News & Notes

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ON THE COVER: Gold twin heads, likely representations of the Egyptian goddess Hathor, with spoons. Excavated beneath a palace floor at Megiddo in 1937. Late Bronze Age IIA (1400–1300 BCE). ISACM A21055.

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

This issue of *News & Notes* celebrates another ISAC milestone: a century of exploration and field research in Israel/Palestine, or the southern Levant, as the archaeological community often refers to the southeastern Mediterranean region that encompasses modern-day Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories. It was in 1925 that James Henry Breasted, with generous financial support from John D. Rockefeller Jr., launched the Institute's landmark excavations at Megiddo (Tell el-Mutesellim), the archetype of the ancient mounded settlements (Arabic *tells*) that dominate the Middle Eastern landscape, and famously associated with the Armageddon of the biblical book of Revelation: the apocryphal setting for the final battle between good and evil.

The Megiddo excavations, which continued unabated until the outbreak of World War II in 1939, and which would become known as the "big dig," produced one of the foundational cultural sequences for the ancient Near East, and it continues to figure prominently in the study of the cultural history of the region today. As described by ISAC Museum curator Kiersten Neumann, who curated the current ISAC special exhibition, *Megiddo: A City Unearthed, A Past Imagined* (September 18, 2025–March 15, 2026), the Megiddo excavations also produced an exceptionally rich assemblage of cultural artifacts that attest to the remarkable florescence of the diminutive city-states that thrived along the eastern littoral of the Mediterranean during the Bronze and Iron Ages. How these spectacularly crafted artworks found their way to Chicago, the considerable media and public interest they generated, and their subsequent "rediscovery" are all compelling parts of the story and provide important insights into this formative period of ISAC's history.

This issue of *News & Notes* also highlights the wide range of ongoing laboratory and field research at ISAC. Kea Johnston, the first joint ISAC–Field Museum postdoctoral scholar, describes her exciting and innovative efforts to build quicker, cheaper, and more reliable 3D models of artifacts in the collections of the two museums, testing software that she wrote to automate the process. Her photogrammetry technique has already paid dividends with the conservation work being carried out on the glazed bricks from the Sin Temple at Khorsabad (featured in the previous issue of *News & Notes*) and with the production of 3D prints of several Megiddo ivories that gave visitors to the opening of the current special exhibition the opportunity to touch and handle these exquisite, yet delicate, artifacts. Meanwhile, Yorke Rowan, ISAC research professor and director of the Eastern Badia Archaeological Project, reports on his team's continuing investigation of the enigmatic "kites" found in the Black Desert of eastern Jordan, which are believed to be prehistoric hunting and herding installations.

From our education and outreach programs, ISAC Museum docent Steven Essex shares one of his favorite ISAC Museum artifacts—an Anatolian sphinx in the Henrietta Herbolsheimer, M.D., Syro-Anatolian Gallery—while Tasha Vorderstrasse, ISAC's continuing education program manager, and Samantha Suppes, University of Chicago PhD candidate and ISAC Museum educator, recount their recent "meta-archaeological" investigation into the origins of the eclectic assemblage of objects and aids in the teaching collection. Finally, I wish to welcome two new staff members to the ISAC community: Allie Scholten, ISAC's new head archivist, and Tonya Lifshits, who joins the education and outreach programs as our volunteer and art program coordinator.

TIMOTHY P. HARRISON
Director

THE SPLENDOR OF MEGIDDO, PIECE BY PIECE

by Kiersten Neumann

In conjunction with the ISAC Museum's special exhibition *Megiddo: A City Unearthed, A Past Imagined* (September 18, 2025–March 15, 2026; bit.ly/MegiddoImagined), curated by the author, the following article revisits the discovery, division, and display of Megiddo's gold and ivory hoards.

UNEARTHING OPULENCE

In 1925, the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures launched its first large-scale field project at the site of Megiddo (Tell el-Mutesellim), initiating archaeological excavations that would bring to light a site of extraordinary depth and complexity, and that would capture scholarly interest and public imagination alike. Situated at a crossroads linking Egypt and the Mediterranean world with West Asia, Megiddo was shaped by imperial powers, elite wealth, cultural exchange, exquisite craftmanship, monumental spaces, cycles of diplomacy, and waves of war and conflict. The site's twenty successive cities, spanning from the Neolithic through the Persian period, revealed themselves to the Megiddo Expedition across fourteen seasons of excavation. This archaeological sequence reached a high point in the 1930s with the discovery of spectacular gold and ivory hoards during the excavation of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550–1200 BCE) phase of Megiddo's north palace—objects that, through their subsequent journeys of display, acquisition, and replication, would tell a story as layered and compelling as Megiddo itself.

The first hint of these exceptional pieces appeared in mid-February 1937, when fragile ivory fragments incised with hieroglyphs were unearthed in what field director Gordon Loud initially called the "big house;" it soon became clear, however, that the structure was in fact "a grand palace full of no mean treasure" (letter from Loud to ISAC director John A. Wilson, March 6, 1937; ISAC Museum Archives). In the weeks that followed, more ivories came to light—"more and nicer ones," as Loud remarked in his February 17 diary entry—across three rooms of the Stratum VIIA palace's semisubterranean annex, ranging from furniture inlays and containers to hair combs, handles, and game boards. The deposits also yielded human and animal remains, along with jewelry, bronze fittings, weapon points, and vessel fragments, underscoring the complexity of the contexts in which the ivories were found (fig. 1). Loud compared some of the finds to carved ivory pieces that had recently been excavated by ISAC's Iraq Expedition at the Assyrian capital city of Dur-Šarrukin (modern Khorsabad). By April 6, a total of 386 pieces had been recovered.

Amid the ivories fervor, another extraordinary collection emerged on March 1, 1937. Just days later, on March 6, Loud sent a coded cable to ISAC director Wilson announcing its discovery, followed by a more detailed letter in which he admitted to being "more or less stumped" by the "magnificent collection, absolutely unique in Palestine." Unearthed across several deposits in Room 3100 of the Stratum VIII palace, what became known as the "gold hoard" included jewelry, vessels, decorative spoons, and cylinder seals fashioned from gold and semiprecious stones (fig. 2). In their respective ways, both hoards showcased the opulence of Canaanite elites and the web of cultural exchange and expert craftmanship that wove Megiddo into the fabric of the Late Bronze Age world. Their exceptionality caused excitement tinged with anxiety for both Loud and Wilson, particularly with respect to the impending end-of-season division of finds.

The gold and ivory pieces, like all the finds unearthed by the Megiddo Expedition, were subject to the partage system, a practice widespread in West Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Instituted under the Antiquities Ordinance of British Mandate Palestine, Chicago's excavation licenses provided for the division of artifacts between ISAC and the Department of Antiquities. Items retained by the Department were shipped to Jerusalem for the Palestine Archaeological Museum (today the Rockefeller Archaeological Museum), which opened in 1938, while those allotted to ISAC made their way to Chicago via Haifa and New York. In total, approximately 8,000 objects from Megiddo entered ISAC's collections, contributing to the museum's early growth. This colonial-era system of division would gradually disappear in the second half of the twentieth century, as states increasingly resisted the export of antiquities and prioritized the preservation and display of their heritage within national borders.

The division of 1937, executed on May 1, brought considerable surprise: almost the entirety of the gold hoard was allotted to Chicago, while the ivories were set aside for the following season's division. ISAC was also granted a one-year loan of three gold objects retained by the Department of Antiquities, along with 100 ivory pieces. The sense of triumph is palpable in Loud's letter to Wilson, written two days later, in which he assured the director that their ambitions for grand exhibitions in Chicago and New York—discussed in earlier correspondence—could now, without doubt, be realized. The stage was set for the opulence of Megiddo to dazzle in museum galleries, capture front-page headlines, and, if all went according to plan, open the purses of prospective donors.

The ISAC Museum's fall exhibition attracted glowing press features, *The New York Times* offering an evocative glimpse into the visitor's experience: "Included are gold fittings from a Prince of Megiddo's dressing table, carved ivories from his walls and bags of broken silver jewelry. . . . The most valuable items, according to

Figure 1. Excavation of the ivory hoard, February–March 1937 (Megiddo B 3458, B 3460).

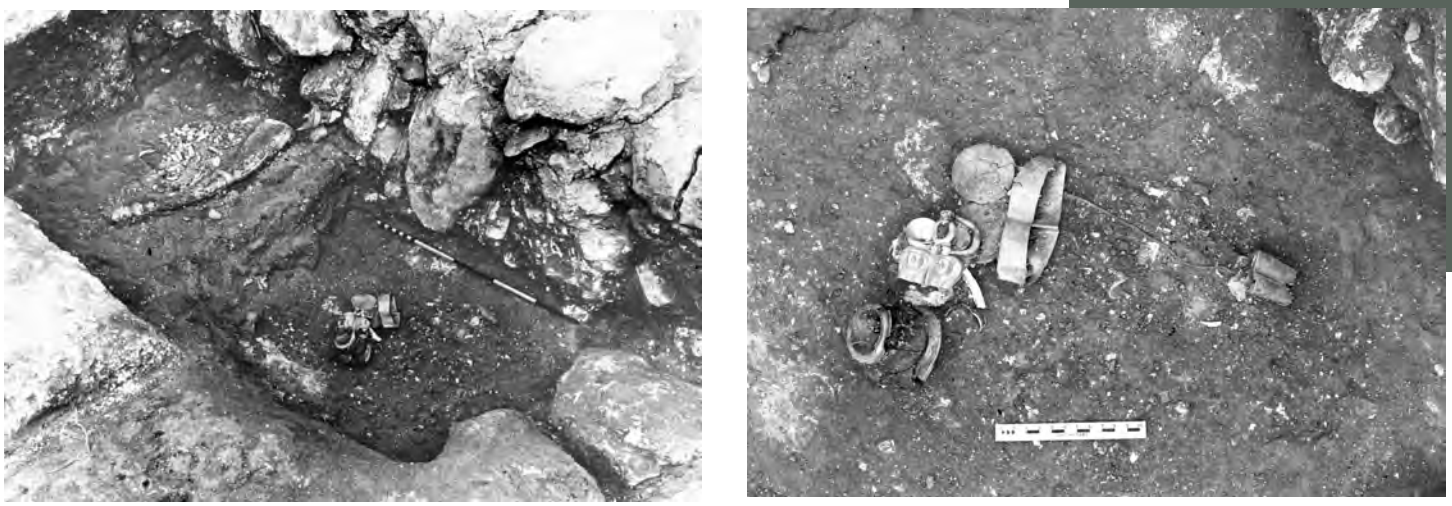


Figure 2. Excavation of the gold hoard, March 1937 (Megiddo B 3429, B 3430).

Dr. Wilson, are carved ivories depicting, apparently, scenes of the life of the Prince. 'Here,' Dr. Wilson said, 'is the Prince of Megiddon celebrating after a victory'" (November 2, 1937). Across the Atlantic, *The Illustrated London News* devoted a three-page spread, lavishly illustrated with photographs, to what it hailed—under a bold headline—as "the most comprehensive example known of 'Phoenician' art in the 13th century B.C." (fig. 3). Just a few months later, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition *Egyptian Style in the Eastern Mediterranean* (March 1938) made headlines of its own, with the Megiddo gold and ivory pieces—both those allotted and those loaned to ISAC—capturing special attention.

HANDLE WITH CARE

While the public was dazzled by the hoards, behind the scenes Loud and his colleagues ruminated on matters of preservation and study. From the start, the ivories' fragility was a pressing concern. A March 6 diary entry offers a glimpse into the improvisations required in the field, where Loud noted the use of Ambroid—an early synthetic adhesive—to stabilize especially delicate and fragmented pieces before removal:

> Quantities of ivory—an intact plain comb, a fine carved piece which I think will turn out to be a cup, now squashed flat and very very fragile, but with scroll, pomegranite [*sic*], and floral designs completely covering the side now exposed. It will take days of treatment with Ambroid before it can be removed.

In a March 18 letter to Wilson, Loud outlined a tentative plan for the treatment of the full group following removal:

> As a suggested solution I offer a plan which I shall discuss tentatively with Iliffe when next I see him—viz. of sending them all to the Jerusalem museum at the end of the season there to have them worked on during the summer by someone to be paid jointly by the museum and us under the supervision of the museum preparator. The division of them would therefore be postponed until next season when the entire lot would be presentable. . . . Dividing the preparatorial work


708—THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS—Oct. 23, 1937

THE MEGIDDO IVORIES: A GROUP FORMING THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE

Oct. 23, 1937—THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS—709

EXAMPLE KNOWN OF "PHŒNICIAN" ART IN THE 13TH CENTURY B.C.

Figure 3. Feature on the Megiddo ivories in *The Illustrated London News*, October 1937 (photographs © ISAC. Reproduced under fair use for educational and illustrative purposes).

> between Chicago and Jerusalem wouldn't work very well in view of the thousands of fragments which may fit certain pieces. It should certainly be done in one place where all fragments are available.

His tone was collegial in working with British archaeologist John Iliffe, then representative of the Department of Antiquities, and his letters show a shared determination to prioritize the care of the ivories. Writing again to Wilson on March 29, he reflected that "the gold hoard pales in comparison" to the ivories, which by then consumed nearly all his time:

> Removing and caring for them is all I can manage for the moment, but when time for study does come I am sure most interesting results in their designs can be worked out. With Egyptian, Syrian, Cretan, and Assyrian motives therein a nice problem is presented which I look forward to tackling.

A visit from Iliffe and his ivory expert the previous week confirmed Loud's approach and opened the possibility of conservation in Jerusalem (fig. 4):

> Iliffe was here last week with his ivory expert, approving my method of removing them, and offering to help in any way they could. The only assistance I am soliciting is the removal of one box—about 15 cms square and 10 high, carved in deep relief, two sides with a pair of sphinxes, and two with as good representations of the Lion of Babylon as you could wish to find. It will probably break (but not without possibility of restoration) in removal, so I shall give them the satisfaction of collecting the pieces rather than take the blame of carelessness.

Loud extended this conviction into his broader plans, where conservation and exhibition ambitions converged. While he envisioned sending the ivories to Jerusalem for treatment, he was simultaneously

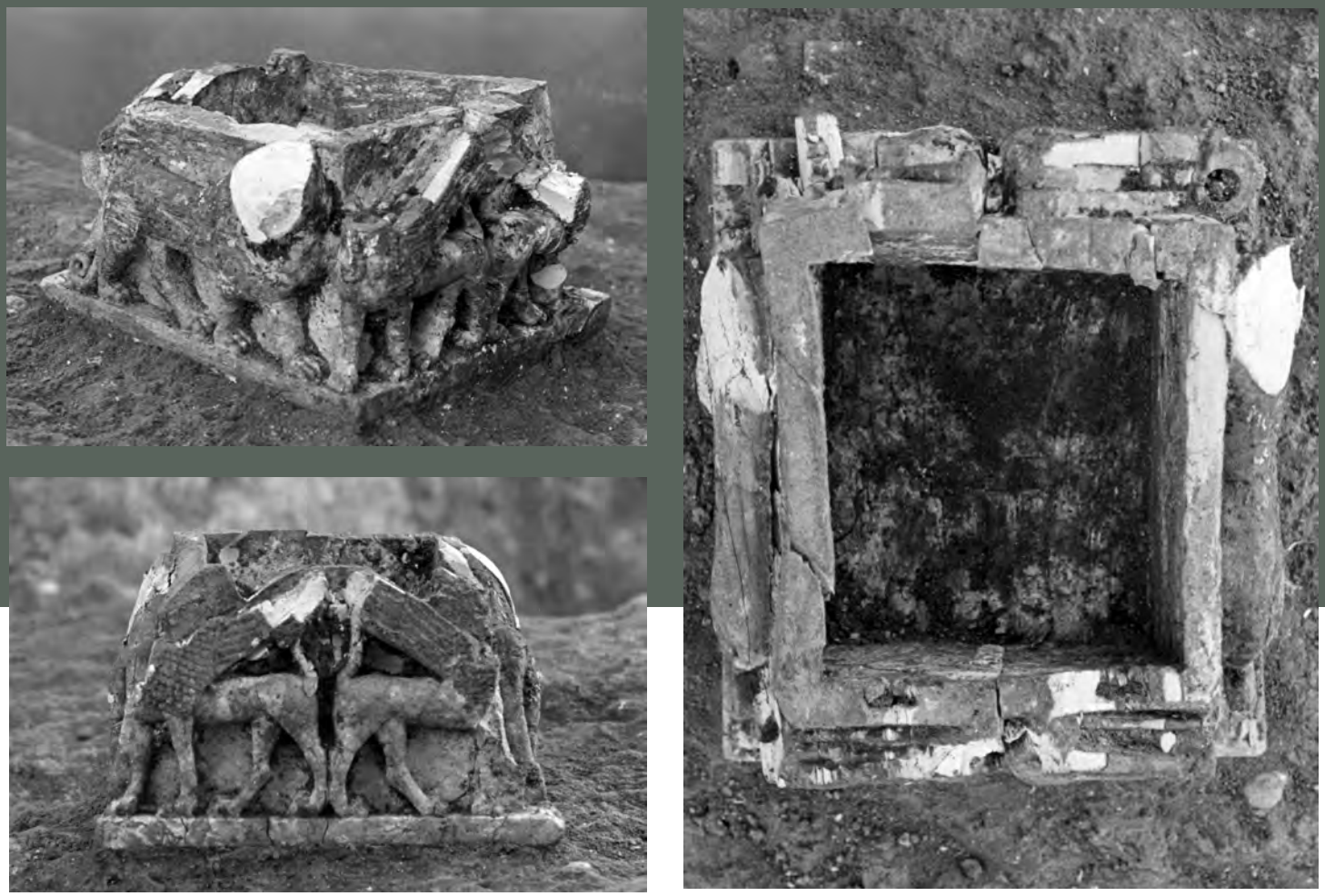


Figure 4. Ivory box in situ, March 31, 1937 (Megiddo A 3476, A3475, A 3474).

anticipating securing loans for American exhibitions—the outcome of which the present reader already knows:

> This I am convinced is the thing to do—send them all to Jerusalem next month, and have the division next year after the pieces have been fitted together and we know the complete picture. . . . I shall have mended and cleaned myself enough good pieces to borrow, pending division, for an exhibition in Chicago—shipping them home on loan with the rest of our things. They will all be complete pieces, so there will be no question of fitting fragments to them. I shall also borrow the pieces of the gold hoard which we shall lose in the division, so that that may be exhibited in its entirety in Chicago. Iliffe says there will be no difficulty in borrowing anything we want. We shall indeed be able to put on a good show which with proper publicity may swing some cash our way.

Although Loud had carefully selected only the most complete ivory pieces he believed stable enough for the American loan, his April 21, 1938, diary entry records the bitter truth: not all survived the return journey to British Mandate Palestine fully intact:

> Of 113 pieces, included 3 gold objects, 39 are broken, one—the fine lady with inlaid eyes—almost beyond repair. It is inexcusable that such valuable pieces on loan and upon which so much time has been spent should be treated in this manner.

By early May 1938, however, repairs had been carried out, the 39 pieces mended, and all 386 ivories formally registered and arranged for division. ISAC ultimately received 262 pieces, which soon embarked on the journey to Chicago to become part of the permanent collections (accession 2391). Once there, the finest ivories quickly took pride of place in the Hittite and Palestinian Hall of the ISAC Museum, which had opened its doors in 1931. A 1941 museum guide imbues the scene with much imagined grandeur:

> The treasury had been hastily cleared of most of its contents before the destruction of the palace. In the excitement of plunder, necklaces had been torn apart and beads of gold and carnelian scattered here and there. The ivories, considered of too little value to warrant removal, were cast aside, while the gold was carried away.

Later records from the gallery's 1978–79 redesign show display cases filled with Megiddo ivories, some combined with sets of delicate bone inlays from wooden boxes, once part of burial goods from excavated tombs (fig. 5).

The year after the pieces arrived in Chicago, Loud published *The Megiddo Ivories* (Oriental Institute Publications 52), a seminal volume presenting 382 pieces "in simple, concise form," cataloged in text and plates (with photographs and drawings at actual scale), and prefaced by a scholarly overview of their archaeological context, dating, character, and inscriptions. In addition to showing their sheer breadth and stylistic richness, the publication also demonstrated the aim of partage: that ivories of like kind be represented in Chicago and Jerusalem (fig. 6). In the decades since, the collection's reputation has only grown. Gallery guides and scholarly articles alike have lauded its exceptionality, often focusing on what the ivories reveal about Late Bronze Age stylistic traditions, craftmanship, exchange, and diplomacy. Interpretations of the hoard's very assembly have also shifted: the ivories are no longer seen as the curated treasury of a prince but rather as a one-time deposition—whether a ritualized act of safeguarding during the upheavals and uncertainty that marked the end of the Late Bronze Age or as grave goods placed in a tomb. The ivories' most recent publication takes an entirely different form: the *Megiddo Ivories Coloring Book*—an engaging volume of twenty-five hand-drawn illustrations that I was inspired to create for children and adults alike (bit.ly/MegiddoColoring).

ALL THAT GLITTERS

The excavation of the gold hoard proceeded more swiftly than that of the ivories, though it demanded comparable care. On March 1, 1937, the first group of objects was lifted from the corner of a small outer room of the north palace, followed the next day by a second group directly beneath it (fig. 2). "So rich, so varied, and so fragile are the finds, that there is infinite work in removing and cleaning them," Loud noted in his March 2 diary entry. Among the pieces, one object demanded particular caution: "Then came a bone wand (?)—very fragile and remaining in the ground for treatment—with three incised gold bands, the small end probably carved as a female head." In a letter to Wilson four days later, he reported that "this is now at the house but not removed from the earth, as it will take weeks of treatment with celluloid before it can be touched." While the wand awaited treatment, the rest of the hoard was likewise kept in the expedition house, where objects were arranged and photographed—both individually and in groups—not just for study and division but especially to supply images to the press. The resulting glamour shots, circulated in the fall to coincide with the upcoming exhibition, gave visual substance to reports of a discovery already being hailed as unparalleled for the Levant (fig. 7).

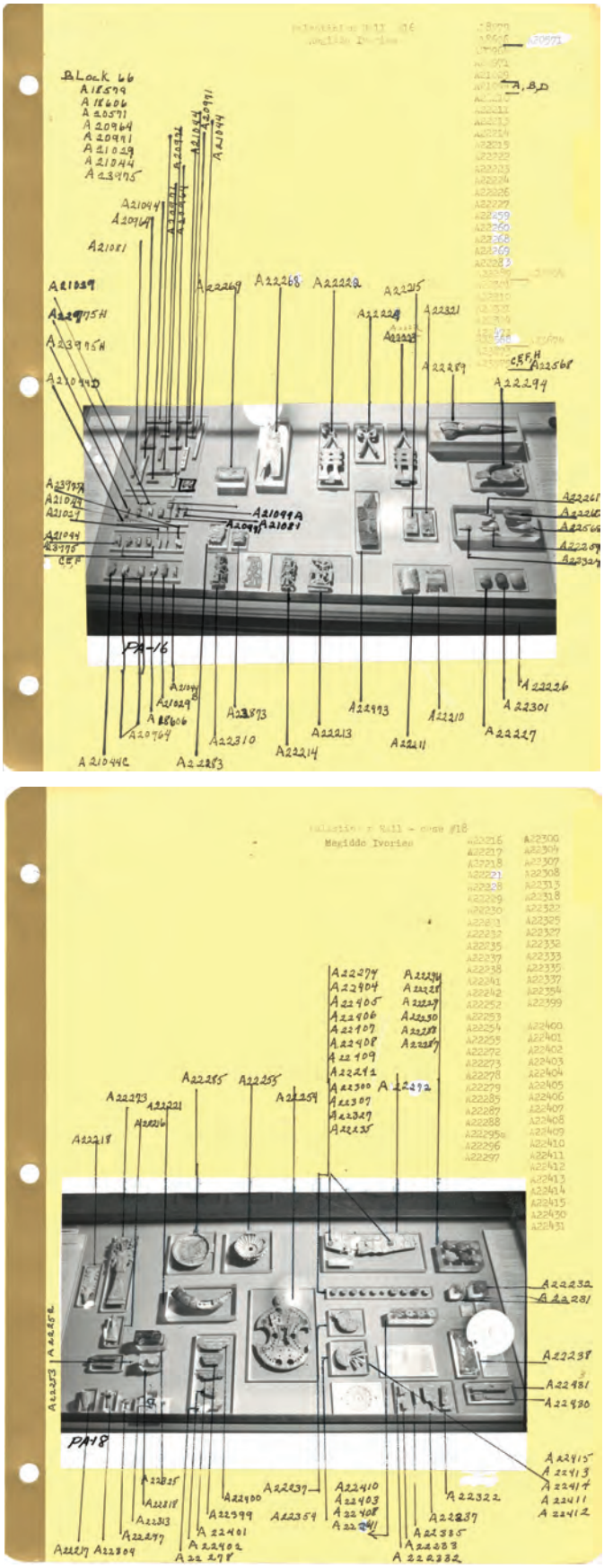


Figure 5. Megiddo registration cards showing the Megiddo ivory display cases as installed in the Palestinian Hall until the 1996 deinstallation.

Figure 6. Openwork ivory plaques with female sphinxes holding cups. *Left*, B 2007 (ISAC Museum A22213); *right*, B 2132 (Rockefeller Archaeological Museum 38.838).

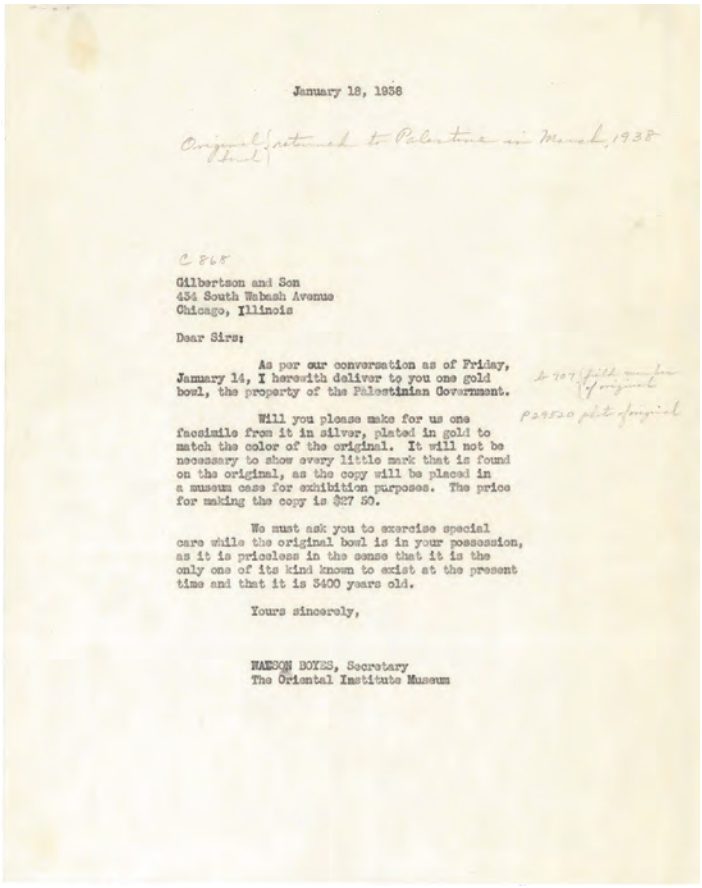
As the archival records make clear, part of the gold hoard was selected for the museum in Jerusalem: the ivory horn with gold bands (b 706), a gold fluted bowl (b 707), a serpentine jar with gold leaf (b 708), and six granular gold beads (b 711). Of these items, the bowl, jar, and beads traveled to Chicago on the one-year loan, while the fragile ivory horn remained in Jerusalem. The division itself, as noted above, took Loud by surprise. As he recounted to Wilson in a letter of May 3, 1937: "I had counted on losing a large part of the gold hoard—in fact I would have been content with one or two reminders of what it had been," he continued, "so you can imagine my surprise when after choosing the fluted bowl he gave us our pick of something to offset that." Alongside the loaned pieces, the 1937 shipment to Chicago included a considerable majority of what remained of the hoard, ultimately destined for ISAC's permanent collections.

After their fall exhibition in Chicago in 1937 and brief sojourn to New York in winter 1938, the loaned pieces returned to British Mandate Palestine while Chicago's share entered the ISAC Museum's Palestinian Hall display cases. The 1941 museum guide described the installation in sweeping, even theatrical, terms:

> ALCOVE AJ.—Royal treasure of a ruling prince of Megiddo, Palestine; 15th–14th century B.C.
>
> The Oriental Institute's Megiddo Expedition discovered this treasure beneath the floor of a palace room at Megiddo. The prince or his trusted servant, desperately in fear of invasion and wishing to preserve his cherished treasures from inevitable looting, had taken this precaution to safeguard them. The twin heads, adorned with disk crowns, and a cosmetic jar of hematite rimmed with gold doubtless came from Egypt. The heavy gold bowl shown here in replica was more probably the gift of an Asiatic prince. The gold mesh chain, as strong and flexible today as it was 3300 years ago, the whetstone capped with gold, the cylinder seals of lapis lazuli, the electrum ring with scarab setting, and the beads of granulated gold and lapis lazuli were all included in the cache.

That phrase—"the heavy gold bowl shown here in replica"—points to a lesser-known stage of the hoard's story.

In fall 1937, knowing the loaned bowl would ultimately return to Jerusalem, ISAC arranged to have a copy made of the original for future display in its exhibitions. With permission from the Department of Antiquities, Gilberston and Son, an electroplating and silversmithing firm established in 1907 on South Wabash Avenue, were commissioned to create "one facsimile from it in silver, plated in gold to match the color of the original" (letter from ISAC secretary Watson Boyes to Gilberston and Son, January 18, 1938; ISAC Museum Archives). Boyes emphasized the object's singularity in his request: it was "priceless in the sense that it is the only one of its kind known to exist at the present time and that it is 3400 years old" (fig. 8). The company provided written confirmation for the receipt of "one gold bowl, the property of the Palestinian Government, for the purpose of making a facsimile." The replica, accessioned as no. 2878 (ISACM C686), cost $27.50 (about $620 today) and remains part of ISAC's collection—currently on view again in *Megiddo: A City Unearthed, A Past Imagined* (see below). Replication did not stop there. In fall 1938, Wilson had a second



January 18, 1938

Original [illegible] to Palestine in March, 1938

C 868

Gilbertson and Son
434 South Wabash Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Dear Sirs:

As per our conversation as of Friday, January 14, I herewith deliver to you one gold bowl, the property of the Palestinian Government.

Will you please make for us one facsimile from it in silver, plated in gold to match the color of the original. It will not be necessary to show every little mark that is found on the original, as the copy will be placed in a museum case for exhibition purposes. The price for making the copy is $27.50.

We must ask you to exercise special care while the original bowl is in your possession, as it is priceless in the sense that it is the only one of its kind known to exist at the present time and that it is 3400 years old.

Yours sincerely,

WALTER BOYES, Secretary
The Oriental Institute Museum

LEFT: Figure 7. *Top*, photograph of the gold hoard taken for media circulation (Megiddo B 3206); *bottom*, a modern-day image of the gold-foil twin heads (ISACM A21055).

ABOVE: Figure 8. Letter of request from W. Boyes to Gilberston and Son, January 1938.

OPPOSITE: Figure 9. The special exhibition *Megiddo: A City Unearthed, A Past Imagined*. Photographs by Tom Van Eynde.

copy made as a wedding gift for Loud, and in 1941 two more for Mrs. Henry D. Sharpe of Providence, Rhode Island. All were produced by Gilberston and Son, not from the original bowl but from ISAC's own facsimile.

Like the ivories, the gold hoard continues to intrigue both scholars and the public, with some pieces resisting easy explanations of function or origin. Yet Megiddo was not unique in its gilded mystery. At Tell el-ʿAjjul, an archaeological site located just south of modern-day Gaza City, British archaeologist Sir William M. Flinders Petrie excavated three Bronze Age jewelry hoards in the 1930s, the items now housed in the British Museum, the Ashmolean Museum, and the Rockefeller Archaeological Museum—evidence that such deposits were a broader phenomenon of Canaanite elite society. In fact, Megiddo itself yielded more than a dozen hoards spanning the Late Bronze and Iron I periods, ranging from palace treasures to household stashes of portable wealth. By the Iron Age (ca. 1200–550 BCE), the character of these caches had shifted: under the floor of a domestic room (AA 2012), archaeologists found a linen-wrapped bundle of hacksilver—cut fragments of jewelry and ingots. Unlike the princely deposits of the Late Bronze Age, these pared-down pieces speak to a changing economy—silver less as splendor, more as currency, to be weighed out for trade or melted down for reuse.

The storied ivories and opulent gold hoard from Megiddo did not travel a straight line from ground to gallery. Following their celebrated rediscovery, each piece followed its own path, marked by stabilization, photography, travel, exhibition, replication, restoration, division, publication, and (re)interpretation. Their most recent stop is the ISAC Museum's special exhibition *Megiddo: A City Unearthed, A Past Imagined*. Marking 100 years since the beginning of the Megiddo Expedition, the exhibition examines not only what was unearthed but also what was imagined: a site transformed into a stage for institutional ambition, philanthropic vision, and global storytelling (fig. 9). Reconstructing these layered object biographies is very much a labor of love that involves careful tracing through archival records nearly a century old. Whether complete, fragmented, restored, or copied, each of these pieces animates a rich story of how archaeological finds continue to move through time.

MEGIDDO: A CITY UNEARTHED, A PAST IMAGINED

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TECHNOLOGY AS A BRIDGE TO THE MUSEUM

by Kea Johnston

As part of my role as the first joint ISAC–Field Museum postdoctoral scholar, I am working on ways to make building 3D models of objects in museum collections quicker, cheaper, and more reliable. While testing software that I wrote to automate this process, I am digitizing more than two hundred decorated Meroitic pottery vessels and fragments in ISAC's collection using structure-from-motion (SfM) photogrammetry. SfM photogrammetry involves building a 3D model from systematically taken 2D photographs.

Potsherds are my least favorite thing to work with. Sherds, or pieces of broken pottery, are hard to photograph and process because they are so thin relative to their height and width. It is easy enough to get nice, sharp pictures of the front or back, but getting the edge into focus means that the rest of the sherd's surface becomes blurry, despite adjustments to the camera's settings. Blurry photos make for inaccurate, misshapen models.

When finding points in common among all my photographs, the computer will look for "areas of interest" in each picture and try to match them with areas of interest in other pictures—these matches are called *tie points*. The computer will use the tie points to predict where in space each picture was taken. Once it figures that out, it can use the location of these tie points to build a model. Insulting though it might be to a ceramicist, the computer rarely finds thin cross sections of pottery interesting, and there are very few tie points on the edges of pottery. So usually what pops up when the computer is done aligning the photographs is a nice model of the front of the sherd and a nice model of the back of the sherd, stuck together at an odd angle in a bubbling, tumorous sandwich (fig. 1).

My favorite things to digitize, on the other hand, are Meroitic cups. These eggshell-thin vessels are meticulously made and painted with animals, plants, and geometric patterns. The artists who painted them borrowed motifs from Greek, Roman, and Egyptian traditions and mixed them with local ones, creating new motifs for Nubian audiences. ISAC's collection of Meroitic pots comes mostly from Meroitic graves excavated at Qustul and Ballana in the 1960s in anticipation of the rising waters of the Aswan High Dam.

When I photograph a cup for building a model, I assess whether it needs to be supported on the turntable. If it does, I make a little nest of beanbags to hold it upright and still as I rotate and photograph it. When rotating the turntable, I try to imagine the hands of a clock and take a photograph at each hour. When I finish a full rotation, I adjust the camera to a higher angle and go around the clock again. After I get to a camera angle of about 75 degrees, I turn the cup over and start again, taking a picture at every hour of the clock and adjusting the angle of the camera back down, from 75 degrees to 45 and finally 20. I can take a photograph every three "hours" if the cup is upside down, but because of the thin lip of the cup, I must take more pictures when it is right side up. Taking the pictures takes about twenty minutes per vessel or sherd.

I make sure the color is consistent in all the photos and import them into a program I wrote that directs several pieces of other software in all the necessary steps to build a model. If all goes well, the program creates a new model in five to ten minutes (fig. 2).

When all does go well, it is cause for excitement. As fun as it is when something works on the computer, it's even more fun to imagine future scholars seeing a sherd that hadn't been previously photographed or being able to examine from their desktop the coils of clay inside a Meroitic cup that give clues as to how it was made. Maybe they will notice a new detail about its construction or decoration.

The models are a basic tool that the ISAC Museum can use to reach both visitors and scholars. At the opening of the ISAC Museum's current special exhibition, *Megiddo: A City Unearthed, A Past Imagined*, in September, 3D prints of models of Megiddo ivories in ISAC's collection gave visitors the chance to touch replicas of the fragile pieces and to examine their details up close. They also gave conservators durable objects on which to demonstrate their techniques when talking about the conservation work done on the ivories. At the Field Museum, work is underway to conserve the museum's Middle Kingdom Egyptian funerary boat, found to the south of the pyramid of Senusret III at Dahshur. My software will be used to automatically build orthomosaics—large, accurate, top-down panoramas of each board of the Dahshur boat—so that scholars have a detailed record of tool marks and pigment use on each plank.

I spend a lot of time during my postdoctoral fellowship thinking of ways to use technology to improve the work of conservators, and to allow scholars and the public to interact with ISAC's collections in ways that have not been possible in the past. As museums are facing significant challenges, technology can help them educate students and collaborate with scholars and the public, allowing museums to act as hubs in a network of knowledge sharing that connects scholars, the public, and the communities whose ancestors created and cared for the objects in the museum's collections.

It was with this idea in mind that I organized a conference in May 2025 titled "Technology as a Bridge to the Museum." The conference featured talks by eighteen scholars, museum professionals, and interactive-media specialists from around the world, who spoke about how they use technology to share museum collections with students, scholars, and the general public.

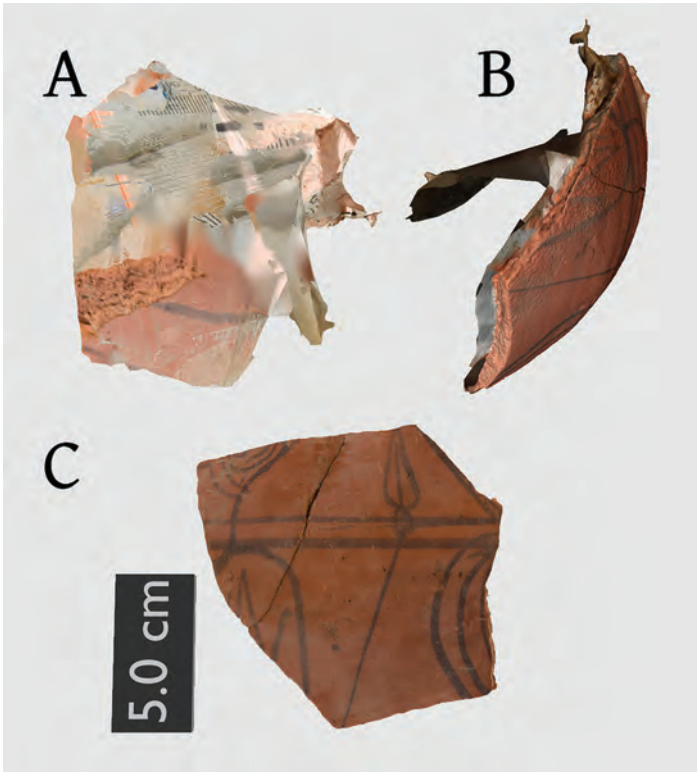
Since the speakers at the conference work in a variety of fields and at different types of museums, the conference gave them the opportunity not only to present their work but also to connect with others working on similar projects in different fields, whom they may not have encountered otherwise.

For example, Mengge Cao (University of Chicago) and Rita Lucarelli (University of California, Berkeley) both spoke about their projects, which use virtual reality (VR) to reunite objects that were removed long ago from their original contexts. These virtual reconstructions help to illuminate the meaning of the objects in their original contexts and how they were dispersed. Dr. Cao works on the Dispersed Chinese Art Digitization Project (bit.ly/UChicagoDCADP), a collaborative effort involving Xi'an Jiaotong University, Tsinghua University, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art to reconstruct the interiors of two buildings in Zhihua Temple, a Buddhist monastery built in the fifteenth century in Beijing. The temple's intricately carved ceilings were removed and sold during the political turmoil of the early twentieth century, and this project allows users to virtually tour the reconstructed temple and brings together the life stories of those who encountered the ceilings across time and space.

Dr. Lucarelli's project virtually reconstructs the tomb of Psamtik in Saqqara, Egypt, a monument that is closed to the public. This tomb takes the form of a room-sized, box-shaped sarcophagus in which Psamtik's monumental stone anthropoid sarcophagus was originally placed. The lid of this anthropoid sarcophagus is now at Berkeley. Dr. Lucarelli's project allows students to visit the tomb virtually, to see the sarcophagus lid in its original setting, and to read the text that is carved on the sarcophagus by clicking on the hieroglyphs. Though Dr. Lucarelli and Dr. Cao are both working on large VR projects that involve virtually recontextualizing museum objects, they had not previously met and can now share techniques and new approaches to the challenges of developing VR experiences.

Digital artifacts are ephemeral. Webpages disappear when funds for server maintenance run out. Video games are unplayable when the systems that run them can no longer be updated. Digital photographs, audio recordings, and 3D models must all be copied to new media periodically in case the old copies wear out or the cloud storage company goes out of business. Therefore, at this conference, the digital projects themselves were less important than the lessons learned from them—lessons that can be applied in other fields and in the future. For example, several speakers at the conference discussed their collaborations with Native Americans and other Indigenous groups to digitize and replicate cultural objects and ensure that Indigenous groups have control over what happens to the digital copies. The speakers at the conference discussed the rules they had followed and refined to ensure that their work was fair and just. These rules and the stories of what did and did not work are useful for any collaboration between museums and descendent communities, regardless of whether the objects collected were botanical specimens or artifacts of cultural heritage.

For those interested in the "Technology as a Bridge to the Museum" conference, a proceedings volume is forthcoming and will be available for purchase as a hard copy or for free as a digital download on ISAC's publications page. Because the publication deals with a diverse array of topics and includes papers written by both industry professionals and scholars, I am trying to ensure that it is as accessible as possible to the curious reader. After all, not even the cleverest scholar can be expected to understand all the jargon in all fields. I hope the various digital projects will draw readers into areas of scholarship previously unfamiliar to them, and I hope the lessons drawn from these projects will inspire many more to come. As for the Meroitic potsherds and cups, you can see most of them on ISAC's Sketchfab page (Sketchfab.com/UChicagoISAC), along with other pieces in ISAC's collection that I have digitized in the course of my work.



LEFT: Figure 1. Attempts to build a model of Meroitic sherd E33064B. *A*, Oops. *B*, Better, at least on one side. *C*, After several more retries, the final model.

ABOVE: Figure 2. 3D model of a Meroitic cup from the site of Qustul, E21472.

KITES IN CONTEXT
2025 SEASON

by Yorke M. Rowan, Austin Chad Hill, Morag M. Kersel, and Blair Heidkamp

The Kites in Context (KiC) project explores Neolithic hunting and herding networks in the Black Desert of eastern Jordan (fig. 1). Kites, named by early twentieth-century pilots who spotted these structures with long tails from above, are monumental, prehistoric hunting traps built across the landscape of Jordan and Syria (fig. 2). Supported by the National Science Foundation and jointly sponsored by ISAC and the University of Pennsylvania, KiC investigates these constructions through pedestrian survey, excavation, scientific dating, and high-precision mapping with drones.

Once thought to serve as walls and enclosures for herding animals, desert kites in Jordan are now widely considered to have been built by hunters as animal traps. Yet many questions remain surrounding these enigmatic structures, over 2,000 of which have been documented in Jordan alone. Why were so many built? Were they used simultaneously or sequentially? Were they all constructed during the Neolithic (9,000–8,000 years ago), or did their construction continue through millennia? How did the kites actually function? The KiC team is actively working on answering these and other questions.

Our second season of KiC (2023) witnessed dramatic flooding that kept the team pinned down for five days. This flooding and a very rough track squashed attempts to visit the previously unexplored area of Bakhita. Two years later, in April 2025, we were able to conduct a brief reconnaissance of Bakhita. During this initial visit, we wanted to identify a passable access route. We mapped the area using drones and examined structures, selecting a large undisturbed building for excavation during our May/June field season. We also identified a good place to build our camp (fig. 3)—something we are more mindful of after experiencing the great flood of 2023.

Running from May 16 to June 19, 2025, the third season of the KiC project included students from the University of Chicago, University College London, University of Connecticut, University of Texas at Austin, University of Pennsylvania, and the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay. We had two primary goals for this season. One was mapping using our drones (Phantom 4 RTK, DJI Mini Pro) to build a database of 3D models, digital elevation data, and ortho imagery of kites and other features to document the extensive network of animal traps in this part of the Jordanian landscape.

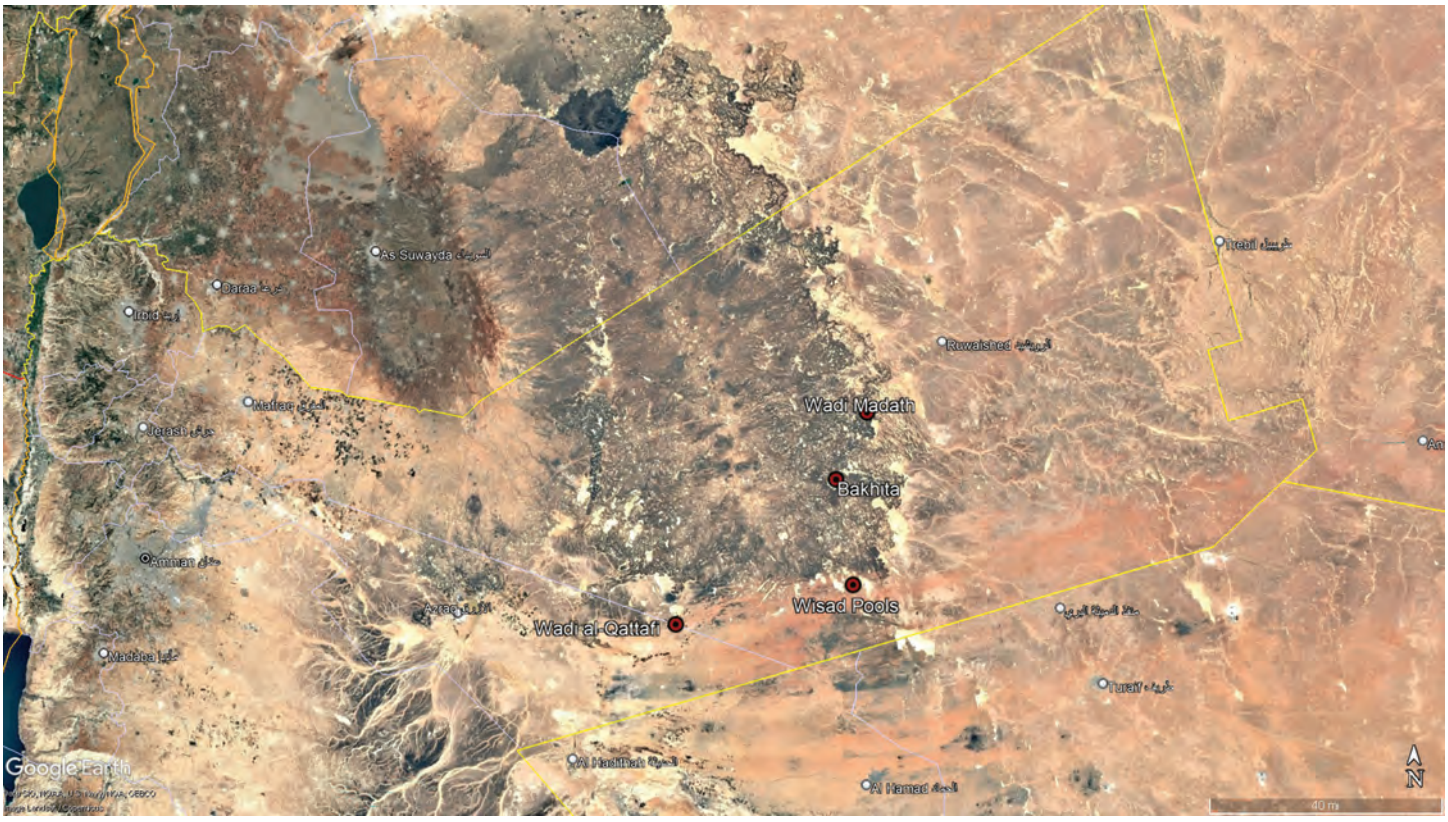


Figure 1. Map of eastern Jordan.

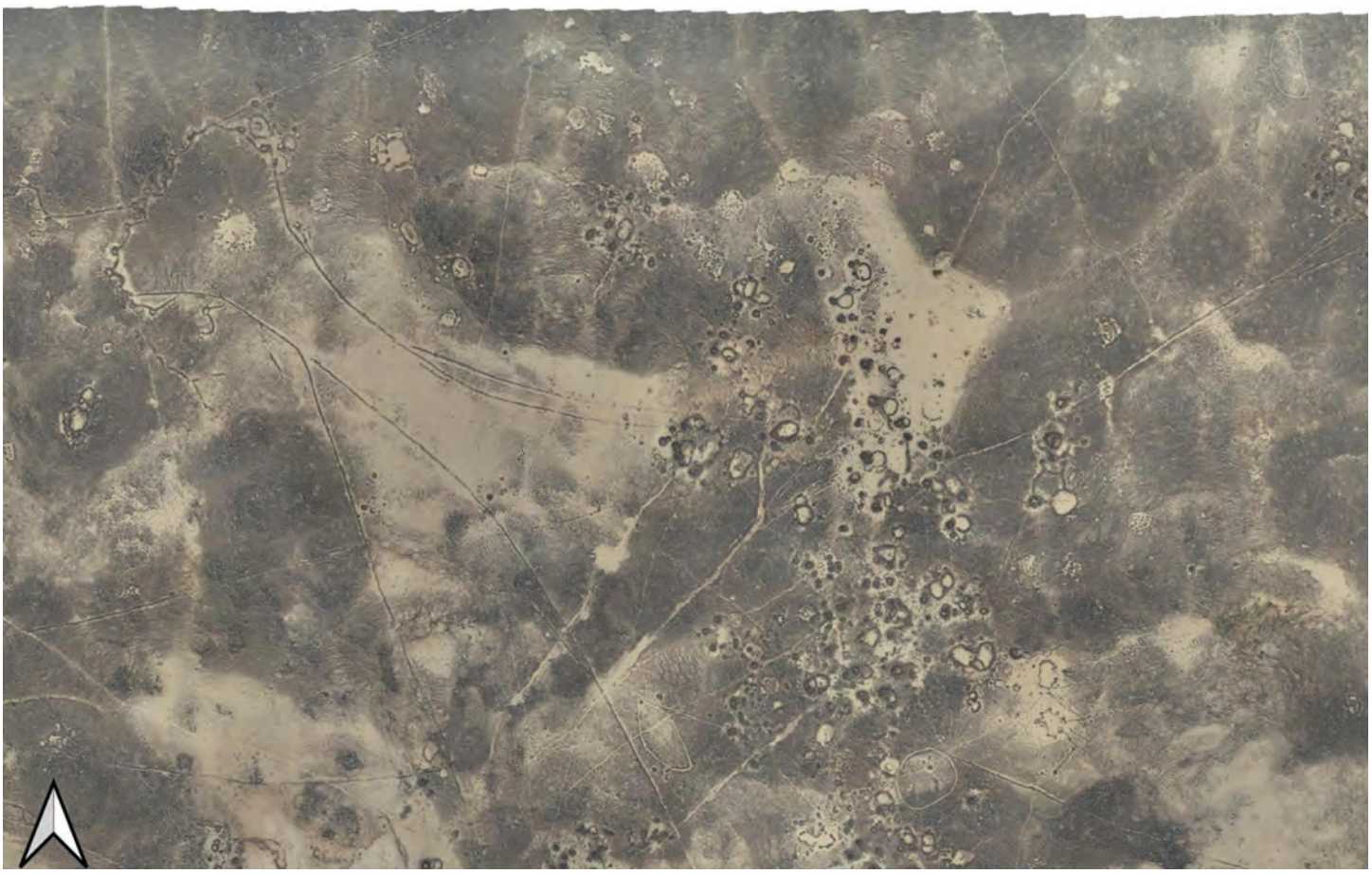


Figure 2. Orthophoto of the central area of Bakhita, with a desert kite in the upper left part of the image.

Figure 3. Camp at the new site of Bakhita.

Figure 4. Oblique aerial view of a kite in the central Black Desert between Safawi and Ruwaished.

Figure 5. Oblique photo of a kite impacted by farming and development near Azraq.

This high-resolution data will allow us to consider how the kites were constructed and functioned relative to local topography, wadi (streambed) channels, and other geographic or human features. The other major focus was excavation of a Neolithic building that may be associated with the nearby kites.

DRONE SURVEY

The aerial survey builds on our earlier surveys, conducted as part of the ISAC Eastern Badia Archaeological Project, at Wadi al-Qattafi and Wisad Pools, both located on the southern edge of the Jordanian Black Desert (fig. 1), as well as the two previous KiC seasons. For 2025, our primary goal was to document the area of Bakhita, mapping the kites around Bakhita and comparing this region with other parts of eastern Jordan. We surveyed approximately four square kilometers around Bakhita, serving as a comprehensive basemap and a source of high-resolution mapping data (fig. 2). Additionally, we mapped approximately fifteen kites in the chain that passes through Bakhita, significantly expanding the recording of kite chains on the eastern boundary of the Black Desert. Our permission to fly drones in other areas of the Black Desert included approximately six kites in the center of the *harra*, accessible along the highway, identifying over thirty kites clustered together east of Safawi (fig. 4) and seventeen kites on the edge of the Azraq wetlands where modern development is destroying prehistoric structures (fig. 5). During the ten days of mapping, we recorded some 18,500 images with the two drones. This massive collection of drone imagery will serve as a robust comparative collection of kite variability across the eastern desert.

EXCAVATION OF BUILDING 1

Building 1 (B-1) was selected for investigation due to its size and lack of damage (fig. 6). A thick layer of collapsed basalt stones covering the structure preserved ancient features, sediment, and artifacts, leading us to conclude that it was largely intact and undisturbed. We could see two roughly circular features below the layer of collapsed stone, hinting at architectural integrity. In addition, a platform attached to the northeastern side of the building resembles one previously identified at Wisad Pools (W66). The platform is an oval stone feature three meters in diameter, constructed of medium-sized flat basalt slabs, and defined by slightly larger slabs along the perimeter.

A well-defined northeast entryway to the main cell from the exterior of the building consists of flat, upright slab stones along the north wall of the entrance, the southeast wall of the entryway being the main cell wall. At each end of the entrance were threshold stones, one at the entrance to the interior of the main cell, and the other at the outer limit of the threshold under the very edge of a stone that was a part of the eastern platform construction. This entryway was intentionally blocked in a later phase, a puzzling element of the building's use.

The interior of the east wall was bordered by very well fit paving stones. To the west of the northern standing stone of the main cell wall, a hard-packed surface included a few small, flat stones that separated the northern surface from the upper part of a hearth inside the main cell, directly in front of the western threshold. Throughout the western cell, small, mysterious fragmented pieces of thin, red and white layered material were found along with a fair amount of

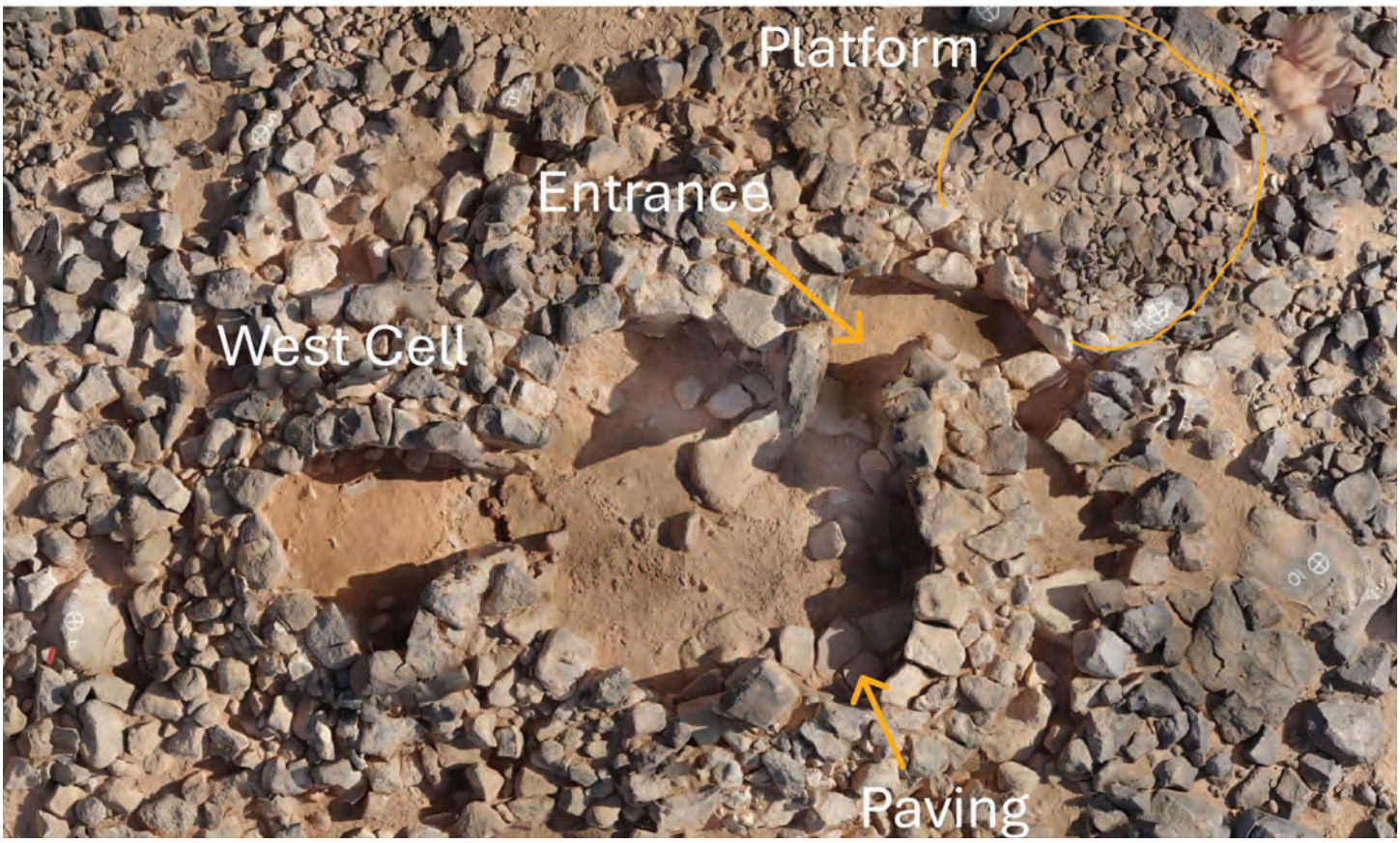
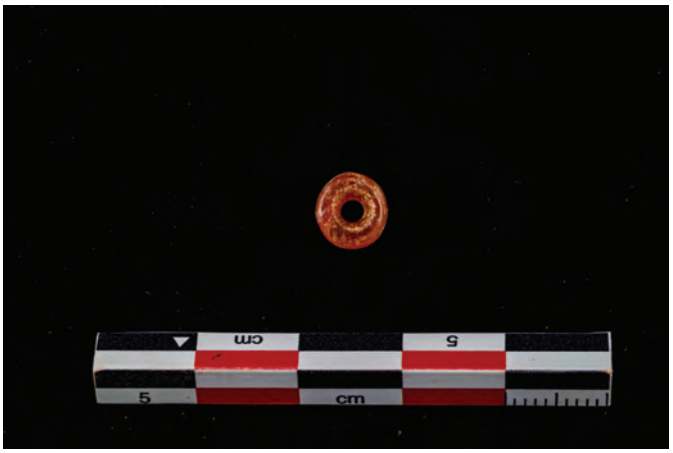


Figure 6. Orthophoto of Building 1: platform (upper right), entrance, main cell with paving, and west cell.

charcoal mixed into the sediment. The earliest phase in the west cell exposed a small layer of fine, light-gray ash derived from a hearth defined by a line of stones separating an alcove of the west cell (fig. 7), which appeared quite different from the other hearths we uncovered.

Finds from the building included chipped-stone debris and tools (particularly burin spalls—very small, thin flakes—and drills), flaked basalt tools, beads and bead blanks, and a few ground-stone items (primarily handstones). A few projectile points (fig. 8) were recovered from the building, while a few others were collected from the vicinity. From the artifacts we recovered, we are sure that bead production was a significant activity in this building. In addition to 122 beads, at least 62 blanks (the start of a bead) were recovered, while raw material for making beads (carnelian, Dabba marble, red limestone) was also found (fig. 9). A few pieces of mother-of-pearl (evidence of long distance exchange) were recovered, including a pendant (fig. 10). An unusual red cone-shaped object, probably ochre, was found directly below the pavement (fig. 11). Although only a small number of animal bones were collected, we hope they will shed light on the types of animals that were hunted (particularly gazelles) and herded (such as sheep or goats).

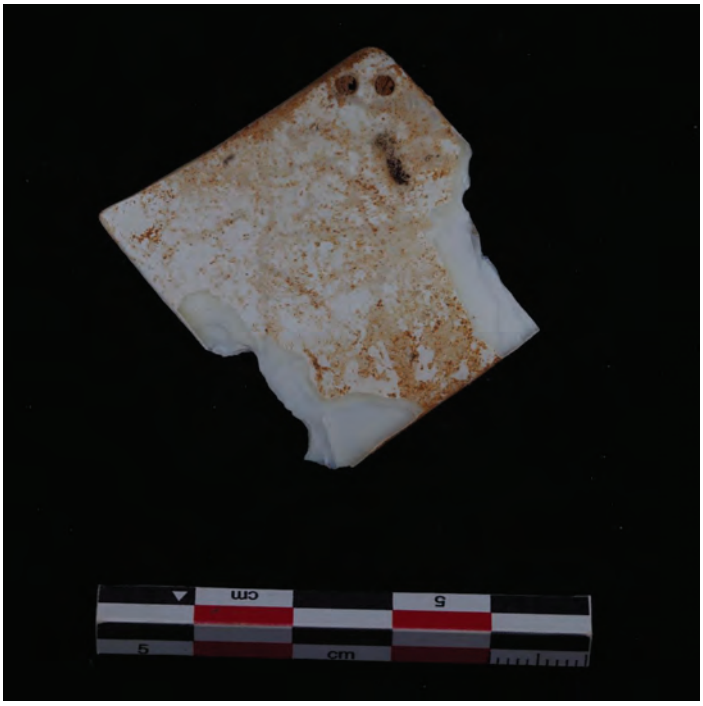
Artifacts date this structure to the Late Neolithic, roughly 6600–5500 cal BCE, but radiocarbon dating of select samples will provide greater precision. In addition to the carbon samples, sediment samples collected for optically stimulated luminescence will help date a kite and its attached walls. Finally, the team built a section of kite wall as an experimental project to estimate the time that would have been required to build a kite (fig. 12). The team looks forward to returning to Bakhita in 2026 to investigate new structures and kites in the hope of answering more questions surrounding these fascinating structures.



ABOVE: Figure 7. Hearth built into alcove of west cell.

UPPER RIGHT: Figure 8. Projectile point.

LOWER RIGHT: Figure 9. Carnelian(?) bead.



LEFT: Figure 10. Mother-of-pearl pendant.

ABOVE: Figure 11. Red cone, probably ochre, found under paving stones.

Figure 12. Team members with their experimental kite wall.

MY FAVORITE OBJECT
THE WATCHFUL SPHINX OF ANATOLIA

by Steven Essex

Have you ever seen a sphinx in person?

I ask this question at the beginning of my tour at the ISAC Museum, where I have been a docent since 2017. The answer is usually a resounding no from the group. I then reveal that I will show them one of these hybrid human-lion creatures within the next fifty minutes.

When we get to the Henrietta Herbolsheimer Syro-Anatolian Gallery, I ask everyone to stop. I proclaim, "Behold the sphinx from Anatolia!" Peering out at them from the display case is a fragmentary sculpture of a resting creature with large, watchful eyes set in a round, human head that rests on a lion's upper body. The sphinx is skillfully carved of grayish basalt, a strong, volcanic-lava rock. It was found by ISAC's Syrian-Hittite Expedition during its 1936 excavation season at the Neo-Hittite city of Tell Tayinat ("mound of Tayinat"), located in the fertile Amuq Valley of present-day southeastern Turkey.

What draws me to this approximately 3,000-year-old object is how people react to it. They are surprised that a sphinx could be so small (it is about ten inches high and ten inches wide). After all, the famous Great Sphinx of Giza in Egypt is about as long as six city transit buses and as high as a six-story building.

People immediately draw closer to the Anatolian sphinx when I next point out that it is female. In fact, sphinxes in Anatolia and the Levant were often female—unlike in Egypt, where sphinxes usually depicted a male pharaoh. The sphinx in the Syro-Anatolian Gallery has long hair curled at the ends, a style known as "Hathor locks," after the Egyptian goddess who wore her hair in a similar manner. The sculpture's M-shaped hairpin clasps the headband. It is similar to a copper-alloy hairpin dating to 1200–550 BCE, exhibited next to the sphinx in the display case and excavated by the same expedition at the nearby site of Alişar Höyük in 1931 (ISACM A10693).

Female sphinx. Basalt, unidentified inlays. Turkey, Tell Tayinat, Building I, Iron Age I–II (1200–850 BCE). Excavated in 1936. ISACM A27853. bit.ly/ISACSphinx.

"I don't think Hittite sphinxes ever depict a specific person, either king or queen," Theo van den Hout, Arthur and Joann Rasmussen Professor Emeritus of Hittite and Anatolian Languages, told me. He added, "At least, there is no evidence of writing on any of the sphinxes, in either cuneiform or Anatolian hieroglyphs, which would be the only way to prove that. A problem is that we don't know the Hittite word for 'sphinx,' so the Hittite texts cannot help us in determining their function or identity."

Larger statues excavated at Tell Tayinat in the twenty-first century by the Tayinat Archaeological Project may have been placed at important gates and doorways to serve apotropaic functions (i.e., to intimidate and threaten visitors and ward off evil). The sphinx in the Syro-Anatolian Gallery is small enough to have been portable, which could have made it a useful guardian figure in a variety of places. While we don't know its exact function, it was found in a treasury room of a palace—perhaps it was put there to guard the wealth of the king.

A final note about the watchful sphinx of Anatolia and the Great Sphinx of Giza: both of these enduring figures appear strong and wise, and both are missing a nose, which only adds to their mystery. Neither of them, however, is saying a word about it.

FURTHER READING

Gordon Loud, *The Megiddo Ivories*. Oriental Institute Publications 52. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939. bit.ly/OIP52.

University of Toronto Faculty of Arts & Science. "Archaeologists Uncover 3,000-Year-Old Female Statue at Citadel Gate Complex in Turkey." *University of Toronto Arts & Science News*, August 11, 2017. bit.ly/TorontoTayinat.

The Great Sphinx and pyramids at Giza. Nineteenth-century albumen print from the photographic studio Maison Bonfils. Public domain image, Library of Congress.

MEMBER EVENT

Translating the End:
Art, Science, and the Media of Apocalypse

Thursday, January 22, 2026, 12:00–1:00pm Central, online

In conjunction with the ISAC Museum special exhibition *Megiddo: A City Unearthed, A Past Imagined* (on view through March 15, 2026), join us for a cross-disciplinary conversation on how complex archaeological, artistic, and scientific ideas are translated into compelling narratives and images for the media and wider public.

The discussion will center on press coverage of ISAC's excavations at Megiddo (1925–1939), long imagined as the site of biblical Armageddon; Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson's film *Song for Armageddon* (2017), filmed on location at Megiddo and featured in the exhibition; and the Doomsday Clock, housed at the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy, whose 2026 setting will be announced on January 27. Drawing on these three projects, the speakers will explore different ways we give form to abstract threats and existential anxieties, shaping how we imagine apocalypse, reckon with "the end," and envision the possibility of tomorrow.

Program speakers: Nick Crowe and Ian Rawlinson, British artists and creators of the film *Song for Armageddon*; Daniel Holz, professor in the Departments of Physics and Astronomy and Astrophysics, the Enrico Fermi Institute, and the Kavli Institute for Cosmological Physics, chair of the Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (which sets the hands of the Doomsday Clock), and director of the UChicago Existential Risk Laboratory; and Kiersten Neumann, ISAC Museum curator and curator of *Megiddo: A City Unearthed, A Past Imagined*.

Register at: TranslatingTheEnd.eventbrite.com

THE TEL EN-NASBEH REPLICAS

TRACING THE ORIGIN OF ISAC TEACHING ARTIFACTS

by Samantha Suppes and Tasha Vorderstrasse

The ISAC education department has a collection of object replicas and real pottery that is often used in our K–12 field-trip programs. A recent effort to catalog these objects led to a meta-archaeological investigation into the origins and background of some of this teaching material.

In 2022, ISAC's education department collection was cataloged by two interns as part of the University of Chicago's Youth Internship Program. During the project, one set of objects stood out: a collection of replicas labeled "Tel en-Nasbeh" and "Hebrew University 1999." These labels immediately raised a number of questions. They implied that the material was excavated at the site of Tel en-Nasbeh in Palestine, which is located near the city of Ramallah in the West Bank, but Hebrew University had never carried out excavations there. Further, the main collection of Tel en-Nasbeh material in the United States is housed in the Badè Museum of Biblical Archaeology at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, and derives from excavations conducted by William Frederic Badè between 1926 and 1935. However, there was no indication that the ISAC material was connected to the Badè Museum, whose excavations ended well before the 1999 date on the labels. Aside from the archival documentation that accompanied the object replicas, the only information we had was the fact that they were part of the teaching materials from the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership located at 610 South Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago (www.spertus.edu/).

University of Chicago PhD candidate and ISAC Museum educator Samantha Suppes worked through the materials and archival documents, which included hand-drawn copies of site plans from published excavation reports; laminated images of a separate site, Beer Sheva; a floppy disk with a note on it saying it contained a database; a collection of colorful maps; and a series of inconsistent notes referring to the "excavation."

This collection was likely compiled in the 1990s and seems to reflect a basic knowledge of archaeological methods, such as understanding sites through stratigraphy and the importance of databases, maps, and ceramics. It also reflects a basic understanding of the ancient history of the region. Together these objects could be used to help students better understand how excavations work.

While the materials helpfully outline what is involved in an excavation, the collection has a number of odd errors and discrepancies. As noted above, Tel en-Nasbeh was not being excavated in the 1990s, as the object labels imply. The inclusion of laminated photographs from the site of Beer Sheva was also perplexing, as was the fact that some of the object labels listed stratum levels that do not exist at Tel en-Nasbeh, specifically levels 8, 10, and 11. Additionally, the floppy disk, which had a putty-like adhesive on one side and a note on the other saying it held a database, was found on examination to be empty.

Replica of an Iron Age I (ca. 1200–1000/900 BCE) Philistine figurine of a woman, complete with a copy of a replica archaeological tag that claims the figurine is from En-Nasbeh.

Although this collection did not come with a written or verbal statement of purpose, after reviewing all the available materials Samantha determined that they were likely assembled at some point as a teaching tool for education groups. The inaccurate date and strata numbers on the labels may have been invented to make the fictionalized version of the Tel en-Nasbeh excavations seem more recent and elaborate. Similarly, the empty floppy disk was likely a visual teaching aid to accompany a discussion about the importance of databases, and the photos from Beer Sheva may have been included to show what archaeological sites look like and conflated with Tel en-Nasbeh for teaching purposes.

After Samantha completed her investigation and concluded that the material had been likely put together to function as teaching materials, Tasha Vorderstrasse, ISAC's continuing education program manager, conducted further research on the provenience of the materials and discovered via a 2007 *News & Notes* article that when the Spertus Institute moved to its current space on South Michigan Avenue in 2007, it discontinued its Rosenbaum ARTiFACT Center (AFC), which had been constructed in 1989 as a focus of K–12 archaeological field trips. ISAC subsequently purchased the AFC resources and reconstructed the center, including an imitation archaeological tell, which allowed students to simulate a modern dig site. The information Tasha uncovered also indicated that the materials were likely created by former ISAC teacher services and e-learning coordinator Wendy Ennes and Museum programs assistant Jessica Caracci to accompany the AFC materials when they moved to the ISAC Museum.

Information about Tel en-Nasbeh can be found at bit.ly/JRZorn1 and bit.ly/JRZorn2. For further reading, see Chester C. McCown, *Tell en-Naṣbeh: Excavated under the Direction of the Late William Frederic Badè*, vol. 1, *Archaeological and Historical Results* (Berkeley: Palestine Institute of Pacific School of Religion, 1947); and Jeffrey R. Zorn, "Tell en-Nasbeh: A Re-evaluation of the Architecture and Stratigraphy of the Early Bronze Age, Iron Age and Later Periods" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1993).

ADULT EDUCATION CLASS

Reading the Rosetta Stone:
Introduction to Ptolemaic Hieroglyphs

Mondays, January 26–March 16, 2026, 7:00–9:00pm Central
Live on Zoom and recorded

The Rosetta Stone unlocked the mystery of Egypt's ancient scripts, but few realize that it is written in the last and most elaborate stage of that tradition: Ptolemaic hieroglyphs. This course introduces participants to the refined hieroglyphic inscriptions of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, when Greek and Egyptian traditions met in the great temple complexes of Edfu, Dendera, Philae, Kom Ombo, and Esna.

Rather than a new invention, the Ptolemaic system represents the culmination of earlier linguistic and scribal developments—inviting us to question how truly "Ptolemaic" this system was. The course examines how the script expanded in complexity while remaining governed by the same grammatical and phonetic principles that had structured Egyptian writing for millennia.

Participants will learn to identify common hieroglyphs and words, understand the language's basic structure, and read short selections drawn from authentic temple inscriptions, including portions of the Rosetta Stone itself. This course offers a rigorous yet accessible introduction to Egypt's final hieroglyphic tradition. No prior knowledge is required—only curiosity about how the last Egyptian scribes preserved a civilization's voice after more than 3,000 years.

Instructor: Foy Scalf, PhD, Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, University of Chicago, is a specialist in the languages and scripts of religious texts from Egypt's Late, Ptolemaic, and Roman periods.

Cost: Nonmembers $392, members $314, docents/volunteers/UChicago alumni $157, UChicago Lab/Charter, students, faculty, and staff and Egyptology students enrolled at a university $98.

Registration: bit.ly/ISACReadingRosettaStone

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