The Digital Non-Professional Archaeological Photographs Archives: Private Photographs of Past Excavations for Current Archaeological Research

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Introduction

In recent years many research groups within the archaeological field have shown a growing awareness—in their studies and reports on the history of archaeology—of both the importance of the study of photographs taken at past excavations and the accessibility of these types of photo collections. Photographs taken at excavations are important because they show stages and details of the dig and the context of artefacts revealed at the site that may have disappeared after the dig has been completed. Besides, they give researchers an impression of both the people who were present at the site and of the circumstances and atmosphere at the excavation, giving a better understanding of the character and achievements of a particular

1See for example the Histories of Archaeology Research Network (http://harngroup.wordpress.com); the Archaeology Data Service (http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk); The Prometheus Image Archive (www.prometheus-bildarchiv.de; all accessed on 24 September 2014).
archaeological campaign (figs 1–2).

The excavation teams, who are responsible for the proper documentation of the digs, usually consist of professionals such as archaeologists, draftsmen, pottery specialists and, preferably, photographers as well. These professionals are often accompanied by a number of ‘non-professionals’ who have a supportive role, carrying out different kinds of (manual) labour on site. The size and role of this non-professional group of individuals present at a dig have changed during the last few decades, owing to the increased awareness of the benefits of involving non-professionals and of the need for their professional training and guidance (Colley 2004; Davis 1990; Faulkner 2000; Perry 2004; Plaisant 1995).

Even though up to the 1980s the number of non-professionals present at an excavation was not as large as it is today, nor was their

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2Here the term ‘non-professional’ refers to participants of excavations who are not part of the trained staff but who support the dig as part of their continual education or out of interest, such as students, volunteers, reporters, sponsors and even royalty.
training and guidance always effective, archaeologists did benefit from their support. Apart from carrying out substantial manual labour at the site, non-professional participants of past excavations remain important for today’s archaeological research, as will be demonstrated in this paper.

**Recording Excavations**

Apart from the growing number of non-professionals working at an excavation, there is also another notable development in the last few
decades: the increasing number of records of the excavation progress and results. The techniques of recording excavation details prior to the 1980s were not as advanced as they are today and thorough documentation took a relatively long time. As the science of archaeology has developed significantly during the last six decades, it is inevitable that views on the recording methods of excavations have changed as well. The same applies to archaeological photography.\(^3\) New excavation techniques required new photographic technology, which, consequently, has contributed enormously to the study of archaeology.

The decisions surrounding the collection of data during excavation and their publication afterwards were usually taken by the professional staff involved (fig. 3). The archaeological photographer at the site had to make decisions on which data to select for documentation. This selection process is illustrated perfectly by the assertion that:

\(^3\)Harold C. Simmons, who, in 1969, wrote a handbook on archaeological photography, noticed that “While objectives of archaeological photography have remained quite unchanged since its inception, techniques of achieving these aims have been in a state of sweeping modification...And certainly there are even more far-reaching transformations in the offing for the near future which undoubtedly will make recent ones appear insignificant by contrast” (1969: 1–2).
not everything found need be put on film, as many objects fail to contribute something distinctly significant towards the record. Therefore much of the photographer’s efforts and skills, to say nothing of time, will be directed to differentiating the more from the less important (Simmons 1969: 1).

It is obvious that the decisions, taken by the staff on what to record at the site, prove to be of great consequence, as an area undergoing excavation is always irreversibly disturbed and, as has been noted, archaeology is an “unrepeatable experiment” (Barker 1977: 12).

The developments in archaeological recording through the years appear to suggest that there might be a difference between what staff members actually recorded at past excavations and what we today expect them to have documented at the time. It has recently been demonstrated that former non-professionals may be able to fill the possible gap in the official documentation (Wagemakers 2014; Wagemakers and Ameling 2012; Wagemakers and Taylor 2011). Non-professionals who are willing to participate in an archaeological expedition tend to show an interest in all divergent aspects of the site. From my own experiences I know that they record any features they are intrigued by as much, and as best, as they can, even if staff members have decided that particular features do not need to be examined. This keen-eyed attitude does not seem to be very different from the way in which non-professional participants of archaeological campaigns operated in the more distant past.

Non-Professional Archaeological Photographs

Unfortunately, the significance of the photographs taken at archaeological sites by non-professionals decades ago has very much been underestimated. Admittedly, attention has been paid to the subject of archaeological photography (for example Bohrer 2011; Cookson 1954; Dorrell 1994; Howell and Blanc 1992; Matthews 1968; Shanks 1997; Simmons 1969) but it merely concerns official photographic documentation. The documentation recorded by non-professionals has so far been neglected. This lack of recognition of the significance of non-professional photographs is not new, as is clearly demonstrated by a statement by archaeologist

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4In addition, photographers who worked on excavations in the 1950s and 1960s were warned that they should always bear in mind “the fact that as the work on a site proceeds a process of destruction is also taking place” (Matthews 1968: 118).
Dame Kathleen Kenyon, who was active in Samaria, Tell es-Sultan (ancient Jericho) and Jerusalem from the 1940s until the 1960s. Kenyon did not appreciate hasty, amateur photography at her excavations at all, “views are taken of inadequately prepared subjects, the view does not cover the subject properly, the scale is not correctly aligned, and many similar faults creep in” (Kenyon 1956: 135).

In some ways Kenyon was right: good photography at an excavation is reliant on certain conditions. The archaeological photographers must have excellent technical skills, including a good knowledge of camera handling. They are also required to act with maximum integrity (as their task involves scientific recording) as well as to ensure the cleanliness of the subject (Cookson 1954: 13). Furthermore, since the archaeologist expects a reliable picture of what he wants to have recorded, the photographers must try to avoid creating false perspective and distortions (Matthews 1968: 101).

Even though non-professional photographs could be less accurate, or could include false perspective and distortions or fail to include certain details, it does not mean that they are futile (fig. 4). On the contrary, they might show aspects or details of sites that had not been recorded (sufficiently enough) by the professional staff at the time (Franklin 2014: 205; Mazor and...
Atrash 2014: 228). Therefore, photographic documentation carried out by non-professional participants of archaeological campaigns in the past can indeed prove to be of great value to present archaeological research.

The Project of Non-Professional Archaeological Photographs

Unlike official documentation, which can be consulted in published reports and is kept in libraries, museums, archives and on the internet, documentation by non-professionals is generally not accessible to the public. Furthermore, it is possible that these non-professional photographs, slides or films have not always been stored in the best conditions over the years. In the case of black-and-white photographs, for example, irreparable damage—depending on the conditions of the storage space—generally occurs within 70 years after they have been taken. Impairments such as de-silvering, yellowing, acidity and broken glass negatives are common. Deterioration of colour photographs—showing visible changes resulting from colour fading—is even more rapid (Gschwind et al. 2005: 123–124). These are the reasons, combined with the average old age of the target group (as will be expounded below), why efforts have now been made to secure this valuable documentation category.

For this purpose, the project of Non-Professional Archaeological Photographs has been set up (NPAPH). Although non-professional written documentation—for example diaries, letters, accounts and working sketches—also deserves attention, the NPAPH-project focuses primarily on visual documentation, including photographs, slides and films. This kind of archaeological documentation is particularly interesting because it has shown significant technological progress, as already predicted years ago:

There are a number of fields in which developments of great potential interest are taking place. Two in particular seem likely to affect archaeological and conservation recording within a few years. These are the use of video and the introduction of digitalization in image capture and storage (Dorrell 1994: 251).

The project aims to trace former non-professionals, who joined an excavation

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5On the other hand, one should recognize the fact that digital files are not invulnerable and everlasting either. There can be loss or degradation because the data medium becomes defective due to natural ageing or to general wear-and-tear, because the corresponding data reader no longer exists or because of a defective service (Gschwind et al. 2005: 123–124; see also Beck 2013: 85; Carlson 1998: 25; Giaretta 2011: 40–45; Schürer 1993: 295).
between 1950 and 1980, and to collect and digitize their photographic documentation, and, subsequently, to make it accessible to the public by providing digital archives. The period between 1950 and 1980 is particularly interesting because the lack of ubiquitous multimedia in those days, and poor photographic recording techniques and high reproduction costs, all limited the amount of official documentation. We have chosen the 1950s as our starting point because it is more likely that from that period onwards non-professionals would have been present at an excavation and will still be alive today, facilitating our search.

Unfortunately, due to the limited time, it is impossible to cover all excavations conducted between 1950 and 1980. We, therefore, started with a selection of three excavations—Tell Balata (Shechem), Tell es-Sultan (ancient Jericho) and Archanes (Crete)—and we will extend this selection with further excavations each year. Also, in order to relieve pressure, the project team has found several students from our department willing to support the tracing and digitizing process using their free time. After all, ‘digging’ into the archaeological past in such a way is not only beneficial to current archaeological research, but can also serve as an inspiring assignment for non-professionals of today.

The efforts made by the NPAPH-project are significant for current archaeological research in several ways. First of all, finding ‘new’ photographic material will mean that the existing documentation of excavations will be enhanced and the material may provide different images and perspectives of the excavations that are not included in the official documentation. In addition, this genre of photographs may provide archaeological institutions with additional scientific data, which could be useful for archaeological research relating to the specific sites. Furthermore, by comparing the non-professional photographs with the official documentation, it is also possible to get an impression of the documentation policy at a particular site. Pictures of particular features or phases of the excavation taken by non-professionals and not available in the official documentation reveal the decisions taken by the staff at the time of what to record and what to leave out. The ability to compare the two categories of documentation will offer institutions insight into the development of documentation within the archaeological discipline. Comparing the ways of documentation through the years can also give a notion of the developments that occurred within the broader field of cultural heritage (Beck 2013: 85; Boyd Rayward 1993: 234–235) or even of the society or community that is represented by the data (Ross 2000: 9). Finally, it is likely that archaeological institutions will be interested in digitizing newly discovered non-professional photographs and in making
them accessible to both scholars and the general public; handling digitized photographic material prevents damage to the original (which can occur due to excessive use) and copies of the material can be made without any loss of quality (Gschwind et al. 2005: 123).

The Search for Non-Professionals and Their Documentation

Since the start of the project we have applied several strategies for tracing non-professionals (or their kin). Generally, the first step is to find the names of the people concerned. This information can often be found in acknowledgements or staff lists published in annual reports or concluding publications.

Secondly, on the basis of the collected names we then search for contact details of the non-professionals. We use two kinds of approach: an active and passive one. Initially, we take the active approach searching the internet, using search engines and network media such as LinkedIn and Academia.edu. If this search is unsuccessful, we contact (former) employers or other archaeological institutions, who generally have access to the required contact details held in their administration or via their relations with alumni and students’ clubs. The former field director of the excavation concerned can sometimes also provide telephone numbers, email or postal addresses. Finally, another successful alternative approach is by word of mouth. The archaeological world can often seem very small.

When no contact details of the non-professional have been found using our active approach, we then apply the passive approach, which means placing an appeal for information using the social media, such as our website, our Facebook page and Twitter account, or other archaeological internet media, and waiting for a response.

Having managed to gather some contact details, we then get in touch with the people concerned and ask them the crucial question: did they take any photographs or shoot any film of the site whilst participating in the excavation decades ago? And if so, do they still have the documentation in their possession? If they do, an inventory is made of the collection and the possibilities of digitizing the material is investigated (fig. 5). In order to restrict the chances of damage to the photographs, slides or films, it is

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6www.npaph.com; facebook.com/npaph; twitter @npaph (all accessed on 24 September 2014).
preferable to have them digitized on location.\footnote{The basic conditions of the digitization process concern the file format (TIFF or JPG2000), resolution (preferable 600 dpi, but a minimum resolution of 300 dpi) and colour mode (CMYK if possible).}

Once the collection has been digitized, as much metadata as possible—data about the images—are added to the images. This information is crucial because without the context of the resources the photographs or films are useless. In short, only in combination with these data can non-professional photographic material be of any value to the existing professional archaeological documentation. In the case of non-professional archives, metadata include a unique code, name, type of source (slide, photograph or film), repositories, name of creator, dates, archaeological sites and caption. In addition, each photo collection has an introduction, which clarifies the origin of the collection, gives information about the creator(s)

Fig. 5. Fortunately, the photographs taken by David Spurgeon, a former reporter of the Toronto Globe and Mail, who visited the site of Tell es-Sultan in 1956, survived the ravages of time (David Spurgeon, 15 February 1956; reproduced with permission of D. Spurgeon).
of the material and provides other essential details.

Ideally, a metadata framework contains various metadata specifications, but regarding this project we have so far been dependent on the information provided by the owners or custodians of the non-professional documentation. As it is important to gather all possible information about the material, it is preferable to analyze the original documentation in their original context (Ross 2000: 11). Any details known of the photographs or films, some of which are not always clearly visible on a scan, should be included in the archive. For that reason crucial information on the non-professional photographic material of the past is not always available straight away. The people concerned, who might have recognized what the images show, often turned out unable to do so. In many cases the non-professionals were either in bad health or already deceased, and the current staff members of the excavations concerned tended to be completely occupied with their own official documentation.

**Digitization of Non-Professional Archaeological Photo Archives**

After having digitized the non-professional photographic material, the collection must be made accessible to the public. According to the NPAPPH’s principle the best way to realize public access is to create digital photo archives as the project endorses the following:

Digital archives combined with new technologies will liberalise scholarship. They will enable simultaneous access to a range of sources (both local and distant) and facilitate the use of research methods not possible with conventionally printed or hand written records (Ross 2000: 12).

The digital photo archives should preferably be hosted by recognized archaeological institutions, because in that way the future of the

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9 Jennifer Baird (2011: 435 n. 45), who examined the Dura-Europos archive at Yale, illustrates this challenge by noting that “much information inscribed on the edges of glass negatives and onto the backs of prints (to give examples from the Dura archive) are not scanned in the digitization project. We also do not have digitized records of the hand annotations to the negative records”.

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archives is most likely to be guaranteed. Another reason for the NPAPH to look for institutions to manage the non-professional photo archives is financial. It is well-known that acquisition and preservation of digital data entails a great deal of expense (Beck 2013: 88; Carlston 1998: 30–31; Ross 2000: 19). These costs can be reduced for the NPAPH when institutions take care of the digitization of the photographic material and the creation and preservation of archives themselves. As far as the expenses relating to the search for non-professionals and to their documentation are concerned, as well as the realization of the digital photo archives which are not adopted by institutions, the NPAPH is fully dependent on donations.

Naturally, it is an advantage when the institution—which has been responsible for a particular archaeological campaign in the past and holds its official excavation documentation—is willing to host the corresponding digital non-professional photo archive. Then both the professional and non-professional data are located in the same place. However, a digital collection can also be handed over to a specific institution because of the mutual field of interest. This can be illustrated by the digitization of the extensive photo collection of late Leo Boer, who was a student of the École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem in 1953–1954. His collection contains hundreds of photographs of archaeological sites in the Levant and includes several images that have proved significant for current archaeological research (Wagemakers 2011). For this reason the photographic material was digitized and made accessible to the public by the foundation of the digital Leo Boer Archive. This archive was made possible by The American Schools of Oriental Research, who created the essential database and now host the archive on their server along with other similar digital photo archives.

If no institution can be found that is willing or able to host a particular digital photo archive, the NPAPH will then host the archive on its own website. However, as this situation is not preferable, as explained above, we consider our hosting a temporary solution and will continue to search for possible partners.

Once institutions have set up their own non-professional archaeological photo archives, they have to manage and maintain the archive themselves. However, participation in the NPAPH will still be useful to them because the NPAPH website functions as a single web interface, providing links to all the other digital photo archives participating in the

10The photo collection is supplied with metadata and can be searched by category or keywords (www.leoboerarchives.com).
Furthermore, the web interface can simplify people’s quest for new documentation on excavations in which multiple parties were involved and it can also help them to locate specific records. In addition, owing to the considerable global reach of the project in both scholarly and public domains, attention will be drawn to all the participating photo archives, along with their relevant excavations and institutions, which might result in expressions of interest by possible sponsors.

**The Results So Far**

The outcomes of the NPAPH are quite successful in several ways. Despite the fact that the project only started recently, several reputed archaeological institutions and departments have already shown their support for this new initiative and are co-operating with the project’s research team in order to find non-professional documentation of their excavations. So far, dozens of non-professionals who participated in excavations prior to 1980 have been traced. In general, they are eager to ‘dig’ into their own past to look for documentation they took in the old days. In fact, they have already provided us with hundreds of photographs, slides and even films. A large quantity of the material has now been digitized and made available via the web interface.

Secondly, various photographs collected by NPAPH have already proven to be significant for current archaeological research. For instance, a photograph of a Greek inscription on a block found in the Aqaba area by Leo Boer (fig. 6) provided new insights. This block dropped out of the artefactual records at some point after Boer took the photograph in 1953 and has since been lost. Only one other picture, taken in late 1936 by archaeologist Nelson Glueck (Glueck 1939: 18 fig. 10), is known to exist, but the quality of this picture is not good enough for reading the inscription with precision (Alt 1954: 85–87; Oliver 1941: 542–543; Sartre 1993: 170–171 no. 137). Given the history of the piece, the revelation of this new photograph taken by Boer is quite fascinating and a careful study and comparison of the two photographs actually led to a reconsidered reading of this lost inscription from Khirbet el-Khalidi (Wagemakers and Ameling 2012).

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11Since the project does not contain one large single photo archive but brings together individual archives hosted by different institutions using a single web interface, uniformity of design, composition and metadata is to some degree restricted.
Another photograph from the non-professional photo collection of Leo Boer even resulted in a reinterpretation relating to the supposed ‘pantry’ at the ruins of Khirbet Qumran where Boer excavated in 1954 under the guidance of his lecturer Roland de Vaux. Despite the fact that the function of this particular room has been interpreted in various ways by different Qumran researchers, the view that it operated as the pantry of the community remains the most widely-accepted theory. The discussion stems largely from the various views scholars have about the purpose of the mud-brick ‘block’ in the centre of the room. The problem is that no close-up picture of this block was taken before the excavators disengaged it from the partition wall in which it was incorporated. Surprisingly enough, instead of ensuring that proper documentation was made of the position and state of the block, the team decided to restore it very soon after its discovery with a new coat of plaster, even before the charred wood at the north side of the block was cleared (de Vaux 1956: pl. IX). The lack of proper documentation of the original shape and height of the block made it difficult to interpret both the function of the block and the room itself. The discussion about the function of the central block among scholars has produced the following suggestions: a pillar base in order to support the roof (de Vaux 1973: 26–27), a table-leg (Pfann 2006: 166–167) and an altar (Humbert 1994: 199–201, 2006: 30–39).

Fig. 6. Instead of visiting the site of Tell Kheleifeh (Ezion-Gheber), the group was given the opportunity to take a look at this stone with its Greek inscription (Leo Boer, 26 October 1953; reproduced with permission of the Leo Boer Archive).
While excavating there, Boer took the only close-up photograph known of the top of the central block in L.86–87 before its restoration and the exposure of carbonized pieces of wood and pottery in front of the block (fig. 7). Thanks to the original shape of the top now being visible, a new premise about the function of the block and the loci has been given. In summary, since the top of this block has a shallow hollow, it seems to be designed to hold a shallow basin securely in position. This moulding for a basin may be suggestive of a libation altar, even though there is no contemporaneous parallel for a cultic altar being made of mud brick and plaster rather than stone; because of the finds discovered in the room, simple secular usage appears most likely. It is fundamental in archaeological analysis that the identification of the purpose of items within a room should be understood in relation to each other, so that the simplest explanation for the whole corpus of artefacts and features may be proposed. On the basis of the presence of the huge amount of crockery, the room seems to have functioned as a pantry for the adjacent refectory (L.77), and the block will have been used to hold a water basin for washing the dirty crockery on return from the refectory (Wagemakers and Taylor 2011).
We hope that these achievements will stimulate others to search for this kind of archaeological documentation; it would surely be a tragedy if all those substantial images from excavations in the past were to be lost forever.

References


ARCHAEOLOGY DATA SERVICE. Website: http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk, accessed on 24 September 2014.


