

INTRODUCTION

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I am pleased to be writing this introduction to the 2023–24 annual report as the new director of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures (ISAC). I am honored to return to the Institute, where I completed my doctoral studies in 1995, almost thirty years ago. It is a particularly fortuitous time to be joining ISAC and the University of Chicago. As the academic community emerges from the pandemic and grapples with its place and role within our broader society, the relevance of humanistic scholarship is increasingly questioned and marginalized. The importance of the Institute’s commitment to foundational research and interdisciplinary scholarship that contributes meaningful insight and understanding to issues of deep contemporary concern, whether they be climate change and the environment or profoundly complex social issues such as inequality and conflict, has never been greater.

Faculty renewal and staffing are vitally important to this research mission. Earlier in 2023, we welcomed Marc Maillot as the director and chief curator of the ISAC Museum, and in September, Sheheryar Hasnain took up the critical administrative leadership post of director of administration and finance vacated by Brendan Bulger. Continuing the recent trend of faculty hires in 2023–24 that began with Jana Matuszak as assistant professor of Sumerology in January 2023, Margaret Geoga joined ISAC as assistant professor of Egyptology in July 2023, and in January 2024 we welcomed Derek Kennet as the inaugural Howard E. Hallengren Professor of Arabian Peninsula and Gulf States Archaeology. This past year also witnessed two new faculty searches. The first, in Egyptian archaeology, has been filled with the appointment of Anna-Latifa Mourad-Cizek, while the second search, in ancient Near Eastern art (the Rita T. Picken Professorship), continues.

Other important transitions also took place in 2023–24, most notably the retirement of Theo van den Hout, the Arthur and Joann Rasmussen Professor of Hittite and Anatolian Languages. Theo’s many years of dedicated service and scholarship were celebrated on October 12, 2023. This past year we also welcomed Kiana Ashtiani and Marilyn Murray as new ISAC Advisory Council members, and we said farewell to two valued staff members: executive assistant Mariana Perlinac, who retired after thirty-five years of service at the University (seventeen years with ISAC), and Youth and Family Program manager Kate Hodge, who started a new role in the Provost’s Office. The Institute’s new name (adopted officially on April 4, 2023), the ongoing renewal of its faculty, and the addition of new staff reflect the remarkable transformation underway at ISAC, while attesting to the University’s continuing commitment to ISAC and its mission.

This past year also provided an opportunity to reflect on ISAC’s core research mission and its legacy of more than a century as one of the world’s most important and renowned centers for archaeological and philological research, teaching, fieldwork, and museum/collections study of ancient West/Central Asia and North Africa. An extensive (and intensive) program of consultations, both within ISAC and across the broader University and academic community, affirmed the continuing importance of ISAC’s historic commitment to foundational research and scholarship in the study of the ancient Near East. However, these consultations also identified important new challenges and strategic priorities, encouraging (indeed urging) ISAC to (1) participate more actively in interdisciplinary research that tackles the complex issues of our day, (2) engage and participate more actively in cultural heritage preservation, and (3) commit to greater community engagement, both locally and internationally, and especially with Middle Eastern partners. ISAC is uniquely positioned to address these strategic priorities. The combination of evolving conditions in the areas studied and the potential and need for utilizing thousands of years of human history, knowledge, and

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data to inform solutions to modern challenges—as well as the timing for addressing them—could not be more suited to the distinctive (and distinguished) capabilities and strengths of the Institute.

This year's annual report reflects the active, post-pandemic resumption of ISAC field research, with projects such as the Nippur Expedition returning to the field, but also the launch of new research initiatives, notably the Suhar Project in Oman, and newly affiliated ISAC projects, such as the Nineveh East Archaeological Project represented in this year's report by the Shamash Gate Project. These projects will be joined in the coming year by newly affiliated ISAC field projects in Turkey (Türkmen Karahöyük Archaeological Project and Tayinat Archaeological Project), Spain (Cerro del Villar), and Egypt (Beni Hassan). Meanwhile, long-running expeditions, such as the Epigraphic Survey of Egypt, the Eastern Badia Archaeological Project in Jordan, the Surezha excavations in Iraqi Kurdistan, and the Zincirli Expedition in Turkey, continued their foundational research.

This expanding field research was matched by ISAC's ongoing scholarly output. ISAC faculty and staff continued their study and editing of texts, development of research tools, delivery of conference presentations, and organization of exhibits. The past year witnessed the publication of four ISAC monographs, including the monumental *Medinet Habu X*, the first volume in ISAC's new flagship publication series (ISAC Publications). ISAC researchers also published or contributed to numerous monographs and edited volumes, including the production of no less than forty articles. The ISAC Museum produced two highly successful special exhibitions, *Back to School in Babylonia*, curated by Susanne Paulus, ISAC associate professor of Assyriology, and *Pioneers of the Sky: Aerial Archaeology and the Black Desert*, which was curated by landscape archaeologist and ISAC postdoctoral scholar Marie-Laure Chambrade and celebrated a century of ISAC's pioneering work in this pivotal field of archaeological exploration. The Museum also continued its active support of research on the Institute's collections, as well as its loan and conservation programs, the latter including, excitingly after a fifteen-year hiatus, resumption of the restoration of the glazed-brick facade from the Sin Temple at Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad, Iraq.

The consultations held over the past year also laid the groundwork for a number of important forthcoming research initiatives. As we enter the new academic year, I am especially pleased to report that ISAC is poised to launch the creation of a data research center (DRC) that will seek to harness cutting-edge computational technologies and recent advances in data science in the study of ancient cultures. Building on more than a century as a pioneering force in archaeological, philological, geospatial, and cultural heritage research and preservation, the DRC will help position ISAC as a global leader in the integration of data science with the study of ancient cultures. By leveraging state-of-the-art technologies, computational methods, and approaches, the DRC promises to help revolutionize the ways in which we analyze, investigate, share, and preserve information about ancient cultures. Look for future reports on this developing and exciting focus of ISAC research.

In closing, I wish to acknowledge the passing of Don Whitcomb and Al Liventals, two longtime members of the ISAC community. A research associate professor of Islamic archaeology, Don was an inspiring presence; a wonderful colleague, friend, and teacher; and a valued member of the Institute for more than fifty years. He was also a true pioneer, incorporating the contribution of mundane material culture (especially pottery) and stratigraphic excavation that moved the study of Islamic culture beyond the aesthetics of its monuments, art, and architecture. Al Liventals was a dedicated member of ISAC's Advisory Council and a stalwart supporter of the Jericho Mafjar Project, ISAC's Islamic collection, and the Tablet Collection. May each of them be of blessed memory.

I am deeply grateful for the generous support provided by our members, donors, and partners, which makes ISAC's foundational research and groundbreaking scholarship possible and undergirds all our work toward our mission to enhance scholarly understanding and public awareness of the places, peoples, and heritages we study.