

# Digitizing Middle Eastern Collections and Enhancing Access Through Linked Open Data

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BRITISH INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH INSTITUTES (BIRI)

# The British International Research Institutes (BIRI)

The BIRI were established in the late 19th and early-mid 20th centuries as archaeological excavation bases and training centres. Over time, they evolved into global hubs for research in the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

Today, the BIRI are supported by the British Academy - the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences – and receive core funding administered through the Academy from the UK Department for Science, Innovation & Technology.

BIRI operate across regions including the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, Africa, the Middle East, Iran, and Central Asia, supporting interdisciplinary and cross-regional academic collaboration.

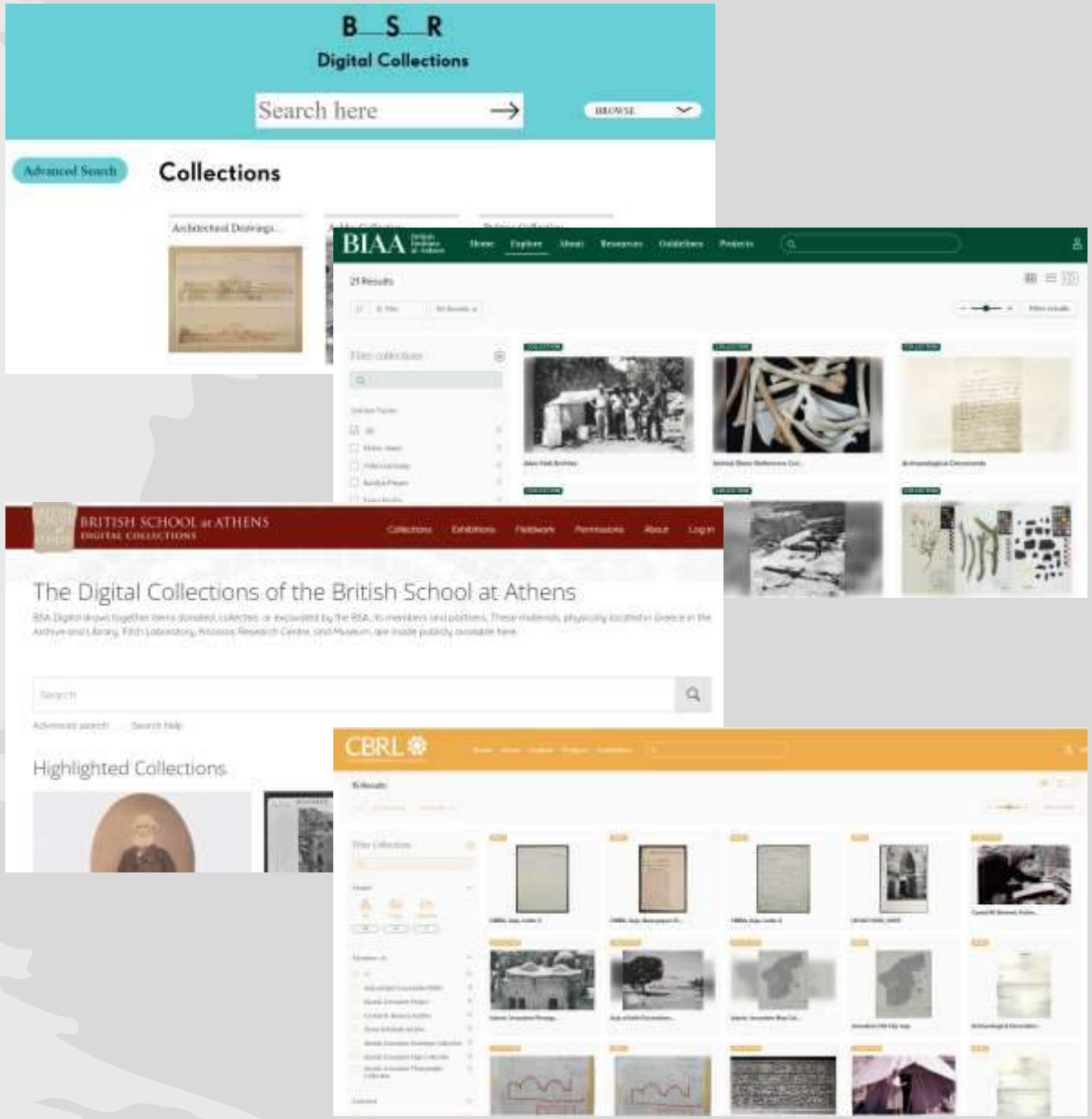


# Digital Repositories at BIRI Institutes

BIRI institutes preserve over a century's worth of archival materials spanning regions including the Mediterranean, Türkiye, the Black Sea, Africa, the Middle East, Iran, and Central Asia.

**BIRI's digital collections offer open access to a wealth of archival resources** ranging from photographs, architectural records, and maps to archaeological documentation and research-related institutional records.

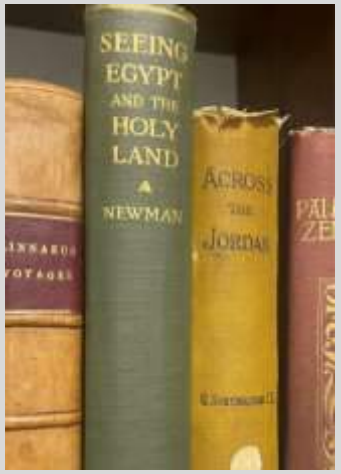
**Digital repositories** at the British School at Rome **(BSR)**, British Institute at Ankara **(BIAA)**, British School at Athens **(BSA)**, and the Council for British Research in the Levant **(CBRL) serve as vital platforms for researchers and the public to explore and engage with these diverse collections.**



# Council for British Research in the Levant (CBRL)

## A Gateway to Digitised Middle Eastern Collections







**CBRL Digital Repository unites accessible archival materials from Jerusalem, Amman, and the UK**, making invaluable resources from across the Levant accessible to all.

**CBRL has played a pivotal role in major digitisation projects focused on Middle Eastern collections,** including the Endangered Archives Programme (EAP): Understanding Mandate Palestine, in collaboration with the British Library.

**This project successfully digitised 98 rare books (1619–1870) and approximately 4,000 archival items**, including photographs, maps, drawings, and administrative documents. These materials are now accessible on **the British Library** website and partly on the CBRL digital repository.

# Adopting
# Linked Open Data (LOD)

## and Aligning with the FAIR Principles




Linked Open Data (LOD) is **a method for structuring and interlinking data across platforms** to build semantic networks.

Within the BIRI archives, **LOD enables researchers to trace meaningful links** between people, places, and historical events across regions. This method adheres to **FAIR data principles**.

# The BIRI collaboration project

**Since 2022**, the British International Research Institutes (BIRI) have been collaborating on the Digital Coordination and Strategy Project.

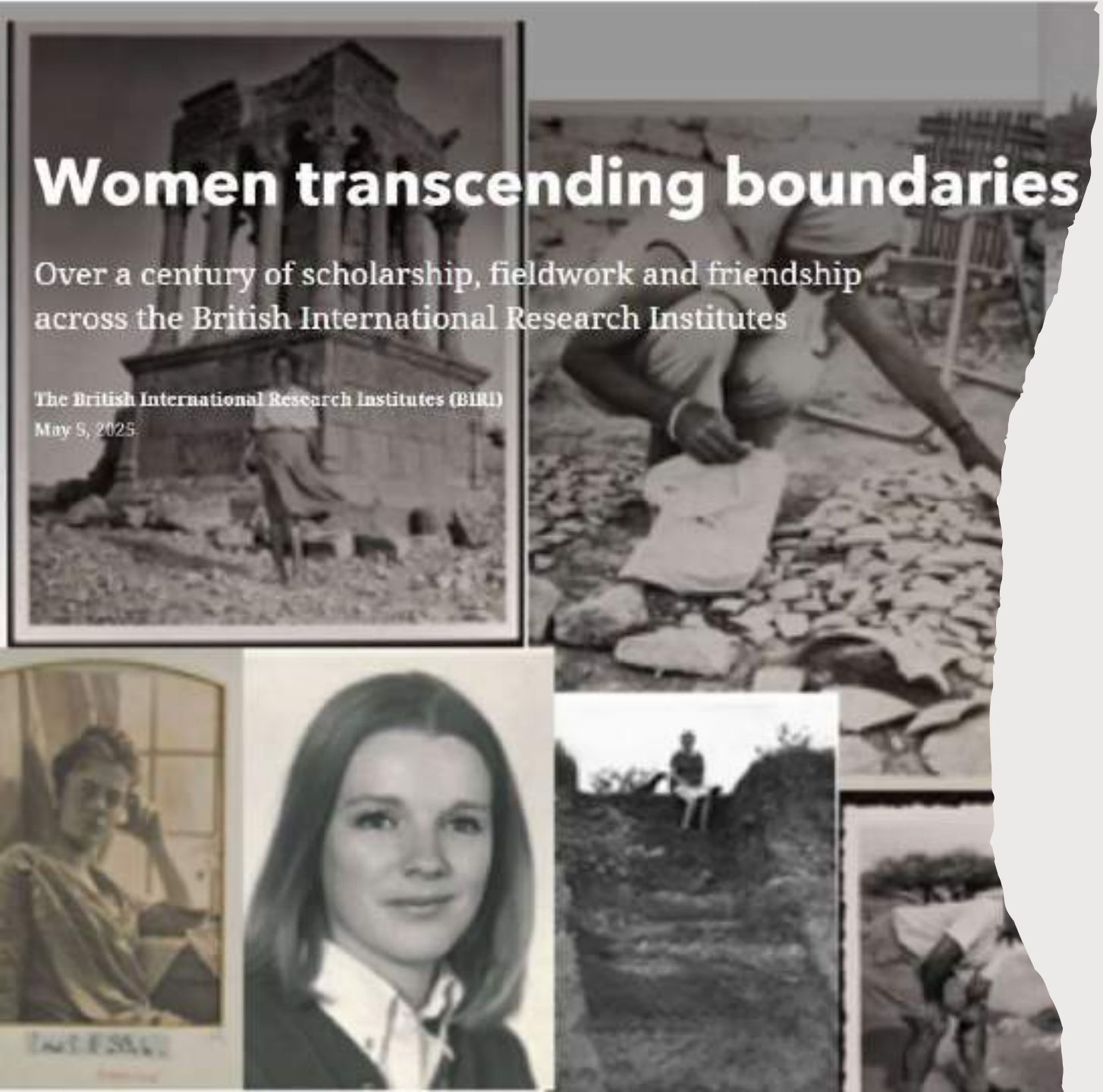



The project adopts **LOD** standards to identify meaningful connections across dispersed collections, with the long-term goal of building **a shared digital archive portal**.

**Goal:**
-To develop a unified digital platform that enables integrated access and cross-institutional exploration of all BIRI archival holdings.
-Promote knowledge-sharing and collaborative learning among archivists and digital teams.

**Purpose:**
To reveal and digitally reconnect overlooked historical links across regions and disciplines, fostering new avenues for research.

**Output:**
These rediscovered connections are brought to life through **interactive storytelling** tools such as **ArcGIS StoryMap**.



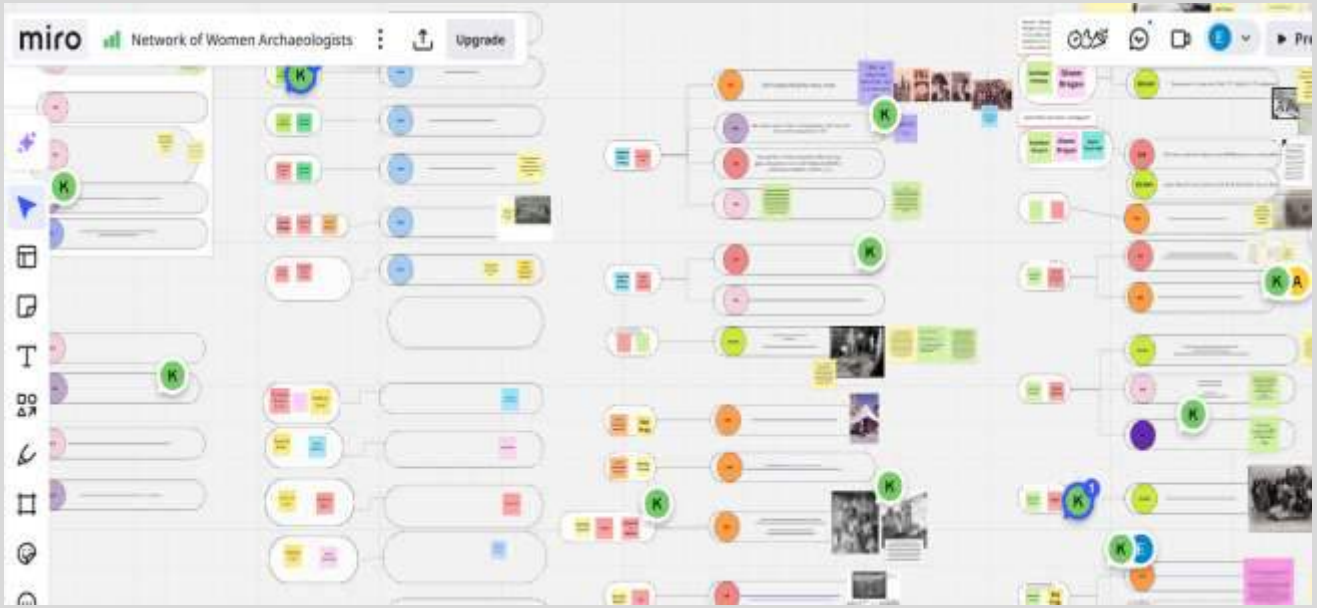

# Revealing Hidden Narratives:

## Women, Archives, and Cross-BIRI Connections

**BIRI has maintained a long-standing presence in the Middle East, contributing to archaeology and cultural heritage.** Its archives house extensive fieldwork documentation, photographs, and correspondence, **especially from pioneering women archaeologists**, offering insight into both the region's archaeological legacy and the gendered history of the discipline.

Archives are not mere repositories; they are narrative sources. **Archival storytelling allows us to reconstruct overlooked histories**, particularly the contributions of women archaeologists, often omitted from mainstream narratives.

# Methodology and Sources




This project merges archival research with digital storytelling. We analysed excavation records, correspondence, photographs, and field notes from the British Institute and regional archives, **uncovering the professional networks and personal narratives that shaped archaeology across several regions, including the Middle East.**

**Using digital storytelling, we visualise the journeys and collaborations of pioneering women** through timelines, maps, and curated narratives. This approach makes archival findings more engaging and accessible to wider audiences.

Our case studies feature many women archaeologists, including those who worked in the Middle East, such as **Gertrude Bell** and **Kathleen Kenyon**. Each profile highlights their fieldwork, key discoveries, networks of mentors and mentees, and the regional connections they helped shape..

**Using ArcGIS StoryMaps, we connect diverse narratives** to map the contributions of pioneering women archaeologists, creating an interactive and immersive digital experience.

# Gertrude Bell

## Pioneer in Archaeology and Diplomacy in the Middle East

As part of our ongoing exploration of women's groundbreaking contributions within the British International Research Institutes (BIRI), we proudly highlight Gertrude Bell (1868–1926), **a pioneering writer, explorer, archaeologist, and colonial diplomat**.

She documented archaeological sites in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq between 1905 and 1914, **laying the foundation for modern archaeological practices in the Middle East**.

**Bell's leadership as Director of Antiquities in Iraq**, founding the Iraq Museum in 1922, and writing the 1924 Antiquities Law marked key milestones in heritage preservation.






Her archive, held at Newcastle University, includes letters, maps, and diaries, connecting with BIRI collections and **providing a network of interlinked resources for deeper exploration**.

# Mapping Gertrude Bell's Legacy Through Linked Archival Sources

This map, part of the BIRI digital storytelling project, traces Gertrude Bell's travels across the Middle East and highlights key locations **like her 1910 stay in Rome, pivotal in shaping her archaeological career**.



# Mentorship Matters:

## Eugénie Sellers Strong's Influence on Bell's Career

Gertrude Bell met Eugénie Sellers Strong in the 1890s while studying Arabic and Persian in London.

Under Strong's mentorship at the **British School at Rome (BSR)**, Bell gave a 1910 lecture on the Abbasid palace of Al-Ukhaidir in **Iraq**, marking a milestone in her scholarly development.

This mentorship influenced Bell's archaeological perspective, illustrating how early women archaeologists supported and shaped the field.




*Gertrude Bell & Eugénie Strong Connection on the StoryMap*

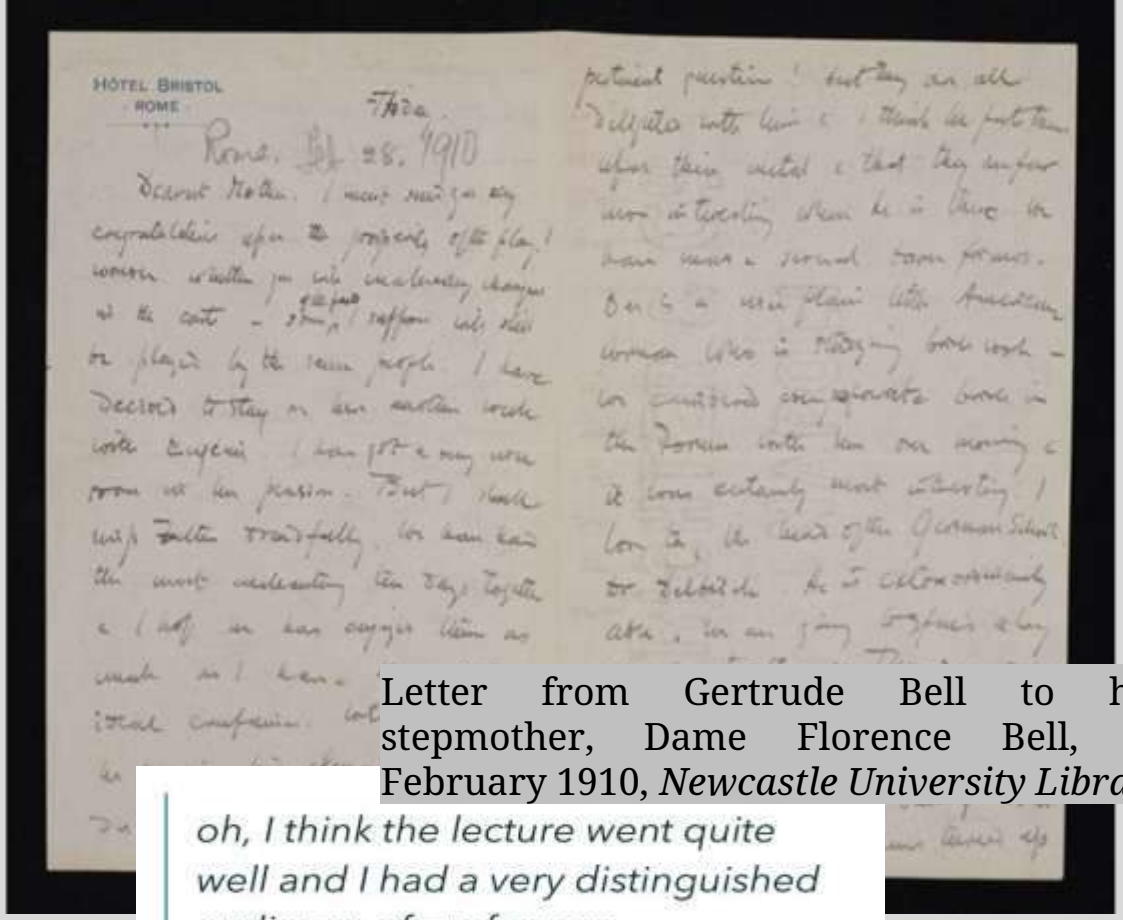



*Eugénie Sellers Strong, 1890-1891, BSAA/7/40 ©BSA*



*Palace at Al-Ukhaidir, March1901, GB/3/1/11/1/113, Bell (Gertrude) Archive, Newcastle University Library*




Letter from Gertrude Bell to her stepmother, Dame Florence Bell, 28 February 1910, *Newcastle University Library*

> *oh, I think the lecture went quite well and I had a very distinguished audience of professors.*
>
> *Letter from Gertrude Bell to her stepmother, Dame Florence Bell, 28 February 1910*

The lecture, on the subject of the Abbasid palace at Al-Ukhaidir, Iraq, is recorded in the BSR Annual Reports, 1909-10.

# Kathleen Kenyon

## Mentorship and the Rise of a Women-Led Archaeological Network




Renowned for her work at **Jericho**, Kenyon mentored a new generation of women archaeologists.

Many of these women later led significant excavations across the Middle East, forming a tight-knit network captured in archival letters and photographs.

Our digital storytelling project used LOD to trace these connections across archives, revealing a network of eight women who advanced Kenyon's field methods and created their own legacies.

This case study demonstrates how digital tools and archival research uncover hidden mentorship networks that shaped the discipline.



*Kathleen Kenyon and unidentified men on site (BILNAS/D5/12/7/8) ©BILNAS*



# Crystal Bennett

## From Kenyon's Excavation to Pioneering Leadership in Jordan

**Archival evidence highlights a mentorship link** between **Kathleen Kenyon** and **Crystal Bennett**, showing how institutional training and field collaboration shaped women's archaeological careers in the Middle East.

**Bennett started archaeology in her late thirties, joining Kenyon's final excavation season at Jericho (1957–58)**. Archives reveal her growing responsibilities under Kenyon's supervision.

**From student to leader, Bennett's career showcases the long-term impact of Kenyon's mentorship**. She later became a central figure in Jordanian archaeology, founding the British Institute at Amman (BIAAH) in 1978, CBRL now and leading key excavations in Jerusalem, Petra.



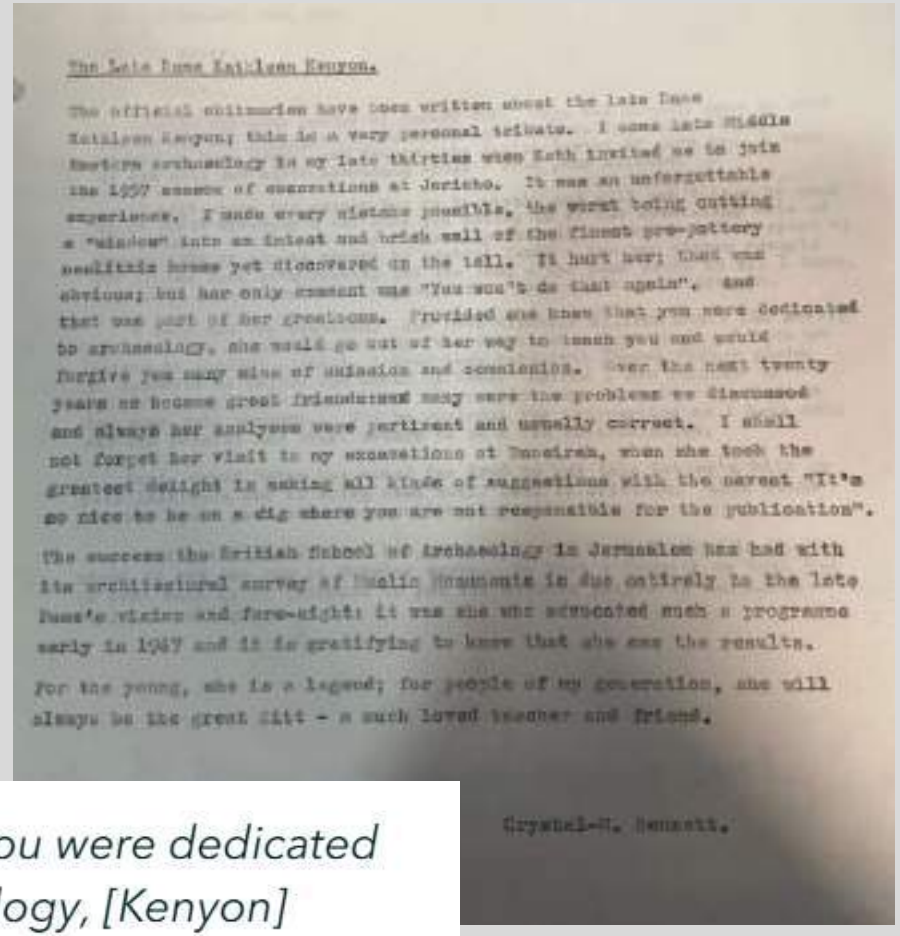
# Crystal Bennett

## A Living Link in Kenyon's Mentorship Network

In a deeply personal tribute, Crystal Bennett recalled how Kathleen Kenyon shaped not only her career but the direction of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem:

**"The success the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem has had with its architectural survey of Muslim Monuments is due entirely to the late Dame's vision and foresight..."**

*- Crystal Bennett, 1979*



The Late Dame Kathleen Kenyon.

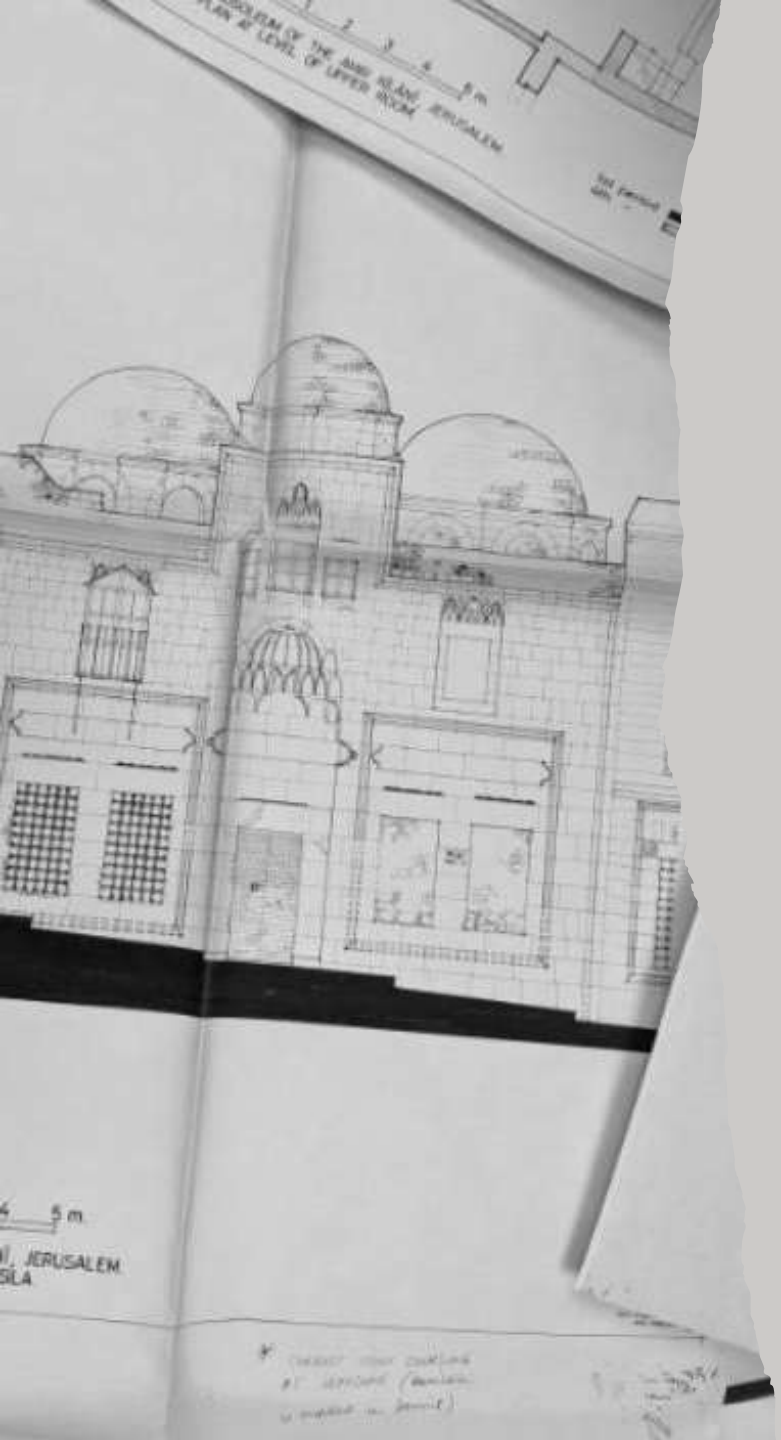
The official obituaries have been written about the late Dame Kathleen Kenyon; this is a very personal tribute. I came into Middle Eastern archaeology in my late thirties when both invited me to join the 1957 season of excavations at Jericho. It was an unforgettable experience. I made every dilettante possible, the worst being cutting a "window" into an intact and lofty wall of the finest pre-pottery neolithic house yet discovered on the tell. It hurt her; that was obvious; but her only comment was "You won't do that again". And that was part of her greatness. Provided one knew that you were dedicated to archaeology, she would go out of her way to teach you and would forgive you many sins of omission and commission. Over the next twenty years we became great friends and many were the problems we discussed and always her analyses were pertinent and usually correct. I shall not forget her visit to my excavations at Tuneirah, when she took the greatest delight in making all kinds of suggestions with the caveat "It's so nice to be on a dig where you are not responsible for the publication".

The success the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem has had with its architectural survey of Muslim Monuments is due entirely to the late Dame's vision and foresight: it was she who advocated such a programme early in 1947 and it is gratifying to know that she saw the results.

For the young, she is a legend; for people of my generation, she will always be the great Kitt - a much loved teacher and friend.

Crystal M. Bennett.

> *Provided you were dedicated to archaeology, [Kenyon] would go out of her way to teach you and would forgive you many sins*
>
> *Crystal Bennett, personal tribute to Kathleen Kenyon 1st Sept 1979*



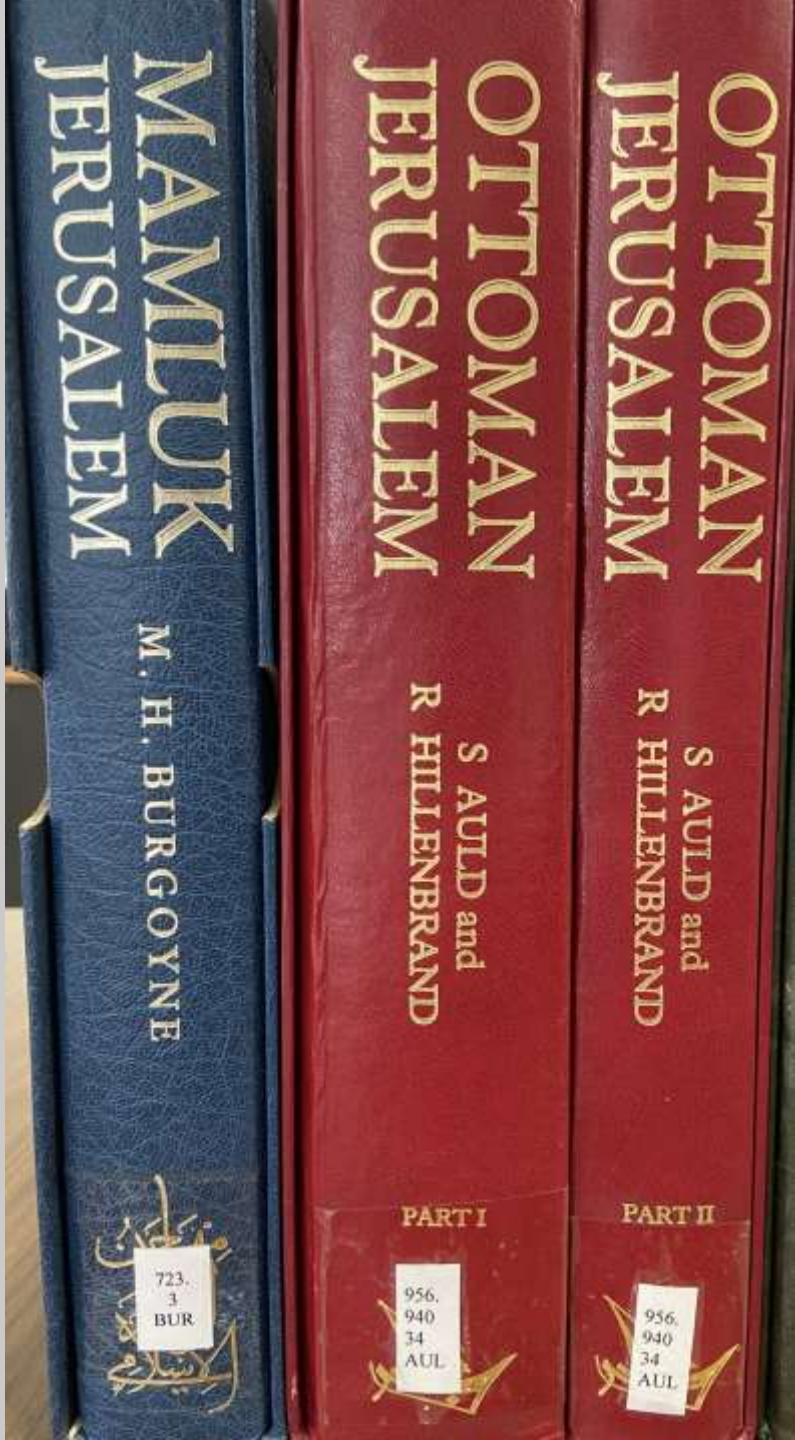
# Continuing a Legacy

## Digitising the Islamic Jerusalem Trilogy

The project culminated in **the Islamic Jerusalem Trilogy**, a monumental documentation of Islamic architecture in Jerusalem and Palestine, which remains the seminal reference work on **Mamluk**, **Ayyubid** and **Ottoman** architecture in Jerusalem, and three of the four volumes have been digitised and are now available open-access from JSTOR.

This foundational vision sparked a long-term commitment to documenting Islamic architectural heritage, a mission that continues to inspire scholarly and preservation efforts today.

**Building on this legacy, our current work focuses on digitising the original architectural records and rare books**, ensuring their long-term preservation and accessibility for future generations of researchers.





# Acknowledgments

**Special thanks to BIRI for their support and to the archivists, researchers, and collaborators who contributed their expertise.**

Grateful for the British Academy's funding of the Digital Coordination and Strategy Project and to those whose archival collections made this work possible.

To CBRL's Archive Team：Alice Lubbok, Qasem Abu Harb and Rudaina Almomani

We also thank the many women archaeologists whose contributions continue to inspire the field.

# THANK YOU!


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Scan the QR Code to explore our **StoryMap**