

Dispersing Past Cities Through Collecting

Travelers, Collectors and Their Networks in
Late 19th and Early 20th Century West Asia

5-6 February 2026

Organized by

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The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, Copenhagen



London: J. Galt & Co. by W. Hayward, 1844.

INTERIOR OF THE MUSEUM OF
THOMAS BARTHOLIN Esq.
Bartholin's House
to whom this House is
By the
Bartholin



AARHUS
UNIVERSITY



Museum für
Islamische Kunst
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

GERDA HENKEL STIFTUNG

CARLSBERG FOUNDATION



Alexander von Humboldt
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Group of travelers and their camels in front of tower tombs at Palmyra. Courtesy of Mary Ebba Underdown.

Front cover

William Bowman, Interior of the Museum of Thomas Bateman Esq, Lombardale House, near Bakewell.
Drawing by W. Bowman, Leeds, c. 1850s. Sheffield Museum.

Outline

The ruined ancient city scapes of Western Asia have attracted attention for as long as we can detect traveling. In the 19th and early 20th centuries the region saw an increase in travelers, for research, pleasure, exploitation, and religious reasons. As long as these sites have been visited by non-locals, their ruins and the soil upon which they were constructed, have also provided grounds for collections - collections which today are spread across the world. These cities, often in ruins, but not lost to their local settings, were, however, considered lost and in turn rediscovered by visitors from the West. They were considered exotic spaces that contained the physical remains of glorious civilizations connected to the western past and therefore deemed invaluable to Western travelers. Beginning in the 18th century, partly due to safer travel possibilities provided by the growing security - for Westerners - in the lands under Ottoman rule, there was a steady increase of Western and some non-Western travelers.

This conference aims to explore several strands of knowledge regarding travelers and collectors: firstly, travelers who engaged in collection and acquisitions. Secondly, the diverse material that antiquities became embedded in through the eclectic tastes and trade patterns utilized by these travelers, who often became collectors on various scales. Furthermore, the aim is to explore the entanglement of these actors and 'lost cities' and the ways in which they influenced and interacted with the European and Ottoman imaginaire. This necessarily includes antiquarian collectors who were primarily interested in the aesthetic and economic value that could be 'mined' from these city scapes. These accounts and collections interact with and need to be contextualized on smaller, local scales; a process through which we can uncover deeper and more nuanced ways of exploring the transfer of knowledge and material in this period. We take an 'objects' first approach in this conference and ask for engagement with the archaeological significance of these individuals' collecting 'habits' and their impact on the landscapes from which they got the material and to which it was brought.

We seek to specifically include contributions that examine diverse travelers and collecting practices in the Greater Syria region in the Ottoman and Mandate periods, but which do so through research that goes beyond single-character accounts and narratives. Therefore we urge invited speakers to situate and nuance approaches that engage with the overarching patterns behind the single individuals or group travelers and engage with questions that speak to the influence on collections, public and private and the dispersal of cultural heritage from the region and its influence on the construction of the western world-view.

Programme: Thursday 5 February

9:00–9:30 *Welcome and Introduction*
Olympia Bobou (Aarhus University), Miriam Kühn (Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin), and Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

Session 1**Chair: Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)**

9:30–10:20 *From Travel Accounts to Excavation Trenches: Ctesiphon and Khirbat al-Minya as Examples for the Shaping of Archaeological Agendas*
Franziska Bloch & Miriam Kühn (Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin)

10:20–11:10 *'Purchases made here and there with much judgment': Oxford University's Network of Stamp-seal Collectors at the Turn of the 20th Century*
Nancy Highcock (Ashmolean Museum)

11:10–12:00 *Collecting Antioch on the Gold River: The Dispersal of Gerasa Through the Dispersal of Excavation Finds*
Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

12:00–13:00 Lunch for speakers (3rd floor)

Session 2**Chair: Anne Haslund (National Museum of Denmark)**

13:00–13:50 *Collecting Roman Lead Sarcophagi from Tyre in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century: Practices, Networks, and Impacts on Archaeological Landscape*
Nicolas Amoroso (Domaine & Musée royal de Mariemont)

13:50–14:40 *Collecting Palmyra in Copenhagen: Some Insights into the Palmyrene Collection of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*
Olympia Bobou & Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

14:40–15:10 Coffee (1st floor)

15:10–16:00 *A Cypriot in Rome, A Statuette in Copenhagen*
Eleanor Q. Neil (Aarhus University)

16:15 Visit to the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek

20:30 Speaker's Dinner (Cofoco, Abel Cathrines Gade 7)

Programme: Friday 6 February

Session 3**Chair: Tine Bagh (Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek)**

9:00–9:50 *Paradoxical Exploitations: The Case of the Rusafa Ware and the Pilgrimage City and Caliphal Residence of Resafa-Sergiupolis – Rusafat Hisham*
Martin Gussone (Technische Universität Berlin, FG Historische Bauforschung)

9:50–10:40 *Smuggling Islamic Artefacts: German Museum Officials and Ottoman Antiquities Politics in the Early Twentieth Century*
Vincent Engelhardt (Leiden University)

10:40–11:30 *Curating the Mission: Private Collectors and Collections in Syria during the Late Ottoman Period*
Rory McInnes-Gibbons (Durham University)

11:30–12:30 Lunch for speakers (3rd floor)

Session 4**Chair: Olympia Bobou (Aarhus University)**

12:30–13:20 *Collecting Plants, Imagining 'Lost Cities': The Botanist Carl Haussknecht Traveling the Eastern Parts of the Ottoman Empire*
Stefan Knost (University of Bamberg)

13:20–14:10 *The Diplomats: France's Consulate in Syria and 19th-century Antiquities Collection*
Sarah Griswold (Oklahoma State University)

14:10–14:40 Coffee (1st floor)

Session 5**Chair: Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)**

14:40–15:30 *'They Braved Arabs to Find Lost Cities: Freya Stark, Gertrude Caton-Thompson, Elinor Gardner, and the Archaeology of the Ḥaḍramūt, 1937–1938*
Wendy Doyon (EUME)

15:30–16:15 End discussion

16:15–17:15 Reception at the KDVS (3rd floor)

From Travel Accounts to Excavation Trenches: Ctesiphon and Khirbat al-Minya as Examples for the Shaping of Archaeological Agendas

Franziska Bloch & Miriam Kühn

Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin

Long before systematic archaeological investigation, Ctesiphon, located in present-day Iraq, was a well-known landmark for Arab and European travellers. Arab authors described its monumental remains within a wider cultural and literary tradition, while eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European visitors referred to the site in line with contemporary scholarly and antiquarian interests. Both approaches reinforced its perception as a monument of past imperial power. In the early twentieth century Ernst Herzfeld visited the site and Friedrich Sarre set out plans for an excavation by the Islamische Kunstabteilung in Berlin, which was not undertaken until the late 1920s and early 1930s under Ernst Kühnel.

Likewise, western Asia has always been a destination for travellers, although less because of its connection to ancient Assyrian-Babylonian civilisation, but rather because of its Hellenistic-Roman period remains and its bearing to and allocation of biblical stories. In the 19th century, critical research into the region began with the famous expeditions of the Palestine Exploration Fund, whose geographic survey was of course motivated not solely by spirituality, but also met clear-cut strategic interests. Convinced to be exploring ancient Cafarnaum, excavation work was taken up in Khirbat al-Minya by the German Salvatorian priest A.E. Mader in 1932. It was only during the course of the work that the early Islamic dating of the site became apparent, and it remained controversial for years. It was Ernst Kühnel again who recognised the significance of the site and continued the investigations on behalf of the Islamische Kunstabteilung.

This paper examines how travel narratives shaped excavation priorities at both sites, considering how inherited descriptions and institutional frameworks influenced the phases and features emphasised or neglected. It situates these processes within the disciplinary context of the early twentieth century, when research on monumental antique architecture and palace structures predominated, while, late antique and Islamic-period occupation, domestic buildings and evidence of everyday life received limited attention. Through a comparative lens, the paper traces the interplay between inherited narratives, scholarly interpretation, and institutional archaeology, demonstrating how perceptions of the sites as mediated through travellers' writings, were translated into archaeological practice.

'Purchases made here and there with much judgment': Oxford University's Network of Stamp-seal Collectors at the Turn of the 20th Century

Nancy Highcock

Ashmolean Museum

The title from this paper comes from the preface of David G. Hogarth's 1920 volume *Hittite Seals*, with particular reference to the Ashmolean collection, and aptly summarizes Hogarth and associated colleagues' overall attitude to collecting stamp seals for the Ashmolean at the turn of the 20th century. Through a network of agents active in Syria and southern Türkiye, including T.E. Lawrence and Gertude Bell, Hogarth, the Keeper of the Ashmolean, greatly expanded upon the museum's earlier collection of ancient West Asian stamp seals, initiating work on their typologies and chronologies that would continue well into the late 20th century. The unassuming stamp seal was small and portable, and ubiquitous in not only the antiquities markets of large urban centres like Aleppo, but also in rural areas where local contacts and networks facilitated their sale. But while Hogarth focused on the so-called quality and research value of the seals (using 'much judgment'), the 'here and there' of their origins was less crystallised, obscuring both their provenance and the local networks of people who made a living by selling these objects to foreign collectors. This paper will aim to reconstruct these networks through the correspondence of Hogarth with Bell, Lawrence and others who donated or sold a large number of stamp seals to the Ashmolean. By tracing the exodus of stamp seals from Syria and Türkiye to Britain, it will forefront the local people and explore their own relationships with the landscapes, places, and cultural legacies that constituted the 'here and there'.

Collecting Antioch on the Gold River: The Dispersal of Gerasa Through the Dispersal of Excavation Finds

Rubina Raja

Aarhus University

Gerasa, Antioch on the Gold River, was – literally – put back on the map by the German scholar Jasper Ulrich Seetzen in 1806. The city's location had prior to his travels been thought to have been much further north – closer to the Sea of Galilee. With the rediscovery and identification of the physical remains of the city, a city also mentioned in the Bible, visitor numbers raised over the next hundred years and in the early 20th century excavations were begun at the site, first by a German team and later by an American-British team. Both missions were connected with the export of antiques from the site in various ways and today numerous of these finds are to be seen in world famous museums in Berlin and America. This presentation will focus on some of these finds, their travels and biographies and their ways into collections and museums, as well as the reasons and mechanisms behind the collection of them. The presentation will also discuss in which ways collection also becomes a dispersal of the original site, and, while it is obvious that we cannot redo such matters, it will address whether there are ways of resituating findings by researching object biographies and the larger narratives around excavations and collections – and the intertwined world between archaeologists, funders and institutions.

Collecting Roman Lead Sarcophagi from Tyre in the Late 19th and early 20th Century: Practices, Networks, and Impacts on Archaeological Landscape

Nicolas Amoroso

Domaine & Musée royal de Mariemont

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, a significant number of Roman lead sarcophagi were uncovered along the southern coast of present-day Lebanon, with a particular concentration in the area of Tyre. These discoveries ranged from isolated fragments to nearly intact coffins and are now housed in various museum collections. These artifacts were made in Roman Syria, and some may have been crafted locally in Tyre, offering valuable insights into the relationship between archaeology and collecting practices. This paper explores the extraction and international circulation of sarcophagi from 1880 to 1920, beginning with a lead sarcophagus housed in the Royal Museum of Mariemont, Belgium, which is incorrectly attributed to Sidon. Research shows it was cut into sections for export from Lebanon in 1903 and later acquired by Belgian industrialist Raoul Warocqué from antiquities dealer Ferdinand Farah.

This is not an isolated case: Four other sarcophagi, wrongly attributed to Sidon, were acquired from Farah by the 'Musée des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels' in Brussels in 1899, using similar methods. Archives indicate that these objects originate from 'Bazourieh' in the Tyre region. No documented artifact of this type has been found in the area, challenging our understanding of lead sarcophagus discoveries and necropolises in Tyre. This raises significant questions about excavation practices and the antiquities trade. The sarcophagi illustrate the complexities of archaeological heritage movement during the early 20th century, highlighting the roles of local workers and European collectors and their impacts on ancient burial sites in southern Lebanon.

Collecting Palmyra in Copenhagen: Some Insights into the Palmyrene Collection of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek

Olympia Bobou & Rubina Raja
Aarhus University

Since 2012 the Palmyra Portrait Project has with a point of departure in the collection of Palmyrene objects at Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek built the largest corpus of portrait sculpture from the first three centuries CE: the Palmyrene limestone funerary portraits. The Danish brewer and antiquities' collector Carl Jacobsen, the founder of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, managed to acquire the largest collection of Palmyrene objects outside of Syria in the 1880s through the activities of the Danish consul in Beirut Julius Løytved and throughout the PPP these collection strategies have been a focus of research. In this presentation, we present some of our research on the strategies for collecting (or not collecting), the human networks surrounding the collection of antiquities in the Middle East in the late 19th century, as well as look into the rush for collecting and the competition between European private collectors and public institutions, who navigated within and beyond the framework of the Ottoman Empire's antiquity legislations that had restricted the export of antiquities from the middle of the 19th century. We take our point of departure in the correspondence between the two men with two aims. The first is to elucidate the trade in antiquities within the broader frame of the trade in exotica, in which Løytved engaged. The second is to explore how the ancient site of Palmyra was framed within the discourse of the competition for antiquities that took place on an international scale. Through these, we highlight the impact of collectionism in the landscape and how it too helped perpetuate the myth of the lost city of Palmyra, while literally also dispersing Palmyra and its cultural heritage across Europe and beyond.

A Cypriot in Rome, A Statuette in Copenhagen

Eleanor Q. Neil
Aarhus University

In March 1879, a small statuette of a woman and child was reportedly discovered in Paphos, Cyprus. This was the beginning of a journey, that, at the very least, involved an excavator in Cyprus, a French merchant captain, a Roman antiquities dealer, and an 1894 purchase, before finally arriving in Copenhagen, and the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. The handwritten note on its back preserves a rare trace of its nineteenth-century journey, offering a unique point of departure to reconsider the networks that moved Cypriot antiquities.

This paper situates the Glyptotek statuette within the wider context of collectors and dealers such as Luigi Palma di Cesnola, U.S. consul to Cyprus and erstwhile excavator, and Augusto Castellani, a Roman jeweller-antiquarian whose business, rooted in ancient aesthetics, epitomized the period's approach to antiquities and their commercial value. Castellani's connections with both Cesnola and the Jacobsen family highlight how such networks operated and the ways in which objects circulated through chains of extraction, gifting, resale, and institutional acquisition.

By placing this 'minor' object at the centre of inquiry, this paper highlights how the fragmented trajectories of archaeological material can speak to broader patterns of mobility and value, and the ways in which this movement impacted (and continues to impact) the interpretation of 'lost' cities such as Paphos. Furthermore, it examines the ways in which a statuette can embody entanglements of findspots, maritime routes, and antiquities markets that defined the transfer of Cypriot heritage in the late Ottoman period.

Paradoxical Exploitations: The Case of the Rusafa Ware and the Pilgrimage City and Caliphal Residence of Resafa-Sergiupolis – Rusafat Hisham

Martin Gussone

Technische Universität Berlin, FG Historische Bauforschung

Ceramic objects presumably looted from the ruins of the city of Resafa in northern Syria entered the art market in the 1920s. These ceramics are characterised by a distinctive polychrome glaze, but their exact provenance is uncertain. Similar to Raqqa ware from the city on the Euphrates 30 km away, the term Resafa ware is likely to be less an exact indication of a specific origin and more a brand name that seeks to benefit from the fame of the respective archaeological site.

The paper first presents the key topics and figures in the history of Resafa research up to the first decades of the 20th century. It then discusses the extent to which the objects in demand on the contemporary art market (and the stories related to them) are consistent with the history and aura of the site to which they are attributed, and the contributions of the various actors involved.

Paradoxically, the various narratives that characterise the archaeological site and the characteristics of the ceramic objects do not align. Resafa is famous above all as a late antique pilgrimage site, renowned for its well-preserved 5th/6th-century churches and city walls, and for being the residence of the Umayyad caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik, built in the second quarter of the 8th century. However, Rusafa ware dates to the 12th/13th century, a period that has long been neglected in Resafa research.

Smuggling Islamic Artefacts: German Museum Officials and Ottoman Antiquities Politics in the Early Twentieth Century

Vincent Engelhardt

(Leiden University)

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Ottoman Empire introduced stricter antiquities regulations to counter foreign exploitation from archaeological excavations and the illicit trade in antiquities. This paper investigates the clandestine strategies employed by Theodor Wiegand (1864–1936), a prominent German museum official, to circumvent Ottoman law and smuggle three Mamluk mosque lamps into the Berlin Royal Museums under diplomatic cover. Drawing on German and Ottoman archival sources, the study highlights Ottoman administrative, legal, and intellectual responses to the smuggling of these artefacts. It argues that these interventions reflect a growing awareness of Islamic heritage within the emergence of an Ottoman national identity, while also exposing the complicity of German museum officials in illegal acquisition practices. The paper thus contributes to ongoing debates on imperial dynamics in the antiquities trade and on provenance research.

Curating the Mission: Private Collectors and Collections in Syria during the Late Ottoman Period

Rory McInnes-Gibbons
Durham University

Missionaries, chaplains and consuls have long been understood as a key conduit to the increasing travel of Europeans and Americans through Syria in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Acting as a base in Damascus (or sometimes Aleppo), they enabled more adventurous travellers to access and rediscover for themselves ruined or 'lost cities' like Palmyra in the Syrian steppe. Previous scholarship has typically prioritised their diplomatic role in securing permissions and documentation from the Ottoman Porte to enable visitors' travel, often making the Early Modern era their primary focus (see Keblusek and Noldus, 2009 and Mills 2012/2020). Their collections, however, have received scant specific scholarly attention. Through a forensic study of travellers' accounts in the period, I will highlight their interactions with these collections and the impact they had on inspiring travel through Syria. Reverend Smylie Robson (1816-1884), a missionary of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland and resident in Damascus for 25 years is one example. He accompanied fellow minister, J.L Porter to Palmyra and later played host to the British traveller, Emily Anne Beaufort showing interested individuals including the court painter, Carl Haag his collections of drawings and artefacts. Though now themselves lost, they are a key source that can be partially restored in the published accounts of contemporary travellers. I wish to use this case study as a launchpad to approach the objects in smaller private collections local to Syria that played a key role in the networks of travel, collecting and knowledge during the late Ottoman period.

Collecting Plants, Imagining 'Lost Cities': The Botanist Carl Haussknecht Traveling the Eastern Parts of the Ottoman Empire

Stefan Knost
University of Bamberg

The German botanist Carl Haussknecht travelled to the Ottoman Empire and Persia in 1865 and again between 1866 and 1869. He left behind a diary of approximately 1,000 pages, which is available now in an online edition and in a slightly shortened and uncommented printed version, published by an interdisciplinary research group from the Universities of Jena (Botany), Halle (Islamic Studies) and Bamberg (Iranian Studies). In addition to this material, Haussknecht left other so far unpublished and unstudied notebooks, letters, etc. Haussknecht's main objective was to collect different types of plants for Suisse botanist Edmond Boissier's six-volume encyclopaedia 'Flora Orientalis' (published between 1867 and 1888). However, he did not limit himself to botanical collecting; he also documented information on 'lost cities' and 'lost places' encountered during his travels.

Haussknecht prepared his expeditions by corresponding with botanists, as well as orientalists seeking for advice. One important preparation was the reading of the relevant chapters in Ritter's *Erdkunde* that drew his attention to a number of places. Later 'in the field', he made considerable efforts to reach these places, such as the city of Harran.

In preparation for his second voyage, Haussknecht compiled a 90-page notebook—so far unedited and unstudied—in which he collected excerpts, summaries, and lists of place names, among other notes. This notebook is of particular interest and will be the focus of this paper.

The Diplomats: France's Consulate in Syria and 19th-century Antiquities Collection

Sarah Griswold
Oklahoma State University

Diplomats at consulates in the Ottoman Empire facilitated the plans of their compatriot travelers-cum-collectors, but they could also undermine such activities, particularly as the interest in 'mining' lost cities came under political scrutiny. As laws passed in Istanbul in the late nineteenth century sought to restrain foreign excavations and exportation, the shifting legal landscape put European diplomats in a difficult spot. Their very job title implied an ability to find *modi vivendi* that appeased their own nationals and the nations where they served. Diplomats struggled with that dual imperative as applied to antiquities.

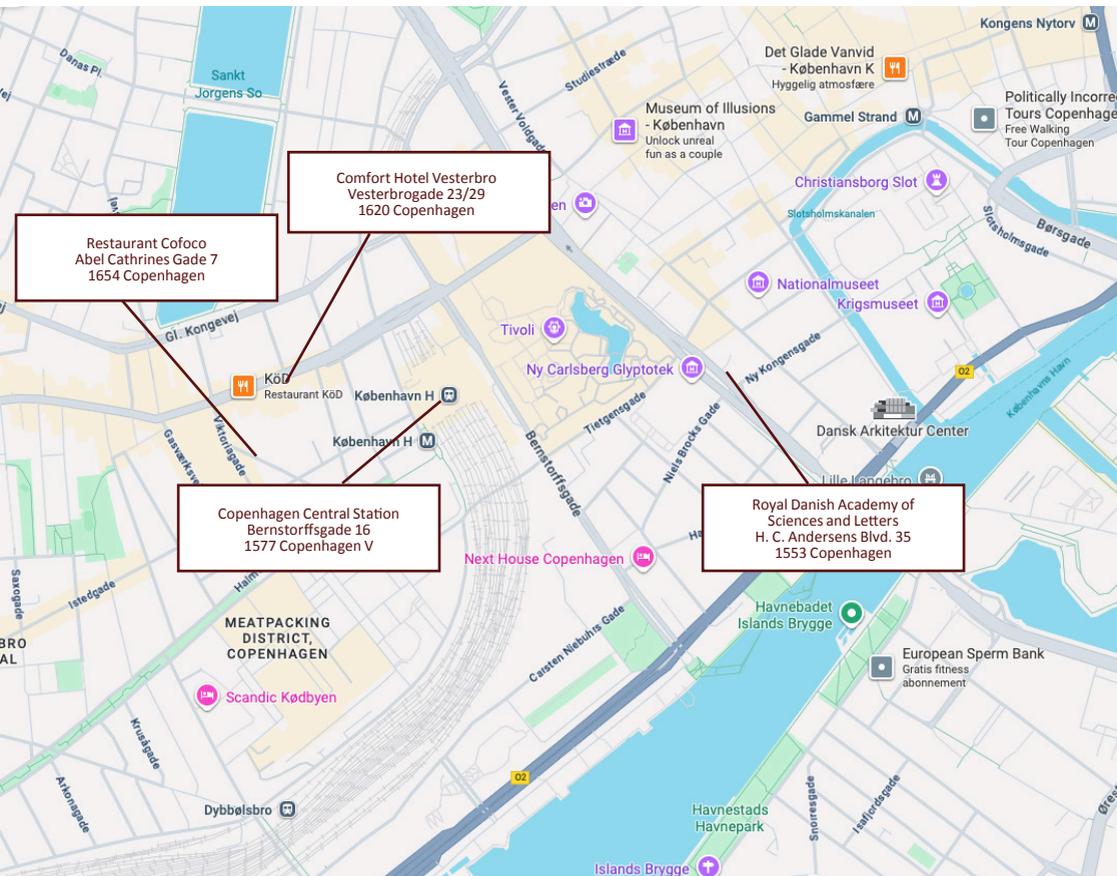
My paper will examine antiquities travelers' collecting habits from the perspective of France's consulate in Syria, including that of Charles Clermont-Ganneau. Clermont-Ganneau, who served as dragoman to France's consul in Jerusalem and then vice-consul in Jaffa, was a key reference for European travelers to the region in the 1870s-80s—years that marked an expansion of interest in Syria's ancient cities. Clermont-Ganneau was not just a diplomat but also a highly trained orientalist. The French consulate became a special hub of political credential, intellectual insight, and practical aid as travelers arrived (and departed) with discovery, collection, and exportation in mind. My paper will put in focus this crucial space and these crucial decades in which diplomats, who had long enabled the practices of their fellow European traveler-cum-collector, now sought to control them.

'They Braved Arabs to Find Lost Cities': Freya Stark, Gertrude Caton-Thompson, Elinor Gardner, and the Archaeology of the Ḥaḍramūt, 1937–1938

Wendy Doyon
EUME

On Saturday, 2nd April 1938, the front page of England's Daily Sketch paper blared the headline: 'LOST WOMEN EXPLORERS LIMP TO SAFETY.' Beneath it, a portrait of a woman wearing her dark hair fashionably cropped in the flapper style and an expensive necklace led the paper's exclusive story: 'Straight from the lost cities of Arabia three English women explorers staggered into Aden yesterday. They were Miss Freya Stark, dauntless traveller, and her companions, Miss Caton Thompson, and Miss Gardner. They set out to seek the lost city of the Queen of Sheba as part of their work for the Wakefield Expedition...' Behind the sensationalist headlines displaying all the ethnocentric sexism of the day, the expedition had the quieter distinction of successfully conducting the first controlled excavations in southern Arabia by two of archaeology's most accomplished scientists. Gertrude Caton-Thompson and Elinor Gardner were long-time, pioneering collaborators who surveyed, excavated, collected, and published the prehistoric archaeology and geology of Egypt's Nile Valley, Fayum, and western deserts. During the winter of 1937–1938, they joined Freya Stark on an expedition to the Ḥaḍramūt region of modern Yemen (sponsored by Lord Wakefield and the Royal Geographical Society), where they spent several weeks excavating, mapping, and recording epigraphy at a pre-Islamic town and temple site at Ḥuraīḍa (Ar. حريضة; ancient Madhāb or Madhabum) in the Wadi 'Amd. The archive and museum collections resulting from their brief but highly systematic and thorough excavations at Ḥuraīḍa, one of the oldest cities in the Ḥaḍramūt, are the only known documentation of the ancient site, which to my knowledge has not been investigated before or since. In this paper, I will present an overview of the 1937–1938 excavations as a microhistory of the ethnic, class, and gender relations of early twentieth-century archaeology in the Middle East, and I will discuss the significance of the archaeological finds and archives from the 'Moon Temple of Ḥuraīḍa' in the light of Gertrude Caton-Thompson's long and distinguished archaeological career.

Venues



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Flag raising at Camp Hill (May 16, 1931). The Aarhus-Yale Digital Archive Platform for the Danish Inter-World War Archaeological Engagement in the Middle East.

Book of abstracts

Dispersing Past Cities Through Collecting: Travelers, collectors and their networks in late 19th and early 20th century West Asia

Organizers:

Olympia Bobou (Aarhus University), Miriam Kühn (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), and Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)