

# James Leslie Starkey

## Archaeologist

### PART 2 (iii)

### Lachish

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

This is my seventh article for Filming Antiquity directly following on from previous articles 'Part 2. Lachish (i) and (ii). 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.



Photo: Family archive. W.Slaninka

***'The leader of this Expedition from the first has been Starkey: it is impossible to speak too highly of his abilities as a leader of men, an expert archaeologist and an organiser and director of archaeological expeditions'***

Sir Charles Marston  
(The Bible comes Alive)

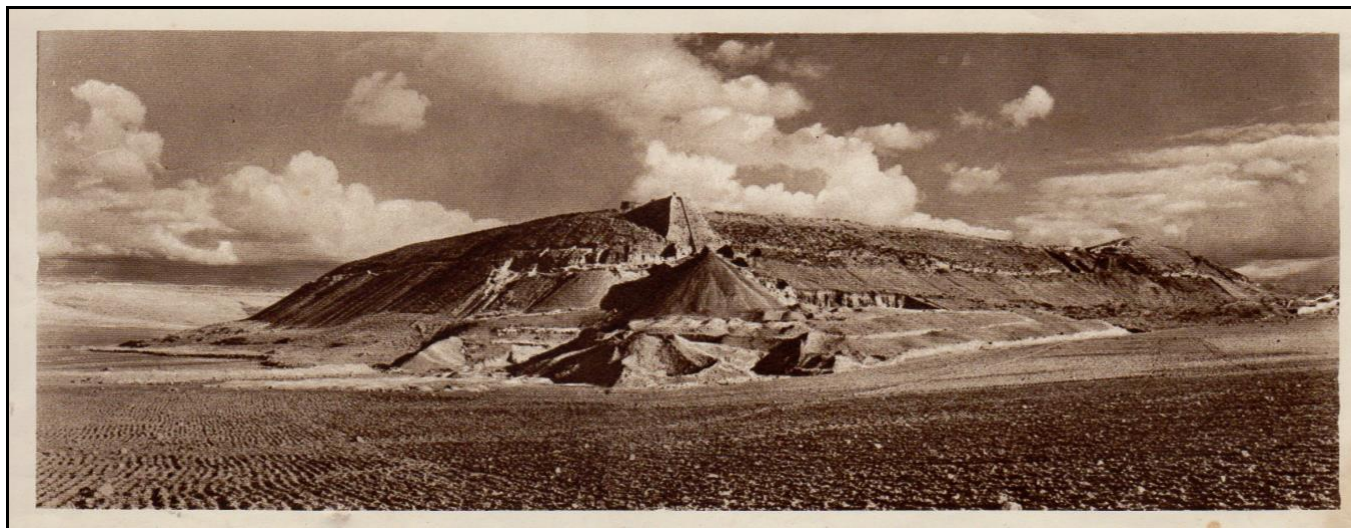
Starkey had great plans for the excavation of Lachish, knowing a long-term programme was required to deal with the formidable site. Unfortunately, not long into the project in 1933, he was hospitalised in Jerusalem and diagnosed with Diabetes – he had been unwell for most of the season in 1931. Running a dig as huge as Lachish, still in its infancy, and having to contend with a problematic situation with the excavations, as well as getting to grips with something as debilitating as Diabetes could not have been easy.

He started systematically with the slopes, including the proper provision of a cleared site for dump heaps. Here he discovered that the limestone ridge flanking the Tell was honeycombed with caverns which had been inhabited from Byzantine to Middle Bronze Age. He also found flint implements on the plain to the north west of the mound city dating to 20,000 BC.

Major finds included the Fosse Temple of the late bronze age, its Sanctuary, the Vestry, and the Priest's room and finds of scarabs, cylinder seals, glass and faience vessels, bowls and beads and carved ivories, Houses 100, the Acropolis Temple, the Great Shaft, outer revetment wall, inner city wall, battlements, Enclosure Wall, Wine Storeroom, the Pillared Building, Judaeon and Persian city gates, the Bastion, Guardroom, Palace Fort, the Persian Road, Residences from the Persian (Governor's Palace) and Judaeon Kingdom period (the Columns from the Residency were the only ones of their type found in

Palestine), the Lachish Ewer, Lachish Bowl, the Bronze Age City, Iron Age Citadel, cemeteries and tombs, the Mass Burial grave, and 'Solar Shrine' of the Persian to Hellenistic periods. The Palace Fort and the City Gate were the most massive structures of their kind uncovered so far in Palestine from the biblical period. I rather like the style of the wording used by Starkey for some of the discoveries, such as The Bastion, The Sanctuary, The Podium, and particularly The Government Storehouse and was pleased that in later work by Ussishkin he used the same terms and also respected Starkey's use of the word Level, instead of strata. I imagine there was a lot of interesting speculation at the time as to the function of the various buildings and finds they revealed. Commander D.L. Risdon said *'it is owing to his enthusiasm and untiring efforts that so much material is now available for study'*.

A section of Roman road was also uncovered, which is mentioned in Roman documentation dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, and formed part of the road which led from Damascus to Jerusalem to Gaza and on to Egypt – Lachish is mentioned at that point on the road in the documents.



**This splendid photograph shows the excavated outer ramparts, chute and dump heap**

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

I have found many references about Starkey's methods of excavation, all citing it as extraordinary, a system careful and thorough, with unlimited patience and precise as a mathematical formula. In their obituaries Yeivin said *'he developed and elaborated meticulous working methods'* and Prof Torczyner said *'one needs to have been an eye witness of the carrying out of the works, the model methods at once learned and simple, free from sterile formality but ingenious and essentially practical, in order to appreciate to the full the exceptional competence of Mr. Starkey. It seems as if no difficulty no obstacle, could stay the vigour and enthusiasm of this bold seeker of archaeological facts'*. Sir Leonard Woolley\*, British Museum said *'I could not but recognise how much of his success was due to his own insight and enthusiasm'*. Sir Charles Close, Chair of the Palestine Exploration Fund said at a meeting *'He was a most experienced and capable archaeologist and an excellent administrator'*. Dr. Alan H. Gardner was quoted in The Times *'you could not talk long with Starkey without realising his immense driving power and his complete honesty, with unflinching enthusiasm and a passion for truth – here was a man who would carry through what he undertook'*.

When an area was being excavated, all the accumulated debris and soil was examined three times – first by carefully sifting by hand for the bigger objects, then women workers put the soil through a sieve to catch the smaller things, and finally it was washed to catch the minutest of items – like prospectors looking for gold nuggets. In order not to lose anything of value to the workers, they were always well rewarded for handing in anything 'special'. The daily rate of pay for adult workers was 2 shillings, and for children – 1 shilling His system of washing seemed to have been forgotten over time but apparently modern day archaeologists have now realised the benefits and it has been revived!



### **Women and children sieving the soil**

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

As they dug, the workers formed chains carrying away baskets of soil to a specially constructed light train and funicular - financed by Sir Robert Mond (who also provided the camp with their radio communication system) - which took the detritus away from the site and then tipped down a metal chute to the base of the tell which had already been excavated and cleared for the dump heap. This was a result of Starkey's unshakeable principle that it was essential to be sure that the area on which excavated soil was dumped was clear of archaeological interest.



### **Starkey – excavating a deep well**

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

There was block and tackle for lowering the human investigators into the deep shafts - The Great Shaft was 85ft deep cut through solid limestone rock which Starkey cites as representing one of the greatest engineering feats achieved by the ancient craftsmen of Judah, and pumping equipment for times of heavy rain and in the spring floods so that the workers could pump out the excavations. This would have

been under the expert direction of Pummell, who seemed to be in charge of anything mechanical or technical. Professor William Foxwell Albright said in his obituary '*Starkey possessed extraordinary promotional flair and at the same time demonstrated unusual talent for engineering operations and organisation of archaeological work*'. There would have been other technical equipment on site too and the expedition purchased an interesting sounding piece of equipment from Belgium called a Priestman Orange Peel Grab! – a hook-on grab with teeth.



**Richmond Brown perching precariously on his rickety tower recording the activity below**

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

They also uncovered the famous Assyrian Siege ramp, the only Assyrian ramp in the ancient near east ever to be found. Unfortunately Starkey didn't recognise it as such and dismantled and damaged a large part of it, assuming it was fallen rocks from the city walls. Similarly the counter siege ramp on the city side of the walls was also not recognised. In his defence though no-one at that time, including archaeologists of the day and for the next 40+ years did not recognise it either. It wasn't until Prof. David Ussishkin's renewed excavations in the 1970s that it was at last identified. Thousands of arrowheads were found round the city walls and the bronze crest of an Assyrian soldier's helmet was found near the city gate matching those of the spearmen of that time.

A market square was uncovered just inside the inner gate of the city, with several shops, some full of crushed remains of oil and wine jars, many bearing the royal stamp inscribed 'for the King', bread ovens, a weaver's establishment with loom weights and a large limestone dying vat and even clay sealings with customer names - once attached to the cloth orders, a corn chandlers, olive and wine press, and pottery workshop. The Potter's implements lay about as he left them – moulds, cockle-shells and pebbles - used to burnish the pottery, a pointed bone with which to draw the decoration on the pot, lumps of paint – yellow and red – and a litter of discarded pots which were badly thrown. Many pottery finger thick 'sausages' were found but their function was unknown. Starkey volunteered they may have been ancient hair rollers for the women of the time who wore their hair in large ringlets!. Apparently the mystery is unresolved and still has archaeologists scratching their heads. Many animal remains were discovered as the excavations progressed – horses or mules, donkeys, camels, dogs, ibex, gazelles, sheep, goats, oxen, pigs, fish and birds, and a skeleton thought to be the forerunner of the modern greyhound. Later excavations also revealed skeletons of lions, brown bears, leopard and cheetah, Thousands of sea shells were also found from the Mediterranean, red sea and Nile.



### **Gerald and Olga in the Pottery Store**

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

The designs on the Lachish Ewer found in the Fosse Temple, now displayed in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem, were used as a template for the Lachish logo (see Article on Olive Starkey). Other unusual finds was evidence of trepanning on skulls 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC and this was quite significant as it was the first to be found in the whole of Asia, and the skilful filling of a tooth of a woman who lived 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. An analysis showed that it was a mixture of gold and silver. There was also a painted sarchophagus from the time of the Hyksos Kings – the Pharaohs who knew Joseph, and in one tomb a striking pottery collection buried with the dead man to serve him in the afterlife.

My personal favourites are the clay anthropoid ‘slipper’ coffins with a ‘lid’ crudely shaped to resemble the occupant, where literally your image for posterity lay in the skilled hands (or not) of the potter employed at the time!



Photo: courtesy of The British Museum

Undoubtedly the major find was the discovery of The Lachish Letters on 29th January 1935 (see next Part).

**CONTINUED IN PART 2 (iv)**

**Sources/Further Reading/Research:** *in addition to those given in Parts 2 (i) and (ii).*

*Further references will be given at the end of the next Parts 2 (iv) – (v)*

**Please note that the References listing given in all five parts is relevant to all.**

\*Extracts from condolence letters sent to Madge Starkey

Prof. W.F. Allbright, 'Archaeology of Palestine', 1949 and obituary 'James Llewellyn Starkey, Excavator of Lachish', JSTOR, Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research, no.69, p.6, April 1938, University of Chicago Press

Sir Charles Close, PEQ opening paragraph, News and Notes, April 1938

E.N. Fallaize, 'The Year's Excavations at Lachish', Discovery, p.250, August 1936 (earlier articles in Discovery can be found in X1V p.228, XV, pp 231, 288, XVI, p235)

Dr. Alan H. Gardiner, 'Mr. J.L. Starkey – a visit to the camp at Lachish', The Times, 18<sup>th</sup> January 1938

Sir Robert Mond, PEQ, June 1937, Seventy-Second Annual General Meeting, pp 168-171 introduction to Starkey's lecture.

Sir Charles Marston, 'The Bible is True', Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1934

Sir Charles Marston, 'The Bible Comes Alive', Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937

D.L. Risdon, 'A study of the cranial and other human remains from Palestine' – Tell Duweir (Lachish), JSTOR, Vol.31, No.1/2, July 1939, Oxford University Press

J.L. Starkey, 'Excavations at Tell Duweir, Palestine, Wellcome Archaeological Research Expedition, 1933-1934', MAN, 129. No.34, pp 107-109, July 1934

J.L. Starkey, 'A late Helladic vase from Tell Duweir in Palestine', MAN, 75, Vol.37, pp 64-65, April 1937

J.L. Starkey, 'The Lachish Letters and an alphabetic missing link: military despatches of biblical inscriptions one thousand years older than the codex Sinaiticus', London Illustrated News, p 242, 10 August 1935

J.L. Starkey (?), MAN, VOL.36, September 1936, p.55, Tell Duweir, The Wellcome archaeological research expedition to the Near East

J.L. Starkey, PEQ, October 1935, Lecture given at Wellcome Research Institute, 'Excavations at Tell el Duweir 1934-1935, Third season at Tel Duweir'

J.L. Starkey, PEQ, October 1936, Lecture given at Wellcome Research Institute, 'Excavations at Tell el Duweir 1935-1936, Fourth season at Tel Duweir',

J.L. Starkey and T. Wilson Parry, MAN, 1936, 'Discovery of skulls with surgical holing at Tel Duweir, Palestine', Article 233 and 234

J.L. Starkey, 'Palestine Surgery 2500 years ago, Skulls from Lachish marked by operations from the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, and other interesting new discoveries at the historic biblical site', London Illustrated News, p 571-573, 3 October 1936

J.L. Starkey, PEQ, July 1937, Lecture 'Lachish as illustrating Bible History', p.171-178.

J.L. Starkey, PEQ, October 1937, Lecture given at Wellcome Research Institute, 'Excavations at Tell Ed Duweir', pp 228-241

Prof. H. Torczyner, obituary Journal of Palestine Oriental Society / 'James Leslie Starkey', Haaretz, 12<sup>th</sup> January 1938

Dr. S. Yeivin, obituary Davar, 'The Murder of James Leslie Starkey' 11<sup>th</sup> January 1938

Dr. S. Yeivin, The Palestine Post, 'Scientist and Organiser – Biographical sketch of the late J.L. Starkey' 12<sup>th</sup> January 1938, (also in family archive)

Dr. S. Yeivin, 'A. Yellin / J.L. Starkey, In Memoriam, Innocent Victims', Bulletin of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society, published Israel Exploration Society, 10<sup>th</sup> February 1938

Plus numerous newspaper articles of the day (mostly from originals in family archive)

Much information on camp life throughout these articles has been gleaned from Olga's letters home to her mother (archived at the PEF) and these are soon to be published in a book entitled 'Olga Tufnell's 'Perfect Journey' Letters and Photographs of an archaeologist in the Levant and Mediterranean', edited John Green and Ros Henry, UCL Press, expected April 2021.

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.