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Early Photographs and Archaeology: The Case Study of K.A.C. Creswell's Photographs of the Amman Citadel

Historical archives are increasingly becoming an important research tool for the archaeological disciplines, especially those related to the Near East. This is of course a positive trend: any effort to make “forgotten” data available to the scientific community is to be welcomed. Archive studies, however, require a specific approach: consistent and shared procedures for cataloguing and publishing the data gathered from archives still need to be fine-tuned by the archaeological community. Archive data is often collected and used by the archaeologist simply to answer doubts and problems already defined in the research in progress. Much potential information is thus neither recorded nor reported, making it difficult to compare data from different archives.

This contribution deals with a specific archive source of information: the early photo archives concerning Amman. By “early photos,” I mean those taken between the very beginning of the use of the camera

in archaeological contexts, around mid-19th century, and World War II. The photographic method was presented by Louis Daguerre, in Paris in 1839, and the first attempts to use a camera on an archaeological excavation were made just a few years later, in 1842, when the German Egyptologist Richard Lepsius decided to include a camera in the equipment of his archaeological expedition in Egypt (Bohrer 2011: 35). The camera was introduced in Jordan very early, most likely in 1842, when the Scottish physician George Skene Keith took some daguerrotypes at Jearash (see Perez 1988; Abujaber and Cobbing 2005; Anastasio forthcoming for an overview of this issue). From this moment onwards, as a rule, photographers were part of the staff of the main archaeological expeditions. World War II marks a radical change in the history of photography. Kodak started the production of Kodachrome, the first commercially successful color film, in

1935, while the Super Kodak SIX-20, the first camera with automatic exposure, was released in 1938; more generally, many new tools were produced, with an increasingly affordable price, for shooting, printing, and reproducing photographs and slides. From this moment onwards, photography became a practice accessible to all, whether professionals or not, leading to a large increase in photographic archives.

The main types of information that can be gained from early photo archives are: 1) how the landscape where the monuments are located has changed; 2) the state of a monument prior to any recent damage or destruction; 3) the reconstruction of the provenance of archaeological items; 4) the history of remakes and conservation works on a monument, if any—just to list the main ones.

The following examples will give special emphasis to the last issue, presenting a group of early photos that I had the opportunity to analyze first-hand: the photos of Amman taken by Keppel Archibald Cameron Creswell in the 1920s.

K.A.C. Creswell (London 1879–London 1974) is known as one of the first and most important scholars of Islamic architecture. He devoted himself to this subject from the time of his military posting in Egypt, in 1916. He spent most of his life living in Cairo and traveling all over the Islamic world, taking thousands of photos, which were published in his works only to a small extent (see Hamilton 1991 for a biographical sketch of Creswell). They are currently included in several archives: the Ashmolean Museum (that holds most of the negatives), the American University in Cairo, the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Fine Arts Library in Harvard, and the Biblioteca Berenson at Villa “I Tatti” in Florence, the latter being the institute where I had first-hand access to his photos. In Florence, there are 27 gelatin silver prints dedicated to Amman, out of a total of about 3,000 donated by Creswell to

the art historian Bernard Berenson.

A total amount of roughly 40,000 photos are spread across the different archives. In most cases the archives have replicas of the same images, but without completely overlapping. Creswell’s photos of Jordan are a very small part of the entire collection; specifically, the images of Amman amount to 39 shots, replicated in prints with a few differences in the other archives, for a total amount of 160 items.

It is important to recall that an international project for reuniting all the archives in a single online platform, aimed at making the whole collection accessible, has recently been launched: “The Creswell Online Network” project (Koulouris 2018; a preliminary outline of Creswell’s photos of Amman is given in Anastasio forthcoming).

The most likely date of these photographs falls between 1916 and 1928. Creswell’s first known visit to Egypt was in 1916, and some photos credited to Creswell illustrate a travel guide published in 1917 (Devonshire 1917). A comparison between his photographs and those taken by the Italian expedition to Amman, directed by Renato Bartoccini in 1928, makes it possible to state that all of Creswell’s photos of Amman were taken prior to the works carried out by Bartoccini (his private archive has recently been published in Anastasio and Botarelli 2015). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that Creswell definitely visited Amman between 1919 and 1920, as inspector of monuments for the Allenby Military Administration (Hamilton 1991: 130). Due to this, we can assume that Creswell’s photos of Amman were taken in 1919/1920.

Creswell took interesting photos both in the plain area at the foot of the Citadel mound, and on the Citadel itself. The former include photos of the Umayyad Congregational Mosque, details of the Roman Theatre, as well as the Nuweijis mausoleum, which intrigued Creswell especially for its dome,



1. Amman. The Nymphaeum in photo ID 133300 of the Biblioteca Berenson collection, Florence (©Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, neg. 5408).

supported by pendentives.

A very interesting case is the Roman Nymphaeum (FIG. 1). Even though the monument is portrayed in only one of the photos of Creswell's collection, it is very meaningful. The main preserved wall is viewed from the north-east, which is an unusual viewpoint, compared to most of the other known early photos of the monuments where the perspective is normally the opposite compared to Creswell's photo: for example, the photo taken by Bartoccini in (FIG. 2); other photos of the monument can be found especially in the photo archives of Bonfils and Phillips in the 1860s (Warren 1870; Renié 2008), Kondakov and Butler expeditions in the early 1900s (Kondakov 1904; Kenfield 2010), and Bartoccini in 1928–1938 (Anastasio and Botarelli 2015).

Despite this difference in perspective, all these photos are linked by visible masonry details. It is interesting to notice



2. Amman. The Reception Hall, from west, in photo ID 133304 of the Biblioteca Berenson collection, Florence (©Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, neg. 5434).

that Creswell's photo shows an intermediate state of preservation of the structure, between the earlier period, until Butler's time, and the later period, around a decade

after Creswell's visit, when the upper part of the main wall was collapsed, as well visible in the photo taken by Bartoccini: the higher part of the wall is still preserved in Butler's time, and completely lost at the time of Bartoccini's excavation, in 1928. The photo taken by Creswell, probably eight years before Bartoccini's photo, demonstrates that the wall had already collapsed in part, but not to the extent shown in Bartoccini's photo. In any case, what is interesting is that if we compare all these early photos in chronological order, a large amount of data can be acquired on the modern history of the building.

Creswell took photos on the Citadel of the so-called Audience (or Reception) Hall, photographing the monument both from the outside (FIG. 2) and the inside (FIG. 3). He

recorded several details of the decorations in the row of niches that are inside the building. These latter photographs are particularly worth mentioning because they are among the first to document these architectural elements. Most previous travelers who had visited Amman had focused their attention on the main monuments at the foot of the Citadel, because its top was a mass of collapsed ruins, with very few standing and accessible buildings.

Prior to Creswell's visit, the photos published in 1904 by Nikodim Kondakov show some of the decorated niches in good detail. Unfortunately, these photos were significantly retouched and adjusted for publication—a common practice at that time—and the original architectural features are not clearly readable (Kondakov 1904: figs.



3. Amman. The interior south-western corner of the Audience Hall, (left) in a photo taken by Creswell and (right) in its current state (left: Berenson ID 133307, ©Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, neg. 5436; right: Stefano Anastasio, photo taken in 2014).

18–25 pls. XXVIII–XXXII). These decorations were photographed and drawn in greater detail only later, during the Italian excavations in the 1930s (Anastasio and Botarelli 2015: figs. 167–184).

The photos of the interior of the structure are very useful because of the significant work of restoration, and in some cases, reconstruction, carried out in the building in recent years, as well as at the time of Bartoccini's expedition. In the 1930s, conservation work consisted mainly in shoring up some instable walls and repairing the masonry in at least "12 endangered parts" as mentioned in the excavation journal, but unfortunately not mapped ("12 punti pericolanti," see Anastasio and Botarelli 2015: 112). Creswell's photos allow some details to be thoroughly compared, as in the case of the corner restored by Bartoccini, displayed in FIG. 3.

Early photo archives are a significant tool for protecting and enhancing archaeological heritage. They may be particularly effective for planning appropriate conservation works on damaged monuments, making their proper use by scholars of key importance.

Of course, professional skills in the study of early photographic materials and techniques require extensive training and experience, which cannot be expected from ordinary archive users. However, both professionals and amateurs may use several tools and tutorials to achieve at least a basic knowledge in the field, especially as regards the materials and the techniques of the photos.

Being able to recognize the material and the technique of a printed photo, generally means being able to date it, at least approximately. Many techniques were used for printing photos especially between the late 19th–early 20th century: salted paper, platinum, cyanotype, albumen, collodion, gelatine silver, etc., and in many cases they were used just for a limited time. Becoming familiar with at least the main types could

surely help archaeologists in dating uncertain photos.

For this reason, it is important to give information about the material, dimensions, and techniques of the archive photos when they are reproduced in archaeological publications. This does not happen very often, unfortunately.

Besides printed handbooks (for instance, Reilly 1986), some useful and practical tools for approaching this subject can be found online: for instance, in the Graphic Atlas Project of the Image Permanence Institute (graphicsatlas.org), which introduces the identification of photographs, as well as the Atlas of Analytical Signatures of Photographic Processes of the Getty Institute (getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/atlas.html).

These and other similar tools may allow the archaeologist to gain a basic knowledge in the field, improving the way archive documents are studied for archaeological research, and making their publication consistent and effective.

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