



THE
ORIENTAL
INSTITUTE

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Exhibit Features Archival Images of Persepolis, A Royal Complex of Ancient Persia

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A new exhibition at the Oriental Institute Museum of the University of Chicago will give visitors a rare glimpse inside the ancient city of Persepolis. “Persepolis: Images of an Empire,” which opens Oct. 13, includes archival photographs and a new multi-media presentation that document an astounding imperial complex of palaces constructed by the Persian kings Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes I and III, who ruled between 522 and 338 BC in today’s southwest Iran.

These Persian kings were the greatest powers in the ancient world, ruling the entire Middle East and battling for supremacy against their rivals, the Greeks. This half-century conflict, culminating in battles with Alexander the Great, has been the subject of popular interest in films such as “300.”

The tremendous political and economic power of the Persian kings was expressed by the scale of the architecture at Persepolis, especially the monumental audience halls with grand stairways decorated with finely carved images of people from throughout the kingdom carrying precious gifts to their Persian overlords.

Persepolis was excavated from 1931 through 1939 by Oriental Institute archaeologists Ernst Herzfeld and Erich Schmidt. The team documented the site

in dramatic black-and-white views of the architecture and the rugged surrounding terrain. The photographs capture the forest of columns that tower over the site's raised terrace, which supported grand ceremonial audience halls, palaces, great stone portals, and carved scenes of the kings and their courtiers.

"[These photographs] are hauntingly beautiful windows to the past," said exhibit curator Dr. Kiersten Neumann. "They present a promise of the opulence and lavishness that was Persepolis, yet they also capture its solitude and melancholy—the resolute ruins of a once equally determined empire."

Approximately 3,700 photographs were taken during the Oriental Institute's expedition. From 1937 to 1939 the expedition used a Waco cabin biplane, christened "Friend of Iran," to document the site and the surrounding region. This was an important technological advance: from the air, the archaeologists could see the outlines of buildings that were then buried under the sand. As excavator Schmidt wrote, "In thirteen hours flying over the environs of Persepolis we succeeded in mapping more than four hundred ancient sites ... a task of years if carried out on the ground."

The multi-media presentation continues that tradition of innovation, juxtaposing vintage aerial photographs with new satellite imagery to show how much the terrain has changed over the last eighty years and using these images to create a 3D model of the original architecture.

"The exhibit and new 3D mapping continues to demonstrate the vital importance of the Oriental Institute's original photographic and documentary archives from over eighty years ago," explained Museum Chief Curator Jack Green.

The exhibit also features quotes from travelers, including Lord Byron and William Francklin, an officer of the British East India Company who visited the site in the

early 1800s, expressing their wonder and admiration of the ruins. A final panel explores the question “What Was Persepolis?” with comments from modern scholars who try to solve the mystery of the role and purpose of the grand complex.

The exhibit will be on view through September 11, 2016.

The exhibit is accompanied by programs for families and adults. Among them are:

- Wednesday, November 4, 2015, 7:00 p.m., Alexander Nagel, Research Associate at the National Museum of Natural History, The Smithsonian Institution, on “Taking Care of Color in Persepolis: New Research on Painters, Palaces, and Polychromies in Achaemenid Persia, c. 520–330 BCE.”
- Wednesday, March 9, 2016, 5:30–8:00 p.m. “Epic Wednesday” a Nowruz-themed (Persian New Year) celebration for adults.
- Sunday, March 12, 2016, 1:00–4:00 p.m. A Nowruz-themed family day with activities. The two Nowruz programs are generously supported by the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA), the Zoroastrian Association of Chicago (ZAC) and Iran House of Greater Chicago.

This exhibit and programming are supported by Guity Nashat Becker, the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA), the Zoroastrian Association of Chicago (ZAC), Iran House of Greater Chicago, and members of the Oriental Institute.

The Oriental Institute Museum is located on the campus of the University of Chicago at 1155 E. 58th St. Hours: Tuesday, Thursday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Wednesday, 10 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Free Entry. Suggested donation: \$10 for adults, \$5 for children. For further information, visit: www.oi.uchicago.edu/museum

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