



IN MEMORIAM

Itamar Singer

1946–2012

Itamar Singer was born on November 26, 1946 in Dej, Romania. His parents, both Holocaust survivors, met in Romania after the war. His mother Gertrude came from a German-speaking family from Tchernovitz, Bukovina and his father Zoltán from a Hungarian-speaking family from Dej, Transylvania. Being raised in this multilingual, multicultural Austro-Hungarian milieu (studying in a Romanian school but speaking Hungarian at home) surely played a role in young Itamar's growing ability for acquiring new languages, both ancient and modern, and no doubt shaped his cosmopolitan outlook and liberal approach to life. He inherited his penchant for history from his father, who had written a scholarly work on the history of the Jewish community of Dej and its district. Yet as a child Itamar hardly ever saw his father, who was repeatedly imprisoned by the Communist regime for Zionist activities. In 1958, after years of refusal, the Singers were finally granted emigration visas and left for Israel.

The family settled in Holon, just south of Tel Aviv. During a summer vacation from high school Itamar participated in Yohanan Aharoni's Arad excavations; it was his first experience in field archaeology.

From 1965 to 1968 Itamar studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, obtaining his B.A. in the departments of Archaeology and Geography. During these and the following years he participated in excavations at Megiddo, Beer-sheba, Tel Masos and other sites. From 1969 to 1973 he fulfilled his military duty as an officer in the Air Force, serving as an aerial-photograph interpreter. Simultaneously, he completed his M.A. studies at Tel Aviv University in the Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures. His M.A. thesis, 'Geographical Aspects of the Proto-Hattian Problem', written under the supervision of Aharon Kempinski, treated the historical geography and ethnic make-up of early Anatolia, long before discussions of 'ethnicity' or 'national identity' were in vogue; it anticipated his future research into the ties between history, geography and theology. Although this thesis was never published, it was widely circulated and is still commonly cited.

From 1973 to 1975 Itamar continued his Hittite studies in Marburg with Heinrich Otten, the leading Hittitologist of his day. His dissertation, 'The KILAM Festival', completed in 1978, was published in *Studien zu den Boğazköy-Texten* (1983–1984). It was the first complete edition of a major Hittite festival, and it quickly became a highly influential study of Hittite religion, serving as the yardstick by which other editions of Hittite religious texts were measured.

Upon returning to Israel, Itamar joined the staff of the Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures of Tel Aviv University, where he became a full professor in 1996 and where he continued teaching until his retirement in 2006.

Through much of his career Itamar pursued parallel yet complementary research paths: Hittite history and culture in the broad sense of the term and the history and archaeology of the Sea Peoples and the Philistines in the Levant and Canaan.

Itamar's treatment of the the end of the Egypt-Canaanite system in the southern Levant and the culture and settlement of the Philistines and the Sea Peoples resulted in numerous important publications, in which he demonstrated his ability (which would become the trademark of his scholarship) to tie together texts and material culture and to contextualize the data and its interpretation into the larger scheme of things. Such was his interpretation of the political status of 12th century BCE Megiddo based on texts and material finds (such as the famous 'Hittite Ivory'). His analysis of the letter found at the governor's residence at Aphek was a harbinger of things to come: there Itamar discussed the closing years of the imperial system in the Levant. In regard to the Philistines' settlement in Canaan, rather than positing a two-stage process, he argued for a crawling conquest of the coastal area, emphasizing the ability of the Philistines to cohabit with the local Canaanites upon their arrival.

As to the question of the origins of the Philistines and the Sea Peoples, Itamar was one of the first to argue on the basis of his interpretation of the political makeup of the Hittite empire and its western neighbours in the 13th century that these groups arrived not from mainland Greece, as had been traditionally claimed, but rather from the western coast of Anatolia and its environs. Recent Iron-Age finds from Anatolia and Syria seem to support his theory regarding the settlement patterns of the Sea Peoples.

Itamar's primary interests in the historical domain lay in the international affairs of the 13th century BCE, the Golden Age of what he termed the *pax hethitica*. Many of his studies (collected as one under the title, 'The Calm before the Storm'; 2011) dealt with the diplomatic relations between Hatti and the other great powers as well as with the Hittite domination of Syria, and especially the kingdoms of Amurru and Ugarit. His two monograph-length essays on the history of these two vassal kingdoms are by now considered classics, not to be quickly superseded: they are masterpieces of the craftsmanship of the historian, who judiciously assesses the minutiae without losing the grand picture.

In the wake of his studies on Amurru and Ugarit, Itamar came to reassess the causes that led to the fall of the Hittite empire and its vassals. Rejecting the long-held thesis that the Sea Peoples were the main culprits of the 'catastrophe', he demonstrated on the basis of sources from Emar, Ugarit and elsewhere that the entire region suffered an extensive drought. This was one, if not the main, reason that brought about the end of the Hittite imperial system in Syria and affected the entire area from the end of the 13th century to the beginning of the 12th century. Today, the data arriving from the exact and life sciences more and more demonstrate the veracity of his thesis.

His continued interest in Hittite culture led to an in-depth study of Muwattalli's Prayer (1996). Along with the edition of the prayer came a discussion of the theological and political grounds of the transfer of the Hittite capital from Ḫattuša to Tarḫuntašša, a move that would have serious repercussions on Hittite history. Itamar demonstrated that behind the fall of the Hittite kingdom, in addition to the severe drought, lay a bitter inter-dynastic struggle between two power centres located at Ḫattuša and Tarḫuntašša.

After the publication of Muwattalli's Prayer, his interest in this genre culminated in his English translations of the best-preserved 'Hittite Prayers' in the Writings from the Ancient World series (2002).

Published in 2009, Itamar's last authored book *Ha-Hittim ve-Tarbutam* ('The Hittites and Their Culture') was the first full-length treatment of Hittite history and culture to appear in Hebrew. Its publication was the realization of Itamar's long-standing desire to present Hebrew readers with a more accessible route to a distant culture from long ago that nonetheless maintains much relevance for those interested in the history of Israel and the whole region in antiquity. This book has sparked an interest in all things Hittite for many young students who study archaeology and ancient Near Eastern studies.

One of his last published articles is his defence of Hittite historiography written in response to postmodern trends in ancient Near Eastern studies that deny any possibility of reliable historical reconstruction. This masterly *apologia* stands as a testimony to his unwavering and life-long commitment to the search for the historical truth.

Finally, it should be mentioned that during his long tenure at Tel Aviv University Itamar carried almost single-handedly the banner of Hittite studies in Israel, and his classes and seminars on Hittite language and culture were regularly attended by students from all the country's universities. Though specializing in Hittite studies, he insisted on offering students the broadest possible initiation into the study of the Ancient Near East, assuring that their curriculum included courses (which he taught annually) on the history of writing and the religions and mythologies of the peoples of the region. Thus, he came to implement what he strongly believed in, namely that the archaeology and history of the Ancient Near East, and with it that of ancient Israel, must always be contextualized and understood in the broadest way possible. Itamar's commitment to his research and teaching was contagious, and despite the relative obscurity and humble resources of the field, he supervised over the years a large number of M.A. and Ph.D. theses. His belief in and personal concern for his students led him to involve many graduate and undergraduate students in his research projects. Among his students are Yitzhaq Feder, Shai Gordin, Ilan Peled, Jared Miller, Amir Gilan, and Yoram Cohen.

In 2010 Itamar was awarded the prestigious Emet Prize, sponsored by the Office of the Prime Minister of Israel. The same year saw the publication of a collection of studies he edited in honour of his long-time friend the British historian David J. Hawkins. A volume of contributions from colleagues, friends and students in honour of Itamar entitled *Pax Hethitica* and edited by his former students was published in *Studien zu den Boğazköy-Texten*.

Itamar was married to Graciela Noemi Gestoso, an Argentinian Egyptologist. Alongside his academic duties and interests, he was involved in various philanthropic and political activities, notably the Israeli Peace Movement.

Itamar passed away on the morning of September 19, 2012 after a long illness.

He is survived by his daughter Yael from a previous marriage.

Yoram Cohen

Note: Some of the above material is based on Cohen, Y., Gilan, A. and Miller, J., eds.. 2011. *Pax Hethitica: Studies on the Hittites and Their Neighbours in Honour of Itamar Singer* (StBoT 51) Weisbaden: 1–3; and Yasur-Landau, A. 2008. *The Word and the Sherd: Itamar Singer and the Historical Contextualization of the Canaanites and the Philistines* (unpublished paper). The photograph is courtesy of Dan Porges.