

Interview with Dr. James Osborne, 2011-2012 IEMA Postdoctoral Fellow

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Dr. James F. Osborne is currently the Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute for European and Mediterranean Archaeology at the University of Buffalo, SUNY. He received a Bachelor's of Arts with honors in Ancient Near Eastern Studies from the University of Toronto. James attended Harvard University for his graduate work, earning a Master's of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy in Archaeology of the Levant, with the latter being awarded with distinction. He has recently been awarded the Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Humanities at Johns Hopkins University. Drawing from multiple disciplines, such as Geographical Information System and built environment studies, Dr. Osborne explores issues of territoriality and politics in Iron Age Turkey.

What are your current research interests and goals, and what projects are you currently working on?

In the broadest sense, my research focuses on the archaeology and history of the Bronze and Iron Ages of the ancient Near East, but of course I have specialties within that. Culturally and chronologically, I work in the Iron Age (which, in the Near East, is roughly 1200-600 BCE) and do most of my writing and field work on the Syro-Hittite culture, a patchwork of a dozen or so city-states that surrounded the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea at that time. I entered the Near East thinking I would become an archaeologist of ancient Israel, and the archaeological record of Israel and the Hebrew Bible will always be interesting to me. Methodologically, I am most interested in studying the relationship of the built environment and political authority, which I try to do both through the quantitative methods of spatial analysis and through qualitative interpretation of the historical and visual records.

My primary field project is the Tayinat Archaeological Project, directed by Timothy Harrison of the University of Toronto. Tayinat is a large Bronze and Iron Age site in the Amuq Valley, right at the northeast corner of the Mediterranean, and was the capital city of the region. At the moment I am starting plans to excavate a small rural site to complement our understanding of life from the capital. This summer I'm also joining in a Harvard-based survey in northern Iraq in the heartland of the Assyrian Empire. I'm hoping these two projects might lead to a cross-regional study of cultural and political interaction between empire (northern Iraq) and province (southern Turkey) during the Iron Age, which is a very exciting prospect.

While at the Institute for European and Mediterranean Archaeology here at the University at Buffalo, my primary research

project is organizing, and subsequently publishing, an international symposium. The title of this year's conference is "Approaching Monumentality in the Archaeological Record," May 12-13, and has scholars participating in the fields of anthropology, classics, history, and art history. It promises to be an exciting event.

Looking at your research interests, I can see you are pulling from several different disciplines. What drew you to this approach?

The ancient Near East during the Bronze and Iron Ages is very much a historical time and place, with many hundreds of thousands of inscriptions of all types, from royal proclamations to receipts of individual economic transactions. At the same time, the art historical record is equally rich. It has always seemed to me that needing to incorporate history, art history, and archaeology is the commonsense approach. Not all archaeologists are fortunate enough to work in a time and place where these types of sources exist, and of course, many archaeologists undertake research in historical periods that does not necessarily require historical documentations—archaeometry, for instance. But when one's subject matter is so strongly "cultural" in nature, as my research into political authority clearly is, then it strikes me that incorporating texts and iconography is not only helpful, but intellectually obligatory.

Whose work did you find the most inspiring for your own?

There have been a number of people who have inspired my research. Foremost among these is art historian Irene Winter, who is also a specialist in the Syro-Hittite culture (among other things), and who always taught me that, in a sense, there are no disciplinary divisions between art history, archaeology, and history—just a research question that can be addressed

from any combination of approaches. My thesis advisor, Larry Stager, treats the past—in his case, ancient Israel—in much the same way, as does Timothy Harrison, who most encouraged me to pursue archaeology as a career. In anthropology, I always find myself coming back to the comparative urbanism research of Aztec specialist Michael Smith. As for social theory, I tend to cite most those scholars responsible for the so-called “spatial turn” in the humanities and social sciences—Foucault, de Certeau, Lefebvre, and, in geography and archaeology, Edward Soja and Adam T. Smith.

What drew you to the topic of “monumentality”? How are you applying interdisciplinary approaches to this topic?

The first time I thought about monumentality as a concept was when I read Michael Smith’s article “Form and Meaning in the Earliest Cities: A New Approach to Urban Planning” (2007), where he talks about five criteria archaeologists can use to assess the presence of urban planning; one of these criteria is monumentality. It intrigued me, and so I looked up it in literature elsewhere, and found that the term is used different ways—often, extremely different ways—depending on the disciplinary tradition of the researcher. Archaeologists, art historians, and architects are the people who discuss monumentality explicitly the most frequently, and so I decided that a conference bringing together scholars from these fields would be a good start to assess the interdisciplinary potential that the concept of monumentality provides. As the students in my class on the topic are discovering (I hope!), there is a lot in common between these three fields, and the places where they diverge reveals a lot about the disciplines’ intellectual priorities.

What have been the most rewarding aspects of the IEMA Postdoctoral

Fellow position? What have been the most challenging?

By far the best aspect of my position at IEMA is its interdisciplinary character. Although primarily based in anthropology, I spend time every week in the Classics department, where I talk to the professors and graduate students there and learn about their research and interests. From these conversations I’ve learned a lot about the classical world that is largely terra incognita to me. I also appreciated not having to teach in the fall semester; as much as I love being in the classroom, that time gave me the opportunity to start converting my dissertation chapters into publishable articles, which is critically important for junior scholars like me. The challenges I’ve experienced pertain mostly to the conference itself, and managing the schedules and special requests of twenty prominent scholars, as well as corralling and stream-lining their intellectual contributions to the symposium. It has definitely been a lesson into the world of event planning.

In your opinion, what are some of the most successful interdisciplinary research projects in archaeology, and what about them in particular yielded positive results?

These days it seems like every archaeological project calls itself “interdisciplinary,” and since archaeology has always been a jack-of-all-trades type of profession, it does seem a fair descriptor for almost all field projects today. That said, I think the work done at Çatal Höyük, directed by Ian Hodder, and including a major UB excavation on the site’s West Mound directed by the director of IEMA, Peter Biehl, deserves a lot of credit for incorporating the research of scholars with vastly different methodological and theoretical approaches. I think that particular project has been successful in its interdisciplinarity because of its constant

willingness to be open-minded and to entertain research proposals from scholars, both established and junior, no matter how experimental the project.

Do you have any advice for graduate students?

They say “a good dissertation is a done dissertation,” and although that is obviously true on one level, I prefer to encourage graduate students to think that “a good dissertation is a good dissertation.” Grad students build up a reputation among professional scholars over the years as they conduct and write-up their results, present at conference, and so on, and this reputation will prove critical as they enter the job market. Furthermore, the better the dissertation is, the easier it will be to convert into publications after graduation.

A second piece of advice I would give is that it is important, if at all possible, to have a publication record begun by the time you graduate with your Ph.D. Although it is very difficult to publish and write one’s dissertation at the same time, having a peer reviewed article on one’s CV demonstrates to search committees that the anonymous intellectual community at large—and not just your dissertation committee—respects your work. If it can be on a topic separate from one’s dissertation, all the better, since it highlights your diverse interests. I encourage graduate students to pick a seminar paper they found particularly interesting to research, and the one they were most proud of writing, and try as hard as possible to convert that seminar paper into a manuscript to be submitted to a peer reviewed journal. If it gets rejected, resubmit it somewhere else. That article will immediately place you in a different league from other junior scholars who have yet to publish.