

News & Notes

The Oriental Institute

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REFLECTIONS OF A VOLUNTEER DOCENT

by Ida B. DePencier

A family group entered the Oriental Institute and turned toward the Museum. A docent approached them and asked, "Would you like a docent?"

The response was a blank look. "Would we like what?" asked the mother.

The docent amended her question. "Would you like to have a guide tell you about the museum and answer questions?"

"Yes, indeed," was the answer.

There are many like this family group to whom the term *docent* is unfamiliar. It has not been a common word but it is gaining in usage especially in connection with museums. One dictionary defines *docent* thus: "In some American universities a teacher or lecturer not on the regular faculty." At the Oriental Institute it is one who has gone through the docent program, has become familiar with the artifacts in the museum, and is prepared to present the material interestingly to groups of varied ages and interests. The docents are all volunteers and serve eight to ten hours a month, three hours at a time, either mornings or afternoons. A longer time taxes one's voice *and* feet. At present there are about sixty volunteer docents serving during the week.

The docent program was set up in 1966 by Mrs. John Livingood and volunteers were recruited. Before the docent program, when someone asked to be shown about the Museum, a student in the Department or a professor who happened to be free at the time was pressed into service. For a while some students were paid for their services. However, as there was more and more demand for guides, some plan had to be devised. The volunteer docent program was the answer.

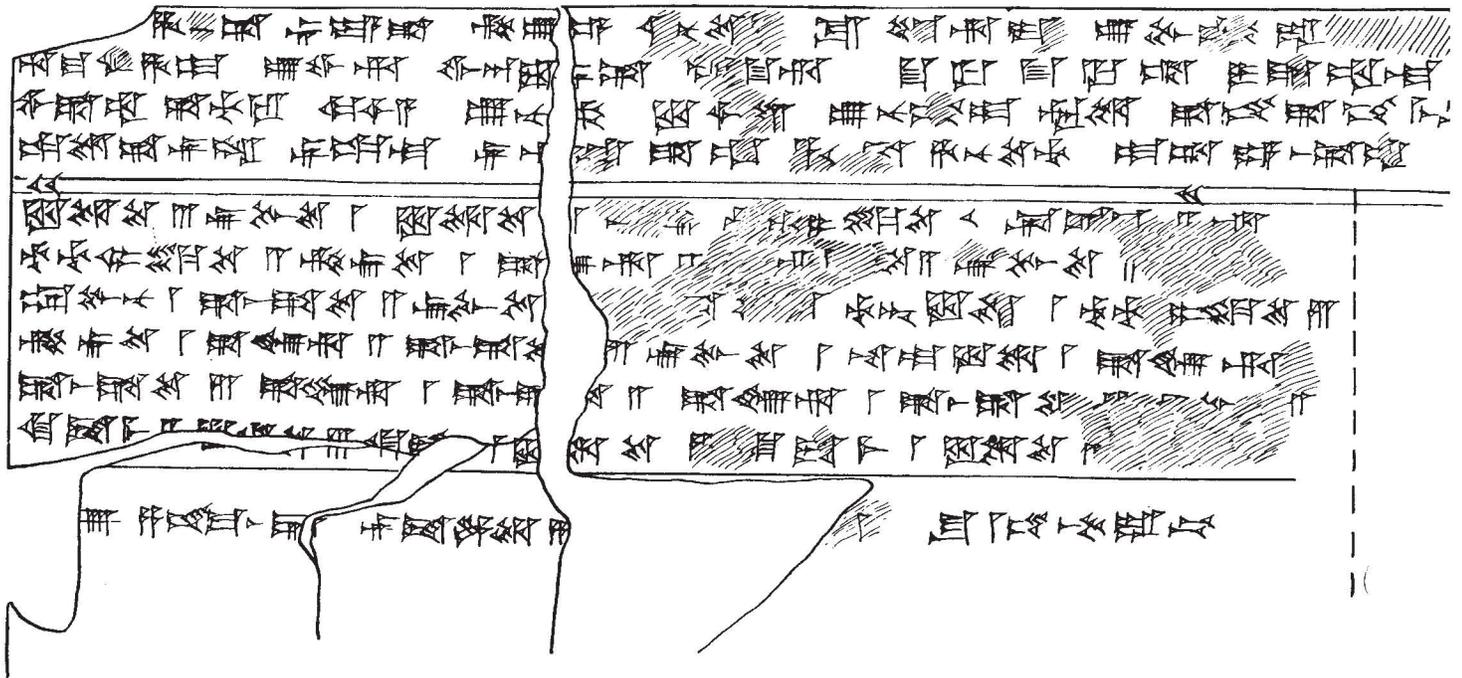
The training program as it was first planned consisted of eight Monday mornings of lectures by Oriental Institute professors, well known authorities in their fields, and the afternoons of the same days were devoted to museum tours; nowadays the gallery tours follow the eight weeks of lectures. At this point, recognition should be given to the excellent lectures and tours that professors and graduate students have given the embryo docents. Theirs, too, is a volunteer service. The museum tours acquaint the volunteer with the many, many artifacts. There are about 70,000 items "which record man's early life in the Near East." Not all are on display but enough are to present a challenge. Besides lectures and tours, a bibliography of considerable scope is made available to the volunteer for further reading. Also, motion pictures are presented. The program, given once a year, has remained essentially the same although the lectures have been extended, the material expanded, and the reading list increased and brought up to date.

As I have said, the training course ends after four months of preparation but no docent is able to stop there. Continuous reading is necessary if one is to be informed and kept abreast of archeological discoveries—which are multiplying at a surprising rate. It is a matter not only of keeping abreast, but also of keeping a vast amount of information sorted out and factual. One reads, forgets, re-reads, and again forgets. In these mental gyrations, one pitfall every docent faces is that of keeping information accurate. It does entangle and enmesh itself in our imaginations, and occasionally without intending to we find ourselves caught up in our own pure fabrication. It is here that impromptu discussions among docents are valuable. Conflicting facts and figments of our imagination and fabrication can be challenged.

After one has amassed a wealth of information there comes another problem. How much of this wealth should be given to the listener? It's too bad not to give them all of what has been gathered—the hard-earned golden nuggets of information—but if that is done, the listener may be so overloaded with facts that he has more than he wants. The docent is obliged to sense how much to give and when to leave well enough alone.

I said there are about sixty volunteer docents on duty each week. It may be surprising that so many are needed, but there are tours at ten o'clock, at eleven-thirty, at one, and at two-thirty, Tuesday through Sunday. The average tour lasts one hour. Large groups are divided into smaller groups so that displays can be seen by all. Therefore, four and sometimes five docents are needed at a time. Small groups start in different galleries and continue through all the different rooms in the Museum. Do we sometimes follow too closely on one another's heels? Yes, sometimes. However, everyone learns two things on tours: one is to adjust and the other is to cope. We also learn that the docent's enthusiasm and some dramatic flair are adhesives that hold a group together. If the presentation gets too dull, listeners begin wandering off and one is left stranded. There are many tricks even to this trade.

Who are the listeners who come? The greatest number are elementary and high-school students, but there have been a few Headstart and kindergarten groups, and, on up the age scale, college students and senior citizens. Twenty-five thousand grade-school children visit the museum each year and about ten thousand high-school students. More than 95% receive guided tours arranged in advance. As many as 250 students will be scheduled on a typical weekday of the school



year. Over the weekends, there are Sunday School groups and many family groups. A while back, one of the airlines ran a description of the Oriental Institute Museum in one of its publications and the result was a number of visitors on their way through Chicago stopping off between planes or trains. In November, the Museum recorded its two millionth visitor.

Where do the students come from? Most come from schools in the Chicago metropolitan area but there are also college students from Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio. Some schools arrange a whole weekend and plan to visit three or four museums including ours. It is a real challenge to the docents who get these groups toward the end of a day of several museums when the pilgrims are footsore and weary and satiated with facts and artifacts. One must adjust, adapt, and cope.

The wide range of ages and interests requires more adaptability on the part of the docent. A group of ten-year-olds might be followed by high-school seniors or a college group. Group interests may range from history to art to handicrafts to biblical connections. Some students come with questions to be answered or a list of artifacts to be seen; others come with no background, no pre-planning. Some come avid to see the many things they have heard or read about; others couldn't care less. The number of students coming with some background is increasing. Many of the teachers are repeaters and can tell their students about the artifacts to be seen and thus provide background. An enthusiastic teacher who has made some preparation is the joy of a docent's life.

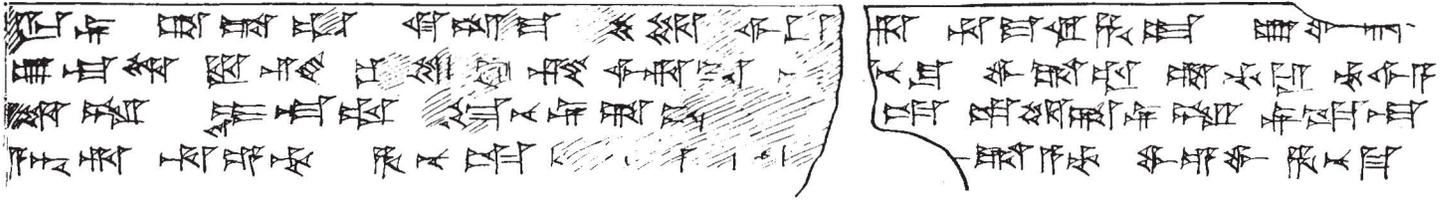
Are there any displays more popular than others? Yes, the mummies. They are the greatest attractions for everyone, young and old. "Are we going to see the mummies?" is invariably asked, and when the docent says, "Now we are going to see the mummies," there is instant attention. Reactions of the younger viewers are interesting. Some look and turn away with disgust only to steal another look in a few minutes. Some ask endless questions. "Are they real?" "Is that skin?" "They are so small." "How old are they?" "Is it a man or a woman?" "Look at the teeth!" "Why are their mouths open?" Some children just look and look.

How careful we docents must be with our explanations to the younger children. For example, I remember remarking that the Assyrian winged bull once stood at the gates of Sargon's palace and the small listener asked, "How could they swing such a heavy gate open?" The Gate of Ishtar is another "gate" which is not a gate in the child's sense. Writing on clay is not the act of writing as children know it. Few children have seen tombs and those they may have seen are a far cry from King Tutankhamon's.

Docents enjoy receiving questions as they are a means of getting insight into the thinking of the listeners. "Was King Tut really that big?" indicating the statue. "Were the Egyptians black like the mummies?" "Were there animals with human faces?" indicating the Assyrian winged bull. "Why are there so many jars?" "Were all these things dug up?" "How can they tell how old these things are?" This question is asked not only by children but by adults as well—and occasionally challenged.

The Oriental Institute in establishing the docent program is providing an outstanding service to a wide community. The museum is a gem but docents are needed to interpret the displays, especially to younger visitors. To be sure, the artifacts are well chosen and charmingly displayed but the human voice, explaining and describing, gives emphasis to what the eyes see. Furthermore, it is all free. No charge is made. The professors' lectures, the graduate students' tours, the docents' services are all volunteer. It is indeed an outstanding service to the thousands who come to look, question, and comment.

Mrs. DePencier has been a docent from the beginning of the program in 1966.



The tablet containing the Hurrian song was not illustrated complete in the *Times*, *Time* or *Newsweek*. It has several peculiarities. Most cuneiform tablets are upright rectangles; the writing on this one is parallel to the long sides. Ordinarily, you finish reading one side and flip the tablet vertically for the reverse. On this one, each of the four upper lines continues around to the back of the tablet, so it must be continually turned over and back. The four upper lines are the words of the song; the six lower lines are the musical instructions. Reproduced from E. Laroche, *Ugaritica* V, p. 487.

BACKGROUND TO A DISCOVERY

by Peter T. Daniels*

The front page of the *New York Times* for March 6 and the network news broadcasts that evening carried the story of the decipherment of the "world's oldest song" by Dr. Anne D. Kilmer of the University of California at Berkeley. Members will be pleased to learn of the important role of the Oriental Institute in this accomplishment.

The chronicle begins, as does so much of modern Assyriology, with Dr. Benno Landsberger. He recognized a list of words on an Old Babylonian (c. 1800 B.C.) tablet sent him by O. R. Gurney of Oxford as the names of the nine strings of the Babylonian harp. About the same time Dr. Kilmer, who had just received her doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania, published one of their tablets which contained the names both of harp strings and of musical intervals.

At the time Dr. Kilmer's article appeared (1960) she was research assistant to Dr. Landsberger here. Coincidentally, Dr. Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin served as visiting professor in the University's Divinity School for a quarter that year, and Mme. Marcelle Duchesne-Guillemin, a musicologist, heard of Dr. Kilmer's interests. The two women worked with the Institute's Dr. Hans G. Güterbock on interpreting the musical texts.

Meanwhile, back at Oxford, Dr. Gurney found an Old Babylonian tablet of harp-tuning instructions in the British Museum proving that the scale used was heptatonic—dividing the octave into seven notes—since the eighth string was described as equaling the first, and the ninth the second. He collaborated with the musicologist David Wulstan, who then published an exposition of Babylonian music theory—relating it indisputably to the Greek system of modes.

1968 saw the publication of the tablet containing the Hurrian song performed last month. Very little is known about the Hurrians save that they occupied northern Mesopotamia and Syria during the second millennium B.C. One area where some Hurrians lived around 1400 B.C. was the city of Ugarit, near modern Ras Shamra on the Syrian coast, discovered by spectacular accident in 1929. A number of the recovered Hurrian tablets come from Ugarit, including this song. Reading the script was no problem—it is written in ordinary Babylonian cuneiform—but understanding the language is quite another matter because we have so few texts and because it turns out to be neither Indo-European nor Semitic. Fortunately, also among

the Ras Shamra tablets were Sumerian-Hurrian vocabularies similar to the Sumerian-Akkadian vocabulary I described in the November *News & Notes*.

It was Dr. Güterbock who recognized the Akkadian interval names on the lower portion of the tablet, accompanied by numerals. He published his interpretation of this "musical notation" and its relation to the Greek modes in 1970.

It remained for someone to transfer the words and numbers of the original into modern notation so the song could be performed. This has now been done three times: first, by Wulstan, who had his version recorded by Oxford choir-boys and presented it at the international Assyriologists' convention in the summer of 1971; second, by Dr. Güterbock, who modified Wulstan's version—Mrs. Güterbock sang the revision at a gathering of the University of Chicago's Near East Club and Music Department that fall—but did not publish it, in deference to Wulstan's musicological expertise; and third, by Dr. Kilmer, who reinterpreted Dr. Güterbock's results and presented her version at last summer's international Orientalists' conference. The public performance at Berkeley was apparently occasioned by the recent reconstruction of the Sumerian harp. It must be emphasized that even this latest interpretation is not definitive; the notation is multiply ambiguous.

All of this is an illustration of the nature of scientific enterprise. Results are very seldom achieved by a single scholar working in isolation, but in successive stages built upon many previous achievements: hence the value of the Oriental Institute and similar far-reaching centers of research. Far more important than assigning credit for the discoveries is the significance of the song in the history of music. Not the "world's oldest song"—we know Sumerian temple-hymns sung perhaps 1500 years earlier—this is the world's oldest *musically notated* song. Coming from a point midway in both space and time between the Old Babylonian musical texts and the Ancient Greek system of modes, the two systems so similar that it is unlikely they are unrelated, this discovery seems to explain why Greek mode names—Lydian, Phrygian, and so on—refer to places in Asia Minor. The song itself is a link between the two cultures.

Mr. Daniels is a graduate student of Semitic linguistics and edits News & Notes.

*From an interview with Dr. Hans G. Güterbock, Tiffany and Margaret Blake Distinguished Service Professor of Hittitology in the Oriental Institute and the Department of Linguistics.

4 A REMINDER

MEMBERS' DAY

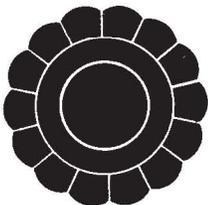
Sunday, April 21, 1974

2:00 - 4:00 P.M.

On that afternoon the Institute will have tours through the museum galleries and through the laboratories, work-rooms, and storage areas in the basement. We will also show films in Breasted Hall and have research exhibits on the second and third floors. We will provide a printed program at the registration desk on that day.

In view of the numbers involved, basement tours will have to be rapid and your cooperation will minimize lingering and delay. Friends who have previously visited these facilities may be kind enough to yield their places to others.

Many members who are unable to drive would appreciate a ride that afternoon. If you can offer one or are seeking a ride, please call us (753-2471). We will be glad to help riders and drivers find each other. All parking lots are open to members on the afternoon of Members' Day.



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