



2012 courtesy Claudia Sagona

Emeritus Professor Antonio Giuseppe Sagona FSA FAHA AM 1956–2017: portrait of a scholar

Andrew Jamieson

Introduction

The death of Antonio (Tony) Sagona on 29 June 2017 deprived the field of Near Eastern archaeology generally, and the University of Melbourne in particular, of a most distinguished scholar.

Tony played a crucial role in promoting and developing the study of archaeology at the University of Melbourne. His unwavering commitment to research, combined with rigorous archaeological fieldwork techniques, an engaging teaching style and remarkable personal generosity, transformed the discipline. When Tony was appointed to the faculty in 1984, archaeology at the University of Melbourne was scattered across History, Middle Eastern Studies and Classics (Davey 2014; Sagona 1988). In a few short years, he consolidated the discipline and introduced the archaeology major which would attract a legion of students over the next three decades.

Tony was the recipient of many grants over the years, including a good number from the Australian Research Council. Other honours and awards included being elected

a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2005 and of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 2004. In 2013, he became a Member of the Order of Australia (AM), ‘for significant service to tertiary education in the field of archaeology’, an honour of which he was immensely proud.

Early years

Tony was born on 30 April 1956 in Tripoli, Libya, and from a very young age was intrigued by the ancient world. His parents, Salvatore and Maria, made the momentous decision to migrate to Australia in 1960 in search of opportunities and a better life. Tony had vivid memories of the sea voyage, recalling that while most passengers on board were feeling seasick down below, he and his father were above deck enjoying salami sandwiches and filled with anticipation and excitement at what awaited them. They arrived in Melbourne on 19 January, and the family settled in Williamstown.

Tony excelled at Emmanuel College, Altona, and then at the University of Melbourne, where he was awarded a



Figure 1: Excavating at Tell Nebi Mend, Syria, directed by Peter Parr. Photo: 1978 courtesy Claudia Sagona.

BA (Hons) in 1977. His honours thesis was supervised by William Culican, who would become his great mentor and model. Its subject, *The Development and Expansion of the Early Trans-Caucasian Culture during the Third Millennium BC: The Khirbet Kerak Problem*, remained an enduring research interest. He was awarded high first-class honours by his examiners, Dr John Thompson (University of Melbourne) and Professor David Ussishkin (Tel Aviv University).

The other great success of his undergraduate career was to meet his wife and lifelong collaborator Claudia, also an archaeologist, in the lift on their way to a first-year class.

A PhD in the History department, also completed under the supervision of Culican, followed in 1983. Like his fourth-year thesis, Tony's doctorate examined Caucasian Early Bronze Age Kura Araxes material culture (Sagona 1983). The examiners, James Mellaart (University of London) and Professor Machteld Mellink (Bryn Mawr College), praised the research highly, and the dissertation was quickly accepted for publication, with the title *The Caucasian Region in the Early Bronze Age* (Sagona 1984a). Reviewers called it a 'milestone' and 'tour de force' (Harding 1984:224–225), and 30 years on, it is still considered foundational. Throughout his candidature (1978–1983), Tony also tutored in the department, launching a brilliant teaching career that would span more than three decades.

William 'Bill' Culican

Tony was much influenced and inspired by his supervisor Bill Culican, a reader in the Department of History from 1972 onwards. Culican was well known for his powers of exposition, which made him a most entertaining speaker (Clarke 1984, 1986:27–34; Sagona 1984b:11–18). His interests encompassed the archaeology of the Old World generally, and the Near East in particular. Above all, it was Culican's ability to synthesise and interpret data, and to formulate concepts, that established his reputation—and these were traits which Tony inherited. Tony would also carry forward a number of Culican's research interests and teaching areas; for example, Culican was fascinated by the Phoenicians, Medes and Persians, and these cultures would figure prominently in Tony's own syllabi.

When Culican died suddenly and unexpectedly in 1984, Tony, his most promising graduate student, stepped in to run his courses.¹ Tony was almost immediately appointed a lecturer in archaeology. In 1985, his position was made ongoing and in 1989 he was promoted to senior lecturer. In 1995, he became an associate professor and reader and in 2006, a full professor. In 2017, shortly before his death, Tony was awarded the title of Emeritus Professor.



Figure 2: Elaziğ Museum stores, Turkey, taken after Tony and Claudia had worked through the many bags of finds from Aşvan Site 3, Keban Rescue Excavations, a British Institute of Archaeology project. Photo: 1982 courtesy Claudia Sagona.

The archaeology programme

One of Tony's greatest achievements was to establish and consolidate the discipline of archaeology at The University of Melbourne. Michael Osborne's time as Professor of Classics (1983–1988) saw new opportunities emerge in this area. Osborne's interest in Greek epigraphy brought the material evidence of antiquity into sharper focus in the Classical Studies department. He identified Tony as the future of archaeology at Melbourne, and also felt that archaeology and classics should combine (Mackie 2018). Tony agreed to join the Classical Studies department, and a short time later its name changed to Classical and Near Eastern Studies, then to Classics and Archaeology (Scott 2016:132).

With Osborne's support, Tony capitalised on the chance to advance his discipline, realising that the courses in classics would provide sufficient subjects to offer students a major in archaeology with a focus on the ancient world. Archaeology at Melbourne quickly flourished under Tony's guidance, with the support of several strong collaborators in those early days: the Belgian Assyriologist Guy Bunnens, the American archaeologist Elizabeth Pemberton, and British-born classicist Peter Connor, as well as Michael Osborne himself (Mackie 2018). The programme was further enhanced by the archaeologists' fieldwork activities: Tony's project at Sos Höyük in Turkey, Guy's at Tell Ahmar (ancient Til Barsib) in Syria, Elizabeth's in Corinth in Greece, and Peter's at Jebel Khalid in Syria.

In 1989, Tony oversaw the introduction of the new archaeology curriculum. A bright orange booklet, its colour appropriate to the prevailing sense of optimism, was produced to promote the new initiative. The booklet listed Tony as the co-ordinator for a range of undergraduate subjects, as well as the honours programme. While some classes were based on Culican's curriculum, *Theory, Method and Techniques of Archaeology* and *Archaeology Research Tools* were Tony's own innovations, designed to furnish students with advanced archaeological research skills.

Over 32 years, Tony's subject offerings always featured material culture. It was not uncommon for him to arrive at classes with a box of artefacts. These 'hands-on' sessions brought the ancient world to life and were extremely memorable for the students. In fact, this form of pedagogy significantly influenced the development of my own teaching praxis, which integrates object-based learning.

A kind and generous supervisor

Tony nurtured many students as principal or co-supervisor for 27 PhD theses, including six from overseas, and 28 Masters theses. In addition, he supervised 76 honours and other graduate theses between 1984 and 2016. Near Eastern archaeology, material culture, the Bronze Age, and Anatolia and the Caucasus were common research themes.



Figure 3: The area Tony excavated at El-Qitar, Syria, directed by Tom McClellan and William Culican. Photo: 1982 courtesy Claudia Sagona.

His graduate students remember Tony as a kind and generous advisor, always constructive and encouraging. When my own supervisor, Guy Bunnens, left the university in 1999, Tony stepped in at the last minute to oversee the completion and examination of my PhD—not an easy task, but one he took on without hesitation.

Students were always Tony's first priority, and he was dedicated to supporting the next generation of scholars. Many students benefited from being included in his field expeditions to Turkey and Georgia, where they were able to increase their practical knowledge and skills.

Tony invested in all his students, but one in particular comes to mind. Jessie Birkett-Rees was just 15 years old when she first met Tony as an enthusiastic Year 10 work experience student. Tony clearly made an impression. Years later, Jessie went on to do her PhD with him, tutored for him, and worked with him on many of his research projects in Turkey and Georgia. They co-authored a number of articles. After completing her doctorate,



Figure 4: Den Plain, Tasmania. Attempts to replicate ballywinne grinding stone fragments fractured from the disc-like, river worn cobbles from the Mersey River, south of the Toolumbunner red ochre site once mined by the indigenous Tasmanians. Photo: 1986 courtesy Claudia Sagona.

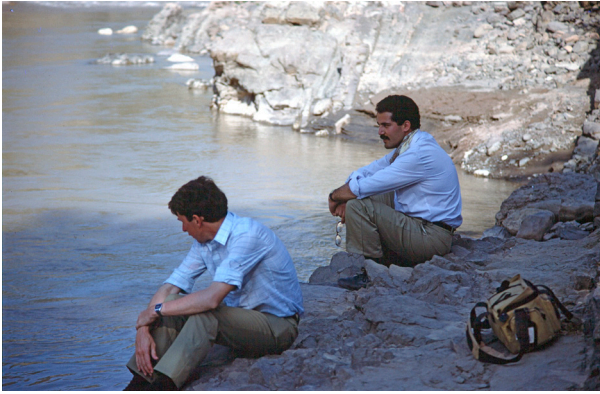


Figure 5: Tony and surveyor, Kepell Turnour, by the Çoruh River, Bayburt region. Photo: 1987 courtesy Claudia Sagona.



Figure 6: Tony with Tamaz Kiguradze, Georgian archaeologist and friend in Tbilisi, Georgia. Photo: 1987 courtesy Claudia Sagona.

Jessie became a Faculty of Arts Postdoctoral Fellow at Melbourne and was then employed as a lecturer at La Trobe University. She is now a member of the academic staff at the Centre for Ancient Cultures at Monash University, teaching students and directing field projects of her own.

Forty-one years of archaeological field-work

Tony's fieldwork simultaneously produced invaluable information on local cultures and contributed to broader understandings of regional developments. Along with a reputation for keeping records of the highest calibre, Tony was admired for his expansive knowledge and keen perspective on site formation and cultural change, especially in the regions from the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea.

With 41 years of experience in the field, 31 of them as director, Tony's knowledge was vast. His fieldwork began in Australia, at Lake Bolac (1975), and in 1985–1986 he would dig at the important ochre mining site of Toolumbunner in Tasmania. He also excavated in Syria, first with Peter Parr at Tell Nebi Mend in 1978 and then at El-Qitar in 1982 and 1984 with Bill Culican and Tom McClellan.

His main interest, however, lay in the Near East, as his postgraduate research had shown. In his own words, Tony had been 'a Melbourne University PhD student, completely immersed in the complexities of the Kura-Araxes,' and in 1981, he and Claudia had visited Georgia for the strictly enforced 12-day period allowed to foreigners (Menabde 2018).

As his position on the faculty became more secure, he turned to his own fieldwork projects. In Turkey, he co-directed major initiatives at Sos Höyük (1994–2003) and Büyüktepe Höyük (1988–1993). More recently he completed a seminal, large-scale investigation of the Anzac battlefield at Gallipoli with the Joint Historical

and Archaeological Survey (JHAS), including five years of field survey (2010–2014). His Georgian-Australian Investigations in Archaeology (GAIA) project commenced in 2008, with work taking place at Samtavro (2008–2010), Tchkantiskedi (2011) and Chobareti (2012–2016), and also encompassing field surveys in southwest Georgia.



Figure 7: Tony recording sites during the Bayburt survey. Photo: 1988 courtesy Claudia Sagona.

I joined Tony in the field at Gallipoli in 2014. I had travelled to Turkey to select objects for an exhibition called *The Anzac battlefield: Landscape of war and memory*, which was to commemorate the 2015 centenary of the Gallipoli landings. One afternoon Tony suggested we return to the survey site, as he wanted to take more photographs while the light was best. He was a fine photographer, always keen to capture the perfect picture. Most of the photographs that appeared in his publications were his own. He believed that high quality illustrations were no less important than text for elucidating archaeological finds.

Tony's standards in the field were famously exacting. The baulks of his trenches were razor sharp, field notebooks were meticulously maintained, and top plans and section drawings were rigorously made. Contexts were carefully and stratigraphically defined, and artefacts judiciously bagged and tagged. In short, Tony was a brilliant field archaeologist and excellent director. Elizabeth Pemberton recalls that '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' (Pemberton forthcoming). His attention to detail extended beyond the site: a recent meeting with staff in the faculty finance office revealed that Tony was well known—and a great favourite—for his meticulous bookkeeping.

Research on the material culture of ancient highland communities of Anatolia and the Caucasus

The unifying theme in Tony's research was how fieldwork on the material culture of ancient highland communities of Anatolia and the Caucasus could broaden our archaeological knowledge more generally, extending our understanding of cultural dynamics in mountainous landscapes and answering questions that ranged across history, the natural sciences, and physical and cultural anthropology.

Tony's approach necessitated working on several levels at once, employing a broad range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. At one end, he had three decades of continuous involvement in detailed archaeological fieldwork; at the other, he explored the broader conceptual questions his data raised, concerning ethnicity and group identity, boundaries and frontiers, the construction of social and religious landscapes, and the relationship between nomadism and sedentary lifestyles.

As Charles Burney has noted, Tony 'approached the ancient Near East on a wide front, eschewing the narrow specialisation favoured today by all too many... academics'. Although his projects were based in Georgia and eastern Turkey, his focus was wider. 'He has shown a breadth of vision together with keeping his nose to the ground, undistracted by diversions into theoretical archaeology' (Burney 2018).



Figure 8: In the early days of excavation at Büyüktepe Höyük. Photo: 1990 courtesy Claudia Sagona.

Author and editor

Tony was the author of eight books, and editor of another eight. He also wrote over 100 chapters, journal articles, records of conference proceedings, and encyclopaedia entries. His key works include *Ancient Turkey*, co-authored with Paul Zimansky and published in 2009, and *Anzac Battlefield: A Gallipoli Landscape of War and Memory* (2015), edited with Mithat Atabay, Chris Mackie, Ian McGibbon and Richard Reid. Sadly, Tony did not live to see his final book, *The Archaeology of the Caucasus*, in print, but his wonderful ability to evoke a landscape and skill as a writer are preserved in the words he used to open its narrative:

On a clear day in the southern Caucasus, standing on a vantage point along the middle Kura Basin, the immense horizon becomes an irresistible attraction. There, dim in the remote distance, towering high above the foothills is the mighty range of the Greater Caucasus Mountains. Their lower slopes are usually veiled in cloudy vapours, while their snow-clad peaks glitter in the sunlight, suspended between earth and sky. Over the ridge is another world, one of mighty river valleys and foothills that merge imperceptibly with the vast European steppe lands beyond (Sagona 2017:1).

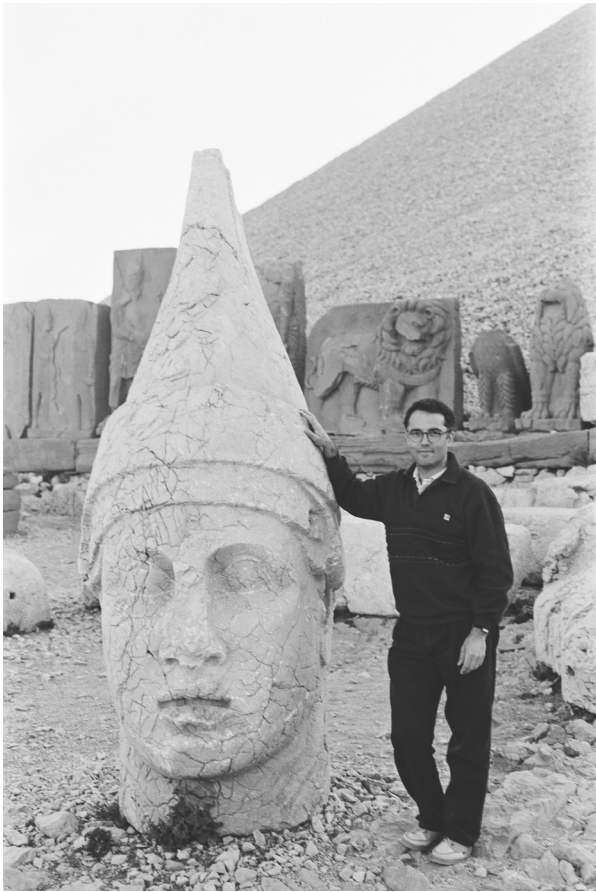


Figure 9: Tony at Nemrut Dağ beside the carved head of Antiochus; taken while conducting an archaeological tour in eastern Turkey. Photo: 1999 courtesy Claudia Sagona

Tony derived great enjoyment from writing, and somehow managed to find time for it almost every day. While his subject matter was diverse, his publications had in common that they successfully merged meticulous research and scholarship with an ability to communicate his enthusiasm for his work and bring the ancient world to life for his readers.

Ancient Near Eastern Studies

In 1999, Tony assumed the editorship of *Abr-Nahrain*, an annual journal originally produced under the auspices of the Department of Semitic Studies and established in 1959 by Professor John Bowman.² In his first year as editor, and in a rather bold move, Tony changed the journal's name to *Ancient Near Eastern Studies (ANES)*, which he felt 'better reflected the contemporary identity and future of the journal as a modern and lively forum for scholarly studies on the ancient Near East' (Sagona 1999). Further changes initiated by Tony reflected his talent for visual design: in 2006 he overhauled the cover art, introducing the distinctive dark blue theme; in 2012, colour plates were added; and in 2013, a new larger-scale format appeared.

In addition, Tony and Claudia embarked on a most ambitious editorial role in overseeing the production of more

than 40 monographs in the *ANES* supplement series. As in all other aspects of his work, Tony was a great supporter of emerging talent in his role as publisher. He extended invitations to numerous graduate students and early career researchers, in Australia and abroad, to submit their work to be considered for the journal or supplement series. One of his final contributions was to see monograph no. 53, *Metal Jewellery of the Southern Levant and its Western Neighbours*, through to completion. Written by Josephine Verduci, it was based on her PhD, successfully completed at Melbourne in 2015. This part of Tony's legacy will continue when volumes based on doctoral dissertations by Giorgi Bedianashvili (École pratique des hautes études, Paris) and Jarrad Paul (University of Melbourne) are published in years to come.

Context and Connection

In 2014, work commenced on a Festschrift to commemorate Tony's 60th birthday and celebrate his myriad achievements. The volume is a testament to the esteem and affection in which Tony was held around the world. It contains 64 chapters by 86 colleagues and students, past and present, from Turkey, Georgia and Australia, as well as Armenia, Azerbaijan, France, Israel, Italy, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. While it is most unfortunate that Tony did not live to see the Festschrift in its final form, he was kept well informed of progress and furnished along the way with the table of contents and other parts of the manuscript. The good opinion of his colleagues was of immense importance to Tony and he was genuinely moved by this tribute.

As Aleksandra Michalewicz and her co-authors observe in the preface of the Festschrift, 'Tony demonstrated that someone from Australia, a country thousands of kilometres away from the Near East, can make a profound and lasting impact on studies in that region. Moreover, beyond his academic contributions, he firmly established himself as someone who has gained the respect and fondness of colleagues the world over. This is no simple success' (Batmaz et al. 2017).



Figure 10: Tony recording sites, Gerda Kaya, Erzurum Survey. Photo: 2003 courtesy Claudia Sagona.



Figure 11: Tony on the highland plain south of Chobareti in the Akhaltsikhe region of southern Georgia; waiting for the perfect lighting. Photo: 2012 courtesy Claudia Sagona.

Final words

Put simply, Tony will be remembered not only as a great academic, but also as a good person. Many will remember his wicked sense of humour. Elizabeth Pemberton recalls his ability to mimic could be devastating – never vicious, but incredibly clever (Pemberton forthcoming). His kindness and generosity were universally acknowledged. He was a dedicated family man, always constant and reliable in an unpredictable world. He was delighted to be a father and, recently, a grandfather. He loved to cook and to entertain visitors to Melbourne, and enjoyed being chauffeured around town by Claudia locally, and hop-on hop-off bus drivers in the many cities he visited as a passionate world traveller.

It has been my privilege to have been first Tony’s student, then his colleague and finally his friend. Let me finish with memories of Tony from each of these eras and in so doing, bring together some different aspects of his wonderful career and many achievements as archaeologist, teacher and publisher.

As a student, I recall his evocative lecture on the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a poem from ancient Mesopotamia, miraculously preserved in clay tablets dating from the third millennium BC. As a brilliant and an engaging teacher, Tony introduced legions of students to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and brought the ancient world to life for us through his passion for archaeology—the material culture of the past—and his interest in historical texts and traditions.

As a colleague, in 2016 I remember him surrounded by a throng of admirers at ICAANE,³ the most important inter-

national meeting of scholars of Near Eastern archaeology, beside a table set up by Peeters and straining under the weight of all the monographs in the *ANES* supplement series. It was a very proud moment in recognition of Australia’s contribution to the scholarship of Near Eastern archaeology under Tony.

As a friend, I was inspired by his words about why ancient world studies were important. ‘[They] lie at the heart of the humanities,’ he said, ‘and ... explore what it is to be human. Whereas it would be possible to live in a world without the humanities and, in turn, classics and archaeology, what a boring and meaningless world it would be – bereft of memory or imagination, or any understanding of the cultural environment that has shaped all our lives.’

Antonio (Tony) Giuseppe Sagona died on 29 June 2017 from complications of Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia. His family was by his side just as he wanted. He was 61 years of age and is survived by his wife Claudia, daughter Amadea, son-in-law Ryan and grandson Harland.⁴ To commemorate Tony’s significant legacy, a named scholarship is being established in his memory, to be awarded to students undertaking Near Eastern archaeological research.⁵

Andrew Jamieson
Classics and Archaeology Programme
School of Historical and Philosophical Studies
The University of Melbourne
asj@unimelb.edu.au

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62614/g4r3gb42>

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express his sincere thanks to Tony's wife, Dr Claudia Sagona, for providing and clarifying details contained in this obituary. He also wishes to thank Abby Robinson for her contributions. For other obituaries on Tony see Pemberton (forthcoming) and Ridley (forthcoming).

References

- Batmaz, A., G. Bedianashvili, A. Michalewicz and A. Robinson eds 2018 *Context and Connection: Essays on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East in Honour of Antonio Sagona*, Leuven: Peeters.
- Burney, C. 2018 Reflections, in Batmaz, A. et al. eds *Context and Connection: Essays on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East in Honour of Antonio Sagona*, Leuven: Peeters.
- Christesen, N. 1996 Goldman, Maurice David (1898–1957), Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/goldman-maurice-david-10319/text18263>, published first in hardcopy 1996, accessed online 3 October 2017.
- Clarke, G.W. 1984 William Culican 1928–1984, Australian Academy of the Humanities, Proceedings 12, 1982–1983 <https://www.humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/AAH-Obit-Culican-1984.pdf>, accessed online 3 October 2017.
- Clarke, G.W. 1986 William Culican (An appreciation given at the Requiem Mass), in Culican, W. ed. *Opera Selecta: From Tyre to Tartessos*, Göteborg: Paul Åströms Forlag, 27–34.
- Davey, C.J. 2014 The Australian Institute of Archaeology and the beginning of ancient world archaeology at the University of Melbourne, *Buried History* 50:21–30.
- Harding, A.F. 1985 Book Review, A.G. Sagona The Caucasian Region in the Early Bronze Age, Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, International Series 214, 1985, *Antiquity* 59/227:224–25.
- Mackie, C. 2018 Reflections, in Batmaz, A. et al. eds *Context and Connection: Essays on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East in Honour of Antonio Sagona*, Leuven: Peeters.
- Menabde, M. 2018 Reflections, in Batmaz, A. et al. eds *Context and Connection: Essays on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East in Honour of Antonio Sagona*, Leuven: Peeters.
- Pemberton, E. (forthcoming) Antonio Sagona 1956–2017, Australian Academy of the Humanities.
- Ridley, R.T. 2007 Culican, William (Bill) (1928–1984), Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/culican-william-bill-12377/text22243>, published first in hardcopy, accessed online 5 October 2017.
- Ridley, R.T. (forthcoming) Antonio Sagona 1956–2017, *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 55.
- Sagona, A.G. 1983 The Caucasian Region in the Early Bronze Age, unpublished PhD Thesis, Department of History, University of Melbourne.
- Sagona, A.G. 1984a *The Caucasian Region in the Early Bronze Age*, British Archaeological Reports International Series 214, 3 vols, Oxford: British Archaeological Reports.
- Sagona, A.G. 1984b William Culican: Portrait of a scholar (1928–1984). In *Opera Selecta: From Tyre to Tartessos*, 7–26. Paul Göteborg: Åströms Forlag.
- Sagona, A.G. 1988 Archaeology at The University of Melbourne: A short essay, in A.G. Sagona and J.K. Zimmer eds *Images of the Ancient World: Archaeology at the University of Melbourne*, Caulfield, Melbourne: Chisholm Institute of Technology, 11–18.
- Sagona, A.G. 2017, *The Archaeology of the Caucasus: From Earliest Settlements to the Iron Age*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sagona, A.G. 1999 Editorial, *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 36.
- Sagona, A.G. and P. Zimansky 2009 *Ancient Turkey*, London: Routledge.
- Sagona, A.G., M. Atabay, C. Mackie, R. Reid and I. McGibbon eds 2016 *Anzac Battlefield: A Gallipoli Landscape of War and Memory*, Cambridge, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Scott, R. 2016 After Hunt to Current State of Classics, in R. Scott ed. *Towards a History of Classics at the University of Melbourne: Papers celebrating the sesquicentenary of the University of Melbourne and the Centenary of the Classical Association of Victoria*, IRIS Journal of the Classical Association of Victoria 25:109–37.

Endnotes

- 1 Culican is commemorated in a Fourth-Year scholarship in archaeology, known as the William Culican Memorial Award, which Tony was very involved in establishing and overseeing.
- 2 The publication of *Abr-Nahrain*, and subsequently *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* (ANES), an annual, refereed journal, published by Peeters, Leuven, has been made possible by the Maurice Goldman Trust. On Maurice Goldman, foundation professor of the Department of Semitic Studies, see Christesen 1996.
- 3 In 2016 the 10th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East (ICAANE) was in Vienna, organised by the Austrian Academy of Sciences.
- 4 A funeral service celebrating Tony's life was held at St. Carthage's Church, Parkville on Friday 7 July 2017.
- 5 For information about the scholarship please contact the author.