

I N T R O D U C T I O N



To the Members and Friends of the Oriental Institute

December 2, 1985, is the 50th anniversary of the death of James Henry Breasted, founder of the Oriental Institute. We hope to commemorate these fifty years by having a “symposium” on life in the Institute and on Oriental Institute expeditions under Breasted, involving recollections by several faculty, staff, and spouses who worked for Breasted and the Oriental Institute in the early to middle 1930’s. In thinking about what has happened to and in the Oriental Institute since 1935, we have been struck once again with the breadth of Breasted’s vision—how much of what we do today was initiated or anticipated by him. It has been interesting to note the historical development of this institution dedicated to the study of history.

Breasted had very clear ideas of what the Oriental Institute should do and how it should be organized. As he stated already in 1919, quoting from his own proposal to the President and Trustees of The University of Chicago and Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.,

[W]hile every oriental department must obviously teach languages, it is equally obvious that productive orientalists must also share in the great task of recovering a whole group of lost civilizations, the very civilizations, moreover, from which our own is ultimately descended. . . . [T]he opening of Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Babylonia to modern business and to enlightened exploitation in mining, railroad-building, manufactures, and especially agriculture with its great irrigation projects, means the rapid destruction of the great ruined cities and buried records of early man with which these lands are filled. . . . To these destructive forces must be added those of natural decay . . . [which] carry on a steady and uninterrupted work of destruction which is appallingly evident when one compares a photograph of a monument taken today with one taken ten or fifteen years ago. . . . It cannot be too often emphasized that an inscribed monument still standing or lying *in situ* is subjected to many natural forces of decay and therefore, even when it is not suffering from vandalism, is *inevitably undergoing slow destruction*. [A]SLL 35: 196–97, 202–3]

In his book *The Oriental Institute*, which appeared in 1933, just two years before his death, Breasted outlined the thoughts which had led him to establish the Oriental Institute:

It is the recovery of these lost stages, the bridging of this chasm between the merely physical man and the ethical, intellectual man, which is a fundamental need of man's soul as he faces nature today. We can build this bridge only as we study the emergence and early history of the first great civilized societies in the ancient Near East, for *there* still lies the evidence out of which we may recover the story of the origins and the early advance of civilization, out of which European culture and eventually our own civilization came forth. *The task of salvaging and studying this evidence and of recovering the story which it reveals—that is the greatest task of the humanist today.* . . . Forbiddingly large as it is, the task of salvaging the written records is without doubt exceeded in extent by that of recovering and saving the purely material monuments of ancient civilization, with which *archeology* is chiefly concerned. . . . It is evident that we need an organization which will insure us the assistance of men thoroughly trained not only in oriental languages and archeology, but also in physical anthropology, botany, paleontology, geology, meteorology, and anthropo-geography. These men cannot of course all be orientalists, nor do they need to be so. But one or more such men should at different times accompany every American expedition which goes into the field. . . . It is evident that, wherever possible, not only the methods but especially the equipment of natural science should be applied to our study of man in the Orient, because not only the vast body of documents which he has himself left behind but also *all data and observations revealing the conditions of his life* must be systematically gathered, filed, and housed together. [pp. 2, 14, 25–26]

One can summarize Breasted's purpose for establishing the Oriental Institute by quoting again from his 1919 article:

Here, then, is a large and comprehensive task—the systematic collection of the facts from the monuments, from the written record and from the physical habitat, and the organization of these into a great body of historical archives. The scattered fragments of man's story have never been brought together by anyone. They must be brought together by some efficient organization and collected under one roof before the historian can draw out of them and reveal to modern man the story of his own career. . . . Housed in their own building, such a methodically collected and growing mass of data would eventually become a body of historical archives, a focus and clearing house for the correlation of all the prehistoric life as well as the various civilizations grouped around the eastern end of the Mediterranean and at least as far east as Persia. The

final result would be a systematically built-up documentary basis, such as exists nowhere else, for recovering the lost chapters in the career of man. Working side by side, each in his own room in a historical laboratory like this, the members of an oriental department would soon find themselves becoming far more than teachers of languages. [AJSLL 35: 200–1]

It was Breasted's foresight which made of the Oriental Institute an institution dedicated to bringing together the various types of material and the various disciplines which bear on the development of man and civilization in that area of the world, the ancient Near East, from which our western civilization derives. It was his commitment to teaching combined with research, to archaeological field projects supplemented by the appropriate scientific analyses, to the combination of archaeological and written sources for the writing of the history of this all-important era which made the original character of the Oriental Institute unique.

Approximately 25 years ago, when Carl Kraeling was Director of the Oriental Institute and one of the early versions of this annual report was circulated to members, the following introduction appeared:

Research institutes are means for the concentration of effort in fields of special importance, particularly on the frontiers of knowledge. . . . 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.

. . . In the more than forty years of its own history the Oriental Institute has, in spite of war and depression, become one of the outstanding research agencies in the field of Near Eastern studies, largely because of the eminent scholars that 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 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 provided the tools for the understanding of the written records. . . .

The record of the Institute's achievement is well known. What has been accomplished is truly remarkable. 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 illuminated. 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 150 large 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. (*Oriental Institute Annual Report 1960*, pp. 3–6)

One further aspect of Near Eastern studies which Breasted anticipated is one that we have stressed this year. Already in 1919, after lambasting the destruction of ancient sites and the illegal antiquities market, Breasted pointed out one of the major, but often ignored, responsibilities of the scientific excavator:

While no censure or blame may attach to the owner [of private unpublished antiquities collections]. . . , this cannot be said of archaeological expeditions, and especially of museums which conduct extensive excavations and collect great bodies of monuments and records, of which no report or publication is laid before the scientific world. . . . It should be said, however, that even the most conscientious museum authorities cannot always command the assistance or the means for rendering their collections promptly available in published form. There is therefore a vast and ever-growing body of unpublished records in the museums. . . . Such materials are as unknown and as inaccessible to the orientalists. . . .as the monuments still buried in the East." [*AJSLL* 35: 199]

Coining the term “Museo-archaeology,” our members’ lecture series this year focussed on the work of a group of younger scholars who have been “excavating” the Oriental Institute basement, publishing old excavations which have “fallen between the cracks” but whose collected data is important for the proper study of an era or area. Because these materials were excavated by an earlier generation, these individuals must first identify the aims and methods of the original excavator. From there, knowing the limitations of the record as preserved, the modern editor may use the materials to help answer the most current of questions.

The importance of the museum to the work of the Oriental Institute, and to its public, was also clearly presented by Breasted.

It has long been the writer’s belief that exhibition of typical examples of the monuments and documents acquired by the Oriental Institute is an essential element in visualizing the oriental beginnings of the career of man. The exhibition of such research materials accomplishes a number of things. Such collections are an invaluable aid to instruction, whatever the age of the students. Whole periods of man’s activity can be so presented through original objects, models, and pictures as to make them very much more vivid, real, and understandable. . . . Such collections serve also as a real attraction to the friends of the University in the Chicago community and reveal to such friends both the nature of the materials and the character of the problems with which the Oriental Institute is concerned. Its exhibits thus make clear to the outside world the early periods of human development and the necessity for research in order to penetrate and to recover the history of the human mind.” [*The Oriental Institute*, pp. 103–4]

I am sure that he would applaud the great increase in involvement of trained volunteers, especially in the Museum, who help us communicate our message to the wider public, and the growth of our membership and education programs specifically designed to inform the public of our work and that of our colleagues around the world. Similarly, Breasted called his generation of orientalists the first to be aided by the possession of highly perfected mechanical appliances (he was thinking mainly of cameras; *AJSLL* 35 [1919] 204) and would probably be delighted at the ways computers and other recent technological advances are being put to the service of the history of mankind.

Thus, there is “nothing new under the sun.” But it was the wide vision of James Henry Breasted which set out the original character of the Oriental Institute broadly enough that many of the best, most creative scholars working on the rise

of civilization in the ancient Near East today not only can, but choose, to work within this multidisciplinary institute he founded. And it is his foresight which allows us today, fifty years after his death, to reiterate Kraeling's statement of 25 years ago:

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 clarifying its long- and short-range 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. (*Oriental Institute Annual Report 1960*, p. 6)

As you read through the individual reports in this year's annual report, you will realize just how well the interdisciplinary approach to ancient Near Eastern studies envisioned by James Henry Breasted has worked and has allowed us to grow with our materials while remaining firmly based on solid knowledge of the raw data.

This year's Oriental Institute Annual Report is dedicated to the memory of Astrid Breasted Hörmann who died August 1, 1985. She was the daughter of James Henry Breasted, founder of the Oriental Institute.

JANET H. JOHNSON
SEPTEMBER, 1985.