The field of landscape archaeology — which studies how humans shape their environments, and how the environment shapes human habitation and culture — was pioneered at the OI, with major contributions beginning in the 1930s. Already at the time of the OI’s founding, James Henry Breasted recognized the importance of aerial photography in archaeology. During his 1919–20 expedition to the Middle East, Breasted requested and received permission to take his own photos over the Giza plateau from a Royal Air Force plane. He wrote of this experience in a letter to his wife Frances, dated January 15, 1920:

“We rose rapidly and headed directly westward across the southern apex of the Delta. Then the full splendor of it all broke upon me, and it was thrilling beyond all words to express. Five thousand feet below spread the green carpet of the Delta with the misty wilderness of the desert stretching for a hundred miles on east and west.... Before I knew it we were sailing over the margin of the desert at the western edge of the Delta, and I was looking obliquely down on the ruined pyramid of Aburoash.... I had the camera all ready for the first shot, and when I lifted it above the edge of the car the blast flattened the bellows and drove them into the field of the picture. Do what I would I could not prevent it, and I had to make the exposure anyhow, with much of the view cut off by the intruding bellows. Then the five miles from Aburoash to Gizeh were passed in less than as many minutes and we hovered over the Great Pyramid. I suppose I am the first archaeologist who has ever opened a camera on the pyramid from a point where all four sides could be seen at once....”

Unfortunately, the adventure resulted in few usable images, with many obscured by the struts of the plan or the shadow of the camera’s bellows, yet it nevertheless paved the way for over a century of pursuits and endeavors made by OI archaeologists in the field of aerial photography and landscape archaeology.