

EMPIRES IN THE FERTILE CRESCENT

THE EAST WING GALLERIES OPEN

GEOFF EMBERLING, DIRECTOR OF THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE MUSEUM



Griffin plaque. Ivory. Late Bronze Age II, thirteenth century BC. Megiddo. OIM A22212

Empires in the Fertile Crescent: Ancient Assyria, Anatolia, and Israel, opening January 29, 2005, in the East Wing of the Oriental Institute Museum, displays beautiful and intriguing objects that have been in storage for nearly nine years, some never before on view.

With a focus on collections derived from groundbreaking Oriental Institute excavations at Khorsabad, the Amuq Valley, Alishar Höyük, and Megiddo, the exhibit presents a geographic arc connecting Mesopotamia to Egypt — the Fertile Crescent so evocatively described by Oriental Institute founder James Henry Breasted. These regions were culturally distinctive but interconnected through trade, technological exchange, and cultural borrowings in political practice, power, and religion. Much of this region was also briefly joined within the Assyrian Empire.

The exhibit begins with the Dr. Norman Solhkhah Family Assyrian Empire Gallery, which evokes the power of the Assyrian Empire that conquered much of the Middle East in the eighth and seventh centuries BC. Reliefs from the palace of Sargon II (721–705 BC) in the Assyrian capital city of Khorsabad, in northern Iraq, show processions of tribute bearers from Anatolia, while other reliefs show scenes of banqueting and hunting. As reward for complying with the Assyrian Empire, loyal vassals would be able to dine and hunt with the king. Among the areas conquered by the Assyrian Empire was the Amuq Valley, at the northeast corner of the Mediterranean, in modern Turkey. Also on display are stone reliefs from the Amuq Valley carved in the local style, that depict Assyrian soldiers carrying the severed heads of their enemies.

The Assyrian army empowered rulers to construct and maintain their vast empire. On display are Assyrian weaponry, horse fittings used by the Assyrian cavalry, and ingots of the iron that was so crucial to their military success. As the empire expanded across the plains of northern Syria, into Anatolia, and down the Mediterranean coast ultimately to Egypt, tribute and spoils of war were brought back to Assyria. Among the best-known and most beautiful of these objects are ivory furniture elements and boxes carved in a variety of local styles; a selection of the Khorsabad ivories is on display. Cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals used in the administration are also on view.



Installation in process in the East Wing

Another of the major empires that affected the Fertile Crescent was that of the Hittites. From their homeland in central Anatolia, the Hittites controlled much of northern Syria and Mesopotamia in the fifteenth–thirteenth centuries BC. Oriental Institute projects in the 1920s and 1930s at Alishar Höyük and the Amuq Valley aimed to understand the development of Hittite civilization. Finds from these expeditions are on display in the Henrietta Herbolzheimer, M.D. Syro-Anatolian Gallery.

Located in the heartland of Hittite civilization, Alishar Höyük was a town long before the Hittites arrived in Anatolia and remained a town after the collapse of the Hittite Empire. The display presents life in a town of the Early Bronze Age as well as beautiful painted ceramics of the later Phrygian period. The Hittites themselves are represented by burnished, painted ceramic vessels with raised scenes in relief that depict Hittite rituals.

The expedition to the Amuq Valley aimed to examine a later period of Hittite civilization. After the collapse of the Hittite Empire in about 1200 BC, a series of small successor states were established in southern Anatolia and northern Syria by the Hittite elite. One of these “Neo-Hittite” states was located in the Amuq Valley, but the results of that excavation have scarcely been published or displayed. As the result of a course taught by Professors K. Aslihan Yener and Theo van den Hout, new sculpture, as well as ceramics, seals, and beautiful jewelry from the Neo-Hittite kingdom in the Amuq were identified and are on display for the first time. The region was conquered by the Assyrian Empire under Tiglath-pileser III in 738 BC but had already been a vassal of the Assyrians for more than a century. Tribute from the Amuq Valley is recorded on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser, a cast of which is also placed in the gallery.

The Amuq Valley, located at an intersection of regions, had a long history of settlement with extensive economic and political contacts before the Neo-Hittite kingdom. Indeed, one of the most significant results of the Oriental Institute’s excavation project was to construct a ceramic sequence from about 7000 BC down into the twentieth century AD. The Amuq sequence not

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Preparator Joy Grad preparing objects for installation

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With its proximity to sources of metal ores in the Amanus and Taurus Mountains, the Amuq was an early center of metallurgical innovation. Statuettes of men and women from this region are thought to be among the first uses of true bronze, made of copper and tin. One case in the gallery is devoted to explaining the development of ancient metallurgy.

The Haas and Schwartz Megiddo Gallery presents cultures and religions in the lands of the Bible, with objects that document the cultural and historical context for the birth of Judaism and Christianity. This portion of the gallery presents objects from Oriental Institute excavations at the site of Megiddo, the biblical Armageddon, which was an important Canaanite and later Israelite city that lay on the major route connecting Egypt with the Levant. As a result, much of the exhibit documents trade of objects and imitation of styles from Egypt, the Aegean, Syria, and Anatolia. Cases present the Late Bronze Age period of internationalism highlighted by the famous Megiddo Ivories, the period of the early Israelites and the royal Israelite city. Long-standing religious traditions are also presented. Also, on display is a fragment of one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, one of the few in North American collections.

It has been a pleasure working with an unusually large and varied team in producing this gallery. It is worth naming them all: guest curators Seth Richardson, K. Aslihan Yener, Virginia Rimmer, Joan Barghusen, Theo van den Hout, Ronald Gorny, and Gabrielle Novacek; curatorial assistant Tom James; registrar Raymond Tindel; registrar’s assistant Dennis Campbell; archivist John Larson; designers Markus Dohner and Dianne Hanau-Strain; preparators Erik Lindahl, Brian Zimerle, and Joy Grad; conservators Laura D’Alessandro, Vanessa Muros, Alison Whyte, Sarah Barack, and Jeanne Mandel; and educator Carole Krucoff. The exhibit would not exist were it not for the efforts of Gil Stein and interim museum director Raymond Tindel to give it shape and keep it on schedule.



Registrar Raymond Tindel building a pedestal for the exhibit