

IN MEMORIAM

Erica Reiner, 1924–2005

Professor Erica Reiner, an Oriental Institute scholar whose work revolutionized the study of the world's oldest written languages, died Saturday, December 31, 2005. She was 81.

Erica was the John A. Wilson Distinguished Service Professor Emerita and Editor of the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary. Her work on the project began in 1952, when she joined the University as a research assistant. From 1973 to 1996 she was Editor in Charge of the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of Erica Reiner's contributions to the understanding of the ancient Near East. Erica combined a tough-minded commitment to intellectual excellence with a dry wit, charm, and a deep love of art, music, and literature. Erica's passion for her work was legendary. She was someone who expected the very highest standards of scholarly rigor both in her own work and in the efforts of others. Even in retirement, she continued to play a key role assisting Martha Roth, the current Editor in Charge of the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, in writing, reviewing, and editing entries for the final volumes. Erica's intellectual engagement and her involvement in scholarship lasted up until the final months of her life.

Erica succeeded in securing National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) funding for the dictionary in 1976, support that continued for nearly thirty years, making it one of the highest and longest funded projects of the NEH. She explained the importance of the dictionary in testimony at a meeting of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1989:

The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary is not only the first comprehensive dictionary of Akkadian, also called Assyro-Babylonian language, it is at the same time an encyclopedic work encompassing the records of a past civilization, and thereby serves as a tool for research in a wide spectrum of humanistic disciplines. The records of this civilization were deciphered barely more than 100 years ago, and their relevance to our contemporary values becomes increasingly apparent as we interpret, and through the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary make them available to colleagues who work in the fields of history of religion, literature, the arts, and retrace the history of moral and philosophical value.

Erica published *Your Thwarts in Pieces, Your Mooring Rope Cut: Poetry from Babylonia and Assyria*, a collection of essays in 1985. Her insights in the book raised the standards expected of scholars working in Babylonian and Assyrian literature beyond translation to incorporating the best of literary criticism.

Scholars in the field consider her greatest contributions to be to the study of Babylonian history of science, including medicine and especially astronomy. She and the late David Pingree of Brown University published four volumes of *Babylonian Planetary Omens*. The author of numerous articles, Erica also wrote *Astral Magic in Babylonia* (1995), which traced the origins



Erica Reiner

IN MEMORIAM

of Greek science and medicine in the Babylonian scholars' observations of their world. The book examined Babylonian magical practices that made use of plants, stones, and other ingredients, and also tried to secure the powers of the celestial bodies for their purposes.

Erica was also one of the few people in the world proficient in the ancient language of Elamite, and she published a grammar of the language in 1969. "Elamite is written in cuneiform but completely unrelated to Sumerian or Akkadian, and it was and is far less completely understood," said Matthew Stolper, the John A. Wilson Professor at the Oriental Institute. He said her grammar on Elamite established her as a central authority in the field.

Erica completed her undergraduate degree in linguistics at the University of Budapest in 1948. After studying Elamite, Sumerian, and Akkadian in Paris at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, she came to Chicago in 1952. She received her Ph.D. in 1955 and joined the faculty in 1956, after serving as a Research Associate. A manuscript for the Assyrian dictionary had not yet been drafted, although there had been three decades of planning and preparation.

"It took an extraordinary confluence of great scholars, led by A. Leo Oppenheim, to finally bring the vision to reality," Roth said. "Reiner and Oppenheim were a magical duo, working together to inspire and lead the team that produced the first volume in 1956."

When Oppenheim retired in 1973, Erica took over the dictionary until her own retirement in 1996. "She provided the unifying vision and intellectual rigor to see this project through. It is impossible to envision the field of Assyriology, or more broadly, of ancient Near Eastern studies without the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, and it is impossible to envision the dictionary without Erica," Roth said. Erica had a hand in the development of each of the twenty-three volumes.

Dozens of Erica's students have gone on to be leading professors in the field in the United States as well as around the world. Many of those scholars returned to Chicago last July for the fifty-first *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, hosted by the Oriental Institute. Erica helped organize the first *Rencontre* in Paris and attended many of the subsequent annual meetings. "It was right after the war, and we wanted to renew scholarly contact that had been broken because of the war," she said last summer. "From the very beginning, we wanted to include students. The enthusiasm we had when we started the organization is still very much in evidence when we get together." She said she looked forward to having so many friends coming back. "We knew them when they were young scholars, and now they have become distinguished faculty members, and some of them have even retired."

Erica was a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the recipient of honor-doctorates from the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Leiden.

A memorial service was held on Monday, May 1, at Rockefeller Chapel.
