

# James Leslie Starkey

## Archaeologist

### Part 3

## The Bethlehem Geology Project

By Wendy Slaninka (Granddaughter of James Leslie Starkey & Marjorie Starkey by their daughter Mary)

This is my tenth article for Filming Antiquity directly following on from my previous articles 'Part 2, Lachish (i), (ii), (iii), (iv) and (v)'. It also links in with earlier articles 'Part 1, Background and Early Career', 'Living at Lachish – Life in Camp', 'First Lady of Lachish – Marjorie Starkey and her family', and 'Olive Starkey – Lady of Lachish' (Leslie's sister), where there is other information and photos of Leslie and Lachish.

***'Overwhelming as the works of Duweir must have been it did not exhaust the intense activity of this 'savant' always on the watch for whatever might throw light on the past of Palestine'.***

Pere Vincent (obituary)

Finally before I finish my series of articles about Starkey's work at Lachish and before I move on to the tragedy on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1938, I would just like to go slightly off tack here and add in something that is perhaps not so well known. Starkey's interests were not just the excavation of Lachish. He had been planning to include many forms of archaeological research in his organisation, and the Geological Section's work in prehistoric research at Bethlehem, known as the Bethlehem Bone Beds, was the first offshoot..



Photo: kind permission of Library and Archives, National History Museum, London

In 1934 Starkey heard that Miss Dorothea Bate was to start searching for fossil elephant bones near Bethlehem - the first ever discovery of an extinct elephant in Palestine – in fact the most primitive elephant yet known out of Africa. He immediately obtained concession for the site from the Department of Antiquities and persuaded Sir Henry Wellcome to fund the project under the aegis of the W.A.R.E.N.E. He directed and organised the excavations in the suburbs of Bethlehem by a group of English specialists in geology, paleontology and prehistory, but mainly under the sub direction of Miss Bate (paleaontologist, ornithologist, zoologist) and assisted by Miss Elinor Wight Gardner (Geologist) . The site was at the highest point in Bethlehem and was originally unearthed by the owner of the plot digging for water.

Findings revealed a hitherto unsuspected aspect of Palestinian paleolithic ages – a giant tortoise, early horse and rhinoceros were also discovered. They also went on to find flints worked by prehistoric man, possibly as long ago as 2.5 million years!. Miss Caton Thompson made a study of them and they constitute the earliest existence of man yet found in Palestine.



**Miss Dorothea Minola Alice Bate in the pit at Bethlehem – part of a tusk can be seen next to the man's right arm**

Photo: kind permission of Library and Archives, National History Museum, London

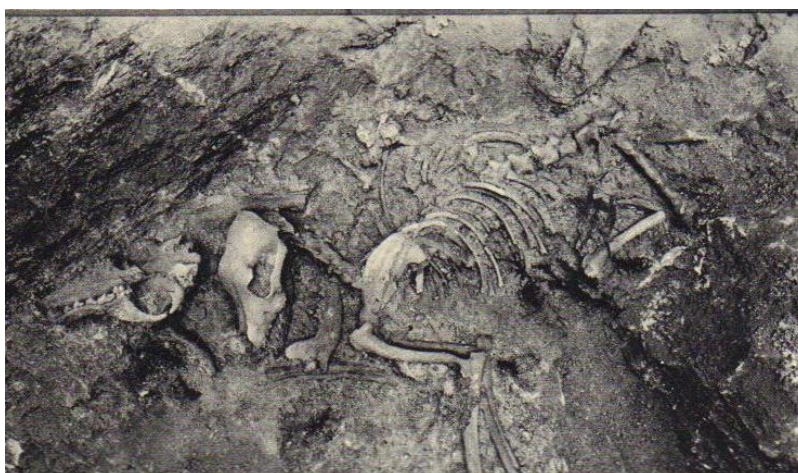
On reading further on this subject it would appear Miss Bate had wanted this to be her enterprise and she was not happy that Starkey had stepped on her toes, pipping her to the post. Maybe he felt he would be more successful in an application for funding at a time when science was a profession dominated by men, and wanted to help. It is noted though that they had a good working relationship and she sent a couple of condolence letters to Madge and Olga saying *'This terrible news has been an awful shock and I want to send you my most heartfelt sympathy .... Dear Mr. Starkey was so well known and beloved and his loss will be felt most deeply, both personally and professionally ... you have great cause to be proud of him and of all the fine work he has done'*. She also attended his Memorial Service in Westminster [see my article Part 4 (iii)]. Later she collaborated with Olga and contributed to both Lachish Books III and IV. Miss Gardner wrote to Madge from Makella *'I have always looked on him as a friend, moreover I have never met any archaeologist – as apart from a prehistorian – who took such a broad view and was so willing to encourage my type of work. I have enjoyed my seasons in Bethlehem so much and was looking forward to the possibility of more permanent work with him'*. So it seems no grudge was borne by either lady. Both ladies visited Lachish.

Finds from this site were also included in the Wellcome annual exhibitions and they published a short piece in NATURE to announce this fact,. Starkey's son John also remembers accompanying his father to the site in Bethlehem, and indeed still has Starkey's footstool which consists of a whole preserved elephant foot though I don't know where he acquired this – possibly from his earlier dabbles in the antique trade.

After Starkey's murder and the increasing troubles brewing in Palestine the Natural History Museum would not grant Miss Bate permission to travel and the Project was abandoned at that time.

I had noticed earlier when he worked for Petrie at Qua how fascinated Starkey had been with the find of an ancient Hippopotamus skeleton in the caves and had arranged for it to be sent back to

Britain, writing to Madge .. *'during the clearance I found many fossil bones of a huge extinct animal ,,, I am sending part of the jaw and some bones to the geologists'*. His interests strayed into this kind of research too later with Petrie's digs in Palestine, and particularly at Gaza where he investigated prehistoric tombs after spotting ancient flints, a project carried on by Ian Macdonald. Indeed at Lachish also, he had sent back many animal skeletons to museums in England, including the Natural History museum and the collections are in the Paleontology and Zoology departments. One skeleton particularly, thought to be the forerunner of the modern greyhound, now resides in the Walter Rothschild Natural History Museum at Tring, England. Miss Bate was working for the Natural History Museum (the first female they employed) so perhaps it was sent here at her suggestion? (she later ended up at Tring herself as Curator).



***'The Greyhound's Arabian Ancestor - The Seluki (a breed perhaps introduced to England by Crusaders), given honourable burial in the early bronze age: the skeleton of a dog in its grave at Lachish, dating from 3000 BC' (Starkey)***

Photo: Wellcome-Marston Expedition Archive, Dept of Middle East, British Museum, copyright UCL Institute of Archaeology, courtesy of the Wellcome Trust and the British Museum  
With kind permission of the Illustrated London News

The photo is included in Starkey's article for the London Illustrated News, 27<sup>th</sup> November 1937 which I believe must have been one of the last things he worked on. I believe also that it is the skeleton featured in the clip from Harding's films shown in the article on the Filming Antiquity blog by Caitlin R. O'Grady, UCL Institute of Archaeology. She was not sure who the lady was doing the waxing but it is Olga Tufnell.

## **TO BE CONTINUED**

WITH FURTHER ARTICLES ON THE TRAGEDY, AND AFTERMATH

### **Sources/Further Reading/Research**

J.L. Starkey, Palestine Clues to the Origin of the Alphabet, New Discoveries at Tell Duweir, the biblical Lachish, Hieratic script and Art relics revealing early Egyptian influence with other evidence bearing on old testament history, London Illustrated News, pp 944-946, 968, 27 November 1937

Pere L.H. Vincent, French Archaeological School, published obituary (in French), Palestine Oriental Society, 'To the memory of J.L. Starkey', 12<sup>th</sup> January 1938

Karolyn Shindler, 'Discovering Dorothea, the pioneering Fossil Hunter, Dorothea Bate', Natural History Museum publishing, also her article in The Irish Times, 29<sup>th</sup> August 2017, 'Mini Monsters of the Mediterranean – Dorothea Bate's spectacular discoveries'

Wellcome Trust, Evidence of Early Man at Bethlehem, Nature 140, July 31<sup>st</sup> 1937, pp 186-187  
Plus numerous newspaper articles of the day (mostly from originals in family archive)

Permission has been obtained from the various journals, newspapers and publishers where relevant – many of the original publications of the above are also in the family archive.