

DIYALA PROJECT

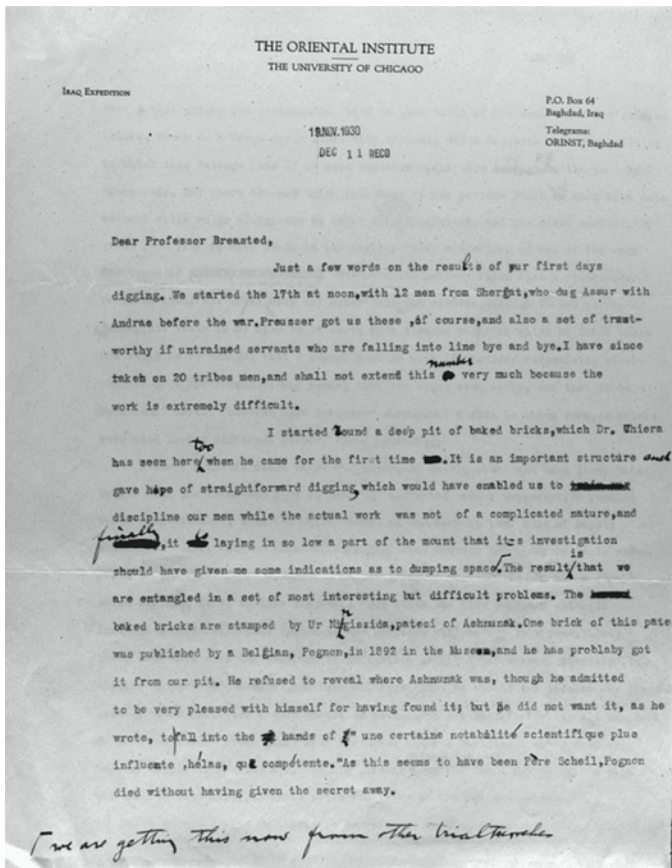
Clemens Reichel

The setup yet is a bit unfamiliar. “Set the F-Stop, shutter speed first. Now adjust the distance.” Ready — hold on! “Did you check the lighting? The lamps may be too low....”

We are in the storage area of the Museum Archives. Just where exactly we are with reference to the outside world I can't tell any more — we have passed too many security doors, turned right angles, and gone up one floor with an elevator. Just like Museum storage, the Archives constitute their own biosphere. Low humidity and a constant comfortable 68 degrees Fahrenheit. Comfortable for documents maybe, but I already feel the first shivers come over me — after all, it is summer and 85 degrees outside.... Karen Terras, my assistant, came better prepared — she brought a sweater. Just as well. She will be in here for hours more to come.

Another day of work for the Diyala Project. And yet, what we are doing is somewhat unfamiliar to all of us. Before us are large stacks of papers — letters, telegraphs, memos. Materials from the Director's Correspondence files. Some pages yellowed by age. A lot of them machine-typed, others written in a careful hand, often beautiful enough to be framed. Right now, a large

stack dating from 1930/1931 is in front of us. February 13, 1931: a letter from James Henry Breasted to Henri Frankfort, Director of the Diyala Expedition: “My Dear Frankfort,” A copy of an outgoing letter to the Iraq Expedition, carefully marked and stamped as such. Frankfort's reply — incredibly, written not much more than a week later (When did the mail service last work that well?) — shows up a few pages down: “Dear Prof. Breasted....” It is the sheer volume of mail that astonishes the most. Two, three, sometimes four letters per week sent each way. Frankfort's letter containing detailed descriptions of events on site, major finds made, visits by dignitaries. The Iraqi crown prince, the Director General of Antiquities, Max Mallowan and his wife Agatha Christie. The immediacy of the narrative, often relating events in progress with the outcome not yet certain, makes the events come alive. One can almost smell the dust of the site, the petroleum lamp under which these



FROM THE FIELD: Letter from Henri Frankfort to James Henry Breasted informing him about the first results of excavation work at Tell Asmar (December 1930)

letters were written. A sandstorm here, a workers' revolt there. Even a holdup, in which one of the excavation vehicles was shot at and pierced by bullets (though, thankfully, no one was injured). Replies by James Henry Breasted and his son Charles (who took care of much of the Institute's business while his father was away) are detailed, eloquent, occasionally admonishing the young Frankfort for his youthful enthusiasm. I cannot help comparing the pitiful semblances of a field correspondence from Hamoukar — usually consisting of two e-mails a month and rudimentary cell phone text messages — with this amazing hall of records.

I also can't help putting myself back in Frankfort's shoes, trying to imagine what the world of archaeology in Iraq was like in 1930, the year of the Diyala Expedition's first season, and what he hoped to achieve. To be fair, a lot already was known about ancient Mesopotamia by that time. After all, European and American museums had sent archaeological missions to Iraq for almost 100 years to dig (though sometimes the word "plow through" would be more appropriate) sites in search of artifacts that could be added to their collections. Tens of thousands of cuneiform texts re-told Mesopotamia's history in great detail, while monumental reliefs and sculpture as well as tiny cylinder seals bespoke the fine achievements of its craftsmanship. A lot was known about early Mesopotamia's legendary kings such as Naramsin of Akkad, but due to the large and often unsystematic nature of excavations, little was known about the associated material culture. What, for example, did pots and pans look like from which King Naramsin's subordinates ate? What did their houses look like and what were they made of? How did people grind their flour, prepare food, or make their garments? These and many other questions were on Breasted's mind when the Oriental Institute launched its Iraq Expedition in the late 1920s. Between 1930 and 1938, four sites — Tell Agrab, Tell Asmar, Ishchali, and Khafaje — in the Diyala Region northeast of



SITE VISIT: James Henry Breasted (wearing hat) at Tell Asmar (ancient Eshnunna), 1932 or 1933. To his left is Henri Frankfort, to his right is Thorkild Jacobsen, field epigrapher and archaeologist

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MASTER AND STUDENT: James Henry Breasted (standing) and Henri Frankfort in the cella of the Abu Temple at Tell Asmar (1932 or 1933)

Baghdad were excavated, uncovering large temples and palaces, but also vast areas of private houses, manufacturing installations, and city fortifications dating between 3200 and 1800 B.C. This is the time that saw the rise of Mesopotamia's early cities, the emergence of writing and bureaucracy, and the formation of the first large territorial states — Mesopotamia's dawn of history.

Considering the scale of the accomplished archaeological work, it is unfortunate that the excavators ultimately fell short in its publication. While most of the architecture was published in five Oriental Institute Publications (OIP) volumes and four more volumes dedicated to key artifacts such as sculpture, cylinder seals, and pottery, some 15,000 artifacts remained unpublished. In addition to more sculpture, cylinder and stamp seals, these unfortunately included many of the tools that defined daily life for the majority of the people, such as pins, awls, grindstones and whetstones, hoes, and knives. The Diyala publications had contributed a lot to our knowledge of Mesopotamia's early history, but not to its full potential of all excavated materials. In 1992, McGuire Gibson launched the Diyala Project to complete the Oriental Institute's obligation of fully publishing this data. Though data was entered into a database to facilitate its analysis, the project's original name, "Diyala Miscellaneous Object Publication Project," reflected its anticipated outcome — a book publication of all remaining objects. Soon, however, our outlook changed — the number and variety of objects was too large for one book, and the number of available photographs, if used comprehensively, would have resulted in a prohibitively expensive multi-volume publication. Eventually we decided to disseminate the data over a Web-based database at no cost to the end user. This allowed us to include all available illustrations at no extra cost while retaining data searchability and sortability for the end user. Since 2002, George Sundell, the project's data architect, and I have been working on a multi-relational Oracle-based Diyala database. The

first step of this work, the creation of an object database, which was funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities between 2004 and 2006, took significantly longer than anticipated. Too many hurdles had to be overcome, and I cannot thank George enough for his willingness to dive into territories previously unfamiliar to him, such as Web design. I am pleased to report that the data migration to the University's NSIT server has just been completed successfully. There still remains a lot of work to do — data to be edited, descriptions adjusted — but the “point of no return” — so critical for any data publication on the Web — has passed.

During data entry and editing, however, we realized conceptual shortcomings in our data layout. Physical object descriptions could be verified if the object was available for inspection, but for its archaeological context we could not get past the field records of the excavators. This is where things got complicated: some descriptions of object proveniences were short and rudimentary, others were lengthy and detailed but unsystematic, and sometimes we have several, even contradictory, proveniences for the same object. We tried to standardize these descriptions as much as we could, but we cannot pretend to know the solution to all problems. In the end it became clear that we had to add the field records as left by the excavators to our database to give the end users the possibility of examining the data for themselves. This was the birth of step two of our project, the creation of a “Virtual Diyala Archive.” In this step we include all available archival materials — field notebooks, plans, object and locus cards, field registers — in the database. This was a gigantic undertaking, requiring the scanning and indexing of thousands of pages of material. Luckily, the NEH saw the importance of this step and in July 2007 awarded us a \$331,000 grant to complete our work. Having faced numerous obstacles during step one — the launch of the Diyala database itself — I am happy to report that step two has been moving along quite smoothly. Many field records have already been scanned and indexed, leaving the field plans and the correspondence files as two of the remaining major challenges. Alexandra Witsell, one of our student assistants, started the arduous task of scanning these oversized plans. So far she has scanned 260; at an average size of 300–400 megabytes per plan, these have added to the storage challenges that the Diyala Project has faced since its inception. We hope to complete the scanning of the plans by winter 2009. Nobody really could conceive of the scope of the other challenge, the sighting and incorporation of the letters from the Director's Correspondence files in the Oriental Institute Museum Archives. At present I still cannot put a figure on how much data there is, but the number of pages is literally in the thousands. Many of them are fragile, multi-page letters often are stapled together — in short, it became clear to us that, no matter how hard we tried, we could not scan all the relevant material in the time available to us. An idea came to

THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO		F.O. Box 64 Baghdad, Iraq Telegrams: ORINST, Baghdad
IRAQ EXPEDITION	December 27, 1930	
BUDGET ESTIMATE Season 1931 - 1932		
With living and working conditions as at present.		
Salaries	\$20,000.	
Travel	8,000.	
Labor	7,500.	
Household	6,000.	
Transport	4,500.	
Equipment (including Library)	1,000.	
Postage & Stationery	500.	
Guarding	1,500.	
Contingent	<u>3,000.</u>	
Total	\$34,000.	
Additional man at Khafaje	<u>2,500.</u>	
	\$36,500.	
(STATEMENT NO. 2)		

BETTER TIMES: Budget estimate by Henri Frankfort for work at Tell Asmar and Khafaje (\$56,000 in 1930 corresponds to about \$687,000 in 2008)

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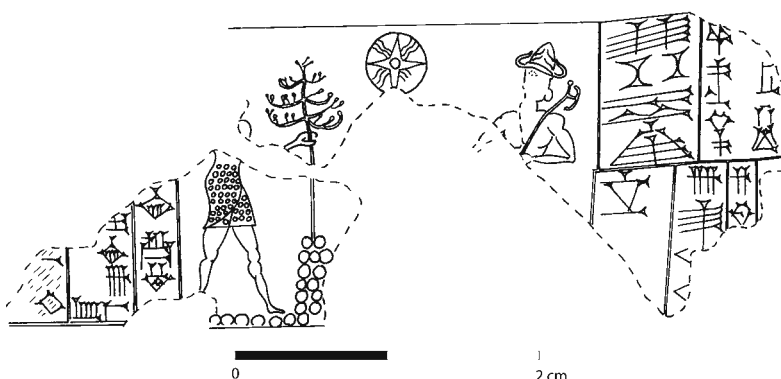
me last year when I needed copies of a large number of documents to prepare a lecture: instead of scanning them I simply photographed them, which took a fraction of the time. I never intended these photos to be more than record shots, but when I compared the quality of the photographs with that of the scans I could not see much difference. We did not take this decision lightly, but in the end, old-fashioned photography won out over scanning. That is, if you call a top-end (12 megapixel) digital SLR (single lens reflex) camera with macro lens and a professional copy stand with color-neutral halogen lamps specifically made for document reproduction “old fashioned.” Seeing the stand with camera put together was an awesome experience, but it was topped by the quality of the photographs. As I zoomed in to the paper matrix of one of the letters with no loss of sharpness, I realized that we had taken the right decision. The overall organization of this sub-project fell into the hands of Karen Terras, previously one of our project volunteers whom I had hired as project coordinator in October 2007. Using a digital SLR is a lot more difficult than using a point-and-shoot camera, but soon Karen had (re-)familiarized herself with the benchmarks of manual photography. Since June she has been joined by student assistant Mike Fisher in taking photographs.

It is difficult to not get lost in the correspondence files. In reading through them, the skeleton of the Diyala excavation’s history is fleshing out. Little did I know that Frankfort’s original intent had not been to work in the Diyala region, but to seek a joint project with the German team at Uruk/Warka. To us younger scholars, Frankfort’s intellectual legacy has elevated him to a quasi-divine status. His letters, however, show all too clearly that in 1930, this 33-year-old future director of the Diyala Expedition still had a lot to learn. Following his arrival in Baghdad he initially bought a large number of antiquities from dealers there, still a legal endeavor in Iraq in those days. Breasted’s impatience with Frankfort’s careless squander of money becomes increasingly apparent in letters and telegrams, culminating in a lecture to young Frankfort in a letter dated April 9, 1930:

“... if the dealers in Baghdad are convinced that we will go on paying high prices for things from our own mounds, this impression on their part will act as a decided stimulus to continue plundering these mounds even after we have taken charge of them. We thus start a vicious circle, which we have no means of stopping except by refusing to pay. I appreciate your interest in our collections, but I think that at this point we shall have to call a halt and, as indicated in one of my earlier letters, throw all our funds into the fieldwork.

One cannot but admire Breasted’s foresight and academic sincerity by putting archaeological work over the acquisition of prestigious objects for the Oriental Institute Museum. Seventy-eight years later his words ring painfully true to those of us who have dealt with the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War, the vandalizing of the Iraq National Museum and the looting of Iraq’s major archaeological sites. Fortunately, Frankfort’s own publication record shows that this lesson eventually sunk in with him. His *Stratified Cylinder Seals from the Diyala Region*, published in 1955 (OIP 72), which presents the Diyala cylinder seals sorted by archaeological provenience, remains a visionary book that must have taken seal experts — so used to cataloging seals by style, not by level and locus — by surprise.

Much work remains to be done, but at the present pace I am hopeful that the complete Diyala Archive will be available online in the next two years. Following my own dissertation research, I am pleased to report that our own student assistants have started using the Diyala material for their own work to show its continued potential for research. Since 2006 Alexandra Witsell has been working on her dissertation on the socio-economic role of Early Dynastic temples in the Diyala



HIDDEN TREASURES: Two clay sealings with impressions of the seal of Usurawassu, city ruler of Eshnunna (Tell Asmar) around 1980 B.C. Though post-Ur III period in date, its style betrays strong influences from the Akkadian period (ca. 2300–2150 B.C.). Below: composite reconstruction

region. Mike Fisher has started to work on the seals and sealings from the Northern Palace at Tell Asmar. My own work on the Ur III, Isin-Larsa, and Old Babylonian sealings from the Palace of the Rulers at Eshnunna, having experienced much delay due to over-commitment elsewhere, has regained momentum; since 2007 Angela Altenhofen has worked as the project's illustrator and has created dozens of composite drawings of these seal impressions.

The bad news about a Web-based publication is that it never will be finished. The good news about a Web-based publication is that it never *has* to be finished. As both technology and our own knowledge of the subject increase, as comments from scholars worldwide give us feedback on our work, I am confident that many things will change and be improved upon. Having created a Web-based database, we hope to provide a template for future online projects, not only at the Oriental Institute but elsewhere as well. Archaeological data not only is lost by site destruction but also by non-publication. It is my hope that the Diyala Database will ensure that the great achievements of pioneering archaeologists such as Henri Frankfort will never be forgotten.