for research became available, allowing him to gather and analyse more and richer data. CAMEL, which he created at the Chicago Institute, became one of the first major institutions to gather and interpret

satellite images, which by then were becoming far more easily available, especially the CORONA ‘spy photos’, which were declassified in 1995. As usual, however, Tony would not be content with merely adding remote-sensing to existing ideas of landscape history—he was already looking for new approaches to add to his analytical toolkit. In 2002, in collaboration with the Argonne National Laboratories, he was awarded National Science Foundation funding to develop a computer-based modelling of the dynamics of ancient Mesopotamian society, tying in his own knowledge of landscape and land-use history with the rich textual sources. Although published long after he had left the United States, this led to a major edited volume which appeared in 2013—*Models of Mesopotamian Landscapes: How Small-Scale Processes Contributed to the Growth of Early Civilizations* (Wilkinson, Gibson and Widell, 2013). Taking his earlier insights into land-use and overpopulation even further, here Tony developed mathematical models of the rise and fall of societies in ancient north Mesopotamia. The full incorporation of the ‘social’, and the innovative use of ‘agent-based modelling’ to reintroduce individual decisions into reconstructions of past societies, shows how far Tony was from being simply a geomorphologist or land-use historian. In fact in an even now much-cited major paper of 1994, he proposed a model for the rise of small city-states in North Mesopotamia, while at the same time setting up a series of models for food production and population levels which could assist in identifying the degree of sustainability of large central-places and their smaller satellite communities (Wilkinson, 1994).

The year Tony left Chicago for Edinburgh University was a culminating moment: it saw the publication of his magnum opus, certainly his masterpiece, *Archaeological Landscapes of the Near East* (Wilkinson, 2003). Here he brought together his encyclopaedic knowledge of the many historic landscape types in the macro-region, to compare and contrast the long-term dialectic between the dynamic physical landscape and changing forms of human society over this vast expanse of varied landforms. No one else could have written such a work; no one had anything like his experience throughout the macro-region, or the layer upon layer of knowledge and ideas about how to make sense of such a magnificent story. It will come as no surprise that this volume was awarded two prizes in the succeeding two years.

Some of the major projects on which Tony was a key staff member as the Landscape Archaeologist included the early research at Siraf and several field seasons in Oman, which gave rise to articles with a wide impact. However, his key involvement with excavation and survey at

Kurban Höyük in Turkey and then at Tell Sweyhat in Syria led to two significant volumes under his own name—*Town and Country in Southeastern Anatolia* (Wilkinson, 1990) and *On the Margin of the Euphrates: Settlement and Land Use at Tell Sweyhat, and in the Upper Lake Tabqa, Syria* (Wilkinson, 2004) respectively. A third volume, entitled *Settlement Development in the North Jazira, Iraq* (Wilkinson and Tucker, 1995), resulted from his collaboration with David Tucker on a survey in northern Iraq. The Jazira Project was the first Middle Eastern survey where standard site-focused survey was accompanied by ‘offsite survey’ where artefacts were plotted and sampled across the entire landscape outside settlement foci, and this was to influence survey practice in the whole region permanently. After the move to Chicago, Tony was busy running field surveys—usually in association with excavations—in Turkey at Titris Höyük and the Amuq Plain, then in Syria in the Balikh Valley, at Tell Brak and Tell Hamoukar, as well as carrying out several field seasons in Yemen. His brief time at Edinburgh University nonetheless led to his participation in two major projects, the Land of Carchemish Project in collaboration with Edgar Peltenburg, published in the monograph, *Carchemish in Context* (Wilkinson et al., 2016), and a collaboration with Eberhard Sauer on the Gorgon Wall survey in northern Iran—*Persia’s Imperial Power in Late Antiquity: the Great Wall of Gorgon and the Frontier Landscapes of Sasanian Iran* (Sauer et al., 2013). His most recent projects, marking his arrival in Durham University, included a survey project collaboration with Graham Philip—the 2008–12 Fragile Crescent Project—an ambitious effort to identify and analyse long-term patterns of settlement, land-use and societal changes over 2,500 years beginning in the fourth millennium BC. Utilising geophysical data in conjunction with the archaeological record from numerous regional surveys across a broad swathe of the Middle East, most of which were conducted by Tony himself over the course of his forty-five-year career, this project was the one he viewed essentially as his magnum opus. Along with a publicly accessible online database, this project has published papers in journals including *Levant*, *Journal of World Prehistory*, *Quaternary International*, *PLoS ONE* and *Quaternary Science Reviews*. A second project with his former Edinburgh colleague Eberhard Sauer—*Persia and its Neighbours*—has examined the landscape of the Sasanian Empire (third–seventh centuries AD) in Iran, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Oman, and the research strategies and data collection techniques devised by him for this project have continued to be implemented in the field, but regrettably without the benefit of his presence as this project continues.

Finally to the man. We have seen how bright and forward-looking Tony Wilkinson was in his research. One always looked forward eagerly to a new paper or book from his pen; it would be full of surprises, ideas and approaches one had not thought of, while immediately making you want to go out and use or test them in one's own landscapes. He was not only a great collaborator, easily measured by the global response to his passing from sympathy letters and numerous obituaries, but he liked to involve students in his work, allowing them enough scope so that so many went on to run their own surveys and landscape reconstructions under his inspiration. His sadness at the eruption of wars throughout the Middle East would result in action: he stayed in close touch with former colleagues in the various countries he had worked in; he was one of the first archaeologists to visit Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein in order to inspect the damage to heritage in 2003; and soon after arriving in Durham he and his wife Eleanor hosted a meeting of Iraqi archaeologists whose work and monuments were threatened by conflict—a conference funded by a grant gained by Eleanor.

Apart from his official hobby 'walking', until the late 1980s somehow Tony found time to play blues harmonica in the Bamboo Beat band in various gigs across England, and even into the 1990s, while at the University of Chicago, Tony would occasionally join in open-mic nights at the local blues club around the corner from his apartment on Woodlawn Avenue. Later in life he took enormous pleasure in playing the vintage guitar he had bought in England in 1973, and although his academic responsibilities occupied more of his time as his administrative responsibilities increased, music remained an obsession through to the end of his days. But most important of all, Tony was a modest and kind man. He was not to be drawn into the 'odium archaeologicum' of personalised arguments about methods and theories, but calmly presented his position alongside views he often did not agree with. Despite his immense knowledge and profound experience, he wore his learning lightly and was a delightful companion whether in academic meetings, in searing temperatures in the hottest parts of the Middle East or in the pub. There really was no one like him: he is simply irreplaceable as a beacon of ever-advancing research skill in Landscape Archaeology, wherever it is practised.

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