

Photo Essay

Archaeology

Past Meets Present

Serge Nègre

Abstract

The École biblique et archéologique française (EBAF) in Jerusalem possesses an abundant collection of several thousand photographs, glass plates of different sizes, glass slides for educational projections, and paper photo prints. This has been enriched with images from other communities and/or collectors in Palestine who entrusted documents to the school for digitization and processing, which were then returned. The owners granted EBAF rights to use the images and receive the digital version. Some original images have been donated to EBAF and are carefully conserved according to Photographic Activity Test standards. Over fifteen years ago, the author began to discover the plentiful collection of glass plate negatives, ranging from small formats up to 20 cm x 30 cm negatives, nineteenth century prints, to glass slides. The subjects are diverse, including images of religious communities and their schools, the friars' journeys through the Near East, and archaeological and even ethnographic research. Working on these photographic collections, the author imagines myself as if with them in the field, spending long hours with the workers who were doing the laborious work of digging, clearing, and searching. In text and photo montage, Serge Nègre shines a light on the anonymous workers responsible for the hard work on the digs.

Keywords

École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jerusalem (EBAF); Dominican friars; archaeology; photographic library; montage; Palestinians; Father Antonin Jaussen.



Figure 1. Father Antonin Jaussen at a well. Photo courtesy of EBAF.

Dominican Father Marie-Joseph Lagrange, the founder of the *École biblique et archéologique française* (EBAF), conducted excavations between 1885–1892 to uncover and restore the remains of the Byzantine Saint Stephen (Saint-Etienne) Basilica in Jerusalem. Since its creation, the EBAF has been at the forefront of excavations in Palestine, its efforts guided by a desire to know the land and its inhabitants as described in the Bible. Scientific programs and field research disciplines were also initiated by the school.

Father Paul-Marie Séjourné and Lagrange undertook explorations that became a specialty of the school, and were continued by Lagrange, Father Antonin Jaussen, and Raphaël Savignac. Other friars included Roland de Vaux on the site of Qumran, accompanied by the young Hugues Vincent and Félix-Marie Abel. The exploratory trips made with students – the “biblical caravans” – were always the occasion of an archaeological, epigraphic, and photographic harvest carefully reported in *La Revue biblique*.

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EBAF's collection includes its own images, and some images in danger of being lost that were recovered from private collections.



Figure 2. Father Antonin Jaussen and Raphaël Savignac under the tent. Photo courtesy of EBAF.

Palestinian Archaeology's Unsung Heroes

In the archaeological images and technical photographs, we note the permanent presence of workers. Bit by bit, I undertook a journey into the past when the passion and study of a few individuals opened up encounters and exchanges with others from different backgrounds.

Archaeology, at its best, seeks out and explains ancient people and societies. For the first archaeologists of the EBAF, it did not exclude improving their knowledge of the inhabitants of the country who were working with them. For this reason, learning Arabic was the first step toward understanding the descendants of these populations.

During meetings in parishes, visits, shared meals in tents, knowledge was exchanged. In addition to the images of archaeological sites and landscapes, the work of Father Antonin Jaussen on Nablus is more ethnography than archaeology, motivated by a genuine desire to know the people, their environment, and their history. He published his research in Paris in 1927, in a book titled *Naplouse et son district*.

For these reasons, I began to use these documents to make montages, that I call *chrono-photo-fusion* to shine a light on the anonymous workers responsible for

the hard work on the digs. Over the years, Palestinians were hired on digs to lift blocks of stone, dig the earth, and haul thousands of tons of rubble that covered many archaeological sites in the country. Looking at those photos for so long, one can start seeing the workers asking themselves, “What deep-buried treasure could be so important to come from across the seas for it?” or “What were these foreigners looking for?”

Nonetheless, these foreigners and their digging and hauling jobs were usually welcome, as they brought salaries to the families and therefore a means of survival in an often harsh and difficult existence, in this region scorched by sun.

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Tharad Raktia	16 4.200 -	Abdullah Khalid	16 4.200 - 5
Tharad Khalid	16 4.200 -	Amr Khalid	16 4.200 - 3
Tharad Khalid	16 4.200 -	Tharad Khalid	16 4.200 -
Tharad Khalid	16 4.200 - 12	Tharad Khalid	16 4.200 - 34
Tharad Khalid	16 4.200 -	Tharad Khalid	16 4.200 - 13
Tharad Khalid	16 4.200 -	Tharad Khalid	16 4.200 - 24
Tharad Khalid	16 4.200 -	Tharad Khalid	16 4.200 - 3
Tharad Khalid	16 4.200 -	Tharad Khalid	16 4.200 - 56
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Figure 3. A sample of the working log, with workers' finger stamps attesting to receiving payments. Photo courtesy of EBAF.

Working on these photographic collections, I imagine myself as if with them in the field, spending long hours with the workers who were doing the laborious work of digging, clearing, and searching. Under the watchful eye of the archaeologist clearing a shard, the men at the bottom of an excavation load and hoist buckets of earth or rubble to the top. Processions of men and women could be seen carrying heavy baskets on their heads with the remnants of their history and those of their ancestors, of whom they knew nothing. These projects provided a temporary source of income for Palestinians, their families, and friends, often from the same neighborhood. The sites also facilitated social exchanges outside of work, so the friars could get to know the workers.

Why Were These Workers Forgotten or Unknown?

From my research of ancient documents on Palestine, and the numerous publications that exist, I am not aware of any images kept by the families of former archaeological workers. There are several reasons for this: first of all, this was more than one hundred years ago, and we know that while taking photographs in the field was possible at the time, developing them was another matter. The photographer's job there was to document the excavations and therefore had to follow closely what was happening in the field. Second, the reproduction or representation of the faces of the workers, men or women, could also pose a problem. The friars were presumably aware of this, and therefore acted with respect and consideration for the workers when photographing and using images. Furthermore, the workers would have never had the opportunity to see the photographs, as they were developed long after they had been taken in the field, when it would have been difficult to return them to the location to show to the workers. This explains the rarity of showing these photographs to the workers on the excavation site, and therefore the workers are "unknown." Most often, these documents have remained in the archives of the different institutions, but there are probably more to discover.

These explorers of the Near East provided well-documented archaeological research, and had an ethnographer's approach, with interest in their fellow human beings.

Likewise, this was my motivation in making these composite photographs.

Serge Nègre is a French photographer and founder of the Photographic Museum Arthur Batut. He is involved in research of nineteenth-century photography in Palestine at the photographic collections of EBAF, using photographs to compose what he calls chrono-photo-fusion. When working as a nurse, he photographed Romani people in France over a thirty-year period. He also participated in polar expeditions for ten years with Dr. Jean-Louis Etienne.

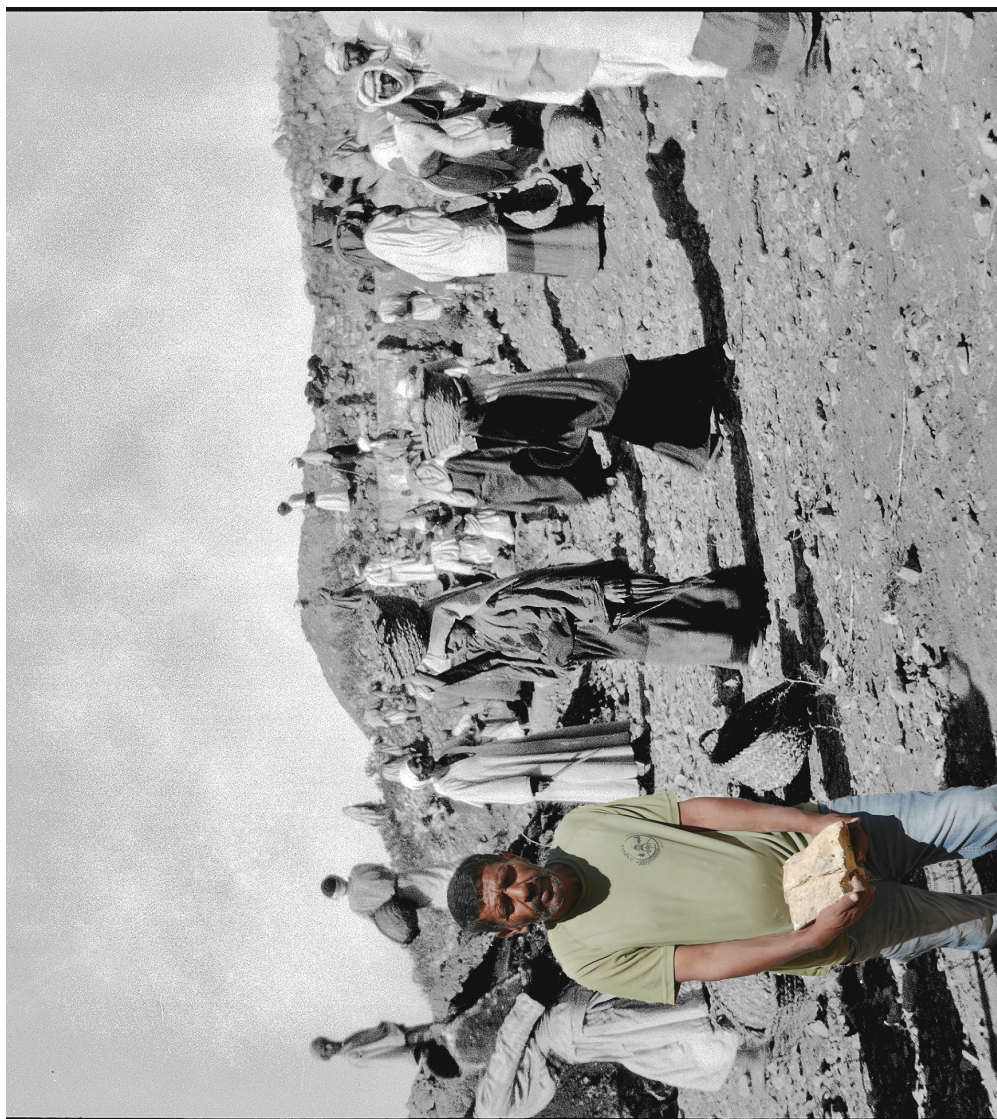


Figure 4. Beth Zur (Khirbat Burj al-Sur) and Jerusalem. Montage by author; photo courtesy of the American Society of Overseas Research.



Figure 5. Tal Bayt Mirsim and Dayr al-Balah. Montage by author; photo courtesy of EBAF.



Figure 6. Father Antonin Jaussen visiting Bedouins. Montage by author; photo courtesy of EBAF.



Figure 7. Amwas and Tal Qila. Montage by author; photo courtesy of EBAF.



Figure 8. Father Roland de Vaux at Tal al-Farah and Tal Qila. Montage by author; photo courtesy of EBAF.



Figure 9. Tal al-Farah, Father Roland de Vaux, on the right, and Gaza, Midan Falistin excavations. Montage by author; photo courtesy of EBAF.



Figure 10. Bayt Jimal and children in Gaza at Midan Falistine excavations. Montage by author; photo courtesy of EBAF.



Figure 11. Teleilat el-Ghassul (Tulaylat al-Ghassul) Pontifical Biblical Institute excavations and Hebron. Montage by author; photo courtesy of EBAF.