

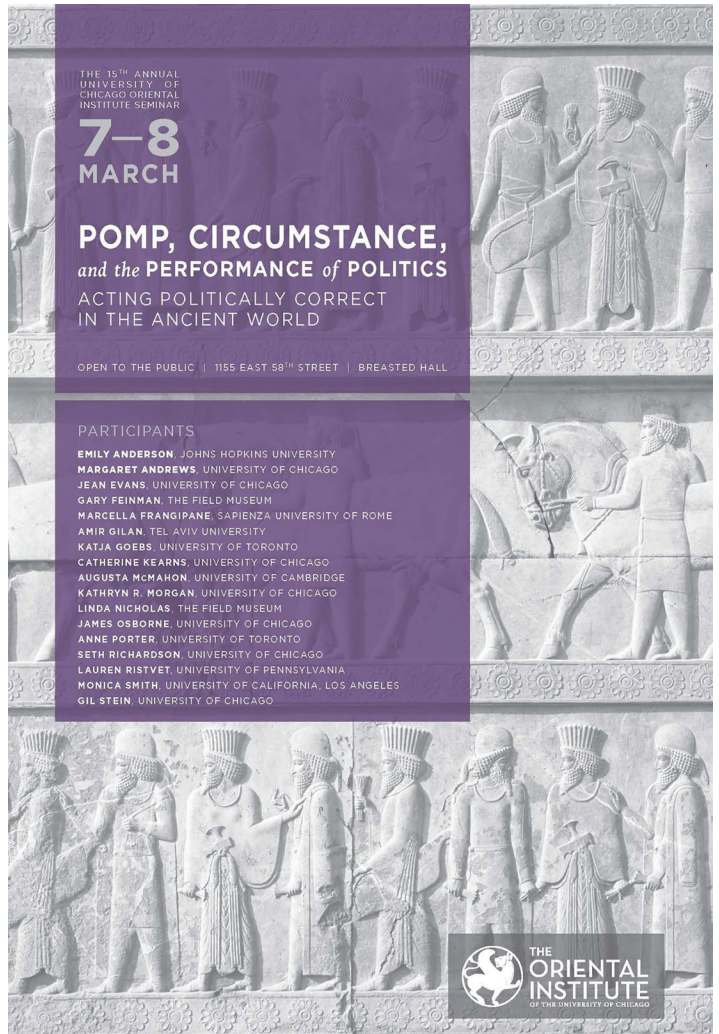
ORIENTAL INSTITUTE SEMINAR (OIS)

Pomp, Circumstance, and the Performance of Politics

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The fifteenth Annual Oriental Institute Seminar (*Pomp, Circumstance, and the Performance of Politics: Acting “Politically Correct” in the Ancient World*) took place March 7–8, 2019, making it the inaugural event of the newly renovated Breasted Hall. The conference investigated the applicability of the hot-button contemporary concept of “political correctness” to the ancient world, inviting scholars working in a wide range of disciplines and periods to consider how we reconstruct the often unspoken rules and norms governing public life in past societies, the ways in which they are established, and the moments at which they shift. Arthur and Lee Herbst’s generous support of the event allowed us to welcome a diverse panel of sixteen presenters to the Oriental Institute, whose range of perspectives and shared enthusiasm resulted in a lively discussion about the expression and execution of political authority in ancient states. In so doing they embodied what was one of the primary goals of the conference: to reframe politics, in the ancient world as in the modern one, as an ongoing conversation among diverse groups of constituents, in which authority and legitimacy were objects of negotiation, not foregone conclusions.

The conference took place over two days, with an introductory paper, “Rethinking Politics in the Deep Past,” delivered by Field Museum anthropologists Gary Feinman and Linda Nicholas, followed by three interdisciplinary sessions: Making Space, Acting in Space, and Reacting in Space. As the session titles would suggest, many of the papers were grounded in spatial analyses—whether of individual monuments, urban built environments, or farther-flung, but no less human-made, landscapes. Understanding how different kinds of objects and spaces generate activity, limit possibilities for







All images: Steven Townshend.

action, and shape experience, narrative, and memory, was a path many contributors took toward assessing the conditions of public life in past societies, whether through the analysis of an unusual class of zoomorphic pouring vessels from pre-palatial Crete, like Johns Hopkins art historian Emily Anderson; investigating the acoustic qualities of temple courtyards in Mesopotamia, like Cambridge archaeologist Augusta McMahon; or mapping the changing dynamics of state-building liturgical processions in early medieval Rome, like Chicago historian Margaret Andrews. Other participants relied on textual criticism rather than spatial analysis: Amir Gilan, of Tel Aviv University, and Katja Göebs, of the University of Toronto, related peculiar episodes from Hittite and Egyptian history, respectively, in which rulers' self-presentation in text yielded unintended insights into their motivations, intentions, and audiences. Finally, certain presenters went beyond the issue of audience participation or experience to directly interrogate audience response, like Marcella Frangipane, of the University of Rome "La Sapienza," who argued that attempts at ideological manipulation by political elites at the site of Arslantepe, Turkey, in the fourth millennium BCE led to a popular uprising that ended in the total destruction of the site. Considerations of types of performance, accessibility, and the diversity of audiences arose frequently in discussion.





Oriental Institute faculty and staff were integral to the success of the event. OI director Chris Woods opened the conference with words of welcome; sessions were chaired, and the ensuing discussions gracefully moderated, by Jean Evans, Seth Richardson, and Gil Stein; James Osborne gave a paper, as did returning OI PhDs Augusta McMahon (mentioned above) and Anne Porter. The OI's IT manager Knut Boehmer, assistant director of events Polina Kasian, NELC PhD candidate Thalia Lysen, and assistant to the director Mariana Perlinac provided much-needed technical and logistical support, while Charissa Johnson, managing editor in the Pub-

lications Office, and Steven Townshend, editor, went beyond the call of duty in assembling publicity materials for the event, including the beautiful poster, programs, and event photography.

But the work of the Publications Office is never done: submissions for the conference proceedings volume, which will be published in the Oriental Institute Seminar series, have now begun to arrive. In it, contributions will explicitly address questions that arose in the concluding discussion period, foremost among them how reframing ancient politics in terms of performance and audience helps us to acknowledge, or more critically evaluate, the creation, distribution, and limits of political power. In a contemporary political climate in which Foucault's observation that "[e]ach society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true," seems increasingly apt, it is vital that scholars of the ancient world work to better understand the modes, loci, and genealogies of public discourse. Performance as a concept lies at the intersection between what is "true," or real, and what we as a society simply choose to make function as true, however briefly, cynically, or hopefully; the question of audience input is thus a call for us all to interrogate our own agency as political actors, in the present as in the past.