

FACING ARMAGEDDON

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As a graduate student in Near Eastern archaeology, I have spent my last five years at the Oriental Institute trying piece together stories of the past. Out in the field, as our teams dig into the ground, we work backwards through time. Sifting through layer upon layer of earth, we uncover clues in the form of a type of burial practice, an animal bone, a stamp seal, or a metal working technology. It is when all of these pieces are brought together that we are able to paint a picture of a culture — how it lived, what it valued, how it came to disappear. Sometimes a written artifact such as a tablet or inscribed pot sherd will appear, and the principal actors of our story can be given names or assigned to a particular point in time.

In these past months I have found that the art of creating a museum exhibit essentially turns this entire archaeological



Zoomorphic vessel.
Megiddo, Stratum VI.
Iron I (1200–975 BC).
OIM A20637. OIP
127, pl. 22:8

process upside down. Curators first identify the story to be told and then seek out artifacts to express it. The process sounds simple enough, but how do curators decide what part of the story to tell? How do they weigh the things that are important to a modern audience against what may have been fundamental to an ancient population? Their eyes may seek out the exquisite gold jewelry found within a queen's burial, but were these items really relevant to more than just a small part of a once complex and dynamic culture?

I will never forget the lesson that my eleventh grade ancient history teacher Mr. Wood taught me — just remember that one day in the distant future, archaeologists may dig up the remains of Disney World and be convinced that ancient Americans worshipped a pantheon of anthropomorphic animal gods, headed by a large mouse whose temple city they made pilgrimages to during a ritualistic period known as “spring break.”

Residing within the Oriental Institute Museum store-rooms are the remains of eight millennia of human activity from the site of Megiddo, a large settlement mound located in Israel's Jezreel Valley. Not only were the Oriental Institute excavations at Megiddo among the largest and most comprehensive ever to have been conducted in Israel, but the site itself carries tremendous religious importance as well. According to the Bible, Megiddo was an important administrative center in the biblical period and will be the site of the penultimate battle between good and evil described in the New Testament Book of Revelation — the battle of Armageddon, named after Megiddo itself. With these daunting facts in mind, my major concern was how to select the pages of the story to emphasize in the small amount of space that a handful of museum cases affords.

Early in the developmental stages of the East Gallery project, Professor Timothy Harrison of the University of Toronto (and formerly a student of Prof. Douglas Esse at the University of Chicago) served as a design consultant to the project. As a scholar who has worked extensively with the Megiddo materials, Prof. Harrison identified several areas in which Megiddo can serve as both a model for major cultural trends of the past, as well as a key to unlocking the legacy of ancient Israel as it impacts us today. As one of the most extensively excavated sites in modern Israel, Megiddo can serve as a teaching tool to demonstrate how archaeologists excavate a mound and use the tool of stratigraphy. Located on the vital land corridor connecting Egypt with Syria, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia, Megiddo is an excellent place to examine the movement of goods and ideas during the great age of internationalism, the Amarna period of the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BC). Finally, as an important biblical center, Megiddo can demonstrate features of ancient Israelite religion and its origins, the nature of the royal Israelite court, and the continuing impact of ancient Israelite religion upon the present day.

With the elements of the story decided, the most heartbreaking of all tasks next came into play — the final culling of objects to the pieces that would appear in the exhibit. As a graduate student, to be allowed free reign to explore the collection of one of the biggest and most important excavations ever conducted in Israel was an incredible opportunity.

How could anyone not enjoy rooting through box after box of scarabs, shelves of gold jewelry and bronze weapons, and virtually every textbook religious object and piece of pottery ever excavated in the region? Time and again though, I was forced to weigh my personal and academic interest in a piece with how well it contributed to the exhibit's story (and how it would conform with the limited dimensions of an exhibit case).

This past June, I spent several weeks in the Jordan Valley of Israel conducting research for my dissertation. On my return trip to Tel Aviv, I decided to pull over for a stop at Megiddo. Archaeologists develop a connection with a site that they have had a hand in excavating — an intimate awareness of the soil, the contours, the range of artifacts, and the surrounding landscape. After the months of “excavating” in museum storage, crafting the language that would accompany the objects, and pondering the story of Megiddo and its place in the broader history of the southern Levant, I felt that connection at Megiddo even though I have never personally put my trowel in its soil.



Offering Stand.
Megiddo, Stratum VI.
Iron I (1200–975 BC).
P 6055. OIP 127, pl. 22:2