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Jordan's Environment in Early Photographs

At the opening of the *First International Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan* convened graciously by His Royal Highness the Crown Prince Hassan at Oxford University, the keynote speaker, the distinguished Professor of Geology at the University of London startled the brilliant assembly of scholars by abruptly chiding us with a totally unexpected rebuke:

'You archaeologists are always looking for the wrong thing!'

Having succeeded remarkably in getting our attention, Professor Vita-Finzi went on to explain that *water* is one of the easiest materials to gather (by digging, trapping in cisterns, or tapping from distant springs) and to move (by aqueduct, subterranean channels, or donkey caravan). By contrast, in Jordan, soil—or at least rich and fruitful topsoil—is rare. 'If you archaeologists can discover how mankind used and conserved soil throughout the millennia, you will *really* be contributing to our preparation for the future as well as to our understanding of the past.'

After this stimulating paper, the Harvard Semitic Museum Team showed the speaker a small picture from which we have enlarged the mural of *Amman's Roman Theater* for this present conference (see FIG. 1). We then were as startled by our geologist's reaction to the image as we had been by his friendly rebuke: 'Look! We can see the topsoil and how it's moving! Can you find me pictures of that hillside over the next decades? If you can, we could plot erosion patterns and predict . . .!'

Not yet, have we totally succeeded in tracing photographs made at close, regular intervals even for central Amman near the Philadelphia Hotel—but, with help from the scholars assembled for this conference, such a visual 'lexicon' for many sites is not all beyond the realm of possibility. Indeed with the help of computer-assisted searching-devices applied to such recent technological developments as videodisc image-storage-systems (with the capability of preserving 108,000 still images on a single platter only slightly larger than a phonograph record) we already can easily, and quite inexpensively, assemble and share visual data in ways which should open new dimensions for scientific research and human understanding.

In this paper, we wish to report on efforts underway to save the fragile records-in-light of Jordan and regions nearby. If this report succeeds in alerting yourselves and your colleagues to the value of photographic documents and the urgent need for concerted action for preservation of them, we shall be grateful. If with your help, the Harvard Semitic Museum is able to trace such photographic records that are useful for the work of Jordan's Department of Antiquities, future generations will be indebted to you.

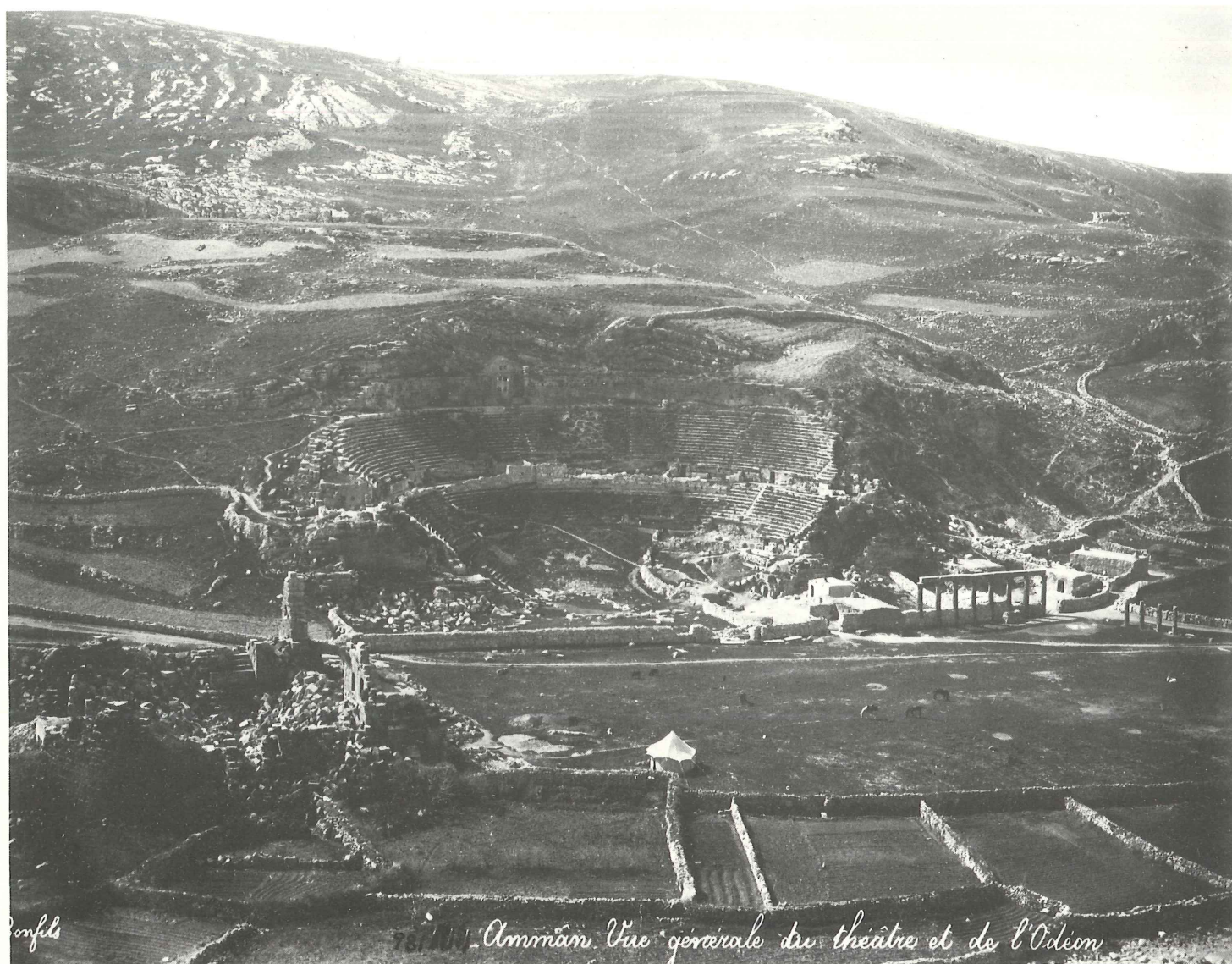
It is highly appropriate that this review be presented in Amman because of the intimate involvement of Jordanians in the Harvard Semitic Museum's photo-archival work—almost from its dramatic beginning in 1970.

Nineteen-seventy was a year of tragic turmoil in Cambridge, Massachusetts as well as in Amman. In the Harvard Semitic Museum's building at the time, Dr Henry Kissinger had his office while the Museum itself was literally banished underground—into our own cellar. Two girls seem to have entered the building and left a small packet (disguised in a 'paper bag' something like an American student's lunch) on a library shelf on our top floor. At midnight this bag exploded—thank God hurting no one—but blowing our roof into New England's October sky!

We have no way of knowing whether the young ladies succeeded, as they intended, in changing the policies of Dr Kissinger's colleagues in regard to Cambodia, but they certainly succeeded in changing many of the policies of the Harvard Semitic Museum! Indeed, ultimately, for our report to you today, we must give credit to their action because the bomb's blast brought me up to that attic the next morning to survey damage: under the eaves in one corner of the attic, I noticed (amid broken bits of skylight) scores of crimson boxes covered with dust. (Crimson is the color of Harvard's football team.) Upon opening those boxes we found hundreds, then thousands of golden pictures. (Later we were to discover that the golden color came from real gold—in liquid form—which had been used to cover the albumen emulsions and thus had protected their pristine clarity, thereby facilitating our analyses today).

As archaeologists and linguists primarily, we did not, at

1. Amman, general view of the theater and the Odeon (Bonfils 981, 144; HSM 951).



first, have any idea how old those pictures were. Only gradually (because some scenes have not changed that much) did we learn that almost all of these pictures dated from over a century ago (a fact confirmed by the subsequent discovery of the customs and purchase documents dated in 1890 and 1891).

Since that dramatic discovery (which eventually was to total over 28,000 images, including negatives, lantern slides, and archaeologists' 'snapshots' as well as gold-toned albumen prints) our work has resulted in: *expeditions* (to find other photographs), *conferences* (to seek advice in understanding what we were finding), *exhibitions* (to share results and stimulate our colleagues), and *this book* (about the photographs of the Maison Bonfils which we are presenting to Dr Hadidi to assist the work of the department in continuing the resolutions of this conference).

Before introducing the microfiche compendium of Bonfils photographs, we wish to thank the many Jordanians, 'too numerous to mention by name', who helped us understand the implications of the re-discovery of our own early photographs.

During his research at Harvard University in 1976, His Excellency Adnan Abu-Odeh, the Minister of Information, became a close friend. As part of the Bostonian Arab-American community's celebration of the US bicentennial, the Harvard Semitic Museum displayed a selection of Bonfils portraits in Boston City Hall under the title *Faces from the Levant*¹. At that time we had no precise idea either how old were these portraits or where their subjects lived. (Subse-

¹cf. pp. 12-15, *Festival Bostonian, Arab Celebration, January 1976* (ed. J. N. Leon), Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs, Boston, 1976.

quently we have found in Europe and Beirut titles which help identify them.)

We persuaded Minister Abu-Odeh to come to City Hall to meet a group of schoolchildren studying the Middle East who wished to interview him for their school's television program. His Excellency was patient, gracious, and very kind to these little reporters—until he saw our portraits on the wall. Suddenly His Excellency went over to the pictures and one by one began analyzing robes, embroideries, jewellery, and head-dresses: 'This woman's costume resembles those in villages north of Damascus; this girl's jacket must come from Bethlehem; this man's *abaya* looks like what was worn long ago in southern Jordan . . .' The 'information' we learned that day from His Excellency the Minister of Information was almost as valuable as the way he taught us to look, to look more closely, and to question. . . .

We must confess to His Excellency that many of our questions (and his own, back in 1976) remain unanswered. So, in some ways, our gift of the microfiche of all our Bonfils photographs to the Department of Antiquities is a way by which we hope to solicit more and better answers—and questions as well!

Answers and stimulating questions have over the years been proposed by many Jordanian visitors to Harvard: Mr Alami taught us about Jerash photographs; Mme Widad Kavar introduced us to the archaeology of costume by pointing out that mature women photographed in the 1860s could well be wearing embroideries they had stitched decades before. Archaeologists such as Professor Moawiyeh Ibrahim and Dr

Fawzi Zayadine taught us about the ancient Jordanian sites recorded in our pictures while Raouf Abujaber and Tawfiq Kavar told us tales of Amman and Al-Salt a century ago.

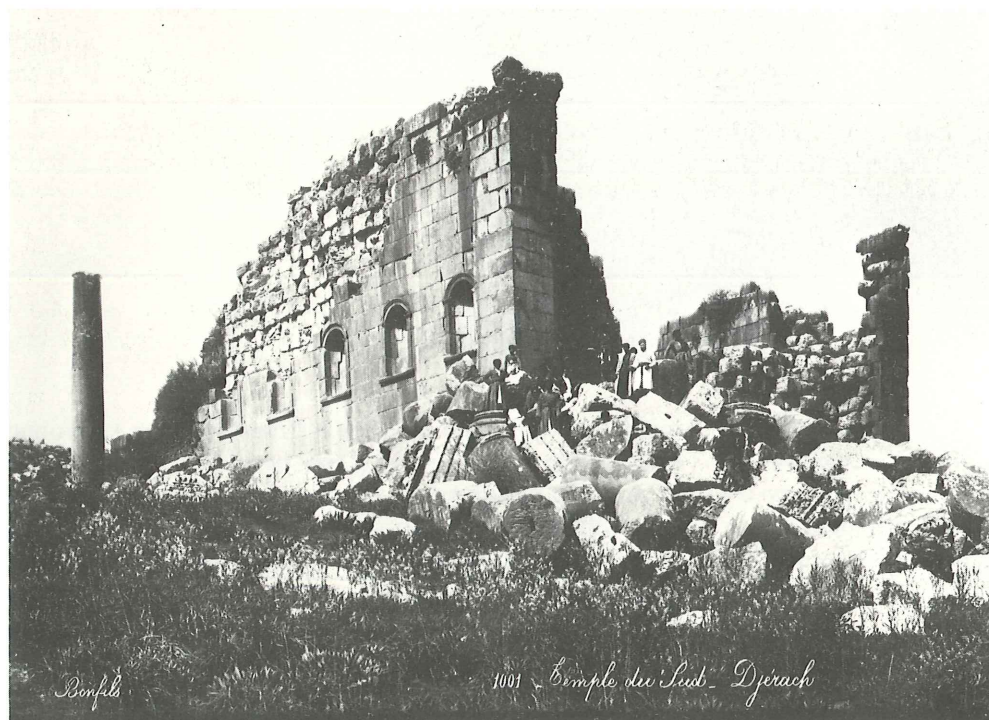
His Excellency Dr Nassir el-Din el-Assad explained the Qasr of Aqaba to us and, in a particularly important theological analysis of many a *fatwa* from Al-Azhar and of relevant *hadith*, His Excellency Chief Justice Ibrahim Kattan elucidated the evolution in Islamic tolerance of images.

Most significantly, Dr Adnan Hadidi pointed out the need to consider other visual documents (drawings, engravings, travellers' sketches etc.) together with early photographs and urged us to come to Jordan with exhibits of our photographs. In Jordan itself, the Harvard Semitic Museum's photo-historical teams learned the wisdom of Dr Hadidi's advice: from men and women of every region and station we found in understanding our pictures.

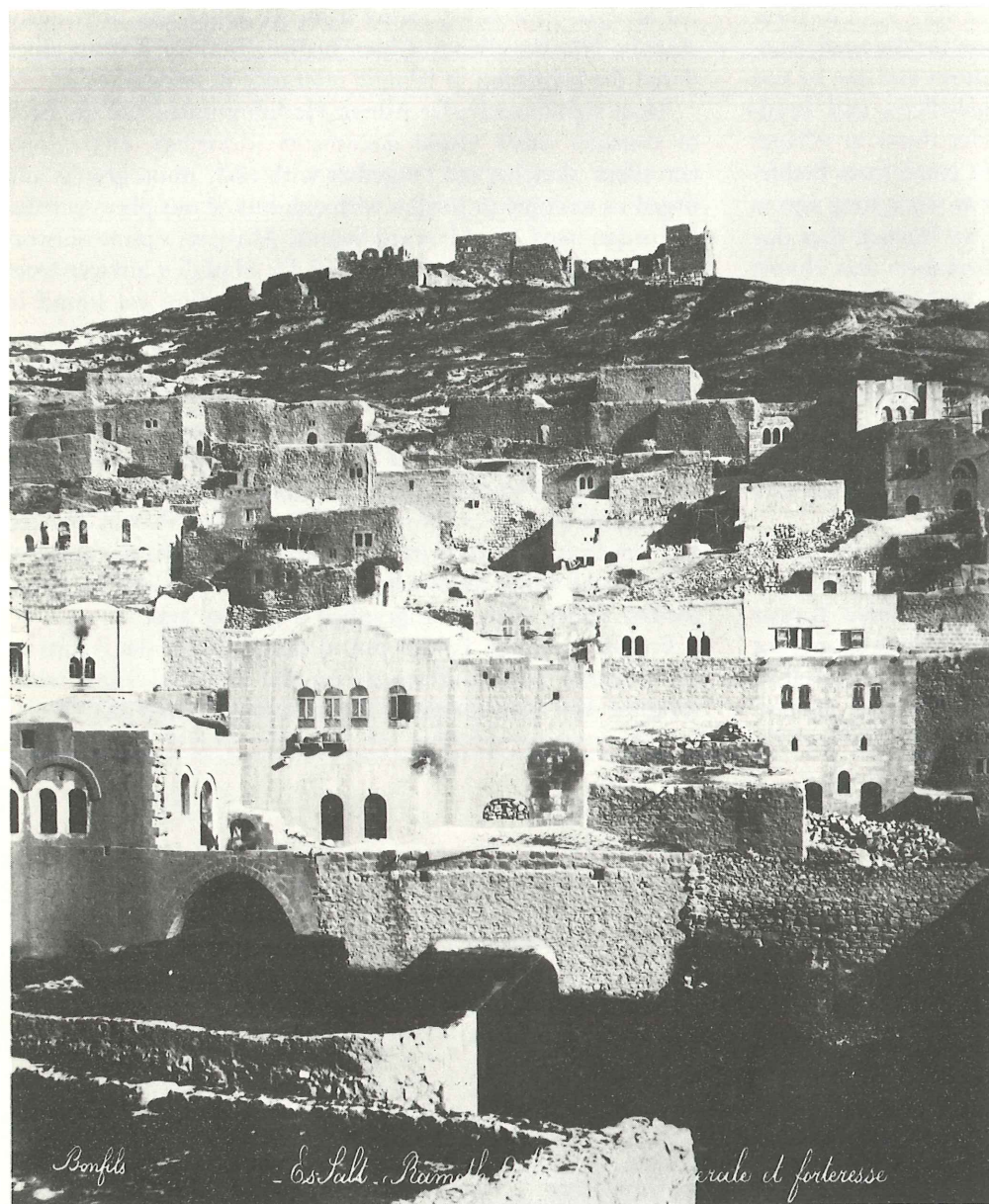
Suleiman Musa identified Bonfils' 'sons of Sheikh Diab' as three princes of the Adwan. Elders of the Circassian community explained those who were photographed—in Caucasian dress—at Jerash by Bonfils (see FIG. 2) as scouts selected to sample the environment before formally requesting the Sultan's confirmation of those lands. Dr Ahmed Sharkis assisted our research with records assembled in his own documentation Center while Rami Khoury helped us precisely to locate Jordan Valley sites photographed a century ago.

Professor Adnan Bakhit put at our disposal the results of his research and conferences on the *Bilad al-Sham* while Ibrahim Abu-Nab identified a handsome anonymous scholar as the great grandfather of his wife: Sheikh Mohammed

2. Jerash, the Southern Temple (Temple of Zeus) (Bonfils 1003, 166; HSM 971).



3. Al-Salt Ramoth-Gilead general view and fortress (Bonfils 978, 141; HSM 948). This image and many others of al-Salt have been assembled by the HSM for study by the Municipality and the Salt Development Corporation to aid in planning for the city's restoration and preservation.



Mafouz al-Sururi of Jerusalem.

In short—and we beg the forgiveness of those many guides in our explorations whom time does not permit us to acknowledge here—Jordan's flourishing intellectual environment has greatly enriched our efforts to understand these photographs (see FIG. 3).

At this moment three special friends of the Harvard Semitic Museum should be mentioned and prayerfully remembered:

—His Excellency the Late Sherif Abdul-Hamid Sharaf—who

in the midst of arduous duties as Prime Minister, still found time to help us understand scenes in our early photographs by teaching us lessons as diverse as the intricacies of Hejazi court life a century ago or those streetcries traditionally voiced by sellers of *sûs* and other refreshments;

—The late Haitham Qassous, who guided us in designing both exhibitions to display our discoveries, as well as seminars for sharing expertise and hopes with today's photographers;

—The late Judge Fuad Attallah, who as President of the

Friends of Archaeology brought us together with those who gather from all walks of life to enrich Jordan's future by preserving her precious past.

In presenting to the Department of Antiquities our entire Bonfils collection—in microfiche—we are responding to Dr Adnan Hadidi's original request several years ago: 'we need these pictures'.

The work of the photographers Bonfils have been selected as both a *case-study* for this paper and as our *first step* in sharing photographic clues for Jordan's environment, physical and historical, for many reasons.

One reason is deeply personal yet should inspire all attending this conference: with great fondness, the Harvard Semitic Museum remembers a discovery made with the help of Judge Attallah: on our last visit with Judge Attallah, he showed us his portrait as a boy in Beirut with his father and older brothers. This family portrait was made by the Maison Bonfils at the time when Fuad Bey was beginning his studies at Syrian Protestant College (the present AUB) in 1916. This is the last Bonfils photograph we have been able to trace—it was taken 50 years after the Bonfils family left southern France to begin their careful encyclopedic visual reportage of the environments of all these regions in 1867. It is fitting that this image was treasured here in Amman, as we hope all their photographs will come to be valued and used to study the past and thereby shape the future.

Permit me to explain the purpose and context of this edition² of the Bonfils photographs—which we hope can serve as a tool for future systematic study of Jordan's environment, geographical and historical:

The intention of the Harvard Semitic Museum (HSM) in editing and disseminating the HSM Bonfils photographs in microfiche format is to share conveniently, swiftly, and comprehensively a remarkably rich and virtually untapped source of documentation for almost every aspect of Middle Eastern studies as well as for various facets of the general histories of ideas, art, technology, and international communications.

Ultimately, the HSM hopes, through publishing its own Bonfils corpus, to stimulate similar efforts to share early photographic collections and thereby open up new dimensions for research in the most swiftly changing part of our world.

Why have we begun with the HSM Bonfils corpus? Two major factors have determined our decision: the potential usefulness of Bonfils photographs and the coherence of the HSM collection.

Photographers (Dumas and Charlier) preceded the Bonfils family's 1867 arrival in Beirut. Several photographic houses (especially Abdullah Frères and Sebah of Istanbul, Beato or Luxor, Lehnert and Landrock of

Cairo) seem to have exceeded even the prodigious production of the Bonfils family's half-century-long photo expedition. Far more influential books of photographs (by Du Camp, Frith, and Salzmann) overshadow the rare Bonfils portfolio of *Architecture Antique* (1872) and the various editions of *Souvenirs d'Orient* (1877–78). More highly acclaimed artists (Lecomte de Noüy and Bartholdi) and much more scientifically oriented observers (de Vogüé, Vignes, de Clercq) recorded Eastern scenes and monuments. The journeys of more mysterious camera pioneers (an Egyptian, Colonel Sadiq, who photographed Medina in 1860, and the recently identified Meccan physician, the Sayyid 'Abd al-Ghaffār, who assisted Snouck Hurgronje) produced works today far more rare than the many thousands of Bonfils albumen prints to be found in collections and shops throughout the world.

If Bonfils images cannot be regarded as the earliest, most numerous, most acclaimed, most scholarly, or rarest photographs of the nineteenth-century Levant, HSM consultations with current investigators throughout the regions recorded by Bonfils lenses suggest that the family's photographic records can today provide the most useful repertoire of early visual documentation of the area for four reasons:

- Bonfils prints were meticulously processed originally, so that, even when adverse environmental factors have caused some subsequent physical deterioration, excellent technical standards maintained in the family workshop can often yield invaluable visual data to modern image-enhancement techniques.
- Bonfils subjects were selected in consciously encyclopedic spirit that has preserved a vast range of data for the geographical, ethnographic, biblical, archaeological, architectural, and historical studies that the Bonfils intended to promote. Further, we are able today to scrutinize background details (often recorded incidentally) for various geomorphological, demographic, and agronomic investigations as well as explorations in other disciplines unanticipated when the photographs were being made.
- Bonfils activity spanned the period when the most profound changes began to alter Eastern landscapes and ways of life irretrievably, so that the family was consciously able to record scenes unchanged for millennia as well as (toward the end of Adrien Bonfils's activity) the advent of occidental technology and mores.
- In contrast to most early Western photographers, who sought primarily to capture exotic or romantic aspects of the local population, the Bonfils portrayed these men and women (among whom they freely chose to make their home), along with their daily life, venerable skills, and human character, with love and respect.

By no means should it be inferred from these four

²Carney E. S. Gavin, *The Image of the East: Nineteenth-century Near Eastern Photographs by Bonfils*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1982.

characteristics that each Bonfils photograph should be accepted uncritically as a straightforward, unimpeachably accurate document. Contrivances—in selection of subject, image composition, and costuming of sitters—abound in Bonfils pictures. Bonfils manipulations during various stages of the photographic process (making an exposure, printing a negative, retouching a print, and even in the labeling of an image) have been detected in many cases and are suspected in others.

Indeed, a charming, rather whimsical sense of humor manifests itself in many Bonfils pictures. The same feathered fan and tasseled cap were shared by several young women posed to represent distinct Beirut types. Advertisements for Bonfils photographs are themselves photographed in views of Baalbek gateway, the temple at Dendur, and the street inside the Jaffa Gate. A seemingly straightforward camping scene by the Jordan has been found by HSM photographic historian Elizabeth Carella actually to consist of a montage pasted together from details of at least six other Bonfils photographs.

We hope that by presenting the HSM Bonfils corpus for the scrutiny of specialists throughout the world, further incongruities and contrivances can be detected. The HSM invites users of this microfiche edition to inform us of their own discoveries so that we can incorporate as many clues as possible into the files being assembled to facilitate our ongoing detective work—which now should include experts everywhere.

The HSM collection of Bonfils photographs seems to be the largest coherently organized assemblage of Bonfils albumen prints surviving intact from the last century. Since the collection's acquisition in 1890, circumstances of storage (indeed, intervening oblivion) have fortuitously preserved the emulsions in an almost pristine state that permits excellent modern reproduction.

In choosing to publish the HSM Bonfils corpus as it has survived, we are aware that much more needs to be done. The present images should be supplemented by Bonfils photographs elsewhere and by others (especially those made after 1890) that we hope can be traced with the help of this microfiche. In particular, we are eager to include in a later edition significant individual images not represented in our own collection and yet to be discovered in public and private repositories throughout the world.

With support from UNESCO's sector for Culture and Communication, the HSM has initiated a cultural preservation project entitled *FOCUS*, to underscore the practical steps of Finding, Organizing, Copying, Using, and Sharing required to save endangered early photographic documentation of the Middle East, wherever such records have survived.

As historians and custodians of heritage from throughout the Middle East consulted the HSM photograph

collections, at the first International *FOCUS* Conference in October 1978, several factors became clear:

- The existence, extent, and potential usefulness of Bonfils photographs had been virtually unknown—even to experts such as Khaled Mo'az, who has devoted a lifetime to compiling documentation about the city of Damascus and the regional costumes of Syria.
- Information preserved in Bonfils photographs is urgently needed today, for projects as diverse as restoring classical ruins and positioning dams for soil retention.
- Accurate analysis of Bonfils pictures requires various specialties and the critical acumen and the combined talents of regional expert in different disciplines. Not only do geologists observe different clues than do epigraphers but both should proceed cautiously, guided by historians who are aware that some Bonfils photographs were originally labeled incorrectly with designations no longer used today.
- The quantity of Bonfils photographs and the crucial decades that they record permit previously undreamed-of precision in tracing historical developments as well as short-lived phenomena sometimes otherwise undocumented. Thus vanished buildings and shops outside the Jaffa Gate, as well as the vicissitudes of nearby walls (breached to permit the kaiser to enter on horseback) and the location of a clock tower (erected by the sultan but removed by the British) can now be studied with reference to such internal chronological evidence as uniforms, shop signs and street posters advertising the facilities of a hotel in Jericho.
- The Bonfils photographs (particularly the pre-1890 HSM corpus) must be studied as *an entity*, irrespective of present-day political boundaries, if firm scientific controls are to be established for the multiple uses of the new dimensions of research and public education opened by the rediscovery of these images. Not only were Bonfils camera expeditions unimpeded by today's borders, but dates for such expeditions (which for some sites can easily be determined by internal evidence) can prove crucial in solving puzzles.
- Presented as an entire corpus, the HSM Bonfils collection can serve as a criterion to provide sets of 'fixed points' by which other anonymous or still chronologically indeterminate photographs or sketches can become useful documents. To determine when another set of views were made, even a few images showing the same subjects as occur in the HSM Bonfils collection, can yield at least an approximate (pre- or post-1890) date to comparative analyses, while in many cases much greater precision may be attained by comparison with Bonfils publications of 1872, 1876, 1878 or datable views made by other photographers.

For three particularly urgent projects (restorations in progress at Petra and in Jerash [ancient Gerasa], as well as the conservation of Ottoman-period palaces in Damascus) the HSM produced a twenty-eight-minute videotape to share with Jordanian and Syrian antiquities experts, which included approximately 150 photographs, most made by Bonfils.

Microfiche publication provides the simplest means of sharing the entire HSM Bonfils corpus. A special spring 1980 FOCUS traveling exhibition entitled *Legacy of Light/Turath al-Nur/L'Héritage Lumineux* enabled the HSM to explore and confirm the feasibility of such microfiche formats in a series of joint seminars conducted with overseas cultural authorities—at Oxford University and UNESCO as well as in the Middle East in Riyadh, Amman, Damascus, Manama, and Doha.

Now in co-ordination with the second International FOCUS Conference, this microfiche is presented as both a tool and a symbol for the work ahead.

As historical evidence, photographs have often been invisible to scholars—perhaps precisely because, since we can today make or consult photographs so easily and frequently, we fail to consider that moments captured in light will never return.

As documents, photographs have often fallen through archivists' nets. Librarians pay attention even to scribbled notes as manuscripts. Art curators do not overlook even hasty sketches. However, countless early photographs have in recent decades been thrown away as 'old-fashioned' or allowed unwittingly to deteriorate. Thus we hope that publication of the HSM Bonfils corpus will convince scholars everywhere of the value of the documentation—at times unique—to be found in early photographs.

Sharing the Harvard Semitic Museum's Bonfils corpus in the microfiche text *Image of the East* is only a beginning. Already a French language edition is being prepared by our Lebanese

colleague Fouad Debbas, to incorporate many new discoveries made even during the few months since the University of Chicago Press published the *Image of the East*! We invite conference participants and those who afterwards use the *Image of the East* to share with us further discoveries which we know you too will make.

The Harvard Semitic Museum has now embarked upon an intensive 3-year project to find and survey surviving early photographic collections of the Middle East³. With the support of a grant from His Majesty Fahd ibn Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud, the King of Saudi Arabia, the museum shall attempt to assess priorities in preservation efforts for surviving visual documentation and to implement computer-assisted storage and retrieval systems to study and share photographs.

We sincerely welcome suggestions for this work from conference participants and invite each of you to visit us in Cambridge.

³ The primary goal of the intensive three-year project will be to save endangered collections and to assemble scattered visual documentation through photographic copying expeditions. The negatives and inventories thus gathered with support of His Majesty will be formally known as: *The King Fahd Archives*.

The fundamental purposes of both the project and the archives thus assembled will be the same as the museum's: 'to promote sound knowledge of Semitic languages and history'—specifically by preserving neglected documentation for future scientific research and education. Five interrelated phases will characterize the work of the *King Fahd Archives* at the Harvard Semitic Museum and throughout the world during the next three years:

- 1) *Finding*: through the *King Fahd Archives* the Museum will coordinate the search for lost, forgotten or endangered collections to assemble an inventory of early pictorial records of the Middle East.
- 2) *Organizing*: through the *King Fahd Archives*, the Museum will begin implementing archival systems for the control and safe-storage of original photographs. Particular attention will be given to recording systems which can eventually be computer-assisted and co-ordinated with videodisc, videotape, microfiche, microfilm and other image-storage and retrieval techniques. Archival manuals and training programs will be made available for the staffs of collaborating repositories.
- 3) *Copying*: as far as funds, time, and circumstances permit, major historic photographic collections will be copied carefully—to preserve an archival record which can be shared, as appropriate, with scholars throughout the world.
- 4) *Using*: through the *King Fahd Archives*, the Museum will encourage scientific and educational uses of early photographs—particularly for television and publications.
- 5) *Sharing*: as far as authorized by each individual repository, the Museum will explore various means of disseminating visual documentation assembled in the *King Fahd Archives*.

