

Female Agency and “Lost Cities” in the Late Ottoman and Early Mandate periods

9 October 2026

Organized by

Olympia Bobou (Aarhus University), Miriam Kühn (Museum für Islamische Kunst),
Eleanor Neil (Aarhus University) & Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

within the framework of the Lost Cities project funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation.

Held at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin.



AARHUS UNIVERSITET

GERDA HENKEL STIFTUNG



Alexander von Humboldt
Stiftung/Foundation

CARLSBERG FOUNDATION



MAX-PLANCK-INSTITUT
FÜR WISSENSCHAFTSGESCHICHTE



Museum für
Islamische Kunst
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Table of Contents

Outline	4
Programme	6

Abstracts

Wendy Doyon: The Women and Qufitis Who Shaped Prehistoric Desert Research in Egypt: Gertrude Caton Thompson, Elinor Gardner, and the Qufitis of the Royal Anthropological Institute Expedition to Kharga Oasis, 1930–1933	10
Sarah Irving: The changing role of female labour in Palestinian archaeology, 1890-1948	11
Rory McInnes-Gibbons: ‘I shall go to Babylon for a few days and stay with my dear Germans’: Gertrude Bell at Babylon and the Lost Cities of Late Ottoman Mesopotamia	12
Kristine Dyrmann: The business of collecting: Ottilia and Carl Jacobsen in Rome 1884	13
Sonja Bäse & Annemarie Schantor: Women and their networks in the interwar period at the Germanico in Rome	14
Sebastian Willert: Gertrude Bell in the Ottoman realm: A Female Agent, British-German Archaeology, and Diplomacy	15
Michael Blömer: Theresa Goell and the Archaeology of Commagene: Collaboration, Conflict, and Legacy	16
Tine Bagh: Maria Mogensen – a woman’s life with Egyptology	17
Eleanor Quasebarth Neil: The Westminster Sisters’ and the Eastern Mediterranean: Agnes Smith’s Through Cyprus	18

Organizers	21
Conference Webpage	21



Flag raising at Camp Hill (Gerasa), with visitors assembled on 16 May 1931. The only woman on the photo (third from the left) is Miss Dixon from the Jerusalem Museum (Gerasa archive at Yale University Art).

Outline

The history of ancient urban sites and their “rediscovery” by Western travellers is one full of narratives about men and adventure, politics and power, conquest and knowledge, technological advances and innovative discoveries. The narratives involving women in these contexts have often been overlooked and to this day remain largely unwritten. This is due to several factors, including a general scarcity of published evidence, less attractive - at least on the surface - narratives, and a general perception that their stories were less compelling, and the enduring view held by many contemporaries and reinforced by later scholars, that their roles were marginal or merely supportive.

Antiquarian travel, archaeological fieldwork, and collecting practices have long been perceived as gendered pursuits. Despite the visibility of a select few, women have largely been written out of the grand narratives of adventure and exploration that have shaped Western perceptions of the East. While some gained recognition as writers, archaeologists, collectors, and patrons, many more were documented only in supporting roles, identified as wives, daughters, or companions of prominent men. Further women would have included those in local contexts, e.g. Arab, Armenian, Kurdish, Ottoman, Jewish, of whom we today know even less, due to the scarce sources. While some women recorded their experiences and activities in their own words, many accounts and examples have not reached academic or public audiences.

Yet the ways in which women operated within these structures and tropes became instrumental to the development of archaeological research and practice in the region and cannot be reduced to mere reflections of their male counterparts. Women travelled, thought, excavated, collected, wrote, and articulated their aesthetic and intellectual preferences in ways that were often distinct. They also formed their own networks of employment, mentorship, friendship and collaboration, alongside dynamics of competition, conflict and animosity.

Focusing on travellers, archaeologists, collectors, and patrons active in Western Asia during the Late Ottoman and Mandate periods, this workshop aims to illuminate those whose voices have long been silenced or sidelined. We seek contributions that critically engage

with the role of women in shaping antiquarian and archaeological practices, as well as with the power relations and material networks that circulated through the objects they recorded, collected, and interpreted.

In recent years, the turn toward archival archaeology has opened new possibilities for critically revisiting the foundations of the discipline and the structures of exclusion embedded in its historiography. This workshop invites participants to reflect not only on the women who were actively involved in travel, excavation, collecting, and patronage, but also on the ways in which their traces have been recorded—or erased—in institutional and personal archives. By engaging with letters, diaries, field notes, photographs, inventories, and museum records, we aim to foreground the archival labour required to reconstruct these fragmented histories and to question the silences that persist in dominant narratives. In doing so, we hope to contribute to a broader rethinking of the gendered practices of knowledge production and the archival politics that continue to shape the field of archaeology.

By moving beyond narratives of exceptionalism and frameworks that view women primarily in relation to men—whether as relatives, colleagues or objectified—this workshop offers a space to begin to reframe the complex entanglements of gender, power, and knowledge in the making of archaeology in particular in the context of the large-scale urban excavations of the late 19th and early 20th century in Western Asia.

Friday 9 October

8:15–08:30 *Introduction to the Lost Cities project*
Rubina Raja

Panel 1: Fieldwork and Invisible Labour

8:30–9:30 *The Women and Quftis Who Shaped Prehistoric Desert Research
in Egypt: Gertrude Caton Thompson, Elinor Gardner, and the Quftis of
the Royal Anthropological Institute Expedition to Kharga
Oasis, 1930–1933*
Wendy Doyon
Respondent: Rubina Raja

9:30–10:30 *The changing role of female labour in Palestinian archaeology, 1890-
1948*
Sarah Irving
Respondent: Anthony Quickel

10:30–10:45 Coffee Break

10:45–11:45 *‘I shall go to Babylon for a few days and stay with my dear Germans’:
Gertrude Bell at Babylon and the Lost Cities of Late Ottoman
Mesopotamia*
Rory McInnes-Gibbons
Respondent: Johannes Köhler

Panel 2: Local Agency and Ottoman Contexts

11:45–12:45 *The business of collecting: Ottilia and Carl Jacobsen in Rome 1884*
Kristine Dyrmann
Respondent: Dagmar Schäfer

12.45-13:30: Lunch

13:30–14:30 *Women and their networks in the interwar period at the Germanico in
Rome*
Sonja Bäse and Annemarie Schantor
Respondent: Mannat Johal

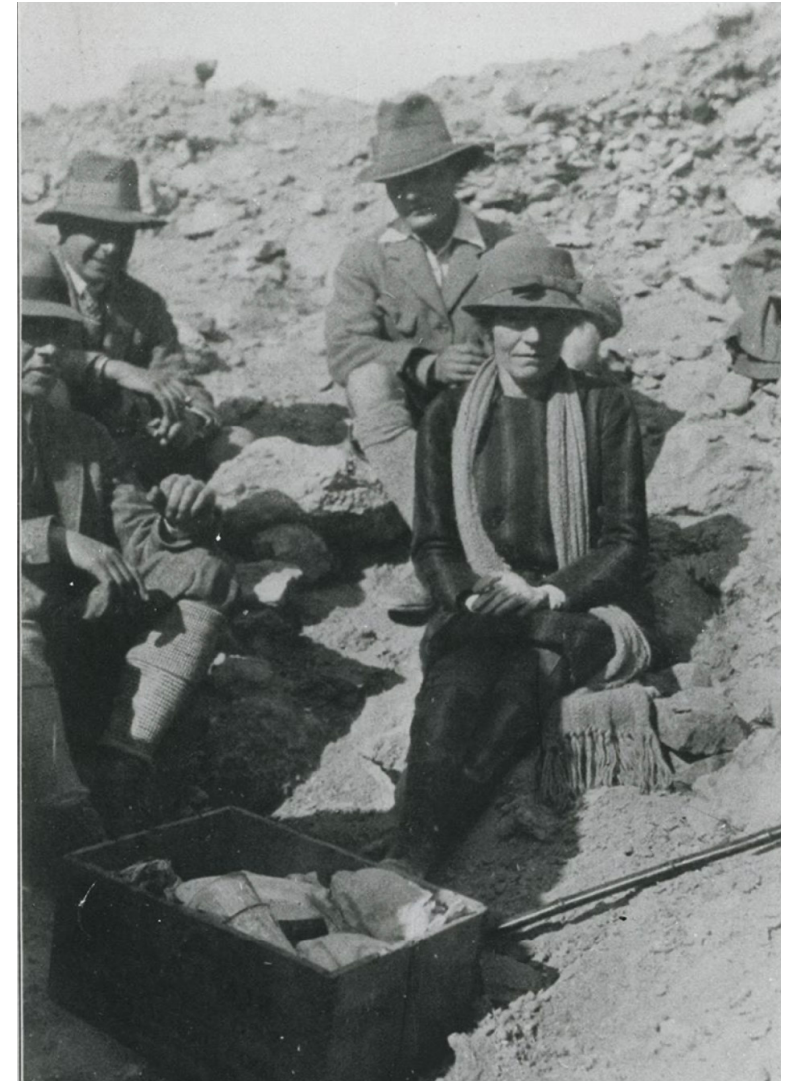
14:30–15:30 *Gertrude Bell in the Ottoman realm: A Female Agent, British-German
Archaeology, and Diplomacy*
Sebastian Willert
Respondent: Rory McInnis-Gibbons

15:30–16:30 *Theresa Goell and the Archaeology of Commagene: Collaboration,
Conflict, and Legacy*
Michael Blömer
Respondent: Olympia Bobou

16:30-16:45 Coffee break

Panel 3: Collecting, Museums, and Material Culture

- 16:45–17:45 *Maria Mogensen – a woman’s life with Egyptology*
Tine Bagh
Respondent: Miriam Kühn
- 17:45–18:45 *The Westminster Sisters’ and the Eastern Mediterranean: Agnes Smith’s
Through Cyprus*
Eleanor Quasebarth Neil
Respondent: Birgit Sporleder
- 18.45-19:00 *Closing Remarks*
Moderation: Rubina Raja
- 19:30 Speakers’ Dinner



Photograph of Gertrude Bell at the archaeological excavation at Ur. Getrud Bell Archive, GB/PERS/B/005.

The Women and Quftis Who Shaped Prehistoric Desert Research in Egypt: Gertrude Caton Thompson, Elinor Gardner, and the Quftis of the Royal Anthropological

Wendy Doyon
EUME, Berlin

In the winter of 1930–31, an expedition of two women and three archaeological technicians from Qift, Upper Egypt (known as Quftis), accompanied by seven camels and four Bedouin guides, traversed the Egyptian desert west of Abydos to Kharga Oasis on foot. It was the first time datable Paleolithic sites in any part of the Western “Libyan” Desert were mapped and excavated, using methods of geological and aerial survey, including the first archaeological reconnaissance flights in Egypt, also by a female aviator, Lady Mary Bailey. This expedition, sponsored by the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI), laid the groundwork for two more seasons of revolutionary geoarchaeological fieldwork across the Kharga desert with spectacular results for prehistoric research. The following year, in 1932, Count László Almásy and Sir Robert Clayton East-Clayton embarked on an expedition, also with Quftis, by car and airplane further into the desert southwest of Kharga, in search of the so-called ‘Lost’ Oasis of Zerkura on the Gilf Kebir. The latter expedition—which falsely claimed to make the first aerial survey in desert exploration—ended in failure and tragedy, with the death of its pilot, Sir Clayton, shortly afterward. Almásy led several more expeditions to the Gilf Kebir and both men were later immortalized, in literature and film, as the tragic protagonists of *The English Patient*. The women’s expedition, by contrast, was never written about and found no place in the popular imagination. Of their earlier, hugely successful, female-led, and scientifically celebrated excavation of a ‘lost’ Paleolithic oasis, Caton Thompson said at the time: “There is not much difficulty about working in the desert when you are used to it. It would be quite wrong for me to talk of our difficulties because really they are easily overcome.” This paper will provide an overview of the RAI expedition’s three seasons in Kharga and its impact on the field of prehistoric research, within the wider context of women’s and Egyptians’ struggles for scientific visibility and legitimacy in the early twentieth century.

The changing role of female labour in Palestinian archaeology, 1890-1948

Sarah Irving
University of Staffordshire

While from the 1920s onwards women from Europe and North America become slowly but steadily more prominent and recognised in the field of archaeology, the same period saw the disappearance of Middle Eastern women from excavations, where they had been a common sight over the previous decades. Although they had worked mainly in the lowest-paid and least skilled roles on excavations in Late Ottoman and Mandate Palestine, archaeological labour had offered women cash work which they combined with other paid activities or with shared agricultural work on family and community land.

This paper traces the ways in which changing methods of excavation and the institutionalisation and professionalisation of archaeology, whilst opening up opportunities for educated western women, paradoxically closed down this source of income and perhaps even some independence for Palestinian women. Shifts from the massive tell digs of early Middle Eastern archaeology, which demanded huge untrained workforces, to more specialised forms of excavation concentrated jobs into the hands of those with established expertise, whilst the advent of British-run state antiquities institutions with more formalised employment systems excluded casual women workers. Using archival documents from excavations and government departments, as well as the memoirs of archaeologists of the period, this paper traces the increasing sidelining of Palestinian women from the archaeology of their land in the years before the Nakba.

‘I shall go to Babylon for a few days and stay with my dear Germans’: Gertrude Bell at Babylon and the Lost Cities of Late Ottoman Mesopotamia

Rory McInnes-Gibbons
Durham University

British traveller archaeologist, diplomat, writer and administrator, Gertrude Bell (1868-1926) visited a series of excavations in late Ottoman-era Mesopotamia including Assur and Babylon. Her photographs, letters and diaries offer unique insight into the scale and activities of the German-led campaigns of these lost cities when she arrived in 1909 and 1911. While her time at Assur and relationship with Walter Andrae has received recent scholarly attention (Cooper in Collins and Tripp, 2017), Bell’s earlier visit to Babylon, and return in 1914, has largely been overlooked. She lodged at the Expeditions-haus with the other German excavators and her extraordinary access resulted in 55 photographs of the site. Alongside the 27 photographs of the ongoing work at Assur, and remarkable series of 100 photographs at Hatra, Bell brought these lost cities back to life through the vivid detail of her camera lens. While Bell was by no means a silenced or sidelined figure in these almost universally male contexts, her presence as a woman during this formative period for the archaeology of the region is extraordinary. Through an anomaly, Bell’s female agency and early career offer an excellent focal point for reflection on the gendered nature of early twentieth-century archaeology. Through consultation of the sources preserved by the Gertrude Bell Archive at Newcastle University, this contribution will restore the embodied experience of the traveller at these sites exploring the ways in which Bell catalogued and captured the excavations in modern-day Iraq during the final days of the Ottoman Empire.

The business of collecting: Ottilia and Carl Jacobsen in Rome 1884

Kristine Dyrmann
Aarhus University

This paper explores Carl and Ottilia Jacobsen’s 1884 journey to Rome, positioning this expedition in the intersection of gendered sociability, diplomatic networks, and cultural patronage in late nineteenth-century Europe. The historiography often identifies the death of J.C. Jacobsen in 1887, and Carl Jacobsen’s connection with the German archaeologist Helbig from that same year, as catalysts for the expansion of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. This case study, however, suggests that Ottilia and Carl Jacobsen began the process of acquiring Roman objects for their collection during a private journey a few years earlier. Drawing upon Ottilia Jacobsen’s travel diaries and correspondence from the Danish consulate in Rome, the study highlights how the Jacobsens navigated the shifting landscape of post-Risorgimento Italy to enter the arena of collecting. Being new actors in the elite milieu of the Roman capital, the Danish collector couple had to navigate the social networks of tourists and artists, diplomats, collectors, and Italian nobility to gain access to private collections such as those of Prince Lancellotti or Prince Sciarra. Securing new objects was not merely a matter of financial capital but also one of social navigation. The presentation underscores the role of the Danish Consul, Christopher Myhlenport, as a broker who leveraged the Jacobsens’ status to secure private viewings and mediate bids. Furthermore, I argue that Ottilia’s agency was central to this project; her aesthetic valuations and social engagements provided the necessary context for Carl’s strategic acquisitions.

Women and their networks in the interwar period at the Germanico in Rome

Sonja Bäse

German Archaeological Institute, Rome

Annemarie Schantor

German Archaeological Institute, Rome

During the interwar period, an increasing number of women began to study and actively participate in archaeology. Recent archival studies have revealed a greater female presence at the Rome Department of the German Archaeological Institute – the Istituto Archeologico Germanico – during this time than was previously thought. Several women worked at the Institute in various roles, including as archaeologists, photographers and secretaries. They played an important role in shaping one of the Institute’s most significant cultural archives: the photo library. The Institute also provided a space where female scholars could study and develop their professional networks.

This paper explores the different roles of women at the Istituto Archeologico Germanico in Rome, whether they were employed by the Institute or not. By analysing photographs, study notes, letters, and other archival materials, it will be possible to reconstruct their work at the Institute and their participation in academic discourse, e.g. as corresponding members, library users, lecture attendees, or recipients of the prestigious Reisestipendium travel grant. We will also attempt to identify the factors that made studying or working in Rome attractive to them, as well as the obstacles they faced.

Gertrude Bell in the Ottoman realm. A Female Agent, British-German Archaeology, and Diplomacy

Sebastian Willert

Leibniz-Institut für jüdische Geschichte und Kultur – Simon Dubnow

In 1905 and 1907, the British traveller Gertrude Lowthian Bell (1868–1926) visited Konya, a city in the Ottoman heartland of Anatolia. In the diary of German vice-consul Julius Harry Löytved-Hardegg (1874–1917), Bell left a personal note, stating ‘Love and good wishes to you both. Gertrude.’ The words indicate a relatively close relationship between Bell and Löytved-Hardegg, while other archival material suggests a distinct rivalry between the British woman and Prussian-German archaeologists. But what does Bell’s archive tell us about her relation to representatives of Prussian-German archaeology and diplomacy in the Ottoman realm? Despite her stature as one of the most renowned female explorers in the Ottoman realm, the dynamics between Bell and her Prussian-German counterparts remain underexplored. However, Gertrude Bell frequently visited representatives of Berlin’s archaeology and diplomacy, especially in the context of their archaeological and extractive fieldwork.

Against this background, this paper delves into the Gertrude Bell Archive at Newcastle University, reexamining her preserved letters, diaries, field notes, and photographs, aiming to conduct a comparative analysis with correspondence and personal notes in German archives. It uncovers power relations and emphasises the unique insights and ambiguities Bell’s perspective offers. Starting with the question of the networks Bell cultivated, the contribution examines her perception of the looting, appropriation, and incorporation of archaeological objects into German and British museums. This research contributes to the complex interplay of gender, material culture, and the translocation of archaeological objects into European museums, shedding light on the interplay of national goals, imperial rivalry, scholarly pursuits, and colonial ambitions in the Late Ottoman Empire.

Theresa Goell and the Archaeology of Commagene: Collaboration, Conflict, and Legacy

Michael Blömer

University of Münster

Lennart Kruijer

Leiden University

Theresa Goell (1901–1985) is one of the understudied figures in the archaeology of Türkiye. She gained her first fieldwork experience with the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem between 1933 and 1935. After the war, Goell joined Hetty Goldman’s excavations at Tarsus, but she is best known for directing her own excavations at Nemrud Dağı, the burial site of Antiochos I, king of Commagene, a late Hellenistic kingdom in the mountains of south-eastern Türkiye. Working under extremely challenging conditions, she successfully led this project for almost two decades during the 1950s and 1960s.

A focus of my talk will be her complicated relationship with the German epigrapher Friedrich Karl Dörner. The two collaborated in the exploration of Nemrud Dağı and the neighbouring royal site of Arsamea on the Nymphaios, but their partnership became increasingly strained. Archival material shows how mounting tensions between Dörner and Goell, along with her deteriorating health, ultimately prevented a comprehensive publication of the excavation results.

Another aspect of my talk will examine the neglect of Goell’s legacy in the site’s contemporary presentation. Friedrich Karl Dörner is prominently remembered and occupies a central place in the official narrative of Commagene’s exploration, whereas Goell has been relegated to a secondary role despite her decisive contributions.

Maria Mogensen – a woman’s life with Egyptology

Tine Bagh

Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek

Maria Mogensen (1882-1932) was the protégé of Valdemar Schmidt (1836-1925), the first Danish Egyptologist, who helped Brewer Carl Jacobsen (1842-1914) build the Egyptian collection at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen. In 1910 she became Schmidt’s assistant and went with him to the exhibitions in London with finds from Flinders Petrie’s excavations in Egypt to learn how to select the best for the Glyptotek. Mogensen eventually succeeded Schmidt as museum curator and collaborated closely with European colleagues. At first they considered her to be a weak woman, but soon they would not bid on objects at auctions if she had not vouched for them.

When objects were offered for sale through photos or even the objects themselves sent to the Glyptotek the director Frederik Poulsen (1876-1950) trusted her keen eye as fakes were also circulated. Once when she was admitted to a sanatorium, as was often the case because of her weak nervous system, the museum still had to send for her so she could give her verdict on a statue offered for sale. During the winter of 1921-22 she visited Egypt for the first time and through letters we hear about how she spent time at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo studying the objects and inscriptions and visited excavations. When she returned home after seven months journalists at home interviewed her about her adventures in Egypt.

The Westminster Sisters' and the Eastern Mediterranean: Agnes Smith's Through Cyprus

Eleanor Q. Neil
Aarhus University

The 1887 travel account *Through Cyprus* by Agnes Smith recounts the author's journey with her twin sister, Margaret Dunlop Gibson, both of whom were biblical scholars known as the Westminster Sisters. It provides a unique case study of women's active engagement with antiquarian and early archaeological practices, through travel writing. In part, this is because of their gender and freedom to travel independently and that Cyprus was a less popular destination, often treated as a stopping off point on the way to somewhere else. However, this travel account also offers enrichment to our study of gender within antiquarian contexts, because it occupies a slightly different position within the author and her sister's broader body of work.

While Smith had previously explored what today might be called ethnography in Greece, *Through Cyprus* shifts toward systematic attention to monuments, inscriptions, and material remains, linking observation to historical and topographical analysis in ways that align with early antiquarian and proto-archaeological practice. Furthermore, it is unlike their later work on Syriac manuscripts or numismatics, which involved close textual and material analysis in libraries and collections. While in many ways following an established rubric of 19th-century travel writing, *Through Cyprus* also offers a distinctive contribution to early antiquarian practice.

By bridging observation, interpretation, and narrative, *Through Cyprus* not only enriches our understanding of women's travel writing but also offers a distinctive example of early, rigorous engagement with antiquarian knowledge, showing how this type of recording could produce insights that impacted more formal scholarly labour.



Maria Mogensen, the first female Egyptologist in Denmark . Carl Jacobsens Brevarkiv.

Venue:

Max Planck Institute for the History of Science

Boltzmannstraße 22

14195 Berlin

Germany

Organizers

Olympia Bobou
Aarhus University
olympia.bobou@cas.au.dk

Miriam Kühn
Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin
m.kuehn@smb.spk-berlin.de

Eleanor Q. Neil
Aarhus University
eleanorq.neil@cas.au.dk

Rubina Raja
Aarhus University
rubina.raja@cas.au.dk

<https://projects.au.dk/lost-cities-rediscovered>



Drawing of mosaic in north aisle of Procopius Church, Gerasa, by Dorothy Crawfoot, 1928.

Book of abstracts

Female Agency and "Lost Cities" in the Late Ottoman and Early Mandate periods

Organizers:

Olympia Bobou (Aarhus University), Miriam Kühn (Museum für Islamische Kunst), Eleanor Neil (Aarhus University) & Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)