The Oriental Institute

Individual Research

In June the Oriental Institute received the complete Mendes archives, which holds the documentation of several excavation seasons from the 1960s and 1970s directed by Donald P. Hansen, Karen Wilson, and Bernard Bothmer. The preparation of a final publication will be part of Moeller’s research projects for the next three years. The material provides important information on early settlement remains dating to the First Intermediate Period as well as an underlying Old Kingdom cemetery. Since archaeological data of these periods are still pretty scarce, the publication will be an important contribution for the understanding of settlements in the Delta region and thus complement the records available from Upper Egyptian sites.

Additionally, Nadine has finished an article with the title “A New Royal Name Sealing from Tell Edfu,” which has been accepted for publication by the Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde. Moeller is currently preparing the manuscript for the first volume of the Tell Edfu Reports, which includes the results from the 2001–2004 survey of the site as well as various chapters dealing with the history of excavations, the objectives then and now, and the wall remains of the buildings above the silo area.

In March Moeller gave an Oriental Institute Members’ Lecture in Washington, D.C., on the latest results of the 2008 season at Tell Edfu; the lecture was well received and the newly appointed Egyptian Ambassador and his wife were among the audience members. She has also recently been invited to the Global Creative Workshop taking place in London, July 13–14, which has been organized by Lord Cultural Resources for the newly planned Museum of the March of Man at Abu Dhabi.

Seth Richardson

This was a year of many conference papers and much behind-the-scenes work for Seth Richardson. Pushing forward toward completion of his monograph on the end of the Old Babylonian period, he completed a database of almost 14,000 personal names from published and unpublished texts, polished off the last of ninety-five copies of tablets from the period, and finished archival, prosopographic, and thematic studies critical to writing a history of the decline of this seventeenth-century state. Two longish notes emerged during the year. First was a re-analysis of a New Kingdom Egyptian wooden “furniture attachment” as part of the base for an enthroned divine image (for James Romano’s memorial volume). The second was the publication of data supporting substantial and functioning temple estates at the old Sumerian city of Lagaš well into the Old Babylonian period, still in control of over 40 sq. km of productive land centuries after their last-attested moment of political dominance (for Marcel Sigrist’s festschrift). Meantime, he enjoyed three weeks writing at a summer house in Maine and managed to climb every mountain in Acadia National Park while he was at it.

On the conference circuit, in November Seth spoke at the Boston meeting of the American Schools of Oriental Research on harmonies between ancient state collapse studies and modern political science work on “failed states,” borderlands, non-state actors, and the ideological failures of “disenchanted communities.” In March he participated in the highly successful two-day Oriental Institute Seminar on divination, delivering a paper he has been writing and revising over almost eight years, to appear in the published conference proceedings as “On Seeing and Believing.” A week later, Seth was in Albuquerque at the American Oriental Society meeting to talk about the last vestiges of Old Assyrian trade in Babylonia. There was also time for a side
trip out to the desert with pals Steve Garfinkle, Alhena Gadotti, Alexandra Kleinerman, and Lance Allred: an effervescent cocktail of mesas, chaparral, Indian fry bread, and Ur III shop talk.

In May, Seth flew to Seattle and drove up to Vancouver, B.C., with Garfinkle to deliver a paper at the annual meeting of the Association of Ancient Historians. The paper there was “Ex Oriente flux: Problems and Preconditions in Transmission,” a discussion of theoretical and methodological problems in positing the diffusion of “Oriental wisdom” to Greece in the mid-first millennium B.C. These points were reinforced on the Greek side by a very sympathetic lecture from Kurt Raaflaub — a very enjoyable conference. Back in Chicago, Seth also delivered two public lectures in October. The first was on the image of the Tower of Babylon in historical imagination, as part of a Chicago Humanities Festival panel (fig. 1). The other addressed the role of divine idols in Mesopotamian society called “Idols without Anxiety” in conjunction with the exhibition entitled Idol Anxiety at the Smart Museum of Art. His most demanding audience all year, though, without doubt, was his son Benjamin’s first-grade class, which came for a tour of the Oriental Institute Museum galleries in June.

Seth looks forward to a year in which he will conclude his work on Old Babylonian state collapse and liver divination, as well as articles on ancient state competition and the role of geography; on rebellion in the ancient Near East; on a “new” military history of Mesopotamia; and a number of smaller projects.

Figure 1. Seth Richardson at the Chicago Humanities Festival

Robert K. Ritner

Robert K. Ritner was the annual Invited Professor in “Sciences Religieuses,” for the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris. In the month of May, he delivered eight hours of lectures at the Sorbonne and (due to university strikes) at the private Institut Khéops. His topics included “Heka: The Origin and Nature of Magic,” “Curses and Love Charms,” “Implements of Magic,” “New Approaches to Magical Literature,” and a final discussion of “Medicine and Demons.” The first lecture treated issues of varying creation myths, the significance of the term “god” in ancient Egypt, trinities and the issues of polytheism, monotheism, and pantheism, the appearance of Heka, god of Magic, as well as the role of magic in theology, iconography, architecture, and script. The significance of domination magic served as the basis of the talk on curses, exorcism magic, and “love” and separation rites. Implements of magic included serpent wands and snake charming, magical knives used to draw defensive perimeters, Bes images and Horus stelae against animal and reptile bites, and the Egyptian origin of the “Hermes” caduceus symbol in modern American medicine. New magical literature surveyed Ritner’s forthcoming publications.