

# INTRODUCTION

**Gil J. Stein**

The Oriental Institute's mission is to rediscover the ancient civilizations of the Near East through archaeological, textual, and art historical research, and to communicate the results of our work to both scholars and the broader public through our Museum and programs of education and outreach. This year's *Annual Report* highlights the impressive scope of activities by the faculty, researchers, and staff of the Oriental Institute in pursuit of those goals.

Research is at the core of what we do, and it is no easy task. Creativity, expertise, and energy are not enough. The work requires not only the right human and financial resources, but also a favorable economic/political climate both here in the United States and in the countries where we conduct our research. These hard truths make it all the more remarkable that the Oriental Institute's most extraordinary period of research activity actually took place in the depths of the Great Depression in the 1930s. It is a tribute to the vision of Oriental Institute founder James Henry Breasted and the strong, generous support of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., that the brilliant archaeologists and philologists of that era were able to make some of their greatest contributions.

Today, even in the midst of the most severe economic downturn in half a century, I am proud to say that my colleagues have been able to accomplish something very similar — the Oriental Institute has not only been able to maintain every one of its research projects, but we have actually expanded the range of our work with the implementation of two new excavation projects and important new work in both textual research and cultural heritage preservation. The ability to pursue our mission so actively and successfully under adverse conditions is due to the strong intellectual partnership between the Oriental Institute researchers and our many supporters, Members, and friends.

Our archaeological fieldwork continues to make fundamental contributions to the study of early civilizations in the Near East. In Egypt, Mark Lehner's work at Giza continues to revolutionize our understanding of the Old Kingdom state, while Nadine Moeller's excavations at Tell Edfu are giving us a detailed look at urbanism, provincial administration, and community structure in the Middle Kingdom period. In Turkey, two complementary projects are giving us a unique comparative perspective on Iron Age urbanism in the highlands and lowlands of Anatolia in the first millennium B.C. Scott Branting continues his investigations of the Phrygian mountaintop city of Kerkenes before its destruction by the armies of Cyrus the Great of Persia. At the boundary between the north Syrian plain and the Taurus Mountains, the Neubauer Expedition to Zincirli, directed by David Schloen, is making remarkable discoveries about urban organization and the religious beliefs of the Aramean and Neo-Assyrian inhabitants of ancient Sam'al. In Syria, Clemens Reichel's discoveries at Tell Hamoukar are redefining the perceived wisdom about the origins of cities and the beginnings of organized warfare in the Mesopotamian world. I am delighted to have started a second Oriental Institute project in Syria, at Tell Zeidan, where we are investigating the spread of social complexity from southern Mesopotamia into north Syria during the sixth-millennium B.C. Ubaid period. Finally, in June 2009 Oriental Institute Research Associate Yorke Rowan started a new archaeological fieldwork program at the site of Marj Rabba in Israel, aimed at exploring community organization and ritual in the fifth-millennium B.C. Chalcolithic period.

Textual research at the Oriental Institute has been extremely active and productive as well. Our Hittite Dictionary Project is making steady progress under the editorship of Theo van den Hout and Harry Hoffner, while the Demotic Dictionary is moving closer to completion through

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the efforts of Editor-in-Chief Jan Johnson. Under Martha Roth's leadership the last volume of the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary is in the final stages of the editorial process. In addition to the Dictionary projects, Oriental Institute text-based researchers are doing groundbreaking work in organizing and digitizing key archives from the ancient world, both to preserve these collections and to make them accessible to scholars around the world. Perhaps the most urgent and monumental of these endeavors is the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project, under the directorship of Matthew Stolper. Matt and his interdisciplinary team have been conserving the tablets, recording sophisticated digital images of the tablets and seal impressions, and have been developing a searchable Web-based relational database of this unique and priceless archive of records from the Achaemenid royal administration at Persepolis. A second key archival effort is the Syriac Manuscript Project, directed by Oriental Institute Research Associates Stuart Creason and Abdul-Masih Saadi. This project is making digital images and cataloging the Professor Arthur Vööbus Collection of Syriac Manuscripts on Film, an archive of more than 100,000 photographs of Syriac Aramaic manuscripts from monasteries and churches across the Near East. Finally, in this past year François Gaudard and his colleagues from the Centro de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales in Madrid have launched a new project to establish a database of all known ancient Egyptian mummy labels in the holdings of museums around the world, including the Oriental Institute. The Mummy Label Database is a wonderful example of the way that Web-based databases can bring together information about a widely scattered set of artifacts and in doing so create a powerful research tool for Egyptology.

Under the directorship of Ray Johnson, Chicago House and the Epigraphic Survey have continued in their painstaking work of recording the reliefs and inscriptions at Medinet Habu, while stabilizing temple walls at Luxor, reconstructing fragmentary reliefs and reinserting them in their original positions, and ensuring the preservation and storage of the many architectural and small relief fragments on long, low "mastaba" platforms to keep them from groundwater damage. The Epigraphic Survey has also published a major volume, Oriental Institute Publications 136, *Medinet Habu IX: The Eighteenth Dynasty Temple, Part I: The Inner Sanctuaries*.

In February, our Museum mounted a highly successful special exhibit, *The Life of Meresamun: A Temple Singer in Ancient Egypt*, which displays our beautiful mummy Meresamun while providing a rare and fascinating glimpse of Meresamun as an individual. I am proud to say that Meresamun has her own page on the social networking Web site Facebook, where she has more than 1,400 "friends!"

Finally, one of our major new education and outreach initiatives in the past year has been the opening of the Kipper Family Archaeology Discovery Center at the Oriental Institute. This innovative installation allows school children (and adventurous adults) to learn how to excavate an ancient Near Eastern "tel" or mound. The response from school groups has been overwhelmingly positive, and we look forward to developing this resource further in the coming year.

Overall then, in 2008–2009, the Oriental Institute has added two new excavations, new archival research projects, and new programs of outreach to the public, while our numerous existing projects continue in their fundamental work of discovery. I want to thank all the members of the Oriental Institute's community of scholars, staff, and supporters for the role they have played in this remarkable achievement.

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