

ICONOCLASM AND TEXT DESTRUCTION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND BEYOND

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On April 8–9, the Oriental Institute held its annual seminar, which traditionally takes place in the Breasted Hall. The title of this year's seminar was Iconoclasm and Text Destruction in the Ancient Near East and Beyond, and was organized by Natalie N. May, the Oriental Institute post-doctoral scholar.

The purpose of this conference was to analyze the cases of and reasons for mutilation of texts and images in Near Eastern antiquity. Destruction of images and texts has a universal character; it is inherent in various societies and periods of human history. Together with the mutilation of human beings, it was a widespread and highly significant phenomenon in the ancient Near East. However, the goals meant to be realized by this process differed from those aimed at in other cultures. For example, iconoclasm of the French and Russian Revolutions, as well as post-Soviet iconoclasm, did not have any religious purposes. Moreover, modern comprehension of iconoclasm is strongly influenced by its conception during the Reformation.

The primary goal of this seminar was to explore iconoclasm and text destruction in ancient Near Eastern antiquity through examination of the anthropological, cultural, historical, and political aspects of these practices. Broad interdisciplinary comparison with similar phenomena in other cultures and periods contributes to a better understanding of them.



Pictured, left to right: (front row) Marian Feldman, Hanspeter Schaudig, Joan Goodnick Westenholz, Claudia Suter, Irene Winter, Angelika Berlejung; (middle row) Seth Richardson, JoAnn Scurlock, Robin Cormack, Natalie N. May, Betsy M. Bryan; (back row) Silke Knippschild, Nathaniel Levto, Petra Goedegebuure, Walter Kaegi, Christopher Woods. Not pictured: Janet Johnson, Richard Neer, Miguel Civil, Robert Biggs, W. J. T. Mitchell, Lee Palmer Wandel

Despite its importance, iconoclasm in the ancient Near East has not received proper scholarly attention. In 1995 Bahrani defined the totality of relevant research as “three brief articles,” those of Nylander (1980), Beran (1988) and Harper (1992). We can now add to the list two articles by Bahrani herself (1995, 2004), another contribution by Nylander (1999), an earlier one by Brandes (1980) and recent articles by Porter (2009) and May (2010). All these studies either treat particular cases of mutilation or certain aspects of its significance.

Mutilation of image and text in the ancient Near East as a phenomenon remains a field awaiting systematic research. The specific framework for the previous scholarship has been assault on royal and divine effigies, although the phenomenon was in fact much more universal. The seminar and the resulting publication of the proceedings are an important step in advancing the entire field.

The problems examined can be summarized as follows:

- The purposes of the mutilation, in the framework of the choice of images and texts meant to be damaged
- The types of damage inflicted as a key to its meaning
- Iconoclasm and aniconism
- The thoroughness of the injury inflicted on complexes of images and monuments
- The significance of the destruction and spoliation of pictorial and textual monuments in respect to territorial domination
- The significance of the mutilation and superimposition of texts
- Iconoclasm and text destruction in European and Oriental Middle Ages and beyond — legacy or universality of phenomenon?

The Oriental Institute Seminars are conceived as interdisciplinary discourse. Thus this seminar embraced all historical periods starting with Sumer and concluding with modernity. Among the participants were such internationally celebrated scholars as Angelika Berlejung (University of Leipzig and University of Stellenbosch; ancient Near East), Robin Cormack (University of Cambridge, UK; Byzantium), W. J. T. Mitchell (University of Chicago; English literature and modern art), and Irene Winter (Harvard University; ancient Near East), together with young and promising scholars such as Silke Knippschild (University of Bristol; classics), Nathaniel Levtow (University of Montana; Hebrew Bible), and Hanspeter Schaudig (University of Heidelberg; Assyriology). The renowned specialists contributed papers in their field of expertise: Betsy Bryan (Johns Hopkins University; Egyptology), Joan Goodnick Westenholz (New York University; Assyriology), Lee Palmer Wandel (University of Wisconsin-Madison; Reformation), and Claudia Suter (University of Basel, Switzerland; ancient Near Eastern art). On behalf of the Oriental Institute, lectures were delivered by Petra Goedegebuure (Hittitology), Natalie N. May (Assyriology and ancient Near Eastern art), Seth Richardson (history of the ancient Near East), and Christopher Woods (Sumerology). The conference was attended by about 120 people and attracted international scholarly attention. The scholarly community all over the world expressed to Natalie N. May great interest in the seminar itself and anticipation of the subsequent publication of the seminar papers.

The proceedings of the seminar will be published in the eighth volume in the Oriental Institute Seminars (OIS) series. The book, to be published in early 2012, is expected to be substantial, with color images.

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