

Unearthing the past: ACOR from 1988 to 1991 through the lens of Bert de Vries

By Ashley Lumb. Published: 28th January 2020

ACOR has recently added the photographic collection of Dr. Bert de Vries (ACOR Director 1988 to 1991) to the online archive, which is the first part of the project that focuses on ACOR's institutional archive. The archive can be seen [here](#) in its entirety and includes 831 color slides, taken around Jordan during his time as Director. Bert has been involved with ACOR since 1968 and he has the most extensive living history of the institution. His knowledge of its past provides a rich well from which we can draw illustrations about life at ACOR during the late 1980s, which was a very active time in archaeology and in Jordan.



Aerial photograph of ACOR and Khirbet Salameh, Amman, Jordan, taken October (APAAME_20181022_MND0831, photo by Robert Bewley/courtesy of APAAME).

Bert's photo collection includes over 100 photographs of flowers taken between 1988 and 1991. This flora collection is mostly comprised of wildflowers around Khirbet Salameh, a late Roman-era and Byzantine farmstead, a site that was first surveyed in the 1970s by Dr. Mujahed Muheisin of Yarmouk University. An archaeological rescue survey of the land adjacent to the ACOR building in 1984 was conducted by Alison McQuitty and Cherie Lenzen from ACOR, and the University of Jordan, prior to the construction of ACOR's headquarters, completed in 1985. Bert's love of nature originates from his mother and a childhood spent in the Netherlands and Canada.

These photographs of flowers at Khirbet Salameh were inspired by observations from the Director's apartment, where Bert resided with his family.







Khirbet Salameh, Amman, Jordan, flora, 1988-91, from top (BV_J_S_745, BV_J_S_735, BV_J_S_806, BV_J_S_779, BV_J_S_815)

Over the years he saw many cycles of blooming, and in times of difficulty he would leap out of his chair and go outside to photograph. Bert says, “It becomes you and a lens and a subject. To get everything right, you just lose everything else. It was a great escape and I really enjoyed it and keep going back.” The site is a haven for wildlife and in the 1990s, a survey of the species at the site revealed over 66 species of plants. A further study found that many of these species are disappearing from the city, so these photos act as a record of botanical presence. The site is currently home to animals, including foxes and many lizards.

The next three photos demonstrate an interesting architectural cross section of ACOR, as well as representing its geographic history. As director, Bert inherited the ACOR building as we know it today (minus the 6th floor and 5th floor extension), but has also spent time at both former locations that ACOR inhabited. He had a two-year fellowship from 1972 to 1974 when ACOR was just starting up. The picture below is of ACOR’s first building that Bert frequented with his wife Sally when they lived in an apartment nearby. In those two years, except for the directors in residence, Bastiaan van Elderen and Henry Thompson, they were the only residents. Prior to this, in the summer of 1969, Roger Boraas excavated Rujm al-Malfoof the Iron Age tower located on the Department of Antiquities grounds near the 3rd Circle. He invited Bert to complete the architectural work as Field Project Architect at the site. They all lived in the ACOR residence: walking back and forth between ACOR and the site at Rujm al-Malfoof, completing fieldwork, and then returning home. Bert says that, “This was early Amman, where the 3rd Circle was still the suburb, and the urban landscape was so pretty with all of these nice houses and trees.”



Former location of ACOR at Abu Tamman Street; near 3rd Circle, Amman, Jordan, (BV_J_S_641)



Rujm al-Malfoof, Amman, Jordan, by Bashar Tabbah, CC BY-SA 4.0, 2013

The building below on the 5th Circle was the result of ACOR's expansion in the late 1970s and 1980s when it was becoming a much larger operation. Bert resided in this building multiple times during his frequent trips to Jordan. He took a sabbatical from June to December 1977 and moved back to Jordan with his family. They lived near

the American Community School where his wife Sally taught, and would spend a lot of time with other former ACOR Directors James (Jim) Sauer and David McCreery and his wife Linda McCreery. James and David's photographic collections will be also made available on ACOR's online in the near future.



Former location of ACOR, near 5th Circle, Amman, Jordan, 1988-91 (BV_J_S_642)

By the late 1970s it was clear that ACOR would need a much larger residence in order to fulfill ACOR's ambitious plans. David McCreery, then director, oversaw the construction of the new ACOR premises which was completed in 1986. David and his wife Linda moved out in 1988 and Bert and Sally and their children moved in, operating the ACOR program from this brand new building. This is Bert's favorite picture of the building, with the morning sunlight and intersecting lines of the walls. At this time it only had five floors, with a sixth being added later by the same architect Farid Habib in 2005.



American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR), Amman, Jordan, exterior of new ACOR building, 1988-91 (BV_J_S_664)

A few years after Bert assumed the Directorship in 1988, Iraq invaded Kuwait and the First Gulf War broke out. According to Bert, this was a really trying period and August 1990 is a date forever engraved in his memory.

When the war broke out, USAID informed ACOR that, during this period of political uncertainty, they couldn't do any further work and grants were postponed. During the Fall, the program wound down and they stashed the library in the basement. A number of ACOR's fellows decided to take a Christmas vacation and never returned. Bert and Sally were the last people remaining in the building. The US had amassed over 500,000 troops and were mobilizing in Jordan. Iraqi troops fled from Kuwait and in this aftermath, non-Kuwaiti guest workers from India and Southeast Asia, as well as Palestinians, began to flow out of Kuwait and into Jordan. Pictured below are the guest worker refugees who would stay at a building across from ACOR for two to three days and then be flown back to India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. This photo is a symbol of Jordan as a place of refuge, a recurring motif in the country's history. "That's something that fascinates me," Bert says, "because then in the next cycle it was the refugees from Iraq, and now Syria, but they started with refugees from Palestine in 1948 and 1967." Bert has been around for all these cycles (except for '48), regularly writing contemporary pieces about the various migrations of refugees.

Ten days into the war de Vries came home to ACOR to find the Minister of Tourism and the Director of Antiquities waiting for him and said, "Ok, Bert, you've got to go, it's not safe for you anymore." He was touched by their words because it was a gesture of love; they had his safety at the forefront of their minds. So leave Jordan he did, only to return a few months later after the endangerment died down. The grants were then reinstated and Pierre Bikai took over as Director in July 1991, with Bert returning to his professorship at Calvin College in Michigan.



Refugees at apartment building across field, view from ACOR, Amman, Jordan, (BV_J_S_713)

Pictured below is Joe Green, who was a Cultural Resource Management specialist at the time. ACOR had roughly eight personal computers, seven of which were donated by the Canadian government, and each with only 15 MB of memory. It was the 'stone age' in information technology, Bert recalls. Joe was very good at creating computer databases and was trying to create a GIS system: merging alphanumeric data with photographic data, an endeavor that fascinated Bert. Out of that work came JADIS (Jordan Antiquities Database and Information Systems), a program, made by ACOR in cooperation with the Department of Antiquities, that allowed one to immediately locate any archaeological site in the path of a construction project. It was established in 1990 and ran until 2002, when it then converted into MEGA-Jordan. When Joe left, Gaetano Palumbo replaced him and worked for some years developing the CRM project. Bert says that he really admired Joe for his pioneering work and for "having the courage to tackle stuff that was not available in software form." Joe then went to work at the Harvard Semitic Museum and has spent his career as a curator there. He is still very active in the field and presents papers at ASOR meetings and visits ACOR regularly.



Joe Greene in the CRM office at ACOR, Amman, Jordan, 1988-1991 (BV_J_S_604)

Another archaeologist that Bert knew well at ACOR was Kenneth Russell. Ken had been on Philip Hammond's team at the Temple of the Winged Lions in Petra. Some years later, when Ken was a fellow at ACOR in 1989 and 1990, he discovered some boxes of potsherds from the project in a shipper's warehouse. Russell himself had excavated this pottery some years earlier as a member of Hammond's team from a probe Hammond had opened in an unexplored area east of the Temple. Ken brought the pottery to ACOR and processed it, publishing the results of the work, through which he made a discovery near the Temple of the Winged Lions. Looking around, he noticed a curved wall which turned out to be the apse of a Byzantine Church and subsequently the focus of Petra Church project. Bert and ACOR applied for funding to start an excavation, with Ken set to be the director of the project, but the outbreak of the Gulf War halted their efforts. It was later implemented under Pierre Bikai when the war ended. Ken tragically died in 1992 at the age of 42. Bert had had a strong relationship with Ken, and still visits his grave in Petra to pay homage to a great friend and archaeologist.



Kenneth Russell, Nabataean pots, Jordan 1988-91 (BV_J_S_616)

Bert met celebrated Jordanian architect Ammar Khammash when Ammar was still in high school. Ammar's career as an architect and artist blossomed very early, and Bert and Ammar worked on many projects together. Bert says that he admires the work Ammar does and how he teaches those who work for him. Ammar designed the Pella Resthouse with only local materials: he refused imported materials and ensured that there was no steel in the building. Bert recalls how Ammar replicated the 19th century Ottoman-era building methods by using donkeys and baskets to transport rocks, which were then combined with concrete to build the walls, and also by collecting reeds from the Jordan valley to help form the domed frame structure.



Resthouse from east, Pella, Jordan, 1988-1991 (BV_J_S_100)

Former ACOR director Jim Sauer pioneered a practice carried on by David McCreery and Bert, which was the organizing of weekly tours for the Friends of Archaeology group (now known as the Friends of Archaeology and Heritage); partly because they knew where everything was in Jordan. Bert remembers going to a mining site behind the Dibbeen Forest, trailed by a caravan of about 100 cars. It was his job to keep that caravan together and reach the destination. "It wasn't just about organizing the tour but taking people there because no one knew where the locations were. That was a very interesting and rewarding part of the job. In this photo you can see Rami Khouri, an invited guest, leading the tour and pointing, Ruba Kana'an to his left, Jordanians, foreigners, and diplomatic communities. ACOR became well known, in part, from that sort of service that the Friends of Archaeology and Heritage organized."



Rami Khouri, President of Friends of Archaeology addressing friends at Numeira, Jordan, 1988-1991 (BV_J_S_620)

The following photographs document two archaeological features that have disappeared, destroyed by both the natural elements and human hand. Bastiaan van Elderen invited Bert to Hesban as an architect, where he worked over six summers from 1968 to 1976. This picture shows Bert's daughter Jenna emerging from a tomb, next to a large circular tomb door close to Tell Hesban, about eight years after it was exposed. The last time Bert visited it had been destroyed. This 'rolling stone' was soft limestone and when it was first excavated the surfaces were pristine limestone, but as is evident in the photo, the stones were badly deteriorated. Sadly, a decade later when Bert visited the site, the stones had been completely eroded and broken into pieces. Bert notes that the limestone is so soft that if you excavated through the surface you could dig it up by hand; it was like white mud and that's why these tombs were so easy to construct in antiquity. They didn't have to hammer and chisel the rocks, but could just dig them out and the surface would harden as it was exposed to air. However, being as far away from the hardness of marble as you can get, when exposed to the elements the limestone begins weathering very quickly.



Tell Hesban, Jordan, rolling stone tomb with Jenna de Vries Morton, 1988-91
(BV_J_S_241)

Bert is very fond of this next photo and has photographed this structure a lot. It's a doorway at Umm al-Jimal, a site where he has done fieldwork for much of his career as an archaeologist and architect. In this photo you see this second-floor doorway precariously balanced with one doorpost stone hinged out, with only about 3-4 centimeters of contact at its bottom. About four years ago, some young men leaned against it and it toppled over completely. This picture, however, could be used to reconstruct it. "It just shows how fragile and dangerous these buildings are" says Bert. The beauty of such structures and the dramatic tension between collapse and preservation their story tells have kept him a spellbound over the years of fieldwork at Umm al-Jimal.



Umm el-Jimal, Jordan doorway to the sky, 1988-1991 (BV_J_S_086)

Since leaving ACOR as Director in 1991, Bert continued with his teaching career at Calvin College until he retired in 2013. In his retirement, he continued to administer the [Archaeology minor program at Calvin](#) and teach archaeology and history until his successor, Dr. Darrell Rohl, took over in Sept 2018. At the time of writing he still directs the [Umm al-Jimal](#) Archaeological Project.

Ashley Lumb is ACOR's Project Archivist from July 2019 - May 2020. Ashley Lumb's term at ACOR is part of the ACOR Research Library Photographic Archive Project (also known as the ACOR Photo Archive Project) which is supported through a Title VI grant from the U.S. Department of Education (2016–2020).