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The Murder of J. L. Starkey According to Local Palestinian Sources: Anti- Colonial Struggle and Local Intrigues

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ABSTRACT

This article reexamines the 1938 assassination of British archaeologist James Leslie Starkey near Tell ed-Duweir in southern Palestine, challenging longstanding interpretations that have framed the killing as a random act of violence committed during the Arab Revolt. Building on the hypothesis proposed by Yosef Garfinkel in 2016, this study draws on overlooked local petitions, oral history interviews, British Mandatory records, and Zionist intelligence sources to argue that Starkey's murder was a targeted response to unresolved land disputes between the excavation team and landowners from the nearby village of al-Qubayba. The article documents how Starkey's acquisition of village lands (at times through expropriation) generated intense resentment, particularly among disenfranchised landowning families excluded from employment by the expedition. Oral testimonies, petitions, and archival evidence point to the involvement of local actors and rebel commander 'Īsā al-Baṭṭāṭ in orchestrating the killing. By situating the assassination within the broader dynamics of colonial archaeology, rural resistance, and agrarian justice, this paper reframes Starkey's death as an act of localized insurgency. It offers a microhistorical lens through which to view the entanglement of scientific exploration, dispossession, and political violence in Mandatory Palestine.

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James Leslie Starkey; Arab Revolt; Mandatory Palestine; Lachish; Colonial archaeology; Land expropriation; Oral history; 'Īsā al-Baṭṭāṭ

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The Canaanite and Judean city of Lachish is identified with Tell ed-Duweir¹ in the Judean Lowlands. The study of Lachish as a historical place and archaeological site goes back to the very beginning of interest in the ancient Near East² (Figure 1). During the late 18th or early 19th century, the modern village of Qubaybat Banī ‘Awwād (named for the eponymous clan that controlled it, al-Qubayba in short) was established northeast of Tell ed-Duweir. More than a century later, in 1932, a British expedition led by James Leslie Starkey began excavating at the site. The expedition worked at Tell ed-Duweir for about six months each year, from autumn to spring. For purposes of accommodation, storage, and processing of finds, a dig house was constructed adjacent to the site. The mound was located within the lands of the nearby village of al-Qubayba, requiring the expedition to purchase or rent land for excavation and logistics. Nearly a hundred villagers were employed in the dig, most belonging to families that cooperated with the expedition.³



Figure 1 The earliest photograph of Tell ed-Duweir, taken by J. Garstang in 1928 (Palestine Exploration Fund, PEF-P-GAR-G1332, courtesy of Felicity Cobbing).

In 1936, Arab militants initiated the Arab Revolt in Palestine, precipitating a worsening of security conditions around the country.⁴ Despite this, the expedition's work went on largely unmolested. However, on January 10, 1938, Starkey was murdered near Hebron, while traveling from Tell ed-Duweir to Jerusalem. The British authorities presented the murder as a random act of banditry rather than an assassination, and exonerated the residents of al-Qubayba from any involvement in the act (Figure 2).⁵

At the time, the murder was reported in newspapers all over the world. Leading scholars of the period, such as William Foxwell Albright, Nelson Glueck, Margaret Murray, William Flinders Petrie, Harry Torczyner, Olga Tufnell, Shmuel Yeivin, and Louis-Hugues Vincent, published obituaries commemorating Starkey.⁶ However, it is only in the last decade that the murder has attracted the renewed attention of researchers. Using unpublished expedition documents held at the British Museum, the Wellcome Trust and the archives of the Mandatory Department of Antiquities, Garfinkel exposed a complicated saga of protracted land disputes between

¹ This article uses the established rendition of the site's name for historical reasons, while other names follow a fully diacritized version of the IJMES transcription scheme.

² Yosef Garfinkel, "The Murder of James Leslie Starkey near Lachish," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 148 (2016): 84–109.

³ Yosef Garfinkel, "Lachish in the Context of Ancient Near Eastern Studies." In *Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honor of P. Kyle McCarter Jr.*, ed. Christopher Rollston, Susanna Garfein and Neal H. Walls (SBL Press, 2022), 505–524.

⁴ Matthew Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine: The British Army, the Colonial State, and the Arab Revolt, 1936–1939* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Oren Kessler, *Palestine 1936: The Great Revolt and the Roots of the Middle East Conflict* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023).

⁵ High Commissioner for Palestine, confidential memorandum to London in Yosef Garfinkel, *Colonial Archaeology in Palestine in the 1930s: The First Expedition to Lachish* (Israel Exploration Society, 2024), Appendix III, Document 91.

⁶ Garfinkel, *Colonial Archaeology in Palestine*, 229.

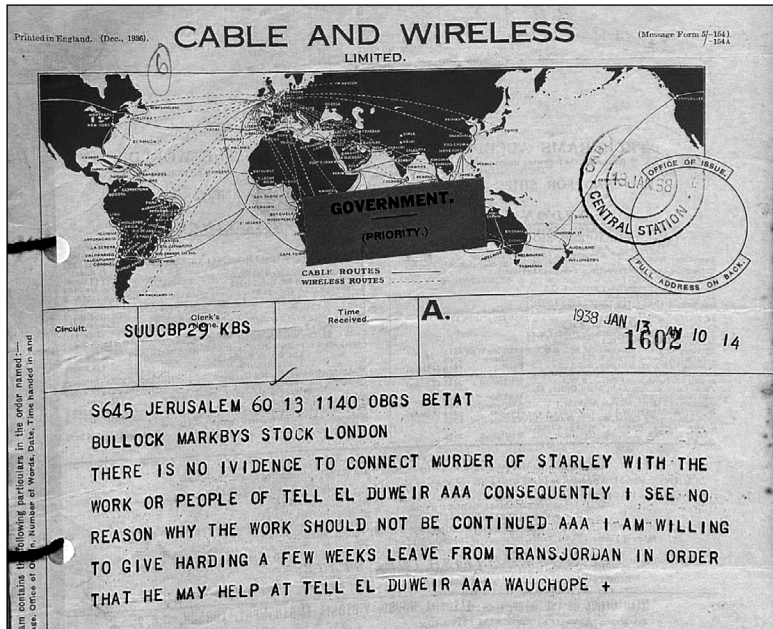


Figure 2 A telegram from High Commissioner Sir Arthur Wauchope to the Wellcome Trust, exonerating the residents of al-Qubayba and urging that the excavation season be continued (courtesy of the Wellcome Trust, London).

the expedition and landowners from the nearby village of al-Qubayba, eventually leading to Starkey's murder.⁷ Other scholars, however, have continued to frame Starkey's death in accordance with the official British version, viewing him as an innocent and random victim of the revolt.⁸ While their interpretations vary in emphasis and depth, none challenge the core assumption that Starkey's murder was unrelated to local land grievances.

This article does not rehash rival interpretations of the murder, which have been amply articulated elsewhere. Rather, drawing on overlooked local petitions, oral testimonies, and official correspondence, the article reiterates Garfinkel's hypothesis through the medium of these newly uncovered oral and archival sources, which independently confirm the theory of a targeted local assassination. As a concrete and irreversible act of violence, it emerged from entangled colonial encounters in which archaeology, land dispossession, and rural defiance of foreign authority converged. Far from being a random episode of banditry, the murder was a locally orchestrated response to bureaucratic evasion and expropriation, turning a scientific enterprise into a site of resistance (Figure 3).



Figure 3 The Starkey family with the two older children arriving at Tell ed-Duweir by car (courtesy of the Starkey Family).

⁷ Garfinkel, *Murder of James Leslie Starkey*; Garfinkel, *Colonial Archaeology in Palestine*.

⁸ David Ussishkin, *Biblical Lachish. A Tale of Construction, Destruction, Excavation and Restoration* (Israel Exploration Society/Biblical Archaeology Society, 2014); David Ussishkin, "The Murder of James Leslie Starkey: Addendum to the Paper of Yosef Garfinkel," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 151 (2019): 146–154; Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine*, 29, 377; Billie Melman, *Empires of Antiquities: Modernity and the Rediscovery of the Ancient Near East, 1914–1950* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Josef Mario Briffa, "The Murder of James Leslie Starkey near Lachish. A Different View from a Colonial Office File," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 153 (2021): 173–190; Raz Kletter, "The Murder of James Starkey, the Excavator of Lachish." In *Past Perfect? The Archaeologies of Mandate Palestine, 1917–1948* (Peeters, 2025), 63–106.

2. MOTIVES AND PERPETRATORS

Writing about the murder, Ussishkin agreed with Garfinkel that ‘the land dispute must have caused a deep and bitter antagonism in the affected landowners or some of them toward the expedition and its director’.⁹ However, Briffa rightly noted that ‘potential motive alone cannot [...] be taken as the only [...] proof of murder,’ elaborating the many reasons that the villagers had ‘not to kill Starkey since the expedition provided an important additional income to the village, and provided medical care’.¹⁰ Indeed, local oral-history narratives highlight the contributions made by the expedition to village development, health, economy, and welfare, as well as the deterioration in the material conditions of the village following the winding-down of the excavations. Local records show how after the expedition had ended patients from al-Qubayba had to seek medical care, formerly available directly in the expedition’s clinic, in faraway places, like the monastic clinic at Beit Jimal, some twenty kilometers away.¹¹

Despite these benefits, a segment of al-Qubayba’s population, especially among landowning families, remained antagonized by the expedition. Prolonged and unresolved negotiations over land use generated significant resentment toward the excavators. Local petitions and oral histories support the interpretation that Starkey’s murder was commissioned by individuals from al-Qubayba, likely in response to land disputes in which the expedition’s director, James Leslie Starkey, was seen as a central figure.

The land disputes between al-Qubayba’s residents and the expedition started immediately with the beginning of work in 1932 and continued for many years (Table 1). As the parties were not able to reach an agreement, even after the expedition had paid half of the requested compensation, the High Commissioner for Palestine expropriated Tell el-Duweir from its owners in 1934. The compensation, however, was paid only in December 1943. In this legal and economic limbo, the landowners suffered threefold: they did not receive the compensation, they lost the land that they had used for subsistence farming (Figure 4), and they were excluded from employment by the expedition, further marginalizing them within the local community.

Table 1 The chronicle of the land dispute at Tell ed-Duweir.

DATE	EVENT	REFERENCE IN GARFINKEL, <i>COLONIAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN PALESTINE</i> (P.)
20.10.1932	Starkey purchased land for construction of the excavation camp. Starkey later went to Jerusalem, leaving his assistant, Gerald Lancaster Harding on site to build the camp.	240
2.11.1932	Starkey arrived from Jerusalem to find that the local villagers had not allowed Lancaster Harding to build on the land purchased by the expedition.	241
2.11.1932	The District Officer from Hebron, ‘Abdullah Qardus, talked to the locals about the expedition, and it then became possible to start the construction of the camp on the expedition’s land.	241
?	Land was rented for the season for the camp of the Bedouin workers from Gaza.	245
23.12.1932	The camp of the Bedouin workers was moved to a new location, as requested by the landowners. A new area was rented.	245
1933	During the season Starkey conducted a long negotiation with the landowners to buy the land of Tell ed-Duweir, without success.	285
14.11.1933	A meeting of the heads of the village with ‘Abdulla Qardus Effendi, the District Officer of Hebron, and ‘Arif al-‘Arif, the Governor of Beersheba. ‘Abdulla Qardus spoke of the expedition’s right to expropriate land if they failed to achieve an arrangement with the landowners. There was no wish to exercise this right, as long as it was at all possible to make an alternative settlement, based upon fair compensation for a lost crop.	286

(Contd.)

⁹ Ussishkin, *Murder of Starkey: Addendum*, 147.

¹⁰ Briffa, “Murder of Starkey: A Different View,” 184.

¹¹ Dr. Simon Srugi, Salesian Agricultural School. Beitgemal, Palestine. Dispensary Registers; Beit Jimal archives, courtesy of Fr. Johnmaria; Giovanni Caputa, *Simon Srugi in the History of Betgemāl* (Studium Theologicum Salesianum Publications, 2021), 97–104.

DATE	EVENT	REFERENCE IN GARFINKEL, <i>COLONIAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN PALESTINE</i> (P.)
30.11.1933	Some of the landowners agreed to sell land on the summit of the tell, if members of their families were employed by the expedition.	298
31.1.1934	Starkey reported that the negotiations had been concluded with all the landowners, for the sum of 163.040 Palestine pounds. This was achieved after he notified them that if they were not prepared to come to an agreement before the end of the month, he would take the necessary proceedings to expropriate the land, and they would lose the privilege that they could otherwise exercise. The landowners left happy with the cash deposit they had received on account.	307
28.2.1934	Starkey reported that the landowners had repudiated the agreement, despite the fact that they had already received half the purchase price. Consequently, Starkey met with the Director of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine to discuss the expropriation of the land on the summit of Tell ed-Duweir.	316, 321
12.4.1934	The Palestine Gazette No. 433 announced the expropriation of Tell ed-Duweir.	58
15.6.1934	Starkey reported that the landowners had received 'notices to treat' from the Lands Department due to Tell ed-Duweir's expropriation, and had gone to appeal to the District Officer of Hebron, who advised them to refer the case to Jerusalem.	337
17.11.1934	Starkey reported hesitations about the expropriated land at the beginning of the third excavation season. An inspector of the Department of Antiquities visited the tell to formally receive the land on behalf of the Government. All of the interested parties, with the exception of one, were prepared to hand it over voluntarily.	341
4.12.1934	The Director of Lands asked for £210 to meet the claims of the landowners.	351
15.1.1935	Starkey reported that he had forwarded a cheque for £210 to meet the expected claims of the landowners. He added: 'I fear that I shall not be privileged to live long enough to see the end of this transaction.'	361
31.1.1935	Starkey reported that he had received a receipt for £210 from the Treasury. The sum had been forwarded to meet the expected claims of the villagers, but Starkey had 'not yet heard of any individual settlements'.	366
30.11.1935	Starkey reported that several locals had now applied to the Lands Department to complete the sale of their share of the expropriated area. These formalities had to be carried out by the claimants before the Government would make payment.	409
5.10.1936	A band of 20 armed men attacked the excavation camp at 10 p.m. They tied up the guards and put them together in one room, and three watches and £P2.135 were stolen. They threatened to burn down the camp on their next visit.	627-628
During 1937	Starkey approached the Director of Land Registration about the expropriation and the delayed compensation.	628
4.5.1937	Landowner Šāliḥ al-Ḥajj Ḥamad Abu 'Awwād sent a harsh letter of complaint about the land dispute to the Department of Antiquities.	<This article>
8.5.1937	The Director of Land Registration answered Starkey's letter. The compensation had not been paid because there were severe problems with ownership of the land. This letter did not reach Starkey, as he had already left for London.	628-629
10.1.1938	Starkey was murdered on his way from Tell ed-Duweir to Jerusalem.	168-171
31.1.1938	A report on Starkey's murder sent from the expedition to the donors in London stated: 'Many conflicting stories appear to have been told, even by the driver of the car himself.'	546
21.5.1943	A letter from the Department of Antiquities clarifies that the land of Tell ed-Duweir had now been valued by the Land Court in Jerusalem at £254.385. The expedition deposited £210 pounds and the Government covered the remaining £44.385.	630
4.12.1943	The expropriation of Tell ed-Duweir was completed and the property was registered in the name of His Excellency the High Commissioner.	631



Figure 4 The summit of Tell ed-Duweir. The land was cultivated by local farmers, and the expedition was obliged to rent or purchase the land from the landowners (courtesy of the Wellcome Trust, London).

During the Arab Revolt in Palestine, the aggrieved landowners took the side of the anti-colonial insurgency, which included residents of al-Qubayba. Pitching rebels against the British colonial-affiliated expedition, it is plausible that locals participated in a raid on the expedition camp on October 5, 1936. During that night, a band of armed men attacked the camp, tied up the guards, and stole three watches and some cash. Before leaving, the raiders threatened to burn the camp down during their next visit.¹² The raid may have been meant to signal to Starkey that if full compensation for expropriated properties was not paid the entire excavation project would be terminated by any means possible (as indeed was the case following his murder).

3. A LANDOWNER'S GRIEVANCE

On May 4, 1937, al-Qubayba landowner Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥājj Ḥamad Abū 'Awwād petitioned the Director of Antiquities in Jerusalem, seeking redress. In his letter, Abū 'Awwād outlined a prolonged and unresolved grievance involving James Leslie Starkey, who had requisitioned portions of his land without due compensation and repeatedly failed to honour pledges of payment (Figure 5):

Received: May 8, 1937

To the Honourable Inspector of Antiquities in Jerusalem,

Petitioner: Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥājj Ḥamad Abū 'Awwād, from the village of al-Qubayba, Tell ed-Duweir.

Respondent: The Director of Excavations at Tell ed-Duweir, al-Qubayba.

Claim:

Four years ago, 48 dunams of my land were taken from me under an agreement signed between myself and the respondent, on the condition that I would be compensated according to the evaluation of experts. However, at the end of the first year, I received nothing as per the agreed condition. The respondent made promises but did not fulfil them.

In the second year, he informed me that he now required only 20 dunams of the land, but again, according to the original condition, he did not provide any compensation by the end of that year, just as he had done in the first.

In the third year, he settled for taking 12 dunams of the land, but the condition remained the same. When the agreed period ended, I requested compensation for

¹² Garfinkel, *Colonial Archaeology in Palestine*, Appendix III, Document 55.

the past three years. He once again promised to compensate me, so I refrained from pressing my claim.

In the fourth year, he took only 8 dunams of the mentioned land. When the agreed period ended, I requested compensation for all four years. Yet, all I received were empty promises from the respondent, from which I gained no benefit at all.

I am a poor and weak man, and my livelihood depends entirely on the yield of this land. Justice cannot allow someone to treat me in this manner.

Furthermore, the respondent obtained authorization from the relevant authorities and has since left for his homeland, from which I have derived no benefit. I am in dire need of assistance.

Request:

I humbly plead for justice and assistance. I request the issuance of an order to grant me compensation for the four-year period in accordance with the agreement between myself and the respondent, as an act of mercy and fairness.

With my highest respect.

May 4, 1937

Petitioner:

Ṣālīḥ al-Ḥajj Ḥamad Abū 'Awwād.

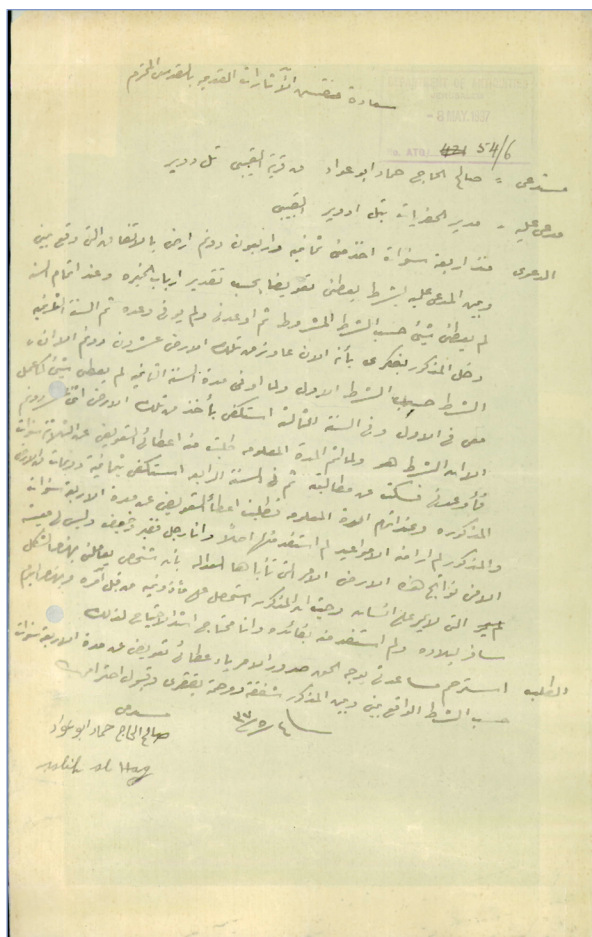


Figure 5 The petition of the land owner Ṣālīḥ al-Ḥajj Ḥamad Abū 'Awwād to the Department of Antiquities of Palestine, dated May 4, 1937.¹³

Abū 'Awwād recounted that an initial arrangement had designated 48 dunams of his land for archaeological use, with compensation to be determined by expert evaluation. Yet despite the formal nature of the agreement, no remuneration was provided at the end of the first year. In subsequent years, the extent of land appropriation was gradually reduced. The petitioner

¹³ Israel Antiquities Authority, Mandate archive, Tell Duweir Excavations, 2nd Jacket, The Wellcome Arch. Research Expedition, ATQ_54/6.

described a pattern of verbal assurances by the excavation director, none of which were fulfilled. He refrained from lodging a formal complaint during this period, relying instead on these repeated promises. This restraint reflects not only the asymmetrical power relations between rural cultivators and colonial authorities but also the limited avenues of recourse available in cases of administrative injustice.

Abū ‘Awwād’s petition frames his grievance in terms of justice and moral obligation. He noted that the excavation director, having secured official permissions, had since returned to his homeland, making the likelihood of restitution increasingly remote. ‘I am a poor and weak man, and my livelihood depends entirely on the yield of this land,’ he stated. ‘Justice cannot tolerate that a person be treated in such a way (*al-amr allādhī ta’bāhū al-‘adāla ‘ann yash‘ur insān annahu yu‘āmal bihādihā al-shakl — amr lā tamurr ‘alā insān*).’ In response, the Director of Antiquities W. B. Kennedy-Shaw issued a bureaucratically dismissive reply, instructing that any future correspondence concerning Starkey be addressed either to Starkey himself or to the District Officer in Hebron.¹⁴

The moral and emotional nuances of the petition may have been lost in translation or disregarded altogether by the British officials, who interpreted the appeal as a routine contractual dispute. In doing so, they failed to grasp the dimensions of agency, trust, and honour that shaped the petitioner’s sense of injustice—and which often underpinned responses to colonial authority in rural Palestinian society. Perceived injustice and betrayal of trust are frequently invoked as motives for killings in contemporaneous Palestinian society.¹⁵ In the Tell ed-Duweir land dispute, all elements converged to motivate landowners from al-Qubayba to order Starkey’s assassination.

These grievances, and the brief and bureaucratic reply by the British Director of Antiquities, underscore the tensions between state-sanctioned archaeological enterprises and the rights of local landholders. They reveal the precarious position of rural cultivators subjected to extractive interventions by institutional actors, often operating under the aegis of antiquities law yet failing to uphold commitments toward the affected population. The case further illustrates how such encounters were mediated not through formal courts but via bureaucratic appeals, wherein moral economy, dependency, and institutional indifference intersected with the lived realities of agrarian life in Mandatory Palestine.

4. LOCAL REFLECTION ON THE LAND DISPUTE’S ROLE IN STARKEY’S MURDER

In our view, the protracted land disputes set the stage for Starkey’s assassination upon his return to Tell ed-Duweir. While he did not name specific perpetrators, an al-Qubayba village historian, descendant of a landowning family of the Abū ‘Awwād clan, detailed the intense friction between local landowners and British excavators, framing the murder within the context of these agrarian grievances. While the interviewee explicitly states that ‘no one knows’ the reason for the murder, his subsequent description of the land struggle implicitly identifies a clear local motive that harkened through intergenerational memory, consistent with Garfinkel’s view.¹⁶ Notably, this account was not solicited in reference to the murder, nor was it part of a narrative effort to confirm any thesis, offering a powerful instance of independent local memory that validates the socio-political climate surrounding the event, even if it stops short of a formal admission of guilt. Although the complicity of villagers has been noted in other interviews with local elders, this particular testimony provides a critical piece of evidence, which while retrospective and partial is worth quoting here at length:

¹⁴ IAA, Tell Duweir Excavations, 2nd Jacket, The Wellcome Arch. Research Expedition, ATQ_54/6. Unbeknown to Kennedy-Shaw and the villagers, Starkey did approach the Lands Department, requesting the completion of the acquisition of Lachish (and the payment of compensation). However, the response of the Lands Department, dated 8th May 1937, did not reach the expedition in time, as it was sent to Gaza after the end of the season (Garfinkel, *Colonial Archaeology in Palestine*, Appendix III, Document 58).

¹⁵ Mustafa Kabha and Nimer al-Sirhan. *Sijill al-Qādah wa-l-thuwwār wa-l-mutaṭawwi‘īn li-Thawrat 1936–1939* [Register of the Leaders, Rebels, and Volunteers of the 1936–1939 Revolt] (Dar al-Huda, 2009).

¹⁶ Garfinkel, *Murder of James Leslie Starkey*.

Tell ed-Duweir itself. Ancient kingdoms passed over it. There were Englishmen digging there, excavating for antiquities. The tell was a ruin (*khirba*), and when the English came, they evacuated the people from there and began to dig, saying it was an ancient area. The English did not allow the residents to engage in agriculture there and said they would give them compensation in exchange for the agriculture, and they began to dig there between '33 and '39 [1933 and 1939]. It was a ruin, and they only sowed field crops and trees there; they ploughed, sowed, and grazed sheep there.

The excavations ended in 1939. They [the English] were searching for antiquities.

[Q: Why did the excavations end?] One of the British excavators was killed, he was murdered, and then they stopped the excavations. The entire country was under the British Mandate, and there were areas that, when they were used [for excavations], they gave compensation to the people, and then when the excavation ended, the land returned to the owners. They never took it as theirs forever—only borrowed it for a time (*ma istamlakūhā 'a-ṭṭūl*).

One of the Englishmen died. He was killed. No one knows [why]. He was murdered, and they accused the villagers of murdering him, but the villagers denied it. There were some people who did not want their trees uprooted and did not want compensation, and there were people who wanted to stop it [the excavations], and they were arrested because of Starkey and then released. They were arrested because they opposed the expropriation of the lands for the sake of the antiquities. 'I want to stay on the land, that they not uproot my trees and not dig in it.'

The whole problem was because of the tell, that they said it was an archaeological area and belonged to the state and not to the people. The tell belonged to certain people with Ottoman-era land deeds (*ṭābō*), and they exchanged it for British *tabo*, and the British reclassified the land as 'Miri' (state-owned land); the residents retained the right to use it, but legal ownership was transferred to the state. The tell's area is 111 dunams. Just the tell itself.¹⁷

This oral testimony is independently validated by Raz Kletter's archival reconstruction of the 'de jure' expropriation of Tell ed-Duweir. Kletter documents how Starkey, frustrated by the 'obstinate' refusal of local landowners to sell their plots, successfully lobbied the Department of Antiquities to have the land reclassified as state-owned (*Miri*), effectively stripping the Abū 'Awād family and others of their ancestral lands.¹⁸

'Abd al-Raḥmān al-'Azza, the sheikh of Beit Jibrīn with extensive ties to al-Qubayba, may have mediated between the landowners and the rebel commander 'Īsā al-Baṭṭāṭ.¹⁹ With those connections in place, the groundwork had been laid for Starkey's assassination upon his return to Tell ed-Duweir.

5. THE MURDER

At midday on Monday, January 10, 1938, a pre-arranged taxi arrived at the expedition's camp to transport Starkey to Jerusalem. The vehicle followed the only viable route within the region's limited motorized transport network: from Tell ed-Duweir to Beit Jibrīn, on to Hebron, and then onward to Jerusalem. The known date, expected route, and prolonged wait at the camp provided ample opportunity for any would-be assailants to prepare a well-organized ambush.

Although Starkey frequently worked near the tell and could have been targeted on many occasions, the attackers chose not to strike in its vicinity. This strategic decision was likely shaped by recent precedents: after earlier assassinations of British officials, the Mandatory authorities had responded with harsh collective reprisals, including home demolitions, mass

¹⁷ The oral testimony cited here was collected on 18 January 2025 as part of the Palestinian Rural History Project (PRHP), a long-term ethnographic and archival initiative documenting the social and agrarian history of Palestinian villages.

¹⁸ Kletter, *Past Perfect*, 81–101.

¹⁹ Ezra Danin and Ya'acov Shimoni, *Documents and Portraits from the Arab Gangs Archives in the Arab Revolt in Palestine (1936–1939)* (Magnes Press, 1981), 116. A personal file in the Hagana intelligence files notes that al-'Azza was the one actually responsible for Starkey's murder (אחראי למעשה לריצח סטארקי), for this complicity in orchestrating it.

arrests, and the imposition of heavy fines on entire villages.²⁰ Although Starkey maintained a regular presence near the tell, his assassins deliberately avoided attacking him there. The choice to strike on the road, away from the excavation site, reflects a calculated attempt to spare al-Qubayba from collective British reprisals, which had followed similar killings in more identifiable localities.

The driver, a Christian Arab affiliated with the Galop Brothers taxi service, later testified to British authorities. His testimony is preserved in the UK National Archives (CO 733/369/11) and was published by Briffa²¹ and Garfinkel.²² An extract reads:

[The driver] got to the scene of the crime a few minutes before five. As he was turning a corner, he observed that a motor car which was in front of him was being fired at by about five Arabs who were on the north side of the road. He stopped his car and saw the car in front stopped by the bandits, who ordered the people to get out but eventually allowed them to proceed. His own car was then fired at. The road was too narrow for him to turn around, and therefore, when the Arabs called to him to come on, he had no other course but to do so. He came up about 50 or 60 metres and was ordered out of the car—Starkey also—by five Arabs, all of whom had their white *ḥaṭṭas* [headscarves] drawn across the lower part of their faces. The driver was asked who he was, and he said that he was a Christian taxi driver from Jerusalem and had come out to drive Starkey in.

Once Starkey was identified as the ‘Director of the “Antiqua” dig at Tell ed-Duweir,’ the attackers, reportedly led by local rebel commander ‘Īsā al-Baṭṭāt, instructed the driver to return to his vehicle and drive away. ‘When he had gone a few metres, he heard two shots fired and, through the driving mirror of his car, saw Starkey fall.’ Then, al-Baṭṭāt himself executed Starkey.²³ In the aftermath of the assassination, British authorities launched a military raid in the Hebron area, targeting al-Baṭṭāt, the prime suspect, but he managed to evade capture.²⁴

6. THE MURDERER

Both Ussishkin and Briffa linked Starkey’s murder to the broader context of the Arab Revolt in Palestine. Ussishkin attributed the killing to unorganized ‘bandits who came from the Hebron area’.²⁵ Briffa, by contrast, ascribed the act to unnamed ‘gangs,’ situating it within ‘the context of the political upheavals in Palestine during the British Mandate’.²⁶

While Ussishkin reviewed multiple sources implicating ‘Īsā al-Baṭṭāt in the murder, he ultimately concluded that ‘the bandits who murdered Starkey were apparently not apprehended by the police, and their association with Issa Battat and his confederates is unclear and doubtful’.²⁷ Briffa, on the other hand, devoted significant attention to Baṭṭāt’s involvement and concluded, contrary to Ussishkin, that ‘those implicated in the murder of Starkey appear to have been apprehended and executed, or — in the case of Issa Battat — killed in a shoot-out with the police’.²⁸ More recently, in a book published after the conclusion of this research, Raz Kletter reached similar conclusions.²⁹

Palestinian documentation, oral testimonies, and British and Zionist intelligence reports all point to ‘Īsā al-Baṭṭāt’s involvement in Starkey’s assassination. The Hagana’s intelligence division

²⁰ Yuval Arnon-Ohanna, *Peasants in the Arab Revolt in Eretz Israel, 1936–1939* (Shiloh Center, 1978), 81; Hughes, *Britain’s Pacification of Palestine*.

²¹ Briffa, *Murder of Starkey: A Different View*.

²² Garfinkel, *Colonial Archaeology in Palestine*, Appendix III, Document 71.

²³ Case report held in The Palestinian Museum, 0125.01.1144.

²⁴ S. Yasin, *Al-Thawra al-‘Arabiyya al-Kubrā fī Filasṭīn 1936–1939* (Dār al-Hudā, 1961), 182; Kessler, *Palestine 1936*, 528, no. 9.

²⁵ Ussishkin, “Murder of Starkey: An Addendum,” 146.

²⁶ Briffa, “Murder of Starkey: A Different View,” 185.

²⁷ Ussishkin, “Murder of Starkey: An Addendum,” 154.

²⁸ Briffa, “Murder of Starkey: A Different View,” 185.

²⁹ Kletter, *Past Perfect*, 70–71.

(SHAY) repeatedly affirmed al-Baṭṭāṭ's role, including in a November 1940 assessment that requested 'a full description of 'Īsā al-Baṭṭāṭ and Starkey's murder'.³⁰ Subḥī Yāsīn, a Palestinian chronicler of the Arab Revolt, described the murder as Baṭṭāṭ's first major operation,³¹ while fellow rebel Bahjat Abū Gharbiyah likewise referenced his involvement.³² Both Sa'd Yusuf Dajani³³ and Kabha and al-Sirhan³⁴ affirm al-Baṭṭāṭ's involvement in the murder, further reinforcing the Palestinian historical consensus. More recently, this consensus has been reflected in Jewish-Israeli historiography, most notably in the work of Billie Melman,³⁵ though without citing her sources, and followed by Green and Henry.³⁶

'Īsā Suleymān al-Baṭṭāṭ (fl. 1930–1938) was an armed gang leader from al-Zāhiriya, located south of Hebron. He hailed from a large clan of rural *fellāḥīn* (peasants) affiliated with the al-Maṭariyya village coalition. The al-Baṭṭāṭ clan traces its origins to ancestors who migrated from the Hijaz and settled in the village of Tall al-Šāfi (modern-day Tel Zafit, identified with the biblical Gath of the Philistines). The family belonged to the Qaysī faction in the long-standing Qays–Yaman tribal feud. During one of the armed confrontations between the two camps, the Baṭṭāṭs were defeated, and many were killed by allies of the al-ʿAzza sheikhs from nearby Beit Jibrīn. Some of the survivors fled to al-Zāhiriya.³⁷ This conflict laid the foundation for the long-term social strife between the Baṭṭāṭs and the al-ʿAzza sheikhs. The traces of betrayal are evident in 'Īsā's life and death.

Little is known about 'Īsā al-Baṭṭāṭ's early life. Like the rest of the al-Baṭṭāṭ clan, his family engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry along the southern fringes of Jabal al-Khalīl, on the edge of the desert. Before joining the Arab Revolt, he relocated to Hebron and became involved in criminal activities. He was arrested, tried, and sentenced to life imprisonment, but escaped after two years and joined the insurgency.³⁸ With the outbreak of the uprising, 'Īsā and his gang attacked the police station in al-Zāhiriya and seized its armory.³⁹ According to Yasin,

'Īsā al-Baṭṭāṭ and a number of residents from the Beit Jibrin area and the Hebron district carried out operations, the most important of which were cutting telephone lines and seizing whatever could be seized from British and Jewish properties. These efforts extended even to managing revolutionary operations and purchasing weapons for his fellow revolutionaries, as I learned from multiple sources—though he was not in direct contact with the revolution's leadership in that region.⁴⁰

In December 1937 a report noted the involvement of al-Baṭṭāṭ's gang in a shooting attack on Broadhurst, the British commander of the Hebron police. The gang operated around key sites along the Beersheba–Hebron road, not far from the location where Starkey would soon be murdered.⁴¹ By April 1938, 'Īsā al-Baṭṭāṭ was commanding a force of fifty to sixty fighters active in the Hebron area, particularly in the western villages near the Zionist settlement of Kfar Menaḥem, close to al-Qubayba and Tell ed-Duweir. His group was engaged in extorting funds from local villagers to finance their insurgency against the British.⁴²

30 Hagana Archives, 105/95b.

31 S. Yasin, *Al-Thawra al-ʿArabiyya al-Kubrā fī Filasṭīn 1936–1939* (Dār al-Hudā, 1961), 182.

32 Bahjat Abu Gharbiyah, *Fi Khidāmm al-Niḍāl al-ʿArabī al-Filasṭīnī: Mudhakkarat al-Munāḍil Bahjat Abū Gharbiyah* [In the Midst of the Struggle for the Arab Palestinian Cause: The Memoirs of Freedom-Fighter Bahjat Abu Gharbiyah] (Muʿasassat al-Dirāsāt al-Filasṭīniyyah, 1993), 113.

33 Sa'd Yusuf Dajani, *Filasṭīn wa-al-taḥaddiyāt al-thawrātiyyah al-šalibiyyah* [Palestine and the Revolutionary Crusader Challenges] (N.P., 1993), 254.

34 Kabha and al-Sirhan, *Sijill al-Qādah*, 634.

35 Melman, *Empires of Antiquities*, 153, nos. 79–80.

36 John D. M. Green and Ros Henry, eds. *Olga Tufnell's 'Perfect Journey': Letters and Photographs of an Archaeologist in the Levant and Mediterranean* (UCL Press, 2021).

37 Al-Baṭṭāṭ/Slīṭ family tree, PRHP archives.

38 Yehoshua Porath, *The Arab Palestinian National Movement, 1929–1939* (in Hebrew) (Sifriyat Poalim, 1978), 220, 305, 362.

39 Al-Zāhiriya village report, Hagana Archives, 105/95b; 'Political Information about the Happenings among the Arabs, #31, 22 October 37,' CZA S25/10097. See also Abu Gharbiyah, *Fi Khidāmm al-Niḍāl*, 113.

40 Yasin, *Al-Thawra al-ʿArabiyya*, 182.

41 Central Zionist Archives, S25/10097.

42 Central Zionist Archives, S25/22437.

Following the murder, British authorities launched an extensive manhunt for al-Baṭṭāṭ and his gang.⁴³ Al-Baṭṭāṭ was nearly captured in a private residence near Halhul, whose owner was later executed for harbouring him.⁴⁴ In response, rebels reportedly executed a local informant from Beit Ummar who had been tracking al-Baṭṭāṭ's movements.⁴⁵ 'Īsā al-Baṭṭāṭ was ultimately killed at Beit Jibrīn in May 1938.⁴⁶ British authorities officially announced his death on 14 May 1938, reporting the location as al-Ẓāhiriya, perhaps in an attempt to obscure the involvement of the al-ʿAzza family.⁴⁷ Zionist sources rejected this version, instead attributing his death to internal rivalries with the al-ʿAzza clan or to broader inter-insurgency disputes.⁴⁸ One intelligence report claims that 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-ʿAzza had initially collaborated with 'Īsā al-Baṭṭāṭ, only to kill him later as an accomplice to Starkey's murder.⁴⁹ Al-ʿAzza's involvement in al-Baṭṭāṭ's death is further confirmed by Hillel Cohen in his study of pre-1948 Arab collaboration with Zionist intelligence agencies.⁵⁰

In 1948, after the fall of al-ʿAzza's hometown of Beit Jibrīn, 'Īsā al-Baṭṭāṭ's son Maḥmūd and his brother avenged their father's blood by assassinating 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-ʿAzza. The two then enlisted in the Palestinian auxiliary forces, supporting the Egyptian army by escorting supply convoys and attaining the rank of master sergeant. After the Egyptian withdrawal, the Jordanian authorities arrested them for the killing of 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-ʿAzza. Maḥmūd was acquitted, but his brother was convicted. In the years that followed, Maḥmūd became an Israeli collaborator—an act that overturned his father's revolutionary legacy.⁵¹

7. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has reexamined the assassination of archaeologist James Starkey by integrating previously overlooked Palestinian sources. Drawing on archival materials and interviews with village elders, the study situates the event within broader socio-political tensions surrounding archaeological excavations during the British Mandatory period. Contrary to prevailing colonial narratives, the evidence reveals that those local grievances—particularly over land expropriation, lack of compensation, and disruption to agrarian lifeways—had fuelled growing resentment toward the excavation project.

Segments of the local population perceived the excavations as intrusive operations aligned with colonial authority. Land clearances, restrictions on cultivation and tree planting, and exclusion from employment opportunities fostered a sense of dispossession and injury. Starkey's murder is therefore convincingly interpreted, based on the evidence curated herein, not as a manifestation of generalized political unrest, but as a targeted assassination in response to specific perceived violations of customary landholding rights. Several families with long-standing tenure claims dating back to the late Ottoman period had opposed the excavation in principle. The ambush, strategically carried out by 'Īsā al-Baṭṭāṭ at a known travel route far from the site, was intended to dissociate the act from the local village and mitigate collective punishment.

More broadly, by foregrounding local perspectives, this study has provided examples of how archaeological activity intersected with land disputes, social tensions, and anti-colonial sentiment in rural Palestine, reinterpreting Starkey's assassination as a consequence of localized opposition rooted in property rights and community dignity.

⁴³ Kabha and al-Sirhan, *Sijill al-Qādah*, 634.

⁴⁴ Abu Gharbiyah, *Fi Khidamm al-Niḍāl*, 113–114.

⁴⁵ Hillel Cohen, *Army of Shadows: Palestinian Collaboration with Zionism, 1917–1948*. Translated by Haim Watzman (University of California Press, 2008), 135.

⁴⁶ Yasin, *Al-Thawra al-ʿArabiyya*, 183.

⁴⁷ Yasin, *Al-Thawra al-ʿArabiyya*, 183.

⁴⁸ Hagana Archives, 105/168; Ezra Danin and Ya'acov Shimon, *Documents and Portraits from the Arab Gangs Archives in the Arab Revolt in Palestine (1936–1939)* (Magnes Press, 1981), 116.

⁴⁹ Hagana Archives, 105/168; al-ʿAzza family confession recorded in 'M-75' [intelligence report], 26 October 40, Central Zionist Archives S25/22570.

⁵⁰ Cohen, *Army of Shadows*, 173; cf. Kletter, *Past Perfect*, 93–94.

⁵¹ Hillel Cohen, *Good Arabs: The Israeli Security Agencies and the Israeli Arabs, 1948–1967*. Translated by Haim Watzman (University of California Press, 2010), 187–190.

The primary data supporting the findings of this study consist of British Mandate archival records and original oral history testimonies. Archival materials from the Department of Antiquities (DAP) are accessible in the physical and digital repositories of the Israel State Archives and the Rockefeller Museum under the specific shelfmarks cited throughout the manuscript (e.g., ATQ 54/6).

The oral history materials were collected as part of the Palestinian Rural History Project (PRHP). Due to ethical obligations and the protection of participant privacy, the full corpus of oral history recordings and transcripts is preserved within the PRHP archive and is not currently publicly available in full. However, all relevant excerpts and English translations included in this article are reproduced with the informed consent of the participants and in accordance with the PRHP's ethical protocols. Researchers seeking further information regarding the archival provenance or the PRHP's collection methodology are invited to contact the corresponding author.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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