

# History Turns Space into Place

## A French Voyage to the Dead Sea Basin in 1864

Isotta Poggi

### Abstract

In 1864, French humanist and collector Honoré d'Albert, duc de Luynes (1802–1867) spearheaded a scientific exploratory mission from Beirut, Lebanon, to Petra, Jordan, with the professional expertise of photographer Louis Vignes (1831–1896), geologist Louis Lartet (1840–1899), and naturalist Gustave Combe (1832–1905). The team surveyed the basin of the Dead Sea, researching historical sites associated with the biblical stories (including the ancient “cursed” cities) and the basin’s geological features. A year later, de Luynes financed the photographic campaign of Henri Sauvaire (1831–1896) to Hebron, West Bank, and the crusade castles of Karak and Shubak, Jordan. Accompanied by an archive of photographs, drawings, and maps, and recorded as a compilation of travelogues in *Voyage d’exploration à la mer Morte, à Petra, et sur la rive gauche du Jourdain* (Paris, 1874), the mission documents a French approach to investigating the historical roots of Christianity in Palestine and encounters with the local inhabitants in the waning decades of the Ottoman Empire. Created shortly before the establishment of the Palestine Exploration Fund, the photographs of living cities – Nablus, Jenin, and Hebron – and of natural landscapes by the Dead Sea, along with the geological maps and the travelers’ texts, may contribute unique historical sources in the context of Yazid Anani’s *Cities Exhibition* project.

### Keywords

French mission to Palestine; Louis Lartet; Louis Vignes; Henri Sauvaire; Honoré d'Albert, duc de Luynes; Exploration of the Dead Sea; nineteenth century travel photography; Mar Saba Monastery; Nablus; Hebron.

Photo historian Liz Wells begins “Landscape: Time, Space, Place, Aesthetics” with the notion that landscapes are defined by the stories written about them: “History turns space into place.”<sup>1</sup> Wells identifies the symbiotic relationship between nature and culture as a fluid definitional process, in which “our perception of nature is filtered through cultural understandings [...], human action contours the landscape, and stories told give meaning to it.” It is with such layered cultural history that the landscape photographs of Palestine taken in 1864, in what is called today the West Bank, feature the topography and urban centers of a region continuously inhabited for millennia.

French humanist Honoré Théodorice Paul Joseph d’Albert (1802–1867), 8th Duc de Luynes, led a mission from Beirut to Petra over a period of five months (9 February to 23 June 1864). After devoting his life to studying and collecting Greco-Roman antiquities from Cyprus, Phoenicia, Palestine, and Italy, he conceived this mission to combine his interdisciplinary interests in biblical studies, antiquity, and archaeology with his scientific pursuits in photography, chemistry, and geology.<sup>2</sup> Inspired by the Bible’s scriptures and exegesis, de Luynes established an itinerary in Ottoman Palestine through the sites associated with Judeo-Christian tradition, including both living cities and ancient ruins. One of his goals was to identify the locations of the biblical “cursed” cities, following the scriptures, within the context of the geophysical environment of the Dead Sea basin.<sup>3</sup>

De Luynes’s team of experts, each with specific assigned tasks, included: naval lieutenant Louis Vignes (1831–1896), who had traveled extensively to the eastern Mediterranean and was trained in photography; geologist Louis Lartet (1840–1899); and naturalist Gustave Combe (1832–1905). The team navigated the length and breadth of the Dead Sea in a custom-built collapsible metal boat and collected water samples at different depths. After visiting Petra, de Luynes returned to France while other members of the expedition headed north to explore Palmyra and other sites. At de Luynes’s request, the following year French diplomat and photographer Henri Sauvaire (1831–1896) and architect Christophe Edouard Mauss (1829–1914) pursued a photographic campaign of the ruins of the crusaders’ castles at Shubak (Montréal) and Karak, in today’s Jordan.

Most significantly, de Luynes launched two photography competitions between 1856 and 1867 through the Société française de photographie. One award was for increased image quality and stability, to prevent image deterioration due to fading, a common problem with salted paper prints at the time. The second award went towards the development of a photomechanical process for the mass production of photographs intended for publication. Photo historian Sylvie Aubenas has chronicled the competition and its resulting rivalries during this early phase of the history of photography, in which Louis-Alphonse Poitevin (1819–1882) ultimately won a prize for his photolithographic process. De Luynes, however, preferred the photogravure developed by Charles Nègre due to its accurate rendition of details, broader range of tones, and image-enhancing qualities. He chose Nègre’s process for the production of the photogravures selected for the mission’s publication.<sup>4</sup>

The report of de Luynes' Dead Sea mission was published ten years later in *Voyage d'exploration à la mer Morte, à Petra, et sur la rive gauche du Jourdain*, released in three volumes.<sup>5</sup> *Voyage* (1874) includes a portfolio of 67 photogravures (after photographs mostly by Louis Vignes) and 18 lithographs (after photographs by Henri Sauvaire) featuring the landscapes functioning as documents of the rich multi-layered history, both cultural and geological, of the Dead Sea basin.

The journey was significant for pioneering the use of photography as a scientific recording tool. Some areas along the banks of the Jordan River and around the Dead Sea were photographed for the first time during this voyage. The images of Jerash, one of the cities of the Hellenistic Decapolis and later a key Roman junction along the caravan route leading to the Mediterranean, are among the first taken of this ancient city, and predate the excavation of the site in the early twentieth century. Other archaeological, biblical, and historically relevant sites photographed during the journey for the first time include: Nahr-al-Kalb, a strategic crossroads in Lebanon with inscriptions left by invading military forces from the Assyrians to Napoleon; the site believed to be Mount Nebo, from where Moses reputedly surveyed the promised land and later died, and the Nabatean-Arab capital Petra with its spectacular monuments carved into the living rock, respectively in north and south Jordan; the Hellenistic sanctuary at Banyas, in the Syrian Golan; and Palmyra, Syria.

During this mission, de Luynes negotiated two important antiquities for the Louvre Near East collection: the sarcophagus of King Eshmunazar (early fifth century BCE) from the necropolis of Sidon, Lebanon,<sup>6</sup> and Shihan's Stele (commemorative slab), or Stele of the Warrior God (1200–800 BCE). The stele had been located by Félicien de Saulcy in 1851 on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, at a site called Rujum al-'Abd, Jordan (near Mount Shihan).<sup>7</sup> This last acquisition in particular drew much attention in Europe, raising the idea that more inscribed antiquities could be found in support of biblical archaeology.<sup>8</sup>

De Luynes' voyage documents a Eurocentric Christian (French Catholic) perspective and perception of Palestine at a time when this region was increasingly gaining international attention not only for its religious Judeo-Christian history (as the cradle of Christianity) but also for its geopolitical interests in the waning decades of the Ottoman Empire. A year after de Luynes' mission, the British crown approved the establishment of the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF). This membership organization was founded in 1865 by clergymen, members of the military, archaeologists, and engineers. Its purpose was "the accurate and systematic investigation of the archaeology, topography, geology and physical geography, natural history, manners and customs of the holy land, for biblical illustration."<sup>9</sup> The PEF founders sanctioned a scientific and methodologic approach to the survey and study of Palestine, and hence criticized the missions such as the one by de Luynes as "partial and isolated" attempts to study the region. In addition, de Luynes and others were deemed responsible for their "ill-advised liberality" in negotiating the acquisition of antiquities with local tribes, as it raised the local inhabitants' expectations.<sup>10</sup>

While the itinerary reflects the movement of the French travelers across multiple modern-day countries, from Lebanon (where they photographed the coastline of Tyre, the necropolis of Sidon, and ruins from the crusades) to Aqaba, Jordan, by the Red Sea, most of the images document the cities and sites closest to the Dead Sea, including in today’s West Bank.

The present preliminary study focuses on the photographs of locations, towns, and panoramas specifically in this area, as a historical resource for Yazid Anani’s *Cities Exhibition* project. A Palestinian scholar and architect, Anani has conceived *Cities Exhibition* as a series of curated cultural events addressing “decades of the Palestinian nation’s fragmentation, its geography, and its cultural production... somehow a response to the post-Oslo spatial enclaves of the West Bank.”<sup>11</sup> While Anani’s focus is to raise a cultural discourse and awareness between art practice and social change in cities and urban centers in today’s West Bank, de Luynes’ journey offers a mid-nineteenth-century portrait of the region: the French voyage produced photographic panoramas and maps which capture living cities (such as Nablus and Hebron), natural landscapes, and ancient ruins that were significant destinations for biblical archaeology or the geologic features of the Dead Sea basin.

## The Itinerary

The main reference map of the mission illustrates the detailed itinerary beginning from the entry point from the north at Sebastiya, which the travelers visited on the way from Jenin to Nablus in early March (figure 1, Jenin is not shown on map).

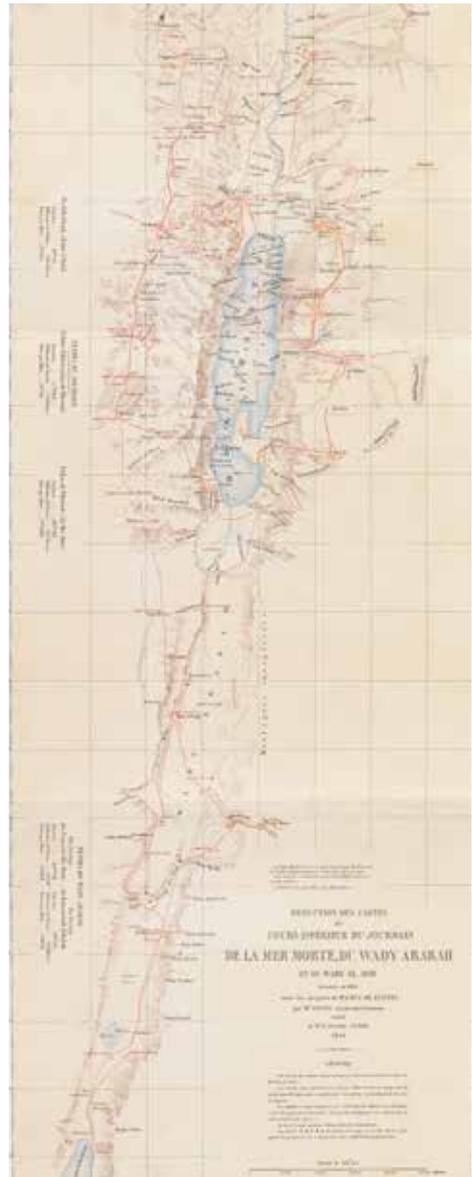


Figure 1. “Cours inférieur du Jourdain de la mer morte, du wadi Arabah e du wady el Jeib,” 1864, Map of the lower Jordan River, the Dead Sea, Wadi ‘Araba, and Wadi al-Jib , in Honoré d’Albert, duc de Luynes (1802–1867) et al., *Voyage d’exploration à la mer Morte, à Petra, et sur la rive gauche du Jourdain – Atlas* (Paris: Arthus Bertrand, Éditeur, 1874), portfolio, 138, detailed view of map online at [archive.org/details/gri\\_33125012263592](https://archive.org/details/gri_33125012263592) (accessed 7 June 2020).

The first site they photographed in what is today's West Bank was Jenin, which they reached on 3 March (figure 2). The view is centered on the French travelers' tents mounted on the outskirts of Jenin, which is visible on the hill on the right. A small herd of horses used to transport the travelers, their luggage and equipment, is to the right of the tents. The mosque and minaret, centered in the background, are framed by the mountains on the horizon and a stand of palm trees to their right. After Jenin, the group visited several locations marked with peculiar (mis)spellings (of the nineteenth century), French and the contemporary Arabic romanized names interchanging the order: "Sebastieh (Samarie)," "Naplouse (Sichem)," "el Kods (Jérusalem)," "er Riha (Jericho)," and "el Khulil (Hebron)," among others.



Figure 2. "Djenin," Louis Vignes, *Vues de Phénicie, de Judée, des Pays de Moab et de Petra – Atlas*, plate 19, albumen print.

Vignes took two panoramic photographs of Nablus, which they reached on 5 March; he first photographed Mount Gerzim because of its religious significance, then the center of Nablus as seen from this mountain, followed by a panorama of the city tucked in the valley between Mount Ebal (Jabal Ibal) and Mount Gerzim (Jabal Jarzim) (figures 3–5).



Figure 3. “Naplouse, Mont Garizim,” Louis Vignes, *Vues de Phénicie, de Judée, des Pays de Moab et de Petra – Atlas*, plate 21, albumen print.



Figure 4. “Naplouse, Base du Mont Garizim,” Louis Vignes, *Vues de Phénicie, de Judée, des Pays de Moab et de Petra – Atlas*, plate 22, albumen print.



Figure 5. “Naplouse, Bases des monts Gazirim et Ebal,” Louis Vignes, *Vues de Phénicie, de Judée, des Pays de Moab et de Petra – Atlas*, plate 20, albumen print.

On 7 March, the group visited a site near Beitin (Baytin) which they speculated to be the ancient Bethel in central Palestine. Vignes took the panoramic view of a plateau covered with ancient rubble in the foreground, as de Luynes attempted to reconcile the stories in Genesis with the actual physical environment (figure 6). There he realized the challenges of understanding sacred topography due to the inconsistencies of the literary sources and what he considered to be “ambiguities” in local oral histories.<sup>12</sup> From this site they could see the profiles of the mountains on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. De Luynes noted that both the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea were visible from that altitude, and observed differing sea levels between the bodies of water. A sketch by Lartet shows the mountain chains on the other side of the salted lake (figure 7).



Figure 6. “Bethel,” Louis Vignes, *Vues de Phénicie, de Judée, des Pays de Moab et de Petra* – Atlas, plate 23, albumen print.

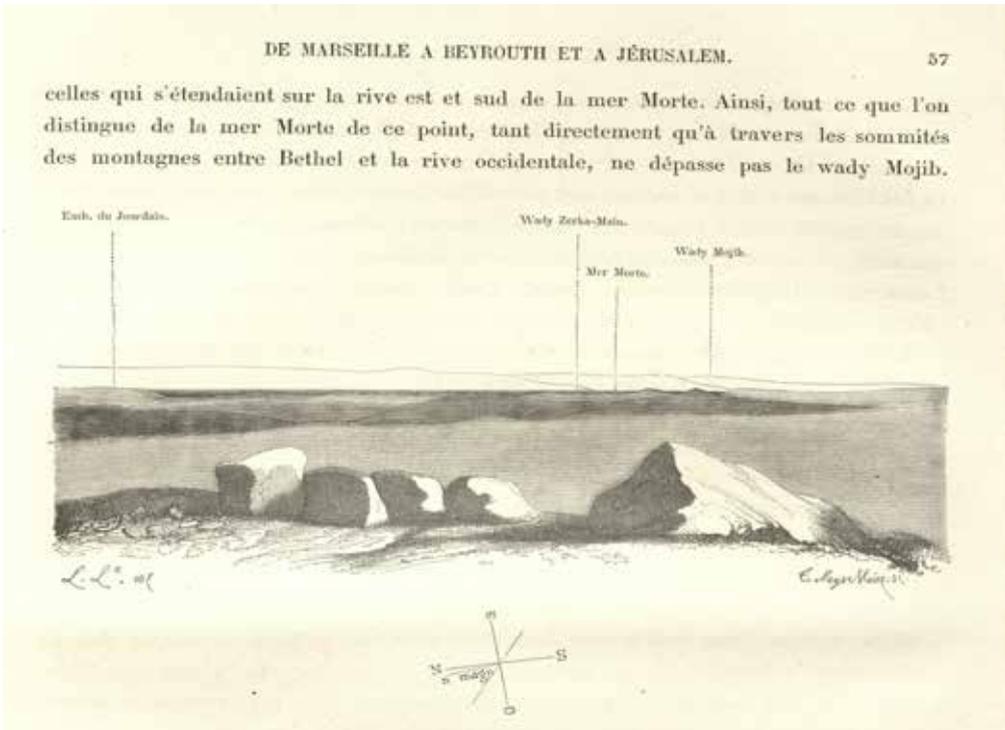


Figure 7. “View from Bethel of the eastern shore of the Dead Sea,” Louis Lartet, drawing, in Luynes, Honoré d’Albert, et al., *Voyage d’exploration à la Mer Morte, à Petra, et sur la rive gauche du Jourdain* (Paris: Arthus Bertrand, Éditeur, 1874), vol. 1, 57.

After weeks surveying the mountain ranges both north and east of Jericho, on each bank of the Jordan River as it approaches the Dead Sea, the team headed south. In Jerusalem they photographed the Holy Sepulcher and Siloam outside the walls (Silwan). On 23 April, they reached the monastery of Mar Saba, which lies halfway between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. For this site, the portfolio included a panorama showing the Kidron Valley (Wadi Qidrun) viewed from above the Greek monastery. However, the group of buildings is barely visible, with only the tops of two towers emerging from a hilltop in the center. Instead, the photograph clearly shows on the left the deep geological cut of the ravine of the Kidron Valley and its tributary to the Dead Sea. On the lower left corner, a small detail of a packing blanket reminds us of the presence of the observers, whose gaze points to the expansive altitudes ahead of them, reaching the mountain chains on the other side of the Dead Sea (figure 8).



Figure 8. “Vue Prise Audessus de Mar Saba,” Peter Bergheim (1844–1885), in Luynes, *Voyage d’exploration à la Mer Morte, à Petra, et sur la rive gauche du Jourdain – Atlas*, portfolio, plate 25, photogravure.

De Luynes visited Hebron in both early and late May. At his request, photographs of Hebron were taken by Henri Sauvaire who planned a photo campaign in Jordan of the Karak and Shubak castles a year later. On 8 April 1865, Sauvaire and Mauss took eight photographs of Hebron’s urban center. The series begins with a panoramic “bird’s eye view” of the mosque and its ramparts; the tomb of the Patriarchs is placed at the center, and the city on the right (figure 9). In this city, Sauvaire focused his camera on urban architectural details, such as the minarets, one of its cupolas marking the presence of the caves, the entrance to the al-Khalil bazaar, and a fountain. He also photographed the narrow alleyways and gateways of the city, noting the historical layers of the city found where the ancient walls stand under the new ones.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 9. Henry Sauvaire (1831–1896), Panorama view of Hebron, albumen print, 1866, Archives, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California.

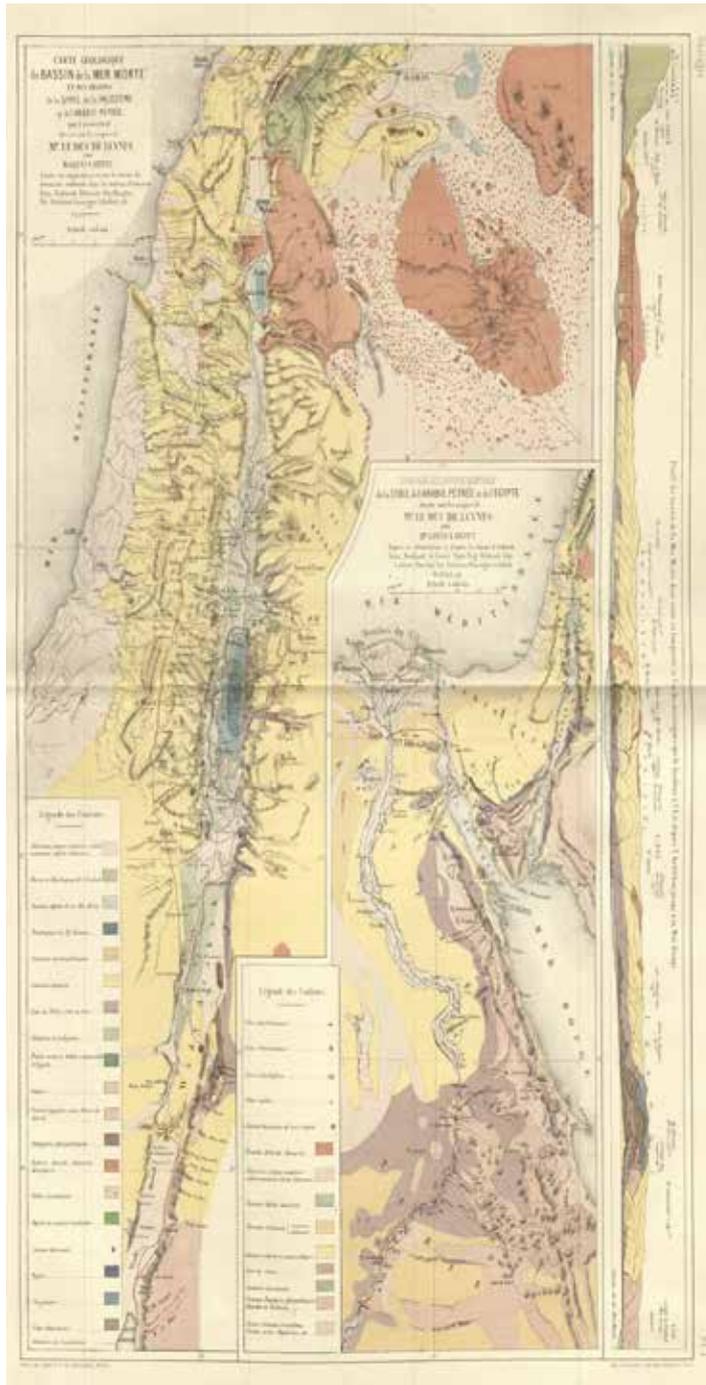


Figure 10. Lartet, Geologic map of the Dead Sea basin and the regions of Syria, Palestine, and Arabia Petraea, 1864, in Luynes, *Voyage d'exploration à la Mer Morte, à Petra, et sur la rive gauche du Jourdain*, vol. 3, plate 1.

The third volume of *Voyage* includes two geological maps of the Dead Sea made by Lartet.<sup>14</sup> One extends over the entire geological basin from Sidon in the north to the Red Sea, and the Sinai Peninsula in the south (figure 10); a second one provides a close-up look of the lake's contours, the surrounding mountains elevations, tributaries and shores from Nablus to the southern edge (figure 11).

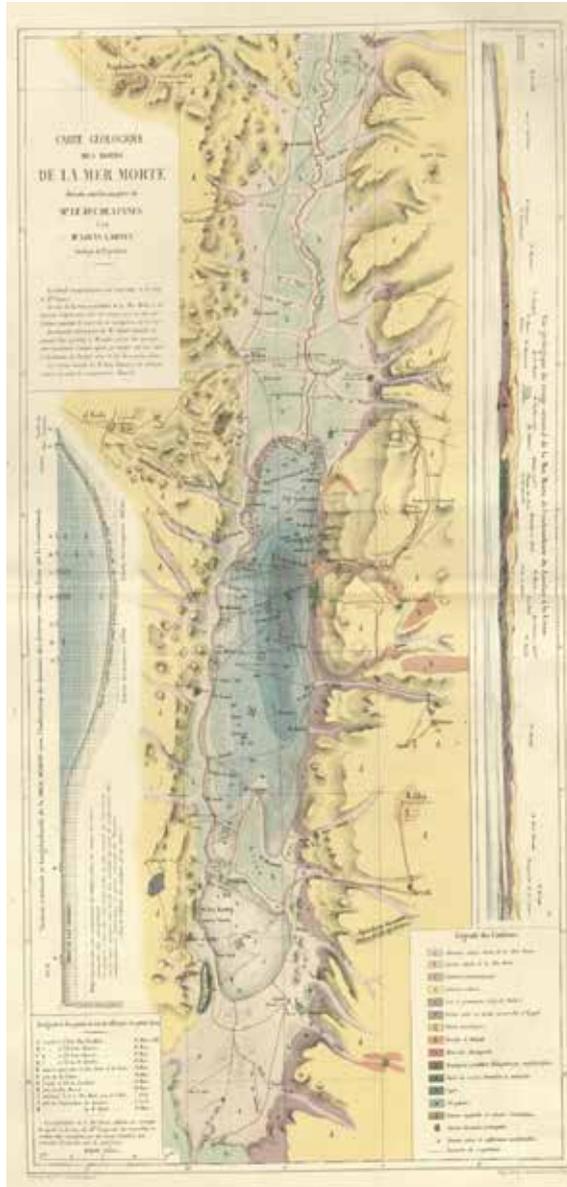


Figure 11. Lartet, Geologic map of the Dead Sea basin and the regions of Syria, Palestine, and Arabia Petraea, 1864, in Luynes, *Voyage d'exploration à la Mer Morte, à Petra, et sur la rive gauche du Jourdain*, vol. 3, plate 2.

De Luynes's empirical research *in situ* on the region's ancient geography could not come to full fruition. He met his death on his sixty-fifth birthday before he could publish all of his conclusions. He was in Italy to support the cause of the Roman pope, whose temporal authority was being threatened by the Risorgimento troops of Giuseppe Garibaldi. The duc's perspective and his devotion to the Catholic faith transpired throughout his writings in *Voyage*, and into the circumstances of his death.

As the publication's editor, de Vogüé, stated in volume one of *Voyage*, this mission was significant for allowing de Luynes to hypothesize the location of Sodom, at the foothill of the mountains of the Ghor valley, although he could not site Gomorrah nor other cursed biblical cities.<sup>15</sup> The editor acknowledged the difficulty of reconciling ancient geography with the exegesis of the scriptures and noted de Luynes' important contributions to the field.

Biblical exegesis apart, the images presented in *Voyage* show how the French travelers were deeply engaged with the complex relationship between ancient texts and the territory, and between culture and nature. Creating early panoramic photographs of land and cities in today's West Bank, this mission stands as a reminder and a resource for the study of the multi-layered history and identity of the region and the encounter of foreigners with local inhabitants.

Anani's *Cities Exhibition* project views "temporality as an important strategy for examining the city's ongoing transformations and scrutinizing the forces that reshape and reinvent Palestine and its political and social imaginary."<sup>16</sup> As de Luynes' mission documented this territory's cultural fabric, focusing on the significance of the sites through an historical lens, it reminds us of the history of migrations and settlements through millennia and the most recent centuries into modernity. While the panorama above the monastery of Mar Saba evokes a static time, harking back even to the Byzantine Empire, de Luynes offers vibrant Ottoman-era views of Jenin, Nablus, and Hebron, which have been dramatically transformed since then.

The photographs by Vignes and Sauvaire, along with the maps by Lartet, provide a counterpoint to public art projects which Anani sees, critically, as a "constant collision and negotiation: "ours" and "theirs."<sup>17</sup> The maps and cross-sectional details by Louis Lartet are a case in point. They reveal the free movement of the French group across the region. An east-west cross section presents the elevations of the mountain ranges from the Mediterranean Sea to Mount Shihan in Jordan, marking the highest peaks and the strategically placed urban centers developed along the way over thousands of years. The geologic formations of the Dead Sea basin beneath the cities visited in the voyage visually define the shared foundational ground not only for the French mission, but most importantly for this whole region, its landscape, its inhabitants, and its history (figure 12).

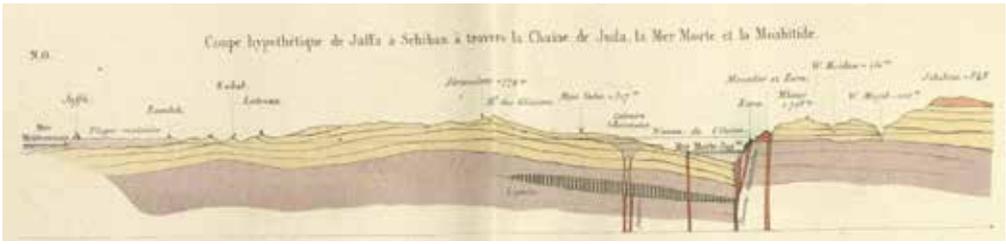


Figure 12. This cross-section drawing is captioned as the hypothetical explanation of the Dead Sea formation based on the depths that the author could explore and as material translation of the theory developed during the work. Lartet, Geologic map of the Dead Sea basin and the regions of Syria, Palestine, and Arabia Petraea, 1864, in Luynes, *Voyage d'exploration à la Mer Morte, à Petra, et sur la rive gauche du Jourdain*, vol. 3, plate 3 (detail).

*Isotta Poggi, a photo historian, studied at the University of Ca' Foscari in Venice, Italy, and at UCLA. She is associate curator of photographs at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, California. Her research interests in nineteenth-century photography focus primarily on the cultural history of photography, archaeology, travel, and exploration of the Mediterranean basin, Middle East, and Africa, and the documentation of cultural heritage. Her exhibition projects related to these themes include Inside Out: Pompeian Interiors Exposed (2012), Connecting Seas: A Visual History of Discoveries and Encounters (2014), and recently collaborated with the Biblioteca di Storia Moderna e Contemporanea on a digital publication on the first photographic reportage of war titled Roma 1849: Stefano Lecchi. A co-editor of Promote, Tolerate, Ban: Art and Culture in Cold War Hungary in Los Angeles, she is currently researching the photo-based production of the 1980s in former East Germany.*

## Endnotes

- 1 Liz Wells, *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 19.
- 2 De Luynes was a member of the *Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres*, and served as deputy director of the Louvre from 1825 to 1828. He co-founded the Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica (now the German Archaeological Institute) in Rome in 1829 with Eduard Gerhard (1795–1867), and in 1835 sponsored the French section of the Institute. He authored more than twenty books on topics ranging from archeology to chemistry.
- 3 Editor Melchior de Vogüé summarized de Luynes' intentions in the publication: "L'intention du duc de Luynes était de résumer dans un travail d'ensemble toutes les observations topographiques, archéologiques et géologiques, recueillies pendant son exploration, et, à l'aide de cette étude, de discuter les textes réunis ci-dessus. Il aurait alors donné ses conclusions et développé le système qu'il avait adopté pour interpréter les traditions relatives aux villes maudites et fixer la géographie ancienne du bassin de la mer Morte." Honoré d'Albert Luynes, Christophe Mauss, Henri Sauvaire, Louis Lartet and Louis Vignes, *Voyage D'exploration À La Mer Morte, À Petra, Et Sur La Rive Gauche du Jourdain*, vol.1–3 and portfolio, ed. Melchior de Vogüé (Paris: Arthus Bertrand: 1874), vol. 1, 375.
- 4 See Frances Terpak and Peter Bonfitto "Transferring Antiquity to Ink: Ruins from the Americas to Asia Minor and the Development of Photolithography" in *Camera Ottomana*:

- Photography and Modernity in the Ottoman Empire, 1840–1914*, ed. Zenap Çelik and Eldem Eldem, trans. Handel Eagle (Istanbul: Koç University Press, 2015), 33.
- 5 All three volumes of *Voyage D'exploration À La Mer Morte, À Petra, Et Sur La Rive Gauche du Jourdain*, and the portfolio are available online courtesy of the Getty Research Institute at ([archive.org](http://archive.org)) [bit.ly/37wLW9u](http://bit.ly/37wLW9u) (accessed 15 May 2020).
  - 6 De Luynes, *Voyage*, vol. 1, 21–22. This necropolis had just been mapped by archaeologist and philosopher Joseph Ernest Renan, an archaeology delegate appointed by Napoleon III to build the antiquities collection for the French national museum.
  - 7 De Luynes, *Voyage*, vol. 1, 171.
  - 8 Hannes Olivier, “Nineteenth-century Travelogues and the Land of Moab,” in Moshe Sharon, ed., *The Holy Land in History and Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 83–84.
  - 9 “The Palestine Exploration Fund: Prospectus,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, vol. 1 (1869), online at [biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/pefq/1869-71\\_001.pdf](http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/pefq/1869-71_001.pdf) (accessed 15 May 2020).
  - 10 *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, vol. 1, 2: “It is sufficient to observe that their researches have been partial and isolated, and their results in too many cases discrepant with each other.”
  - 11 Yazid Anani, and Hanan Toukan, “On Delusion, Art, and Urban Desires in Palestine Today: an Interview with Yazid Anani,” *Arab Studies Journal* 22, 1 (Spring 2014): 211.
  - 12 De Luynes, *Voyage*, vol. 1, 351.
  - 13 While the Hebron series was not published in the *Voyage* portfolio, the original prints and negatives of this series are in the archives of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles.
  - 14 De Luynes, *Voyage*, vol. 3, plates 1–3.
  - 15 De Vogüé, *Voyage*, vol. 1, 375–76: “La grande lagune qui forme l’extrémité de la mer Morte, au sud de la Liean, occupe la place de la plaine de Siddim; les villes maudites étaient situées au pied des montagnes dans le Ghôr: Sodome près du Djebel -Esdoum, Ségor à l’embouchure du wady Es-Safieh ou à celle du wady Ed-Draâ. Il croyait, en outre, à l’existence d’une seconde ville du nom de Ségor ‘ou Tsoar au nord de la mer Morte, dans le Ghôr El-Belkaâ, près de l’embouchure du Jourdain et sur sa rive gauche. Il ne s’était pas encore prononcé quant à l’emplacement précis qu’il assignait à Gomorrhe, à Seboïm et à Adarna, mais il les cherchait aussi au sud du lac. . . . il est vivement à regretter que la science ait été privée des lumières que cet esprit éminent aurait jetées sur les difficiles questions de géographie et d’exégèse soulevées par les récits bibliques.”
  - 16 Anani, “On Delusion, Art, and Urban Desires,” 216.
  - 17 Anani, “On Delusion, Art, and Urban Desires,” 216.