MUSEUM
EXPLORER’S
GUIDE

ORIENTAL INSTITUTE
MUSEUM

100 YEARS
Have you ever wondered how humans started living together? How did people build cities and empires? How did they understand the world and their place in it? How did they work, live, and play together, and why did they fight?

The Oriental Institute (OI) Museum of the University of Chicago holds over 350,000 artifacts, excavated mainly by OI archaeologists. In these artifacts from thousands of years ago, you might see a few things that remind you of your own life. Use this guide to explore our galleries, and learn more about the first civilizations and how they relate to us today.

**WHO ARE ARCHAEOLOGISTS?**

Archaeologists are scientists who study people of the past using artifacts, written languages, and the environment. Lots of archaeologists work in this building!

**WHAT’S AN ARTIFACT?**

An artifact is anything made, modified, or used by a human. The Museum is full of them!
At around 3200 BC, there’s a lot to keep track of in Mesopotamia’s cities! Goods are being bought and sold, people are working and need to be paid, and workers need to be organized. People started using pictures to communicate and keep track of things. They wrote in wet clay using a stylus cut from a reed, creating triangle-shaped marks. We call this writing cuneiform, meaning “wedge-shaped.”

Drawing all these pictures took a long time (and some talent!). What do you see happening to cuneiform writing over time?

They also had to write down abstract ideas—like “life,” “write,” or “belief”—that are difficult to show with a symbol. Luckily, many words in Sumerian sound the same! So, they could use the symbol of a word that is easy to picture to also mean another more abstract word that sounds the same. This is called the rebus principle.

The more people wrote, the more they wanted to say! They combined symbols to show more complex ideas, like eating or getting paid in grain:

**Find examples of early writing in the writing area.**

- What did people first write down?
- When were letters, histories, and poetry first written? Can you guess why?
- What types of things do you like to write?

**Why do the symbol for “bread” look like a bowl?**

The symbol for bread came from the symbol for rations. Check out the nearby bevel-rimmed bowl, which may have been used to pass out grain as payment to workers.

**What kind of crown is that?**
The lamassu wears a cylinder-shaped crown decorated with rosettes (flowers), feathers, and three pairs of horns. Horned crowns were only worn by divine beings in Mesopotamia. The more horns, the more powerful—making our lamassu a mighty gatekeeper.

**How many legs can you count?**
From the side, the lamassu looks like it’s walking, but from the front, it looks like it’s standing still. To achieve both looks, the lamassu has five legs!
King Tut ruled from age nine or ten until his death at age eighteen. How did he have a beard? He didn’t! Look closely at this statue and you can see that this beard is shown strapped to Tut’s chin. Pharaohs wore false beards to imitate Osiris, the god of the afterlife. Even female pharaohs, such as Hatshepsut, were shown with false beards.

What is King Tut holding? This remains a mystery. Some believe that King Tut is holding the base of a crook and flail, symbols of kingship, or two scrolls, or rolls of cloth. Others believe that the cylinders are ways to show empty space while preventing the hands from breaking, similar to the strips of stone behind Tut’s beard and behind his left leg.

Whose small feet are these? These feet belonged to a statue of King Tut’s wife, Ankhesenamun (ANK-es-en-AH-mun), which was lost in ancient times. Tut’s wife is shown smaller than he because this statue was made for Tut’s temple. Since Tut was the most important person at his own temple, he was shown much larger than his wife. Her small size is no slight, though—that she is shown with Tut indicates that she was still important.

The cobra on King Tut’s crown is called a uraeus [yoo-RAY-us]. It was a symbol of protection and royal power.

Hieroglyphs were only one of the writing systems used in ancient Egypt! Hieratic, Demotic, and Coptic were all used at various times for everyday writing, while hieroglyphs were used for monumental inscriptions—important and permanent carvings and paintings found in tombs, temples, and palaces.

Ancient Egyptians called hieroglyphs “the god’s words” and believed that the writing had been given to them by the god of wisdom, Thoth. Egyptians believed that things written in hieroglyphs would be magically made to happen over and over again.

Because hieroglyphs are pictures, they could be written right-to-left, left-to-right, and top-to-bottom (but never bottom-to-top!). They were arranged to be beautiful, not easy to read. Symbols would also be rearranged to put the gods’ names at the top of an inscription. Hieroglyphs symbolized both sounds and ideas, and included only consonants.

This statue was restored when it was brought to the OI almost one hundred years ago, meaning that things that were broken or missing were put back together to look like what we know or think they would have looked like in ancient Egypt. Today, museums don’t usually restore objects in this way. How would your experience of this statue change if it were left unrestored? Do you think we should restore ancient objects or leave them how they were found?
**WHAT ARE ANATOLIAN HIEROGLYPHS?**

Anatolian hieroglyphs are a type of writing that was created in ancient Turkey. These hieroglyphs began as pictographic symbols, where a picture represented a specific word.

In the sixteenth century BC, the hieroglyphs evolved to include phonetization (fo-NET-ta-ZAY-shun), where pictures could also represent sounds, similar to the English alphabet. These sounds were based on Luwian and Hittite languages.

These hieroglyphs were often used for monumental inscriptions, and they were read throughout Anatolia. Worshippers and travelers, not just the upper classes, could see and read many of the signs.

**USE THE “WRITING IN SYRO-ANATOLIA” EXHIBIT TO FIND FAMILIAR SIGNS IN THIS FRAGMENT OF A THRONE.**

- Can you find one tall triangle (city) or two tall triangles (country)?
- Look for body parts. Can you find hands and feet, or a hand holding a dagger (strong)?
- Look for other familiar symbols. What might they represent? Can you find anything in the gallery that looks like these symbols?

**FROM THE DAWN OF CIVILIZATION TO THE END OF IT. MEGIDDO IS FAMOUS FOR BOTH.**

Megiddo is an ancient site in Israel where people lived for thousands of years. It’s legendary for its eight millennia of human activity and for being the site of the next-to-last battle between good and evil known as Armageddon. (Armageddon is the Greek name for Megiddo.) Over time, people built on the ruins left behind by previous groups, forming a man-made hill that archaeologists call a tell. When archaeologists excavate a tell, they look at the site’s stratigraphy—all the different layers of stuff left behind. Each layer shows a different part of the history of this site.

By studying the stratigraphy of a site, archaeologists can look at how things changed over time.

Megiddo is famous for both. From the dawn of civilization to the end of it.

**STRATIGRAPHY OF MEGIDDO**

**FUTURE?**

**TODAY?**

**IRON AGE LAMP**

**LATE BRONZE AGE LAMP**

**MIDDLE BRONZE AGE LAMP**

**EARLY BRONZE AGE LAMP**

**WHAT IS A CLAY LAMP, ANYWAY?**

Clay lamps were used for light. The basin was filled with oil, and a wick was laid in the oil with one end on the spout. The wick was lit like a candle.
Persepolis was a great city of the mighty Achaemenid Persian empire, the largest empire ever to exist at that time, over 2,500 years ago. Despite its military and political power, the architecture of the palaces and halls at Persepolis emphasized the welcoming, inclusive nature of the empire. Many of the artistic details show the empire’s respect for the cultural diversity of its peoples.

Persepolis was famously sacked and burned by Alexander the Great in 330 BC, but many monuments, like this column with double-bull capital, were preserved.

Many of the columns at Persepolis were topped by capitals that included bull protomes (the front halves of the bulls). This type of double-protome capital is typical of Achaemenid architecture.

The flower-like capital of palm fronds and leaves was inspired by Egyptian art.

The missing horns and ears may have been made of gilded wood or solid gold. This flat space would have held a massive wooden roof beam. While the column stands just under 3 m today, the real column would have been 16.5–19.5 m tall (that’s at least three of our King Tut statues stacked on top of each other!).

The fluted column was made in a Greek Ionian style.

Many groups of people lived in ancient Nubia, first bringing pottery to the area and living as hunters and herdsmen, then becoming farmers and famous archers. They traded with, lived with, and sometimes ruled their neighbors to the north— the Egyptians—and created beautiful pottery and other goods, many decorated with patterns and animals.

This feline creature is from an artifact famous for showing an early relationship between Nubia and Egypt.

This crocodile adorned an important warrior’s possession.

This cow and calf may have symbolized the power of someone who had passed away.

These cartoonish creatures can be found on playfully decorated Meroitic pottery.

Find this cow among many others on a beautifully decorated bowl.

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What styles and animals would you include in your palace? Draw your own double protome capital above.

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MUSEUM INFORMATION

MUSEUM AND GIFT SHOP HOURS
Tue, Thur–Sun: 10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m.
Wed: 10:00 a.m.–8:00 p.m.
Mon: Closed

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DISCOVER OUR COLLECTIVE IDENTITY
Understand the origin story of our lives as humans together through programs, events, tours, workshops, and education courses.
oi.uchicago.edu/programs


How many fifth graders would it take to weigh as much as the lamassu? (Around 1,066 of them!)