Kathleen Kenyon (1906–1978)

Dame Kathleen Mary Kenyon is arguably the most influential woman archaeologist of the 20th century. Kathleen, or ‘K’ as she was known to her close associates, was the eldest daughter of Sir Frederic Kenyon, a biblical scholar and director of the British Museum, London. From an early age Kathleen was exposed to the ancient world as well as the discipline of archaeology. After graduating from Somerville College Oxford, Kenyon participated in a variety of excavations, working with Gertrude Caton-Thompson at Great Zimbabwe in Africa and on the Roman town of Sabratha in Libya. She became the first female president of the Oxford University Archaeological Society in 1927.

While serving as director of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem from 1951 to 1966, Kenyon conducted research (1952–58) at Tell al-Sultan, in Jordan, the site of prehistoric and Old Testament Jericho. This work resulted in the recovery of ancient layers which dated back to the Neolithic period, and significant finds including examples of plaster covered skulls. Drawing on the technique originally developed by Sir Mortimer Wheeler, this project also allowed her to further develop what would become known as the Wheeler-Kenyon method of excavation. From 1961 to 1967 Kenyon turned her attention to excavations at Jerusalem. She undertook large scale works marking a new era in the exploration of this historically important site.


The objects displayed here were excavated by Kathleen Kenyon at Jericho and Jerusalem and are held in the University of Melbourne's Classics and Archaeology Collection and the collection of the Australian Institute of Archaeology, Melbourne. The Ian Potter Museum of Art would like to acknowledge the Australian Institute of Archaeology, its partner organisation in the development and presentation of this exhibition.
Kathleen Kenyon working on material from Jericho, where she excavated 1952–58.Courtesy of UCL Institute of Archaeology, London
Kenyon’s contribution to archaeology and connections with Australia

Kathleen Kenyon made significant contributions in the field of stratigraphic excavation techniques; she also introduced innovative approaches in ceramic methodology. Drawing on the skills originally developed by Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Kenyon developed what would become known as the Wheeler-Kenyon method of excavation. This system involves digging within a series of 5 x 5 metre squares set within a larger grid. A wall or ‘baulk’ is left between each unit. These vertical slices of earth allow archaeologists to compare the exact stratigraphy of a found object or feature to adjacent layers of earth. During Kenyon’s excavations at Jericho, she perfected this technique which helped her discern the long and complicated occupational history of the site.

From 1948 to 1962 Kenyon lectured in Levantine archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. Kenyon’s teaching, complemented by her excavations at Jericho and Jerusalem, helped to train a generation of archaeologists, including several Australians.

The Australian Institute of Archaeology and the University of Melbourne both contributed funds to Kenyon’s excavations at Jericho and Jerusalem. Founded by Walter Beasley in 1946, the Australian Institute of Archaeology provided financial support to Kenyon’s excavations, among other projects in the Holy Land at the time. Because of this contribution, the Australian Institute of Archaeology holds important collections of pottery, especially selections from the Early Bronze Age (c. 3300–2100 BCE) at Jericho and the Iron Age (c. 900–600 BCE) at Jerusalem.

Keen to establish a teaching collection, the University’s former Middle Eastern Studies department also provided funds to Kenyon's projects. In return the University received seventeen ceramic objects from several tombs at Jericho excavated by Kenyon 1952–54. In 1969 and 1970 the University received two further shipments of 113 ceramic objects from Kenyon’s 1967 excavations at Jerusalem.
Jericho and Jerusalem are two of the oldest cities in the world; both sites are of archaeological, historical and cultural importance. The site of Jericho (Tell al-Sultan) is situated on the west side of the Jordan River and about 16 km north-west of the Dead Sea. Jerusalem is located approximately 22 km south-west of Jericho.

Jericho is most remembered as the city where Joshua blew his trumpet and the walls came tumbling down, but it was an important city long before and long after the Israelite invasions in the late second millennium BCE. Archaeologists have unearthed the remains of more than 20 successive settlements at Jericho, the first of which dates back to the Neolithic period (c. 10,000 BCE). Jericho was first excavated by Charles Warren in 1868, then by Ernst Sellin and Carl Watzinger 1907–11, then by John Garstang 1930–36. Extensive investigations using more modern techniques were made by Kathleen Kenyon between 1952 and 1958. Kenyon is credited with uncovering and interpreting the many layers of civilizations which date back to the beginning of Neolithic culture at Jericho.

Following her work at Jericho, Kenyon commenced excavations at Jerusalem. A city sacred to Christians, Jews and Muslims, during its long history Jerusalem was destroyed and rebuilt many times. The earliest remains date to the fourth millennium BCE. From 1961 to 1967 Kenyon explored several regions of Jerusalem, focusing principally upon the south-eastern hill near Gihon, the region of the mouth of the Tyropean River, the territory immediately south of the temple area, the Armenian Gardens inside the west wall of the Old City, and south of the citadel atop the south-western hill. Some archaeologists, including Kenyon, believe Jerusalem was founded by Northwest Semitic people with organized settlements from around 2600 BCE.