

## [Visualising Colonial Hierarchies in Images of Archaeology in Mandate Palestine](#)

Blog Post published by Aaron Ackerley on Monday, December 12, 2022



*Figure 1 - Work in progress at Ain Shems (Beth Shemesh)*

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Photographs of archaeology allow us to examine the visual language of the colonial hierarchies which underpinned the development of archaeology as a discipline. The Mandate system placed Britain in a role of colonial tutelage and guidance over Palestine. As part of this, archaeology was encouraged by the British, and the Mandate era saw a large number of extensive excavations undertaken by teams, mostly from Europe the US. Whilst many Palestinians worked on archaeological sites, their names have often gone unrecorded, their work belittled as unskilled, and their contributions ignored, whilst those of western archaeologists are celebrated.

Yet photographs allow us to bear witness to this valuable contribution, something which the recent online exhibition of the Badé Museum of Biblical Archaeology, [Unsilencing the Archives](#), highlights. Archaeological sites were deeply hierarchical places, and these hierarchies reflected biases of race, class, gender and age. Photographs offer a visual record of this, and by examining them we can assess how a visual language of colonialism developed.

Take for example this photograph (Figure 1) of work in progress at Ain Shems ([excavated between 1928 and 1933](#)). The focal point is the male figure in western dress (possibly dig director Elihu Grant of Haverford College in the US), standing alone supervising the excavations; a striking visual reflection of both his place atop the hierarchy, and that of the western institutions which undertook these excavations. We can see two men in white robes, also standing in positions of authority: these are likely the Egyptian foremen, or 'Reis'. Many Egyptians, such as Salih 'Abd el-Nabi who worked at the Ashkelon and Ophel excavations in the 1920s, were [employed as foremen](#) and were seen as more skilled than local Palestinians. We see their presence in another photograph from Ain Shems, [captioned in the archive](#) with the note 'The Egyptian "task master" speeding up the workers'(Figure 2).



Figure 2- The Egyptian "task master" speeding up the workers

We can also glimpse the gendered division of labour. Two men are visible in the bottom left of Figure 2 digging: this was seen as men's work as opposed to the work of basket carrying done by women who were often [confined to a more limited set of tasks](#). Yet despite their position at the bottom of the hierarchy, the work these women did was vital and [Palestinian women had been contributing to excavations since at least the 1890s](#). A further image (Figure 3) shows two unnamed women at Tell Gemmeh, near Gaza, during excavation in 1927. One is sieving dirt to check for small artefacts, a vital task on any dig, and the other is emptying her basket. This photograph offers a more human portrayal of archaeological workers - showing them smiling, relaxed, and looking directly to the camera.



*Figure 3 - Women at Tell Jemmeh*

The racist and classist attitudes of archaeologists working in a colonial environment has meant we do not have the names of many workers as they were not seen as important enough to record. These attitudes are reflected visually in portrayals of workers as a nameless, faceless mass, visible most starkly in Figure 4, also of Aim

Shems. We see a distant horizon dotted with the distinctive silhouettes of women carrying baskets on their head, far, away, insignificant, a background detail to the archaeology; a visual echo of the archaeological laws of the mandate, which prioritised the needs of western researchers over local communities.



Citation: Aaron Ackerley. *Visualising Colonial Hierarchies in Images of Archaeology in Mandate Palestine*. H-Empire. 12-12-2022. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/5293/blog/h-empire/12000338/visualising-colonial-hierarchies-images-archaeology-mandate>  
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*Figure 4 - workers on the horizon at Ain Shems*

Figure 5 shows excavations in progress at Ashkelon between 1920-1922, and the man pictured is most likely either dig director and Mandate Palestine's first Director of Antiquities, [John Garstang](#) or his deputy W. J. Phythian Adams.





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Figure 5 - Work in progress at Ashkelon

It is interesting to compare how the figure of the western archaeologist is portrayed in comparison to labourers; he is the expert in charge, a figure of authority and the visual focal point. He is even wearing a pith helmet, which has become almost a [visual shorthand for colonialism](#). The focus on the archaeologist is reinforced by the fact that the man at the top right, who is operating the winch, has been partially cropped out by the framing of the photograph. The archaeologist here is portrayed in the vein of an adventurous, masculine hero and this visual language, and what it says about the practice of archaeology undertaken by white westerners in the global south, has seeped in popular culture presentations of archaeology. Perhaps most familiar from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Figure 6). Here, Indiana Jones is instantly recognisable even in silhouette, against a background of nameless, faceless extras, a scene which visually recalls the photographs from Ain Shems.



Figure 6 - Raiders of the Lost Ark

In both the fictional and historical images, it is the figure of the archaeologist who oversees the faceless others who are doing the hard work for him. To use a cinematic metaphor, the archaeologist is the 'main character', the active protagonist, and the labourers are the stock character bit parts and extras, which visually reinforces the inherent inequalities which underpin the development of archaeology as a colonial discipline.

These photographs allow us to reflect on how we tell the history of archaeology,



which is as historian Christina Riggs suggests, is [too often celebrated and not scrutinised](#). By reading deeper into these images, by considering how they are products and visual representations of a deeply colonial world, we can give the history of archaeology and how it has informed our popular perceptions of the discipline, some much needed scrutiny.

You can find Chloe on Twitter [@cloemmo](#)

### List of Photographs:

Figure 1 - Work in progress at Ain Shems (Beth Shemesh)

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/matpc/item/2019706463/> - No known restrictions on publication

Figure 2- The Egyptian "task master" speeding up the workers

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/matpc/item/2019706465/> - No known restrictions on publication

Figure 3 - Women at Tell Jemmeh -  
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/matpc/item/2019706454/> No known restrictions on publication

Figure 4 - Workers on the horizon at Ain Shems -  
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2019693728/> No known restrictions on publication

Figure 5 - Work in progress at Ashkelon -  
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/matpc/item/2019695313/> No known restrictions on publication

Figure 6 - Raiders of the Lost Ark -  
<https://filmschoolrejects.com/indiana-jones-franchise-shots/> - Gif taken from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) Cinematography by Douglas Slocombe and Directed by Steven Spielberg. Should come under fair use for purpose of criticism.

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[H-Empire](#)