

# ANTONIO SAGONA AM FSA FAHA

1956–2017

FELLOW · ELECTED 2005



PHOTO: MONASH UNIVERSITY

Antonio (Tony) Sagona came to Australia as a very young boy. Born in Libya on April 30, 1956, his parents emigrated in 1959, arriving in Melbourne on 19 January 1960. They settled in Williamstown.

From a very young age, Tony was intrigued with the ancient world. As with so many archaeologists, the passion for understanding the past became almost an obsession. And so for Tony. He thought of himself as a collector of information, one who wanted to know as much as possible about the ancient world and the Bronze Age in particular.

He graduated from the University of Melbourne with first class honours for his thesis, *The Development and Expansion of the Early Trans-Caucasian Culture During the Third Millennium BC: The Khirbet Kerak Problem*. He was fortunate to have as his teacher and supervisor at Melbourne the mercurial William Culican, who fostered his love for the ancient Near East.

His PhD thesis, also supervised by Culican, continued his study of the Caucasus: *The Caucasian Region in the Early Bronze Age*. It was examined and given high praise by two eminent scholars in the field: Machteld

Mellink (Bryn Mawr College) and James Mellaart (University of London). It appeared in the British Archaeological Reports series in 1984 and even though it is now over thirty years since its appearance, it is still a foundational text.

Both he and his wife Claudia (an archaeologist also, focusing on Malta), whom he met in the lift in the John Medley Building during their first undergraduate year at Melbourne, had teaching scholarships. This required five years of teaching after completion of the undergraduate degree. So during the time he completed his PhD, he also did a Diploma of Education.

He began his teaching at Braybrook College. But three weeks into his job, in 1984, William Culican died. Tony was appointed to fill the position (this satisfied the government's teaching requirements), first as a fixed-term, then in a continuing position, and promoted quite swiftly to senior lecturer in 1989. In 1995, he advanced to a readership and in 2006 was given a personal chair. He began his teaching in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, but in 1988 this programme was taken into Classics and Archaeology.

He began archaeological field work here in Australia, at Lake Bolac (1975) and in 1985–86 worked on the important ochre mining site of Toolumbunner, in Tasmania. This work resulted in one of his first major publications, *Bruising the Red Earth: Ochre Mining and Ritual in Aboriginal Tasmania* (1994).

But his interest lay in the East, as his thesis indicates. He excavated in Syria, first with Peter Parr at Tel Nebi Mend in 1978 and then at El-Qitar in 1982 and 1984 with Tom McClellan. As his position at the University of Melbourne became more secure, he turned to his own work.

What fascinated Tony was the Early Bronze Age in the trans-Caucasus region. In 1980 at a conference in Manchester, he met Charles Burney who had worked in Eastern Turkey and Iran. This meeting helped inspire Tony to begin his survey and excavation work in Turkey.

He also met several Turkish archaeologists, in particular Altan Çilingiroğlu (Ege University) who attended that same Manchester conference. He helped to facilitate Tony's applications to the Turkish government for archaeological permits. For 15 years, Tony and his team

worked in the Bayburt and Erzurum provinces, first surveying the area and then excavating at two sites: first at a small hill site, Büyüktepe Höyük, from 1988–93, near Bayburt and then at Sos Höyük from 1994–2003, just outside of Erzurum. Behind these choices lay his ongoing investigation of the trans-Caucasian cultures of the Bronze and Iron Ages and the great need for a defined cultural sequence for the region underpinned by a suite of absolute dates.

Sos Höyük is a mound comprising remains that begin in the Late Chalcolithic, continue through the Bronze Age, into the Iron Age, and end with some late Hellenistic and Byzantine material. It is the earlier periods that are most important, showing that this site near Erzurum is part of the Trans-Caucasian culture. There had been a short excavation in Sos Höyük in 1987 by a Turkish archaeologist, but much more exploration was needed, as the earlier work had been limited to the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age. So Tony's excavation filled in a huge lacuna in our understanding of the history of this area.

From Turkey, Tony moved to Georgia. Given the political situation earlier in his career, it had been impossible to work there. After 2003, the situation changed. Tony met a number of Georgian archaeologists while researching for his PhD and later in his frequent research visits to Georgia. Notable among those who facilitated his applications, just as had happened in Turkey, were David Lordkipanidze (Director, Georgian National Museum), and Vakhtang Nikolaishvili, Gela Giunashvili, Giorgi Manjegaladze and Kakha Kakhiani (all in the Otar Lordkipanidze Centre of Archaeology).

Tony was a great attender of conferences on the Bronze Age, all around the world, and he was able through his genuine interest in other archaeologists and their work and by his genial personality to make friends easily. This helped him greatly.

He excavated in Georgia at three sites: Samtavro (2008–10), Tchkantiskedi (2011), Chobareti (2012–16). The latter site has helped to define the complexity of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium Bronze Age through the various pottery fabrics found together in this settlement. Most importantly, the site challenges the prevalent view of a subsistence economy in the period. The reports in *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* are models of archaeological reporting, demonstrating Tony's collaboration with many experts; this is a great example of archaeological collegiality, rather than the rivalry that so often occurs.

His most recent work, in addition to the continuing excavations in Georgia, has been an investigation of the battlefield terrain of Gallipoli. This was funded by the Australian government in collaboration with New Zealand and Turkey. To safeguard the long-term preservation of the area, an intensive survey and plotting was necessary. The publication, *Anzac Battlefield:*

*A Gallipoli Landscape of War and Memory*, with contributions by several of those who worked there, was published in 2016.

His publications are numerous, both as single author, or with his wife Claudia, and many others. He recognised the limitations of his available time. When beginning a book on the ancient history of Turkey (*Ancient Turkey*, 2009), he realised that he did not have the time to research the post Bronze Age periods. So he collaborated with Paul Zimansky (Stony Brook University), an expert on Iron Age material, especially concerning the Hittites and Urartians. This book has received very positive reviews and is a very useful text for teaching.

It is fitting, though ironically so, that there will be one more book: *The Archaeology of the Caucasus*, in the Cambridge World Archaeology series, scheduled for publication later this year. It is an appropriate swan song, as this brings full circle his fascination with this area that began in 1984.

His fieldwork was not limited to the basics of an excavation, pottery and architecture. He tried to have all aspects of the site studied: botanical, geological, metallurgical, anthropological, and so forth. The many dissertations supervised by him show the breadth of the study of these sites. He nurtured so many students: 27 PhD theses as principal or co-supervisor, including 6 from overseas, and 28 MA theses.

Tony was an excellent field director. He insured that his team was well fed and well housed (as far as circumstances permitted). He loved to cook, and his ability was shown one day in Bayburt during the Büyüktepe Höyük excavations. While shopping for our lunch, he discovered nutmeg in the market. That for him was a critical ingredient in one dish – spaghetti bolognese. So that evening, he was able to take over part of the kitchen in the restaurant that provided most of our meals and made his fabulous spaghetti. We sat out by the banks of the Çoruh river, eating, surreptitiously drinking wine, telling tales of other excavations (primarily mishaps) and laughing. He was careful to build teams that worked together and he fostered collegiality. It is no wonder that so many students sought to continue working with him, even in the rather austere conditions of eastern Turkey and central Georgia.

He was in great demand as a reviewer of manuscripts submitted for various journals and publishers, including Routledge, Cambridge University Press, and Brill. He edited the journal *Ancient Near Eastern Studies*. He served on the editorial boards of a number of journals: *Ancient East and West*, *Journal of Archaeology of the Turkish Academy of Science* and many others. In addition, he was a regular assessor for grant applications for the ARC, National Science Foundation (USA), MacArthur Fellowships (USA), the Rustaveli Foundation (Republic

of Georgia) and others. All of this is a clear indication of his commitment to the field, to the work of other scholars, and to the high regard in which he was held by so many archaeologists.

He was a great colleague. Tony was not one of those scholars who engaged in self-aggrandisement. His ambition, rather, was geared to his excellence as a teacher and an archaeologist. He took on administrative work, albeit reluctantly, as it interfered with what he felt to be the necessary focus of an academic – his research, and the importance of inspiring and educating the next generations of archaeologists; in his words, ‘passing the baton.’ And this he did so very well.

He had a strong sense of humour. His ability to mimic could be devastating – never vicious, but incredibly clever. He loved books, not just archaeological tomes, but biographies of archaeologists and relevant travel books. In recent years, he had become very interested in photography honing his skills in site record shots and in capturing the archaeological finds at a high standard, suitable for any publication. Waiting for the best lighting and finding the most striking location when taking regional views (always with his camera perched on a tripod) ensured that his lectures were a visual treat for his students and general audiences, even if the bus-load of dig members were waiting patiently for him to return to the vehicle.

He and Claudia travelled extensively, often rather adventuresomely. In 1981, they went by train from Kars, Turkey, into Soviet Armenia. At the place for the changeover from the Turkish engine to the Soviet one, they sat in a compartment, all by themselves, as the

Soviet border police tore the cabin apart, looking for contraband, such as blue jeans, that might be sold on the black market. Then the same attention was paid to their luggage. Claudia recalled that as poor students, they had nothing to flog!

Tony became a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 2004, and the following year was elected to the Australian Academy of the Humanities. The last honour came in 2013, when he became a Member of the Order of Australia (AM), for ‘significant service to tertiary education in the field of archaeology.’

He died on 29 June 2017 after a prolonged illness, a rare form of leukaemia. Many different therapies were tried, alas to no avail. He has gone far too soon. He leaves behind a great legacy of work from his excavations, his teaching and his many students; but there was still so much he wanted to do. The numbers of scholars from around the world who have written to express their sorrow is another indication of his standing in the archaeological world.

On the order of service for his funeral was the following excerpt from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (tr. N.K. Sanders)

Though he was strong of arm, he will not rise again;  
He had wisdom and a comely face, he will not rise again;  
He is gone into the mountain, he will not come again;  
On the bed of fate he lies, he will not rise again.  
From the couch of many colours he will not rise again.

ELIZABETH PEMBERTON FAHA

With assistance from Claudia Sagona