OCHRE DATA SERVICE

Sandra Schloen

View from the Top

As a software developer and database consultant, it is all too easy to get bogged down in details of syntax and code, fields and values, and lose sight of the big picture. I am sure this is true for archaeologists and philologists too who must deal with the minutiae in their respective fields of study before getting to theories and ideas with grander and more far-reaching themes.

But standing on the site of Tell Keisan, Israel, with David Schloen who is starting up a new excavation there, I admired the view from the top, looking over fertile fields of peppers, cabbages, sunflowers, and fruit trees, and dry fields studded with grazing cattle and sheep. As we traveled to visit other colleagues and sites, I have also admired the view from the top of Tel Shimron, looking out on the territories of the kings of northern Canaan, once purportedly conquered by Joshua (Joshua 11:1ff.); the view from the top of Abel Beth Maacah, looking towards the hills of Lebanon to the west and Syria to the east (not to mention the view of the impressive Canada Center sports complex with its unexpected ice rink in the nearby town Metulla); the view from the top of Tell es-Safi, the site of ancient Gath of the

David and Sandra Schloen standing on the site of Tell Keisan, Israel, a new Oriental Institute excavation

Philistines, high above the Elah Valley where Goliath met his match, or rather, his demise; the view from Mount Scopus looking down over the shining city of Jerusalem below; the view from the top at Masada, looking east over Jordan through the haze of the evaporating water of the Dead Sea. The view from the top inspires me not to lose sight of the broader research goals as we do the detailed work of the OCHRE Data Service.

One of our recent projects requiring detailed work of mind-boggling proportions was patiently moved along by research data specialist and philologist Miller Prosser of the OCHRE Data Service (NELC Ph.D. 2010) and expanded on work begun by our colleague Edward Stratford (NELC Ph.D. 2010, now teaching at Brigham Young University). This involved articulating the generally accepted cuneiform sign list in a digital format so that it can be referenced by digitized texts, linking these texts sign-by-sign to the relevant signs in this complex ancient script. Prosser has captured phonograms, logograms, synonyms, determinatives, and numbers so that they can be referenced by any of our OCHRE projects that analyze archives in Elamite, Akkadian, Old Assyrian, Sumerian, Ugaritic, or any other ancient language written using this script. This work will enhance the study of these archives and form the basis for broader investigations into the societies described therein.

Archaeological data is just as detail-oriented as philological data. Former University of Chicago student Nicole Herzog (M.A. 2014), along with summer interns Jack Hallam and Robert Schloen, put in many tedious hours tracing excavation top plans and georeferenced aerial photos stone by stone, painstakingly outlining every wall, floor, or other architectural feature of the archaeological record from the site of Zincirli, Turkey. OCHRE incorporates this georeferenced data into the project database in such a way that every archaeological artifact or architectural feature knows where to draw itself on a map. OCHRE also integrates the mapping data with everything else that is known about these archaeological items. The spatial awareness of the database items, combined with their other descriptive qualities, greatly enhances the analytical capabilities of the database environment, and allows for features like interactive, query-based, map views of excavation areas.

Whether developed sign by sign or stone by stone or through a variety of other input methods, the more than 3.2 million database items from over two dozen research projects organized within OCHRE constitute a comprehensive dataset primed for further study and interpretation. As project directors gain insights and draw conclusions from their data, our task becomes one of assisting in the digital publication of project results. To this end we plan to be focusing more in the year ahead on the presentation of project overviews, scholarly syntheses, and interpretations, well-informed by rich data underpinnings, where a community of scholars, students, and other connoisseurs of the ancient world can gain fresh perspectives and admire innovative, integrative, interactive, and informative views of the past.

For a more detailed view of the work and projects of the OCHRE Data Service, please visit us at http://ochre.uchicago.edu.

————————————