

ISLAMIC ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE

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The Islamic collections are an important part of the Oriental Institute Museum. Over the years, the Museum has assembled important collections of Islamic archaeology, art, and ethnographic items from excavations sponsored by the Oriental Institute and objects donated to or purchased by the Institute. Selections from these collections have been the focus of several exhibitions, such as the bookbindings exhibit in 1981 and Rayy exhibit in 2007. Many artifacts are published in excavation reports and specialist studies, but there has never been an overview of these collections.

The Islamic collection includes a wide variety of different types of objects from all regions of the Middle East and from all periods of Islamic history. This comprehensive nature suggests a new project to provide an “Introduction to Islamic Archaeology” organized around these collections. In addition, it is hoped that a catalog of highlights of the Islamic collections in the Oriental Institute may also be published in the near future. These two projects on Islamic archaeology and Islamic art form a project being conducted by Donald Whitcomb and Tasha Vorderstrasse.

Islamic Archaeology

Islamic archaeological material has been found in a number of different excavations sponsored by the Oriental Institute since the 1930s; among the earliest were excavations at Alishar Huyuk and in the Amuq in Turkey, as well as at Khirbet al-Karak, Israel. While the primary aim of an excavation or survey was not the Islamic component, archaeologists tended to treat these materials seriously and returned with collections for the Oriental Institute. Although the study of Islamic archaeology was still in its infancy in the 1930s, Erich Schmidt began excavations at Istakhr and Rayy, both sites with primarily Islamic occupation. The site of Istakhr was begun by Ernst Herzfeld as part of the Persepolis project. Herzfeld had excavated the Abbasid capital of Samarra some thirty years earlier and was commissioned by James Henry Breasted to investigate the “last Oriental empires” — the Sasanian through early Islamic — in Iran.

Schmidt continued the Persepolis project, bringing all the materials to publication except



Figure 1. A sherd of minai ware from the excavations at Rayy, used in the exhibition of that site

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that of Istakhr. He had also brought to the Oriental Institute his materials from the city of Rayy, now south of modern Tehran. The result is that major collections of pottery, glass, coins, and various small finds lie in the basement of the Oriental Institute (fig. 1). These holdings have been augmented in more recent times with collections from Quseir al-Qadim in Egypt and from Aqaba in Jordan. One must also note the Islamic components from archaeological surveys from virtually every part of the Middle East.

Collected Islamic Objects

In addition to Islamic archaeological collections at the Oriental Institute, there are many objects that were purchased or donated from the early decades of the last century. Perhaps



Figure 2. An astrolabe in the collection of the Oriental Institute and featured in the guidebook to the museum published in 1982

the most sensational for philologists in the Oriental Institute are the Arabic manuscripts and papyri, many studied by Nabia Abbott, but many lying in wait of scholars' attention. One particularly important collection is that of Bernhard Moritz, formerly head of the Khedival Library in Egypt, who had sold part of his private collection of papyri, manuscripts, and coins to the Oriental Institute in 1929. Among the particularly important items is the earliest known fragment from the *Arabian Nights*, published by Abbott in 1946. Other private collections and donations have been acquired by the Oriental Institute (fig. 2), from travelers, dealers, and even archaeologists. For example, the Alishar excavators, purchased ethnographic items including local clothing and model farm implements from different villages around the excavations. Ethnographic items also include a fine collection of Palestinian costume, the subject of an exhibition at the Oriental Institute in 2006.

The Islamic collections at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago constitute one of the most important Islamic archaeological collections in the United States. With the art objects and ethnographic holdings, this is an aspect of the Oriental Institute Museum that has been inadvertently neglected. Despite the lack of a specific gallery for the Islamic collection, there are some objects displayed in the Museum and many objects in storage that should be better known to scholars and researchers alike. This project will endeavor to introduce this Islamic collection of remarkable variety, scope, and importance.