

4. Echoes of Daher al-‘Omar: Land, Labor, and Architecture in Scholten’s Galilee

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Abstract: Frank Scholten’s images of the Galilee region contribute to our understanding of the social, cultural, and architectural diversity of northern Mandatory Palestine. From the fading grandeur of Daher al-‘Omar’s Tiberias to rural hill villages and the cosmopolitan life at Safed’s Kabbalah center, Scholten’s photographs capture aspects of Galilee life rarely seen in collections focused on Jerusalem and Jaffa. His images depict both peasant labor and urban life, reflecting the region’s complex social fabric. Scholten’s studies of cloud formations, landscapes, and the Sea of Galilee showcase both his technical skill and artistic sensitivity. This chapter examines the impact of Scholten’s work on representations of the Galilee, exploring its significance in terms of Orientalism, modernity, and photographic practice.

Keywords: Nazareth, Tiberias, Marj ibn Amer, Zahir al-Umar al-Zaydani, agriculture

Trying to think about Frank Scholten’s photographs in relation to how they represent their subjects and where they fit into the creation of knowledge about Palestinian society in the Mandate era highlights some of the challenges of working with images as a historical source. Looking at some of these photographs on their own might suggest that Scholten’s gaze replicates that described in many analyses of Orientalist image-making: the landscapes empty of human beings, except perhaps for the occasional lone figure with a few sheep or goats, evoking notions of an uninhabited space ripe for colonization or of a land frozen in biblical time.¹ But looking at the collection

1 See, for example: Nassar, “Biblicification”; Merli, “New Art in an Ancient Land.”



Fig. 1: "Boy standing on the back of a horse," NINO, F. Scholten, *Galilee*, 22. The agency of Scholten's subjects emerges in this image of a boy standing on the back of a horse, showing off his skill for the passing photographer. His clothes and the structures in the background suggest that he is an inhabitant of one of the Galilee's Jewish or German Templer settlements.



Fig. 2: "Camel with branches on his back," NINO F Scholten, *Galilee*, 28. A camel stands in the road, laden with bags and topped with branches. The subject matter and the absent human being – out of shot, holding the camel's reins – are a standard trope of Orientalist image-making. In the context of Scholten's other photographs, though, the animal and its burden are one of many everyday encounters, a catalog of varied road users.

or sections of it as a whole, and considering how pictures may have been taken over the course of days or weeks, and the circumstances in which this happened, starts to provoke questions.² While one image might conform to the broader analyses of how images contributed to the construction of imperial ideas about “the Orient,” the next may well defy such expectations. A couple of images, obviously taken a few moments apart, show a young man proudly showing off his equestrian skills; in another, a girl guides a horse in concentric circles, threshing grain using methods employed from Central Asia to Western Europe; a landscape image does not present a scene redolent of the Bible, but a townscape of Tiberias, dominated by the mosque built on the orders of Daher al-'Omar in the eighteenth century.

Despite its importance for the country's agriculture and the politics of Zionism, the Galilee – the well-watered, hilly northern region of Mandate Palestine – is underrepresented in the historical literature. Lacking the religious weight of Jerusalem, the modern dynamism of Jaffa and Haifa, or the rebellious glower of Nablus, towns such as Nazareth, Tiberias, and Safed had their heydays before or after the Mandate and have their high points in other narratives, whether the cotton industry under al-'Omar or the birth of Kabbalah in seventeenth-century Safed. But, as Scholten's photographs show or at least suggest, Galilee was subject to the same processes that impacted the rest of Palestine during British rule, and its inhabitants were participants, for good or ill, in the same social and political changes.

For the sake of clarity, I am defining Galilee here as the hilly zone that stretches from the north of Jenin, east as far as Tiberias and the Sea of Galilee, north to Safed, and west to the Mediterranean coast at Akka and Haifa. Significant places within it include the city of Nazareth, which during the late Ottoman and Mandate periods had grown under the influence of church and missionary institutions such as the Russian-funded school and hospital;³ symbolic battle sites such as Hittin (when Salah al-Din defeated the Crusaders) and Ayn Jalut (where the Mamluks halted the Mongol advance); and unique environments such as Lake Huleh. However, the Scholten photos I discuss do not include those from the coastal plain, an area with a complex history that deserves its own consideration.

2 For a detailed discussion and theorization of the effects of the arrangement and curation of images, see *Camera Palaestina* for Issam Nassar, Salim Tamari, and Stephen Sheehi's work on the Palestinian collector Wasif Jawhariyyeh and his albums, compiled through the late Ottoman and Mandate periods and framed to act as a pictorial history of modern Palestine.

3 See Agsous, “Making Stage” and Gerd, “Palestine Society” for in-depth explorations of the importance of Russian educational establishments in Late Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine, and their impact on Palestinian culture.



Fig. 3: "Child working the land with a horse," NINO, F. Scholten, *Galilee*, 03. A girl, head covered against sun or rain, drives a horse in circles around a huge pile of wheat or barley, the board she rides separating the grains from their husks. The image highlights the role of women's labor in Palestinian agriculture.

Al-Jalil: Women, Land, and Labor

As highlighted by Rawda Morkus-Makhoul, a Palestinian scholar whose farming family is deeply embedded in the land and history of the Galilee, the region's economy and society are principally agricultural, and much of the work done there has been performed by rural women.⁴ Contrary to the many European stereotypes of female roles in Middle Eastern and Islamic societies, peasant women in Palestine carried out all kinds of physical labor, growing and processing farm produce and sometimes traveling long distances to sell it,⁵ as well as taking on paid work when it was available.⁶

Frank Scholten's unique style of photography offers some rare glimpses of female work in the Galilee of the early 1920s. In Figure 3, a young girl, well wrapped up and with her hair covered against inclement weather,

4 Morkus Makhoul, "Decolonising the Social History."

5 Morkus Makhoul, "Decolonising the Social History," 126–33.

6 Irving, "Women versus Wheelbarrows," 431–3; Irving, "Excavating the Subaltern," 16–26.



Fig. 4: "Children and women in the street," NINO, F. Scholten, *Galilee*, 17. An outstanding feature of Scholten's photography is the spontaneous, human portrayal of ordinary people who he apparently met on his travels. Here, two women are accompanied by a group of children; one woman seems to be speaking while two girls smile shyly as a toddler wanders off.

uses a horse-drawn threshing board to divide grain from their husks, driving the horse in long, repetitive circles around a huge pile of wheat or barley. Most of the cereal crops grown in Palestine in the early twentieth century would have been for domestic or local consumption, but not all. The Gaza region, for instance, had grown barley as a cash crop for export to the British beer industry between 1850 and World War I,⁷ and the size of the pile of grain being worked by this lone girl suggests that some of it might have been for sale as well as subsistence (conversely, it may have been that the harvests from several farmers were being threshed together for efficiency's sake). But, as has been increasingly pointed out about late Ottoman and Mandate Palestine and other parts of the Levant, women's labor was vital to local and national economies, not just on the domestic scale but for cash sales that helped families pay taxes or buy tools or livestock.⁸

7 Halevy, "Stripped," 55–116; Schölch, *Palestine in Transformation*, 163–4, 285.

8 Irving, "Women versus Wheelbarrows," 431–3; Khater, *Inventing Home*, 19–47.

Agricultural Production

Even a cursory consideration of the agricultural history of the Galilee confounds another stereotype that permeates Palestinian history. Zionist literature at the time and since has portrayed the Holy Land as a barren and degraded landscape, once the fertile “land of milk and honey” from the Bible but allowed since antiquity to slowly drown in malarial marshes or wither into desert.⁹ Whether implicitly or explicitly, Zionist thinking – both Jewish and Christian – created a narrative in which this represented the (Promised) land pining for its Chosen People; according to this logic, the degradation of the land was the responsibility of Islamic rulers, be they Arab or Turkish, and served as evidence for why the Palestinian peasants who farmed the land could justly be evicted from it.¹⁰ Indigenous knowledge was dismissed as worthless and Palestinian peasants were depicted by health researchers and agronomists as desperately poor, ignorant subsistence farmers who had starved the soil and allowed disease to proliferate.¹¹

In his autobiographical account of a career as an official in the British Mandate administration, Edwin Samuel (son of Herbert Samuel, the first high commissioner of Palestine) admits that he had been in error when he tried to make peasants in the area under his control remove rocks from their fields so that they could plow them more efficiently. After some time, and after witnessing farming methods and listening to the explanations given for them, he conceded that the stones dotting the fields actually served an important purpose, their cool surfaces condensing valuable water from the air overnight.¹² But Samuel was an exception, and on a much larger scale it was only after many decades that the State of Israel has had to reverse large-scale schemes like the drainage of the Huleh marshes, as the environmental damage wrought by these modernist-nationalist megaprojects makes itself known.¹³

Indeed, a focus on the Galilee as a space of agricultural production also allows us to pay attention to the region’s important history as a large-scale producer – very far from the stereotype of the marginal subsistence farmer on land verging on the uninhabitable.

9 Sufian, *Healing the Land*.

10 Raz-Krakotzkin, “Exile within Sovereignty.”

11 A classic example from the Mandate period is Lowdermilk’s *Palestine*.

12 Samuel, *Lifetime in Jerusalem*, 76–7.

13 Avisar and Fox, “Chemical Evolution,” 1096–7; Tal and Katz, “Rehabilitating Israel’s Streams and Rivers,” 323; Dajani, “Thirsty Water Carriers.”



Fig. 5: "Clouds over a landscape," NINO, F. Scholten, *Weg Tiberias Safed*, 02. One of a series depicting striking cloud formations over the Sea of Galilee, looking toward the hills on the other side of the Jordan Valley. Scholten seems to be reveling in the simple glory of the landscape.

The hub of Tiberias

The dome and minarets of the grand mosque erected by Daher al-'Omar in his capital of Tiberias, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, are a graceful silhouette in Scholten's photograph taken from the edge of the town. The mosque, tragically neglected under Israeli rule (along with many of the Galilee's other Islamic heritage sites) is now dilapidated and (to judge by what was visible during a visit in 2022) used by the municipality to store machinery for street cleaning.¹⁴ But it was once an important landscape with thriving Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities and, at the time when Scholten took his photographs, good relations between them.¹⁵ During the Mandate period, Tiberias was an important regional hub for the Galilee, the crossing-point for major roads and close to major bridges across the Jordan Valley, including the bridge bearing the Haifa spur of the Hijaz railway.¹⁶ The

¹⁴ Gilad, "How Israel Destroyed Old Tiberias."

¹⁵ Abbasi, "End of Arab Tiberias," 7.

¹⁶ Abbasi, "End of Arab Tiberias," 6.



Fig. 6: "Gathering of men and boys. Man playing music," NINO, F. Scholten, *Galilee*, 46. A group of Palestinian men and boys, some watching the foreigner as he photographs them, others focused on the musicians. A drummer is visible in the image, his hands blurred with speed; other players are cropped out of the image, to the left.

city's heyday, though, was its years as the capital of Daher al-'Omar's rule of the Galilee as a semi-autonomous entity under the Ottoman Empire – and much of the success of that political experiment was down to the growth and export of cotton for international markets.¹⁷

Scholten and the Exotic Others

Although many of Scholten's images diverge from the Orientalism of most European photographers creating images of Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century, his pictures of the Galilee are not wholly free of his positionality as a privileged white male traveler in a colonized land. On the one hand, his pictures of ordinary Palestinians are unstaged, lacking the biblical or Orientalist themes imposed by Europeans and Americans creating images for sale to tourists or for use in accounts focused almost wholly on stories from the Bible. Several images of a group of women and children,

17 Yazbak, "Politics of Trade."

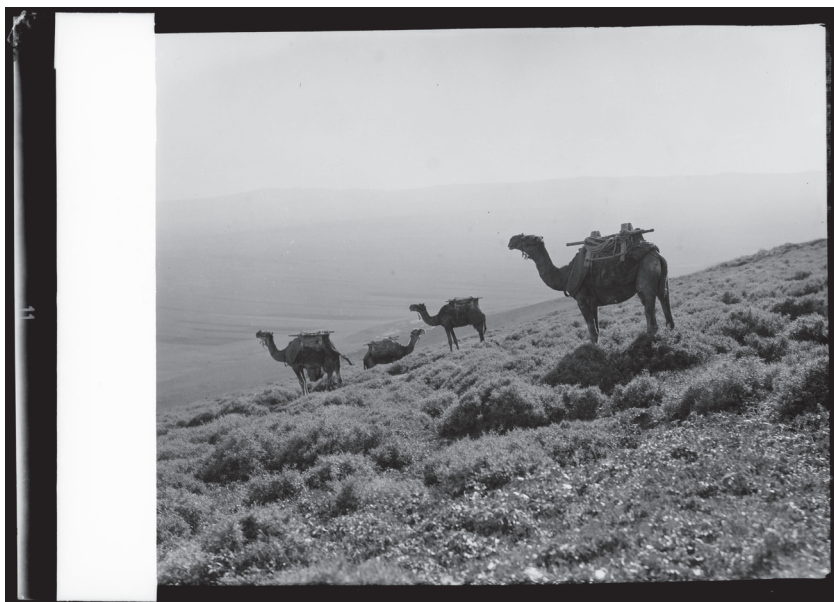


Fig. 7: "Landscape view with four camels," NINO, F. Scholten, *Weg Haifa Nazareth*, 07. Four camels stand on a hillside, roaming but ready to be laden with baggage or saddles. Scholten seems to be focused on the symmetry of the standing animals and the perspective of the hills and plain behind them.



Fig. 8: "Tiberias seen from a distance," NINO, F. Scholten, *Tiberiade*, 20. A newly surfaced road into the city of Tiberias, running through the dilapidated walls and past a ruined fortress. The Great Mosque of Daher al-'Omar, now tragically neglected and used to store machinery by the Israeli municipality, stands proud in the distance.

ranging from an almost-grown boy to a babe in arms, seem spontaneous and unforced. Their faces display a range of emotions at the odd experience; Scholten could well have simply met them in the street and asked them to stay one moment while he set up his camera. Similarly, a photograph of a group of men listening to musicians presents us with a second in the lives of a whole range of real, ordinary characters: some squint curiously at the outsider, others stare with frank interest, while others ignore his presence and focus on the musicians, some out of shot but including a man whose hands are a blur of movement above the skin of his small drum.

On the other hand, despite their spontaneity and ostensible lack of staging, these images still have an ethnographic quality to them which is not entirely free of a sense of the exotic Other; they are part of a collective cultural entity rather than interesting as individuals in their own right. This becomes especially clear in juxtaposition with two more pictures. The first, of a boy or young man balancing on the back of a horse, is striking for the almost palpable sense of agency and interaction; one can almost hear this lad calling out to the traveler with the camera to come and take his picture while he shows off his equestrian skills. Despite the apparent innocence of the image, though, its background (the front of a motor car, large heaps of newly dug earth beside large metal container drums) suggests that its setting is either one of the German Templar colonies scattered across the Galilee or a newly founded Zionist settlement. The lack of obvious links to either the Zionist project or the British colonial presence in Palestine means that the Templers, a German Christian sect who settled in the Holy Land to await the imminent second coming of Christ, often escape analysis as part of the settler colonial dynamics of the period. But, as Mahmoud Yazbak has shown, their attitudes toward their Palestinian neighbors, and the ways in which they established their agricultural settlements, were often extremely similar to these other colonial projects, and they had similarly disastrous consequences for the peasants thrown off their lands to make way for the European newcomers.¹⁸

The second image is one of the very few for which the subject is named: a caption calls him "Architect Weydeveld," the well-known Dutch architect and graphic designer Hendrik Wijdeveld (1885–1987). A number of companion photographs carry information indicating that they show his first wife, the cellist Ellen Kohn. It is reasonable to assume that Wijdeveld and Scholten knew one another from intellectual and artistic circles in the Netherlands. Wijdeveld was visiting Egypt and Palestine on a trip with his friend Erich

18 Yazbak, "Templars as Proto-Zionists?"



Fig. 9: "Wharf and the Sea of Galilee," NINO, F. Scholten, *Tiberiade*, 37. A jetty projects into the Sea of Galilee from the Tiberias waterfront; fairly recent work is visible in the intrusive metal gate, designed to bar access to the jetty, and the metal girders used to reinforce the waterside. In companion photos, a group of Palestinian fishermen sits further down the pier while their boats float alongside.



Fig. 10: "Architect Weydeveld in a garden," NINO, F. Scholten, *Safed*, 09. One of a selection of photographs of Dutch Catholic architect and writer Hendrik Wijdeveld and his wife, taken in Safed. The relaxed, sometimes playful, tone of the images suggests that they already knew Scholten or were perhaps just enjoying the company of a compatriot.

Mendelsohn:¹⁹ the two were important figures in the architectural scene of post-WWI Europe and Mendelsohn was to go on to become one of the leading thinkers and builders of the Zionist architectural movement in Mandate Palestine, constructing villas for the likes of Chaim Weizmann.²⁰ Ellen Kohn was also Jewish and from what is now Poland, and thus may also have influenced Wijdeveld's interest in Palestine, as may his connection with Charles Ashbee. When he was training in London, Wijdeveld had met Ashbee, a British Arts and Crafts movement figure. In 1918, then governor of Jerusalem Ronald Storrs had appointed Ashbee as his "civic adviser," and thus Ashbee became one of the instigators of the far-reaching decisions made by Storrs and his administration about the infrastructure and visual nature of Jerusalem, in particular the Old City.²¹

The very fact that it is possible not only to put a name to the image of Hendrik Wijdeveld sitting in a Safed garden, surrounded by plants and drying laundry and swathed in heavy winter clothing, but also in a few sentences to sketch his networks across a trans-European intelligentsia and into circles of men (sic) who would shape the built environment of Palestine, highlights the gulf between this picture and others by Scholten, even that of the youth on horseback. While Scholten's practice does genuinely display a qualitative difference from most images of Palestine and Palestinians taken by European and North American photographers in this period, the comparison between the nameless groupings of ordinary Palestinian people he captures and the intimate pictures of his countryman and the latter's wife makes clear the limits of that difference.

As Nassar, Tamari, and Sheehi emphasize in their volume on Jawhariyyeh, captioning, arranging, and labeling are all acts of power and, in some cases, theft and appropriation.²² While Scholten's humanistic approach to his subjects and his openness to the contemporary culture of Palestine set him apart from other producers of images, the fact that his Palestinian subjects often remain nameless and elusive, consigned to anonymity by the scantness of the information recorded on them, both aligns him with other Orientalists and foregrounds his entanglements with the colonial projects that would impose themselves so catastrophically on Palestine in the ensuing decades.

19 Stralen and Lootsma, *Landhuizen*, 141.

20 Nitzan-Shiftan, "Contested Zionism," 152.

21 Pullan and Kyriacou, "Charles Ashbee."

22 Nassar, Tamari, and Sheehi, *Camera Palaestina*.

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