

News & Notes

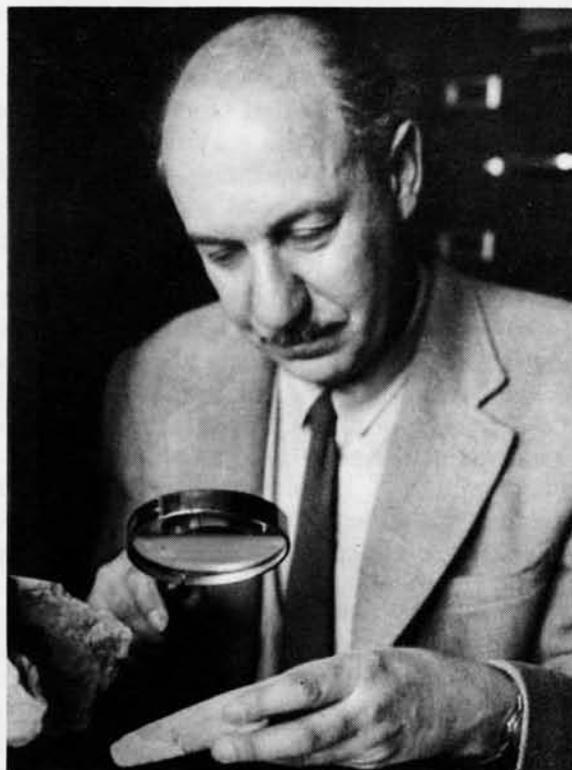
The Oriental Institute
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Not for publication

A. LEO OPPENHEIM

The John A. Wilson Distinguished Service
Professor Emeritus of Oriental Studies

June 7, 1904–July 21, 1974



Adolf Leo Oppenheim, one of the great Assyriologists of the twentieth century, won international renown as a scholar despite extraordinary personal hardship during the early years of his career. Forced to flee from his native Austria in 1938 after the Nazis came to power, he worked briefly in France before being interned at the outbreak of the Second World War. Coming to the United States in 1941, he continued his research while working in a series of minor posts in libraries and universities. In 1947, he came to Chicago and began his long and fruitful association with the Assyrian Dictionary project. Here he found his home; and his unique talent in interpreting cuneiform texts resulted in a long series of books and articles, of which the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*—twelve volumes now completed—will remain his outstanding contribution to learning.

Oppenheim, born and raised in Vienna, studied at the university there. His uncle, an astronomer, encouraged his wide-ranging studies, which in their early days included anthropology and work on the Mayan civilization. In 1933 he earned his Ph.D., nominally in philosophy, since Assyriology was not at the time a recognized degree subject in his university. The same year he published his first article, on a type of verb form in the Law Code of Hammurabi. For the next several years, Oppenheim served as librarian and assistant at the Oriental Institute in Vienna and published his first book (on Babylonian law) and articles on subjects as diverse as Babylonian geography, personal names, and foreign words in cuneiform texts. Even at this relatively early stage in his career, he was already showing himself master of many fields and dialects of Babylonian and Assyrian.

In 1938, Oppenheim left Vienna with his wife, the former Elizabeth Munk, whom he had married eight years earlier. They took up residence in Paris, where he worked as research collaborator at the Collège de France. Again dislocated, they eventually worked their way to New York, where in 1941 he ob-

2 tained a job for a year cataloguing the cuneiform tablets in the collection of the New York Public Library. This catalogue, when published, proved a landmark in the study of Sumerian economic texts of the Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2100-2000 B.C.), a totally new field which Oppenheim had learned under trying conditions. After 1944, he was connected with the Asia Institute in New York, taking time off to serve briefly as a visiting faculty member at Johns Hopkins and at Dropsie College (Philadelphia). He became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1946.

In 1947, Thorkild Jacobsen, then Director of the Oriental Institute, invited Oppenheim to come to Chicago to work on the Assyrian Dictionary project, which was being vigorously revived after loss of staff during the Depression and war years. Oppenheim came as a research associate, but was appointed a member of the university faculty (1950), then associate editor of the dictionary (1952), and finally editor-in-charge (1955). Under his energetic and able direction, the first two volumes of the dictionary appeared in 1956; and, until 1973, when he retired as director of the project, additional volumes appeared at the surprising rate of about one every twenty months. Despite this production schedule, the individual dictionary volumes were models of philological scholarship; detailed, concise, interpretative statements of what was known about the Babylonian and Assyrian languages.

Though Oppenheim devoted most of his time to dictionary work in these years and—according to his own estimate—wrote the initial drafts for about 70% of the dictionary articles himself, he continued to write on an astonishing variety of subjects concerned with Mesopotamian civilization: language, literature, economy, technology (such as the making of ancient glass), religion, mythology, astrology, dream interpretation, medicine, the structure of society, urbanism, and trade—to mention just some. He brought to his subjects a thorough acquaintance with and deep insights into the cuneiform texts, an intelligent and creative mind, and an interest in transcending the conventional humanistic categories to apply a more anthropological framework to the interpretation of ancient Mesopotamia. His approach was often controversial, especially in his later, more popular writings; and his colleagues were often stimulated to rethink and reappraise their own work in the light of his incisive criticism. One of his most important contributions of these years was to bridge the gap between Assyriology and other disciplines as, for instance, between the study of ancient astrology and ancient astronomy, or between philology, archeology, and modern technology, as in his work on ancient glass where his accurate edition of the cryptic Babylonian texts dealing with glass-making recipes allowed modern technologists at Corning to reproduce ancient-style

glass by approximating the conditions of manufacture used before 1000 B.C.

No account of Oppenheim's career would be complete without mention of his qualities as a teacher. To study under him was a unique and stimulating experience. Disorganized to a fault, he did not prepare his classes in advance; but, working from cuneiform texts which his students were trying to translate, he conducted his weekly lessons in a stream-of-consciousness manner. With four or five students gathered around the table in his small office on the third floor of the Institute building, he would sit perched on the stool behind his desk, peering over the glasses settled well down on his nose, and begin by asking the students to remind him what texts they were to consider in that session. The rest was an exercise in ebullience and acrobatics. While the students defended their oral renderings of difficult passages, he would correct and expand their interpretations, opening up new vistas within the field, drawing comparisons with other scholarly disciplines, and punctuating his remarks every few minutes by leaving his perch and reaching down a book or pamphlet from his shelves to illustrate a point which had just occurred to him. The classes were chaotic, but under the spell of Oppenheim's personality and love for his subject they were a fascinating educational experience. His effectiveness as a teacher may be gauged by the number of his students who have since gone on to make their own mark in the scholarly world, not as carbon copies of the master or as products of a particular narrow "school," but working in a variety of areas with many different methods of approach.

Over the years, Oppenheim won many honors, too many to enumerate here. In 1969, he was named first occupant of the newly endowed John A. Wilson Chair of Oriental Studies and also made a Distinguished Service Professor in the university. He taught as visiting professor at the Collège de France (Paris), Hebrew University (Jerusalem), and the University of California (Berkeley). In 1971, he was elected both President of the American Oriental Society and a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy. His book *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (1964) won the Gordon Laing Prize, awarded by the vote of his colleagues to the author of the best book of the year by a University faculty member and published by the University of Chicago Press. On the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, his younger colleagues who were either serving or had served on the dictionary staff—many of them his former students—presented him with a *Festschrift* (anniversary volume) of their own articles, in many instances their first scholarly publications. For his seventieth birthday this past June, the University of Chicago Press issued a substantial number of his out-of-print articles in a microfiche edition. Perhaps his greatest tribute,

however, is the esteem for him as a scholar and the affection for him as a warm-hearted man felt not only by his former students but also especially by his younger colleagues, whom he encouraged and inspired in their studies.

Oppenheim formally retired in 1973 and went to live in Berkeley, though he remained active in dictionary and research work and planned to spend some time in Chicago each year. He enjoyed parti-

cularly good health in his year of retirement, and his sudden death from a heart attack took him at the height of his powers. He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth, a noted artist and a beloved member of the university community, in Berkeley and by his sister, Gerti Schiller, New York.

--John A. Brinkman

THE 1975 MEMBERS' LECTURE SERIES

- Wednesday, January 15 John A. Brinkman and McGuire Gibson, The Oriental Institute
"Ashurnasirpal Comes to Chicago"
- Sunday, February 16 Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., The Oriental Institute
"Historical Retrospect among the Hittites"
- Wednesday, April 9 William W. Hallo, Yale University
"The Royal Correspondence of Larsa"
- Wednesday, May 21 Charles Francis Nims, The Oriental Institute
"The Camera, the Eye, and the Past"
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Dr. Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., has been named Associate Professor of Hittitology in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and in the Oriental Institute. He had been an associate professor of Hittitology and Assyriology at Yale University.

Dr. Robert McC. Adams, a former director of the Institute, has been elected to membership in the American Philosophical Society. He is Professor in Anthropology, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, and the Oriental Institute.

★ LOOKING FOR AN INTERESTING AVOCATION? Come to The Suq to find out about volunteer work in a fascinating place, the Institute's gift and bookshop specializing in reproductions of archeological objects. We prefer mature persons willing to give 3 hours a week on a steady, year-round basis. Please call Mrs. Hurwich at 753-2484 for an appointment. ★

Get in touch with Mrs. David Maher (phone 753-2573 or 753-2471, or write her at the Institute) for either of the following activities:

★ The next Members' Course will begin on Monday, February 10, 1975. *Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, a course in reading ancient Egyptian, will be offered by David P. Silverman, degree candidate in Egyptology. The class will meet Mondays 10-11:30 a.m. and be repeated Tuesdays 5:30-7 p.m. Members who enroll may come to either or both sessions. The class will meet for eight weeks; tuition is \$30.00 (\$45.00 for non-members to include membership in the Oriental Institute).

★ A trip, open to members only, to archeological sites in Turkey will be sponsored by the Oriental Institute May 7 to May 29, 1975. The tour, led by Paul Zimansky, degree candidate in Anatolian archeology, will visit Ankara, Hattusas, Gordium, Side, Aphrodisias, Ephesus, Sardis, Pergamum, Troy, Istanbul, and other sites. The fare of \$1945 includes a \$100 tax-deductible contribution to the Institute.

★ The Membership Office is now making tape recordings of the Members' Lecture series (with the speakers' permission), and will be able to provide copies on request to interested members who were unable to attend the lectures. A fee will be charged for postage and handling; when requesting tapes, please specify the format your playback machine can use.

4 THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE

*cordially invites you
to a showing of the film*

“DIGGING FOR THE HISTORY OF MAN”

Sunday, December 8, 1974

2:00 P.M.

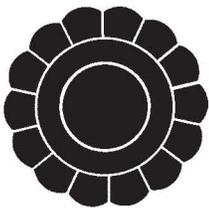
The James Henry Breasted Lecture Hall
1155 East 58th Street

Admission is free. Museum halls and The Suq will be open as usual.

(The Quadrangle Club is closed on Sundays.)

The German Archeological Institute has produced a one-hour color film (narrated in English) of their work in the Near East. The film weaves beautifully photographed views of ancient sites, sensitively chosen *objets d'art* from the excavations, and glimpses of archeological methods into a vivid panorama of our understanding of the past. Sites highlighted are the Babylonian Uruk in Mesopotamia, Hittite Boğazköy in Anatolia, Classical Pergamon in Asia Minor, and the Sassanian-Islamic imperial resort of Takht-i-Suleiman in Iran. The whole is a stunning overview of the achievements of modern archeology.

VISIT THE SITES IN TURKEY—MAY 7 TO 29—CALL MRS. MAHER, 753-2573 OR 753-2471.



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FIRST CLASS