

The Palestine Exploration Fund

Philanthropy, Exploration and Imperial Scheming



In May 1865, a group of British public figures met in London and established a fund, called the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF), with the aim of mapping the “Holy Land” and investigating its archeological sites and its flora, fauna, and natural resources. This represented the culmination of structured nongovernmental British endeavors related to Palestine at the religious, cultural, and scientific levels since the beginning of the nineteenth century and the start of systematic field research and related publications during the following decades. This exploration drive took place within the context of the British Empire 's strategic and political interests in the Levant . This article discusses the background that led to the establishment of the PEF and its achievements during its first thirty years.

History

Great Britain 's policy in the Levant during the nineteenth century was dictated by a number of considerations: competing with other European countries,

especially France and Russia , to “penetrate” the Ottoman Empire ; ensuring the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire; and maintaining a grip over the Mediterranean Sea , after its control of Gibraltar since the early eighteenth century, to ensure a safe and fast route to its colonies in India . Out of these concerns, Great Britain assisted the Ottomans against French invasion of Egypt (1798-1801); was the first European country to open a consulate in Jerusalem in 1838 under Ibrahim Pasha ; forced the latter to leave Syria and Palestine and return to Egypt (1840); and tried to imitate France and Russia by finding (even creating) Jewish and Protestant communities in the Levant in order to “protect” them.

In London, religious and cultural societies related to the Holy Land emerged throughout the nineteenth century. In 1805, the Palestine Association , dedicated to the “philosophical, physical and biblical” study of Palestine, was established, but it was absorbed in 1834 in the Royal Geographical Society that had been established in 1830. The London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews was founded in 1809. In addition to its work as reflected in its title, the society advocated the “restoration” of the Jews in the Holy Land, either after converting them or as a prelude to this conversion. Lord Shaftesbury , who became the president of the society in 1848, wrote in 1838 that Britain could establish a colony of Jews in Palestine that “could provide Britain with cotton, silk, herbs, and olive oil.”

Following riots in Damascus in which thousands of Christians were killed, the Syrian Relief Committee was established in London in July 1860. The aim of its founders was broader than charitable assistance; their objective was to investigate the natural resources of Syria and to explore the possibility for growing cotton in the region. In 1861-62, they constituted two separate entities: Christian public figures and prelates supervised the Syrian Asylum Committee , devoted to relief and assistance to Christian communities in Syria and Palestine (funding for instance the establishment of a hospital in Nazareth); Christian and Jewish members, among them Sir Moses Montefiore , sponsored a broader association, the Syrian Improvement Fund . Also in mid-1861, the Syrian Relief Committee commissioned geologist John Irwine Whitty to survey water supply to Jerusalem and to test the possibility of creating artesian wells.

Whitty spent approximately a year in the Jerusalem area. The report he published in autumn 1863, entitled “Proposed Water Supply and Sewerage for

Jerusalem with Description of its Present State and Former Resources,” offered a thorough survey of the water supply of Jerusalem. Whitty argued that the geology of Jerusalem was not suitable for artesian wells and that rehabilitating two historical aqueducts, one he attributed to the time of Herod and the other to that of Solomon, would be more efficient for the piping of rainwater from sources outside the city. However, the conclusion he drew from his limited topographical investigation demonstrated that he was much interested in implicitly redefining Jerusalem as the biblical holy land.

In 1864, the Jerusalem Water Relief Fund was constituted. Its membership overlapped with that of the Syrian Asylum Committee and the Syrian Improvement Fund. While having at its disposal the detailed water supply survey prepared by Whitty, the fund appointed Captain Charles Wilson, in charge of topography at the War Office and engineer of British intelligence system, to head a mission composed of engineers (who were mainly military officers). The official task of the mission was to look for ways to consider the hydraulic works contemplated by Whitty, and this required a cartographic survey of Jerusalem, a project that came to be called the Ordnance Survey of Jerusalem.

Wilson's mission in Jerusalem lasted from October 1864 to May 1865. The team did not add much to Whitty's 1863 report on water systems. The main result was a map of Jerusalem and its environs at 1:10,000, and a plan of the walled city at 1:2,500, in addition to descriptions of the topography and the ancient remains in Jerusalem, and an album of seventy-six photographs. Important buildings and sites including walls and tombs inside and outside the walls were surveyed, excavations under the Haram al-Sharif complex and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre were made, and the differences of elevation from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea were measured. More than being a prerequisite for water supply plans, the survey had a clear military relevance, all the more so that it was performed by British military officers. Consequently, the Jerusalem Ordnance Survey became the catalyst and foundation for a more ambitious endeavor, the Palestine Exploration Fund.

The Mission of the Palestine Exploration Fund

On 12 May 1865, just before the return of Wilson's mission, a meeting was convened in London to discuss the creation of an association for the “reconnaissance” of Palestine. The initiative was supported by Queen Victoria.

Participants included the Archbishop of York , William Thompson , who chaired the meeting and twenty-four eminent figures of Victorian British society distinguished for their philanthropic interests and scientific backgrounds. The meeting concluded with the following resolutions:

1. A fund is to be formed for the purpose of promoting the exploration of the Holy Land.
2. The exploration of Jerusalem and many other places in the Holy Land by means of excavations would probably throw much light upon the archaeology of the Jewish people.
3. In addition to the praiseworthy research of Frenchmen, Englishmen, and travelers of other nations in the Holy Land, it is highly desirable to carry out such a systematic survey as will completely establish the true geographical and geological characters of that remarkable region.
4. It is desirable that the animals, plants, and minerals of the Holy Land be collected and that the facts required for their systematic history be noted by competent observers on the spot.
5. The biblical scholars may yet receive assistance in illustrating the sacred text from the careful observation of the manner and habits of the people of the Holy Land.

In the inaugural speech at the first PEF meeting on 22 June 1865, Archbishop Thompson stated: “The country of Palestine belongs to you and to me. It is essentially ours.” He asserted that the PEF should adhere to scientific principles and should abstain from controversy. He reiterated that the PEF should not be started or conducted as a religious society. Yet he stressed the significance of Palestine to Evangelists: “No country should be of so much interest to us as that in which the documents of our Faith were written, and the momentous events they describe enacted. At the same time, no country more urgently requires illustration.”

The intent of the PEF founders to find evidence for the pre-existing speculations and theories of evangelists cannot be ignored. Their approach and scope of interest were very much influenced by the works of Edward Robinson , an American traveler who was the first to conceive the idea of making a biblical geography and base his account on the explorations he conducted in Palestine in 1838 and 1852. Robinson published his *Physical Geography of the Holy Land*

in 1865, after having published *Biblical Researches in Palestine, Mount Sinai and Arabia Petraea* in 1841. The PEF founders' reading of the topography of Jerusalem, on the other hand, was based on the works of Flavius Josephus . Despite that there were many contradictions between Josephus's account and the conclusions of the Royal Engineers, the latter, however, remained faithful to Josephus' narrative, and mission to search for evidence under Haram complex.

Explorations, Excavations and Mapping

In 1865 the PEF committee quickly put together an elaborate plan of action that identified areas of interest. Regarding archeology, it considered that, once the “present” survey “above ground” is completed in Jerusalem, focus should be put “below the surface” in these sites in Palestine (Mount Gerizim , Joseph's tomb , Baysan , Jericho , Gaza , and other locations, all of which are associated with biblical or Roman times) and beyond. Regarding manners and customs, including rites, habits, and language of the “present inhabitants,” and whose meaning could find its correspondence in the Bible, work is “urgently” required before they vanish due to the “increasing tide of Western manners.” Regarding topography, the committee affirmed that it possessed an accurate map of the coastline of Palestine and that it needed a survey which would give the position and elevation of the principal points throughout the country with equal accuracy. Regarding natural sciences (botany, zoology, meteorology), the committee noted imperfect knowledge and hoped to know more.

As a first assignment, the PEF decided to send Captain Charles Wilson back to Palestine in October 1865 to conduct a feasibility study for the planned exploration, in terms of particular places to focus on, time and cost. Wilson returned in August 1866, after having made some discoveries and preparing the ground for further investigations. Lieutenant Charles Warren and three officers from the Royal engineers followed up with an expedition between spring 1867 and spring 1870. Its purpose was twofold: making excavations in Jerusalem (which interested PEF committee members) and drawing a map of areas south and southwest of the city (which was the concern of military-oriented royal engineers).

At the start of his mission, Warren announced that his excavation plan included the Haram area and the Holy Sepulchre. But he very quickly encountered problems with Ottoman authorities and with Muslim and Christian clerics. The

former were ready to permit “scientific” excavations anywhere, but excluding the interior of the Haram and other Muslim and Christian shrines. Warren attempted to dig near the walls of the Haram, but again was forbidden to do so within 12 meters of the structures. He resorted to sinking shafts some distance further and digging tunnels that reached the walls. But again, he encountered opposition and had to stop in June 1869. From that point on, mapping became the main PEF task. Excavations undertaken by PEF in Jerusalem would not resume until 1890.

Warren's accomplishments consisted of creating a map of the Old City of Jerusalem and its gates and examining much of the circumference of the Haram al-Sharif and the site of the Holy Sepulchre. Some of his conclusions were inconsistent with the findings of a PEF donor, James Fergusson . For instance, the latter had alleged in his *Essay on the Ancient Topography of Jerusalem* (1847) that both the Temple and the Holy Sepulchre were located in the site of the Haram and that what is considered currently as the Holy Sepulchre was built after the Christians were expelled from its original place. Warren disproved the allegation that the Temple can be possibly found under the Southwest side of the Haram area, and affirmed the authenticity of the current location of the Holy Sepulchre. His conclusions caused havoc at the PEF.

Warren returned to England in May 1870. Several months later, a new Palestine expedition, known as the Survey of Western Palestine (or the Western Survey) was prepared; it launched in July 1872. The expedition, which could be considered the major PEF achievement, was mainly carried out by lieutenant Horatio Herbert Kitchener and lieutenant Claude Conder from the Royal Engineers, from 1871 to 1877. Arab Palestinians who saw the survey as intrusive and invasive of their land confronted the surveying team on several occasions, especially in July 1875 in Safad where a scuffle took place. The team was rescued by an Ottoman garrison, and several Palestinian rioters were later punished by the Ottoman authorities. The survey was even suspended for several months before its completion in December 1877.

PEF Publications from 1881 - 1889

Back in London, the PEF team, with the assistance of the War Office, worked on assembling and compiling the field maps (described as traces) drawn *in situ* in order to produce the map of Palestine. The map covered the area from the

Litani River in the north to Wadi Gaza and Beersheba in the south and Jordan River in the east. In 1880, the map was published. It consisted of twenty-six sheets at a scale of 1:63,360, the dimension of each sheet being 54x66 cm. In 1881, a 438-page volume containing lists of all names appearing in the 26 sheets (about 9,000 names) was published under the title *Arabic and English Name Lists Collected during the Survey*. The map itself was considered extremely accurate at the time. More recently, however, Palestinian scholar Salman Abu Sitta has identified in it “considerable errors in the location of points up to 450 meters in the east direction and up to \pm 60 meters in the north direction.”

The PEF published the findings of the Survey of Western Palestine in the following volumes:

- *An Introduction to the Survey of Western Palestine* (1881)
- *Memoirs of the Topography, Orography, Hydrography, and Archaeology*: I. Galilee (1881); II. Samaria (1882); III. Judaea (1883)
- *Special Papers on Topography, Archæology, Manners and Customs, Etc.* (1881)
- *Jerusalem* (1884)
- *The Fauna and Flora of Palestine* (1885)
- *Memoir on the Physical Geology and Geography of Arabia Petraea, Palestine and Adjoining Districts* (1886)
- *General Index* (1888).

Parallel projects were sponsored by PEF, including the archeological work of French diplomat Clermont-Ganneau in Jericho, Askalan, and Gaza, undertaken in 1873-74; the Survey of Eastern Palestine published in 1882; and the survey of the Hauran, Golan, and Ajlun by German engineer Gottlieb Schumacher. Between 1890 and 1900, the work of the Fund was mainly geographical and topographical. Excavations in the Old City of Jerusalem and other sites in Palestine were resumed by Frederick Jones Bliss, an American archeologist, between 1891 and 1899.

British Victorians during the nineteenth century were religious evangelists and imperialists. Their imperialist mission was to provide impetus for building the

Empire using commercial projects, philanthropy and biblical research. The work of the Palestine Exploration Fund catered for these interests in the region. The War department in 1912 adopted the PEF projects, and became responsible for their publishing, it also made good use of maps and memoirs collected by the Royal engineers before and during World War I . In 1920, the PEF funded the *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* . The work of the PEF continues until today to promote the study of archeology, natural history, anthropology and history of Palestine.

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