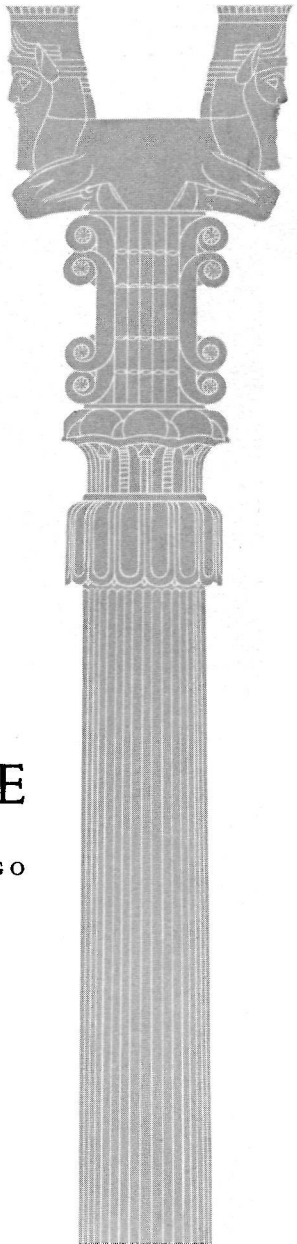
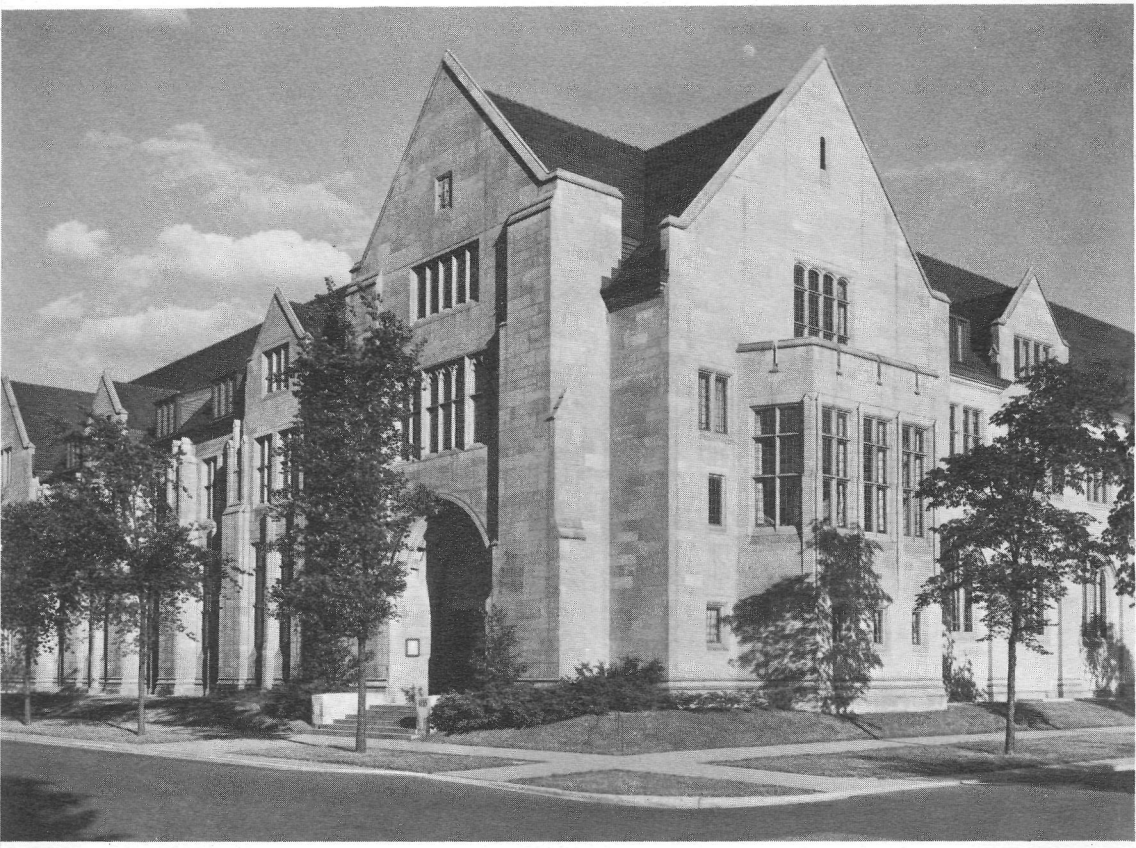


THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

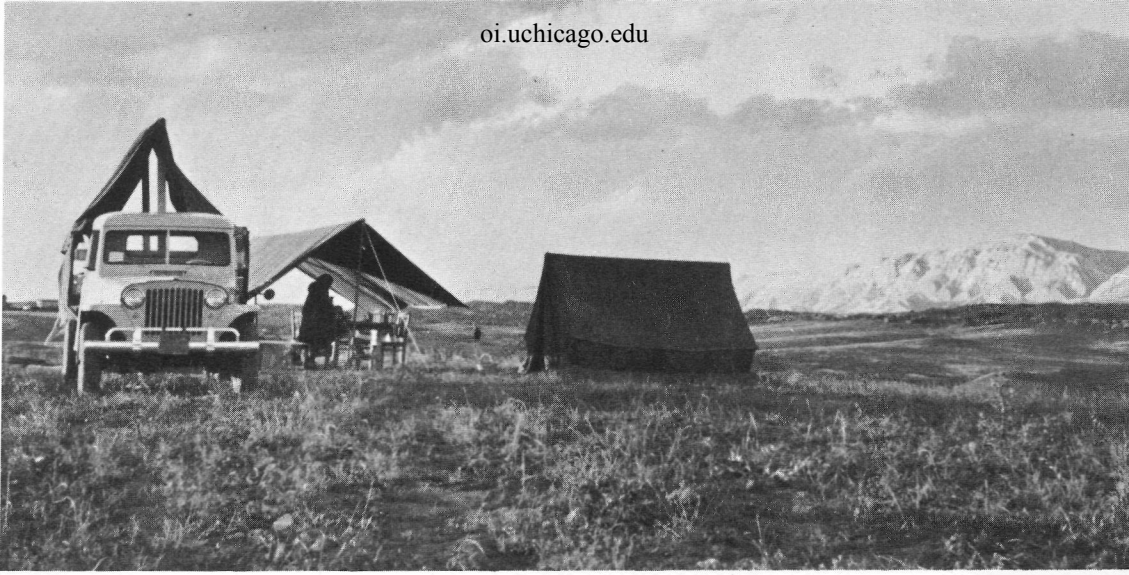


THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE

Research institutes, properly understood, are means for the concentration of effort in special fields, particularly on the frontiers of knowledge. In the natural sciences, in medicine, and in the social sciences they are today playing a momentous role, exploring and defining ever more clearly the structure and process of animate and inanimate existence. Through the agencies of industry and government they are in effect remaking the circumstances of national and individual life.

In the field of humane letters, where they began, institutes are anything but numerous and, lacking national and industrial affiliation, relatively less powerful. They respond, however, to the basic conviction that the exploration of the nature and course of human civilization in all its elements will be continuously relevant to the enrichment of human experience and to the enlightenment of human effort. The existence of an Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago implies further that the ancient cultures of the Near East are worthy of special attention as the record of man's earliest attempts to organize human life on a comprehensive scale, to unfold its higher potential, and to give it a cosmic frame of reference.

All research institutes require the services of many different specialists working together in close co-operation. This is particularly true of an institute devoted to Near Eastern civilization, where the time ranges covered extend over so many thousands of years and where the materials for the knowledge of the successive cultures have themselves first to be dug from the ground and made intelligible in the light of their own premises. In the



Expedition camp at Jarmo in Iraqi Kurdistan

more than forty years of its own history, the Oriental Institute has, in spite of war and depression, become one of the outstanding agencies in the field of Near Eastern studies, largely because of the eminent scholars who constitute its moving force. Their competence ranges from remote prehistory to modern Islam, covers all the many languages, literatures, and cultures that existed in the Near East over a period of several thousand years, and includes also the technical skills necessary for field work in the geographic and ethnic areas in question.

On horseback and camel-back, in car, jeep, and airplane, Institute staff members have explored the Near East, locating sources of strategic information or monuments most immediately in need of salvage. In teams of field workers, with hundreds of laborers locally recruited, they have excavated in Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, bringing home full accounts of their findings and some share of the precious objects and written records brought to light by their efforts. Meanwhile, other staff members, working continuously at the home base, have made available and interpreted the materials collected and have provided the tools for the understanding of the written records. All the work proceeds in closest co-operation with schol-

ars of other institutions and other lands for the enrichment of the learning of all.

The record of the Institute's achievement is well known. Many phases in the history of man's rise from savagery to civilization in the Nile Valley and in the Tigris-Euphrates Basin have been illumined. Important historical and cultural monuments—palaces, temples, military installations, literary and historical records—have been brought to light, studied, drawn, photographed, and made accessible in published form. Over one hundred and fifty volumes already attest the painstaking work of a generation of scholars, and more are continually being prepared. Indeed, so fast was the tempo of the Institute's work, particularly during the first twenty years of its history, that the printer is still catching up with the spade.

Although the Institute's purpose as originally set forth by its founder, James Henry Breasted, has been well served, the work is still only in its earlier stages, and the full range of the program as originally conceived has not yet been developed. But opportunity remains almost limitless. In spite of all that has been done by several generations of scholars the world over, most of the ancient cultures of the Near East are still only imperfectly known. Others have only recently come within the scholarly purview, and still others, quite unknown today, will certainly come to light in the years ahead. The work on the written records of the ancient Near East has only begun, for the task of reading and publishing the material is so difficult in itself that the interpretation of its relevance for the social, economic, political, and religious history of the region has not yet reached a systematic level. Problems of the intermingling of cultures in the Orient and the whole question of the transmission of Near Eastern civilization to the West can today be posed only in the most general terms and must be treated with the greatest discretion because so many aspects of the problems and steps in the developments cannot yet be documented properly.

In the meantime new perspectives have opened up on the distant past, and new methods for its appraisal have been developed. The historical questions we seek to answer require the judgment of humanist, social historian, and cultural anthropologist as a matter of course. The time limits within which the range of interest must move have become so comprehensive as to include everything from the paleolithic to at least the period of the Mongol invasions. The sites to which we must apply ourselves are no longer merely the capitals of empire but also the market towns and agricultural villages that register the pulse beat of economic life. The record of human achievement needs to be measured not only in terms of individual literary, political, and artistic accomplishment but also in the successful use of natural resources. Here the soil experts, the geologists, the paleozoölogists, the paleobotanists, and the climatologists take their places alongside the physicists—who check the carbon 14 samples—the chemists, and the metallurgists as persons whose technical competence is needed to elucidate the findings and to establish the frame of reference for both question and answer.

In the past decades the Oriental Institute has sought to keep pace with such changes and has, indeed, been able to serve as pioneer in some of them. It is therefore continually re-examining its procedures and seeking to clarify its long- and short-term objectives. Fundamentally, its purpose—to help describe the rise and growth of human civilization in the Near East—remains constant. But the effort at home and in the field will vary as opportunities develop and as men and means are available to make proper use of them.

In the pages that follow, the Oriental Institute is described as it is today, in terms of its official enterprises—both those inherited from the past and those recently inaugurated—its staff, its Museum, its publications, and its outreach to the general public.