

‘TO AVOID A STRANGE EUROPEAN EXPLANATION’: HILMA GRANQVIST’S EARLY ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN PALESTINE

INTRODUCTION

This year marks a century since Finnish ethnographer Hilma Granqvist (1890–1972) embarked on her first journey to Palestine, an undertaking that proved intellectually rich alongside becoming a professional impasse. Initially setting out to study ‘The Women of the Old Testament’, she soon shifted her topic to reflect new methodological and theoretical insights. Yet, her pioneering research ultimately fell victim to the fate often faced by those ahead of their time.

In Palestine, al-Sitt Halimah’s (as she was known amongst her Palestinian interlocutors) work has remained highly regarded for decades, with her detailed recordings of rural Palestinian customs contributing to Palestinian scholarship as well as identity-building (Abou-Hodeib 2021). Today, her work resonates more than ever given Israel’s ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people as well as against the erasure of Palestinian heritage and knowledge systems which continues unchecked—a process that Granqvist witnessed in its early stages in the 1920s.

Upon her return to Finland, Granqvist was among the very few who openly criticised the Zionist colonial expansion in Palestine. Arguably, this stance, along with her theoretical and methodological advancements, contributed to her effective banishment from pursuing an

academic career in Finland. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in her work, both in her native Finland and in Western academia at large.

THE ROAD TO PALESTINE

On a typically grim November morning in London, I took a train to the southeast suburb of Greenwich, aiming to familiarise myself with Granqvist’s archives. Since her passing, half of her archive has been housed at the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF), while another half resides at Åbo Akademi in Finland. Once in Greenwich, a staff member told me that the PEF had saved the archive from likely destruction following Granqvist’s death. Reflecting on how deeply her work had been forgotten in Finland at the time of her passing (and for decades afterwards), I did not doubt his words.

Granqvist’s path from a trained teacher in war-torn Finland to a self-taught ethnographer in a small village in British Mandate Palestine was far from straightforward. When she enrolled at the University of Helsinki at the age of 28, her chosen fields of interest—psychology and religion—were considered too ambitious and controversial for a woman. Consequently, her supervisor, Professor Gunnar Landtman, recommended a more appropriate topic to his student: a literary study of women in the Bible (Häggman 2023).

Granqvist quickly exhausted the limited literature available on the subject and sought further learning opportunities in Germany. There, with encouragement from more progressive professors and inspired by an array of interdisciplinary influences, she began to entertain the idea of studying ‘real Biblical women’ in contemporary Palestine. After many hardships and delays, Granqvist was finally able to attend—with special permission due to her gender—a Biblical archaeology course organised by the German Evangelical Institute in Palestine (Hägman 2023).

At that time, Palestine was viewed through an Orientalist lens, perceived as existing outside the passage of time with its people viewed as remnants of and trapped in the Biblical past (Abou-Hodeib 2021; Moors 2006). Most research conducted in Palestine prior to and during this period focused on theologically driven Biblical archaeology, with the main motivation of finding proof for Biblical events in the contemporary landscape. This strand of research was closely invested in and a driver for colonial expansion and extraction, and discarded those layers of history—and, indeed, the present—which did not fit the narrative of the Judeo-Christian Promised Land. These epistemic practices marginalised or outright ignored Palestinian existence and laid the groundwork for its dispossession and erasure.

With support from the vibrant Western community in Jerusalem, Granqvist was introduced to Louise Baldensperger, an Alsatian woman who had spent most of her life in Artas, a small, roadless village within walking distance of Bethlehem. Granqvist took up lodging in Baldensperger’s home and, within a few days in Artas, abandoned her Biblical preconceptions and shifted her gaze to the contemporary lived experiences of her informants, focusing on marriage customs and everyday life as seen

from the perspective of women and children (Hägman 2023).

In the introduction to *Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village I*, Granqvist sheds light on this sudden and unconventional shift in her focus. She attests that she observed some ‘tangible and concrete’ evidence of the advantages of polygyny to some of the village women. Thus, she (1931: 3) asked:

[W]hether, in order to understand fully the life and position of women in Palestine, one must not first understand a Palestinian society, seeing that it is guided by laws and regulations and is held together by ties which, if we only knew them, would give quite another view and elucidation of the women’s life.

In articulating this holistic (and, indeed, early functionalist) approach, she further noted, ‘The facts had convinced me that it would be wrong to take one custom and study it in isolation instead of first trying to see the connection and study all the phenomena as widely and equally as possible’ (Granqvist 1931: 3). Hence, Granqvist’s turning away from the Biblical-Orientalist as well as evolutionary and comparative scholarly traditions was a shift not only in her choice of topic, but in both her theoretical and methodological paradigms.

Granqvist’s methodological decision to focus on an in-depth study of a single village, as well as her early theorising that shared many features with the emerging functionalist school, failed to garner support from her superiors at Helsinki. This included her supervising professor, Landtman, who favoured comparative approaches and failed to appreciate Granqvist’s insistence on the importance of single-context work. For Landtman, Granqvist’s work was too descriptive and subjective, which is ironic

considering Granqvist's almost natural scientific focus on 'concrete facts, details, and figures' (1931: 6, emphasis in original).

Undeterred by her supervisor's warnings and confident in her vision, Granqvist spent three years in Artas on two separate visits, employing participant observation and meticulously documenting every detail of village life. She laboured over learning colloquial Arabic, participated in local events, and recorded her findings with the assistance of her 'scientific committee' composed of two elder village women along with Louise Baldensperger. Granqvist sought to capture the intricate details of the villagers' customs, beliefs, and values, ensuring that all information was verified through multiple sources. Her meticulous work included a unique data set inspired by W. H. R. Rivers' genealogical method: tables documenting marriages in Artas spanning four to five generations preceding her arrival. These proved a rare and valuable record of rural Palestinian kinship practices, and, as is often the case with ethnographic research, they showcased that cultural values or ideals (in this case, the superiority of cousin marriage) do not always correspond with people's everyday behaviour.

CONNECTIONS AND CONTINUITIES

Contrary to popular portrayals of Artas as isolated in time and space, the village was already deeply embedded in regional and colonial power dynamics at the time of Granqvist's arrival. In the mid-nineteenth century Artas had been the first village in Palestine to seize the interest of European Millenarist Christian settlers (Naili 2012; Qleibo 2014). Their vision revolved around restoring Jews in historic Palestine and converting them to Christianity in order to

hasten the second coming of Christ (Naili 2012; Stewart 2022).

Amongst them was a Jewish-born Christian-convert John Meshullam, a British businessman with a millenarist vision. In the mid-nineteenth century, Meshullam had come across an empty and desolate Artas brought to ruin by the wider political turbulence involving rebellion and the subsequent destruction of entire villages ordered by the Ottoman governor Ibrahim Pasha. This was followed by blood feuds with nearby Ta'amre Bedouins who had forced Artasians into exile (Qleibo 2014).

Meshullam paid the blood money to the Ta'amre in exchange for agricultural rights, which guaranteed Artasians an opportunity to return to their village (Naili 2011, 2012). Meshullam's involvement also attracted other colonial figures, including Louise Baldensperger's Alsatian-born father Henri, sent to Palestine as a missionary in 1848 (Naili 2008, 2012; Qleibo 2014). It was his deeply held belief that Divine providence had guided him 'to teach the people of Palestine better ways' (Baldensperger 1913: viii). In Artas, Baldensperger built a house in which Granqvist would lodge some 70 years later, with Henri's daughter Louise serving as her host.

This brief historical context stands in stark contrast with the Orientalist and ahistorical view of an 'Immovable East', establishing the complicated relationships weaving together local, regional, and international influences. One of the most striking ironies of this history is that, at the time of Granqvist's research, the Artasians owed much of their recent prosperity to Christian settlers, who used Artas as their base to directly support the Zionist project in Palestine.

Granqvist's presence and ethnographic work in Artas were thus linked to, and largely accepted because of, these complex historical

connections that had rendered villagers dependent on the European missionaries, to which Baldenspergers' continuing presence in the village was associated. In Granqvist's work, Louise's presence is strong, and she comes across as an interpreter between two distinct cultural cosmologies. This merited suspicion from Granqvist's academic opponents, who went as far as questioning whether Granqvist had collected her data independently. Whilst this was an intentionally harsh accusation meant to cast doubt on Granqvist's integrity, the colonial dynamics that shaped Artas' way of life and Granqvist's research are important to account for, since they allow us to place Granqvist's research within a broader context.

The political contextualising of Granqvist's research also challenges the narrative of a lone, heroic anthropologist. This highlights the broader need to de-exoticise ethnographic access and trust, and to recognise the role of privilege and power beyond body-political positionalities in shaping relationships with informants and in influencing research outcomes. Whilst Granqvist instantly recognised the importance of her unique positionality as a woman, judged by today's standards she did not sufficiently bring the political changes, colonial missionaries' influence on socio-material relations nor the regional dynamics (including the Bedouin influence) into the fore of her analysis. At times, she fell into an ahistoricism typical for her times as well as for, arguably, the emerging functionalist school (Moors 2006).

In Artas, the future loomed as prominently as the past. Despite her shortcomings as a political analyst, Granqvist quickly realised that her unique timing and researcher positionality enabled her to document a way of life on the brink of irrevocable change. She understood that the influx of Zionist immigrants would profoundly transform—and potentially

erase—the way of life she was observing (Häggman 2023). Motivated by this awareness and the pressing reality of her quickly depleting funding, Granqvist worked tirelessly to record every aspect of village life, as if anticipating that she might never return to the field. Her fears would be confirmed.

CONFLICTING RESPONSES

In the 2010s during my anthropology studies at the University of Helsinki—Granqvist's alma mater—I never encountered Granqvist's work despite focusing on Palestinian women in my Master's thesis. It was not until 2021 when the Finnish Institute on the Middle East and the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland digitised and made public a substantial portion of Granqvist's archives that I became aware of her work. This lack of awareness is not unique to me. In her biography of Granqvist, Sofia Häggman (2023) recounted first learning about Granqvist's research from a Palestinian colleague. Häggman's biography both reflected and greatly contributed to a recent revival of interest in Granqvist's work in the West.

In Palestine, Granqvist's work has been acknowledged throughout the decades. After 1967, it was granted new relevance when the Palestinian nationalist movement began highlighting culture—especially folklore—as important elements to Palestinian national identity and survival (Weir 1975; Abou-Hodeib 2021). Inspired by Granqvist's work, one of the relatives of Granqvist's interlocutors started a folklore museum in Artas and continued Granqvist's work cataloguing family lineages and the customs of the village (Abbas 2022). In fact, Palestinian ethnographers and researchers found value in her curations, and Granqvist knew many of them personally. They included 'the father of Palestinian ethnography' and the

leading figure of Palestinian ethnographers at the time, Tawfiq Canaan, who was influenced by Granqvist's ethnographic developments (Bourmaud 2012; Tamari 2009).

Granqvist's detailed accounts of marriage arrangements spanning a century and her lively descriptions of her informants have provided an indispensable record of a lifeworld already being disenfranchised by Zionist immigration and which suffered a major rupture following the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948. If in her native Finland Granqvist's research was out of place and out of time, in Palestine it was timely and well-positioned.

The happy and intellectually fulfilling time Granqvist spent in Palestine stood in stark contrast to the rejection she faced upon her return to Finland, a rejection that would come to define her life. Towards the end of her first fieldwork period in Palestine, Granqvist received a letter from her supervisor informing her that she would not be permitted to defend her thesis at the University of Helsinki. According to Professor Landtman, her work went against common research norms and failed to meet the criteria of a scientific monograph due to its narrow focus on a single location and its lack of theoretical elaboration, amongst other perceived shortcomings.

Denied the chance to defend her thesis in Helsinki, Granqvist turned to her long-time unofficial mentor, Professor Edvard Westermarck, whose sister was a friend of Granqvist's and had introduced them to one another. With Westermarck's influence, Granqvist was granted the opportunity to defend her dissertation at Åbo Akademi, where she became the first woman in Finland to earn a doctorate in sociology in 1932. Yet, her struggles were only beginning.

Granqvist continued to publish, with her monographs receiving praise in international

journals. For example, Evans-Pritchard (1937:20) wrote:

It is not easy to praise too highly Miss Granqvist's book. Her descriptive powers and use of texts are excellent. Her statistical material is well arranged. Her fieldwork methods have not been bettered by any anthropologist. In recording her material she brings out clearly the way in which formal rules and actual practice affect each other and the relations between individual behaviour and social structure.

In contrast to this elevating support from afar, Granqvist's application for a Docentship (Associate Professor) at the University of Helsinki was rejected after a gruelling, year-long review process. Her opponents criticised her lack of formal Arabic skills, invoking an Orientalist view that placed philology—and not much else—at the heart of understanding a culture (Lockman, cited in Juusola 2013). Granqvist argued in vain that her research was rooted in the social sciences rather than philology and that her colloquial Arabic skills were more than adequate for the nature of her research (Häggman 2023).

After the failure of her Docent application, Granqvist's professional prospects vanished. Her repeated attempts to secure funding for further ethnographic work in Palestine also proved unsuccessful, apart from a short visit in the late 1950s to Artas. By then, the village had entered a new era as a result of Israeli independence in 1948.

CHRISTIAN ZIONISM AND OTHER OBSTACLES

Many factors worked against Granqvist, some more obvious than others. As discussed above, her forward-thinking approach clashed with the Westermarck school's evolutionary theory and comparative methods at a time when

the functionalist school was already gaining dominance elsewhere.

Undoubtedly, being a woman in Finnish academia during the 1920s and 1930s posed significant challenges. The patriarchal values of the academy associated rationality, objectivity, dynamism, and intellectual creativity with men. Furthermore, research interests associated with the feminine and private sphere were, and often still are, afforded a lower status (and less funding) than those deemed public and political. These structures shaped the reception of Granqvist's inquiries into women's lives and childhood, much as they continue to constrain many researchers and research initiatives today.

Gender Studies and Childhood Studies, fields that would have been natural fits for Granqvist's research, only emerged in the late 1980s. Even then, these disciplines tended towards an ethnocentric focus. Middle Eastern Studies, another area relevant to Granqvist's inquiries, began to distance itself from the Orientalist tradition only after the Second World War. However, in many contexts—and particularly in Finland—the field continued to emphasise philological methods and classical eras over the study of contemporary societies (Juusola 2013). At the time, there was simply no academic home in Finland for the type of research in which Granqvist was immersed.

Additional factors mentioned as contributing to Granqvist's struggles as a researcher included Finland's political circumstances. Her studies and career were significantly delayed and disrupted by the Winter War and the Continuation War (Häggman 2023). Whilst her class background afforded her a degree of mobility and comfort, it did not provide the financial means to allow her to continue fieldwork in Palestine independently. After failing to secure a professional income,

Granqvist was forced to rely on financial support from her brother throughout her life.

Another factor thought to have contributed to the animosity toward Granqvist by some of her academic contemporaries related to the politicised language question in Finland. Granqvist was a Swedish speaker at a time when Fennomanian ideals—emphasising the importance of the Finnish language and culture—proliferated. Notably, one of her most influential opponents, Professor Tallqvist, was a Fennomanian. However, this explanation appears less credible given that Finnish academia at the time was predominantly Swedish speaking (see, however, Isotalo 2009, on the nationalist demands directed at the University of Helsinki in the 1930s).

Relatively little attention, however, has been paid to the role of religious-political currents and Christian Zionism in Granqvist's marginalisation. For much of the Western world, Palestine held a unique significance shaped by Judeo-Christian mythology. Within this framework, the presence of Palestinians—embodying a living, material, and cultural continuity in what was conceived as the Biblical Holy Land—was often regarded as, at best, an inconvenience. In numerous popular and scientific writings from that era, the perceived neglect of the Holy Land was frequently attributed to the Palestinian presence, leading to disappointment amongst European travellers (Stewart 2022).

As described above, the academic studies of Palestine during this period predominantly focused on its Biblical past, largely neglecting the socio-political realities of contemporary Palestine. Furthermore, for a newly established nation of Finland, small Israel acted not only as a religious but also a nationalist allegory of victory against an overwhelming enemy (Stewart

2022). Granqvist's work, with its emphasis on the lived experiences of Palestinians, directly challenged these entrenched perspectives, which were upheld by prominent figures such as her most ardent critic, theologian-archaeologist and Christian Zionist Professor Aapeli Saarisalo. Moreover, Granqvist was unreserved in articulating her views and was among the early scholars to openly criticise Zionist colonialism in Palestine. This placed her in direct conflict with the mainstream ideology regarding Israel and, by association, the popular religious-nationalist values of her time.

THEORY AND LIFE

Granqvist's archive at the Palestine Exploration Fund is substantial, but, in a manner typical of archives, it reveals as much about its subject through its form as it does through its content. In the archive, it becomes evident that Granqvist prepared for posterity. Not a single slip of paper, grammatical exercise in Arabic, unfinished manuscript, or piece of professional correspondence was discarded. It becomes painfully clear that the three-year period Granqvist spent in Artas defined the remainder of her life.

Granqvist continued publishing on her fieldwork in Artas throughout her life, and whilst her books garnered praise abroad, she did not receive wider recognition nor a position in Finnish academia. One of the cruel ironies of Granqvist's life was that the new generation of sociologists and anthropologists associated her with the outdated Westermarck school even though she had outright rejected Westermarck's evolutionary approach in her work (Suolinna 2000). For the emerging generation of anthropologists, her pioneering role in developing participant observation went equally unnoticed, with the title of 'the father

of modern ethnography' habitually credited to Malinowski alone.

Granqvist formulated the basics of her anthropological principles largely independently. After attending a talk in London by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, and a seminar by Malinowski and Firth in 1938, Granqvist contended that she had already formulated some of the key principles of the functionalist approach in *Marriage Conditions*, published in 1931. In *Birth and Childhood*, she offers insight into her theoretical formulations that so separated her from the comparative school of her superiors: 'It was impossible to study an isolated event, it had to be observed in all its relations, in its organic connections; and to study these in their mutual influences and reactions the society as a whole must be studied which is best done by an intensive study of a limited area' (Granqvist 1947: 11–12). These theoretical postulations emphasise the importance of a holistic study of a single organic unit aligning with functionalist principles. She admitted, 'There was much in the new school that attracted me' (Granqvist 1947: 15). Yet, she was always careful to avoid dogmatism and theoretical allegiances.

While her opponents were correct in pointing out that her work lacked the theoretical development of her findings, it is partly this very quality that has kept her work fresh over time. Whereas many works of the time are almost impossible to read today due to their condescending coloniality, Granqvist's work is astonishingly free of such tendencies. It would be interesting to know more about how Granqvist conceptualised her data, given that the theoretical frameworks available at the time did not resonate with her. In today's terms, we might say that Granqvist let the data speak for itself.

Although Granqvist was unsuccessful in securing additional funding for her research,

she continued to closely follow developments in Palestine. In the 1920s, she had witnessed the early effects of Zionist immigration to the region. During a brief visit in the late 1950s, she returned to Artas, which was now part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Right next to the village, a large refugee camp had been erected, housing thousands of Palestinians displaced in the 1948 *Nakba*. Today, the Dheisheh camp hosts almost 20 000 displaced Palestinians, who at the time of writing are again subjected to intensified Israeli raids and house demolitions. Upon her return to Finland, Granqvist attempted to publicly discuss these developments. However, the political climate was not receptive to accommodating a Palestinian perspective.

In this respect, little has changed over the past century, as evidenced by the ongoing silencing and increasing erasure of Palestinian voices and the marginalisation of academics who have criticised Israel's policies of ethnic cleansing and genocide against Palestinians.

Granqvist's work was, in many ways, ahead of its time. Her emphasis on the human responsibility inherent in cultural contact, for example, foreshadowed a holistic approach to research ethics that would become central to anthropology much later. Reading her work, it is easy to forget that, during her time, it was commonplace to use colonialist terminology such as 'primitive cultures' and 'savages'. The control of native populations was integral to colonial governance, and mainstream anthropology—with many other forms of academic knowledge production—was deeply complicit in these efforts.

From the outset, Granqvist strongly believed in studying people and phenomena within their own socio-historical contexts—a distinctly anthropological orientation that stood in sharp contrast to the dominant modes of

knowledge production on Palestine. In a social setting steeped in colonialism and Orientalism, Granqvist managed to portray cultural practices in a manner that was neither condescending nor exoticising. Instead, she went to great intellectual and epistemological lengths to 'avoid a strange European explanation' and placed paramount importance on documenting 'the people's own views and explanations' (Granqvist 1947: 27).

Although Granqvist stood outside the Biblical archaeological and Orientalist canon that underpinned epistemic colonialism, she was nevertheless a product of her era. Her initial research focus on Biblical women shaped her perspective, and she often drew parallels to Biblical narratives. However, these references were largely relegated to footnotes and framed within her broader ethos of avoiding what she termed 'the biblical danger' (Granqvist 1931: 9). This seeming contradiction can be interpreted as Granqvist attempting to provide historical continuity for her context instead of legitimising Judeo-Christian narratives, much in the same fashion as many Palestinian ethnographers did at the time, including the Palestinian Tawfiq Canaan (Bourmaud 2012).

Undisputably, Granqvist was an early pioneer of ethnographic methods and developed many theoretical insights largely independently of her contemporaries. In retrospect, however, she did not always fully theorise or articulate her most striking observations. She was primarily focused on her ethnographic material, excelling in the recording, cataloguing, and presentation of various forms of ethnographic data. However, her own voice as a researcher does not come across strongly, several factors of which likely contributed to this. The absence of any meaningful supervision or mentoring, combined with her exclusion from academic environments, discussions, and networks, undoubtedly played significant roles. Despite her determination

to follow her intuition, the rejection she encountered as a result of doing so led to a lack of self-confidence, further compounded by her experiences as a woman studying marginalised topics within a marginalised social setting.

CONCLUSIONS

In the early 1980s, there was a modest posthumous revival of interest in Hilma Granqvist's work following the publication of a book on her extensive photographic archive by Karen Seger (1981). These photographs provide a rare and intimate glimpse into the everyday lives of women and children in Artas. In this respect as well, Granqvist was ahead of her time, as one of the first to employ visual ethnography.

Highlighting Granqvist's trajectory and scholarly contributions now offers a critical lens through which it is possible to examine several aspects of the realities of knowledge production in history as well as today. Disciplinary gatekeeping alongside theoretical and methodological dogmatism deeply affect research in anthropology and other fields, limiting not only what can be known, but who is considered capable of knowing. Questions of positionality that extend beyond identity and body-political categories and which are rooted in the unequal material and epistemic power relations between people have become topical only recently through attempts to decolonise anthropology. The tensioned relationship between theorising and ethical engagement also finds an echo in Granqvist's method as well as in the critiques she received from her peers. Granqvist's case also points to questions of coloniality in knowledge production about 'the other', and how nationalist or otherwise politicised tendencies impact recognition, access, and, ultimately, funding.

In the Palestinian context, Granqvist's work provides tools to challenge the ongoing epistemicide in Palestine, underscoring the resilience and continuity of Palestinian heritage in the face of systematic erasure. A century ago, Granqvist accomplished the rarest and perhaps the most valuable of recognitions: that of her interlocutors.

Granqvist's digital archive can be found at <https://granqvist.sls.fi/sv/#/home>

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