

ORIENTAL INSTITUTE ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

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Introduction

Research institutions like the Oriental Institute depend on collecting, assembling, and extracting meaning from data. Network computing and the vast array of electronic resources available worldwide via the Internet are becoming an important component in ancient Near Eastern studies. As a result of the introduction of the desktop personal computer just over a decade ago, the ways in which scholars practice their crafts have changed radically. Over the next few years we will witness the explosive growth and expansion of network computing, as both individual users and the entire university community expand their reach beyond the traditional boundaries of desktop, office, building, and campus. It is our belief that these media will be of fundamental importance for the development of the study of the ancient Near East.

This new component of the annual report will focus on the Electronic Resources that the Oriental Institute makes available to scholars and the general public via the Internet, and how these new technologies are helping to maintain the Institute in the forefront of ancient Near Eastern studies. Briefly stated, these emerging tools will allow Institute scholars

- to communicate both formally and informally with an increasing variety of colleagues and public audiences,
- to acquire and filter the ever-increasing amounts of relevant electronic data that are available worldwide, and
- to publish and further disseminate the work of the faculty, research projects, and the collections of the Oriental Institute Museum, in new and interesting ways.

During the past two years Charles E. Jones, Research Archivist, and John Sanders, Head of the Computer Laboratory, have collaborated in the development of three Internet gateways to the Oriental Institute. During 1994/95 the Oriental Institute's presence on the Internet was both firmly established and very well received by the scholarly community and the public at large. The three Internet gateways described below are now providing Institute faculty and staff with their first glimpses of a research environment that is worldwide in scope, with almost instantaneous access on demand to computer databases of text, graphics, and video imaging.

Internet Gateways

Oriental Institute World-Wide Web Database

The World-Wide Web (WWW) is an international network of computer file servers and databases on the Internet that allows users at any personal computer connected to the Internet, either directly or by modem, to request information from any web server. It is the potential for easy computer access to a virtually unlimited number of database sources worldwide using "browser" (or viewing) software such as Mosaic and Netscape that is primarily responsible for the current movement toward electronic scholarship at universities and academic institutions around the world. The World-Wide Web uses a hypertext computer interface to put textual and graphic information, regardless of the type of original source, into a convenient and easy to use electronic format and provides users with indexed query capability for on-line database access and filtering of worldwide Internet resources.

Our World-Wide Web file server, which started operations on an Institute Macintosh computer in November 1994 (after seven months of operations on the university's Department of Computer Science's Macintosh Laboratory server), has grown steadily since its debut to its current average of 13,000+ "hits" (or requests for files) and 2,400+ different computer connections weekly. People connect to our server around the clock, twenty-four hours a day, from an average of twenty-five countries per week, in order to read various text documents and look at the drawings and photographs available in our database that describe past and present research projects of the Oriental Institute.

The Institute's World-Wide Web database has several components and is composed of information obtained from a number of different sources. The part of the database entitled *Highlights from the Collection* contains registration and descrip-

tive information and digital images for sixty-five artifacts from the public displays of the Oriental Institute Museum. These artifacts represent a cross-section of the cultural regions and historical periods contained in the Museum's entire collection. Another section of the database includes the entries in the annual report dating back to 1991 for the Museum, research projects, and the individual scholarship of faculty and staff members.

The database also includes previously published articles by Institute faculty that will reach a wider audience now as electronic publications available via the Internet. The most recent addition to the database is a series of black and white photographs from the Museum's Photographic Archives, highlighting the 1905–1906 Expedition to Egypt and Nubia by James Henry Breasted and the Diyala Expeditions in Iraq and the Persepolis Expeditions in Iran during the 1930s.

One of the bigger challenges for users of the World-Wide Web is information overload. Filtering and intelligently selecting electronic information on the Internet that is meaningful to a researcher's objectives will likely develop into a computing specialty, a business in its own right. Such software is already beginning to appear on the market in first generation form, and more advanced filter programs and other types of data screening utilities will become available for a wide variety of text, image, and video formats.

The Abzu component of the Institute's World-Wide Web database is the first electronic-only publication of the Oriental Institute. It provides an up-to-date index of ancient Near Eastern resources on the Internet and is an excellent filtering tool that is available now for scholars and the public. Even a cursory examination of the resources accessible through the Abzu indices shows an extraordinary range of publications. Some of these are on-line analogs of existing print publications, others are original contributions to scholarship, unavailable in nonelectronic forms. Virtually all of them offer tools for manipulating their data which could never be offered in paper-based publications. We have no doubt that publications issued in this form will soon be a fundamental part of the curriculum materials used in teaching on every level. In the context of a research institute, we believe that the fundamental research tools that are beginning to be presented in these media will become a more and more important component of scholarly research. Through the Abzu project, the Oriental Institute is committed to providing expert access to all such materials whether produced locally or remotely, by means of a series of indexed catalogs.

The Universal Resource Locator (URL) of the Oriental Institute's server on the World-Wide Web is:

<http://www-oi.uchicago.edu/OI/default.html>

The Universal Resource Locator (URL) of the Abzu project is:

<http://www-oi.uchicago.edu/OI/DEPT/RA/ABZU/ABZU.HTML>

We invite any computer-minded reader with Internet access and World-Wide Web browser software on their computer to log onto the Oriental Institute's database. Comments from viewers are appreciated, by either electronic mail (email) or the more conventional snail mail (postal service) as it is called today.

Ancient Near East Mailing List (ANE)

ANE is an electronic mailing list on the Internet focusing on topics and issues of interest in ancient Near Eastern studies. In July 1993 the Computer Laboratory and

the Research Archives collaborated in the establishment of the Ancient Near East Mailing List discussion group. John Sanders oversees the Majordomo computer program that automates the routine administration of Internet mailing lists, and Charles E. Jones administrates the Ancient Near East List itself. List communications are electronic mail messages sent to each subscriber in either the standard format or in digest form, which combines a series of separate contributions into a single electronic mail message to the user. At the present time the Majordomo software resides on the Institute's Sun SPARCstation 1 computer.

The Ancient Near East List and List-Digest currently have more than 1,100 subscribers worldwide, with an daily average of 10 mailings to each subscriber and a peak output of 30–40 messages. A wide range of topics are discussed on the list: new discoveries and publications in the field, public debate on controversial issues of policy and scholarship, job placement information, and other musings by subscribers.

July 1995 marked the second anniversary of the Ancient Near East List. It has been an enormously successful venture. It is now known as a virtual common room, allowing fruitful collaboration and dialogue among a large number of students of the ancient Near East. It is frequently noted for the responsibility of its members in maintaining a professional level of discourse, and for its reputation of not delivering "junk mail" to subscribers. Charles E. Jones and John Sanders are the first to thank the subscribers for the success that the electronic mailing list has experienced. Take a bow, please!

To subscribe to the Ancient Near East Mailing List, send an electronic mail (email) message to:

majordomo@oi.uchicago.edu

In the body of your email message, include either one or both of the following lines:

subscribe ane

subscribe ane-digest

You will receive a return email immediately confirming your subscription. We welcome either active or passive participation.

Oriental Institute File Transfer Protocol (FTP) File Server

As a complement to the Ancient Near East Mailing List, an anonymous File Transfer Protocol (FTP) file server was established on the Institute's Sun SPARCstation 1 computer in the fall of 1993. The purpose of this file server is to provide easy computer access via the Internet to text and image files, and other types of computer documents and programs which are made public by the Oriental Institute, its faculty, and research projects. In addition, the Chicago society of the Archaeological Institute of America and the American Schools of Oriental Research are posting newsletters and other informational documents on our FTP server. Virtually any user connected to the Internet can access our anonymous FTP file server to download these image and text documents about the Oriental Institute, its Museum and current activities, and Institute research projects and publications, as well as those of non-Institute scholars.

During the past year our File Transfer Protocol server has served as host to regular contributions from the Chicago society of the Archaeological Institute of America

and the American Schools of Oriental Research. Several individual contributions were received and posted, and the Institute's Publications Office price list was updated recently.

The Future

In the arenas of the World-Wide Web and the Ancient Near East mailing list, the Oriental Institute has experienced phenomenal success during the past year that is most gratifying. The Computer Laboratory and the Research Archives have collaborated to establish the Oriental Institute as a significant Internet source for valuable research data on the ancient Near East and a major Internet Museum stop on the "Information Super Highway."

We noted earlier in this report that Institute faculty and staff are now experiencing their first glimpse of an on-line research environment that is worldwide in scope. Because the Institute's World-Wide Web database is early in its development, it seems an auspicious time for us to offer a reminder concerning the Oriental Institute's primary presence on the Internet. Public dissemination of ancient Near Eastern research notwithstanding, the benefits of these technologies will only be fully realized when they are integrated into the management of the Oriental Institute's Museum collections and research projects. We will continue to report on our progress toward this goal in future editions of the annual report.
