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A message from
Paul-Alain Beaulieu
Acting Chair and Acting Graduate Chair

We are at the close of the academic year 2016-2017 and on many counts it has been a fruitful one. Fundraising is underway for rarely taught subjects such as Ge'ez and Coptic. The Department is involved and even leading in the application of new technologies to the Humanities. The CRANE Project is a case in point, and we are also excited that NMC will participate in the Digging into Data Challenge Project, which promises to open new horizons for the interpretation of ancient texts.

The development of academic units such as NMC is critical for our society at a time when universities are under pressure to allocate their resources mainly to subjects of immediate economic value, with the danger of fostering new forms of obscurantism.
NMC-CESI - THANK YOU JAYS CARE FOUNDATION AND THE TORONTO BLUE JAYS

On Monday, May 8th, the NMC-CESI were invited to the Rogers Centre as guests of Jays Care Foundation, to watch the Toronto Blue Jays take on the Cleveland Indians from Jays Care Community Clubhouse!

The group of 44 included both student volunteers and Syrian newcomers, all of whom received a free ticket, Jays cap, and enjoyed the view of the game from their own private box, complete with catering and even a visit from the Toronto Blue Jays mascot at the end of the 5th inning!

NMC-CESI would like to thank Jays Care Foundation and the Toronto Blue Jays for this amazing opportunity and wonderful experience!
Following a successful application to the international T-AP Digging Into Data Challenge, a SSHRC-funded team of Assyriologists led by Heather D. Baker from the University of Toronto’s Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations will be joining with partners from the University of Frankfurt and the University of California, Los Angeles to develop new tools for the automated translation and analysis of cuneiform texts.

Émilie Pagé–Perron, PhD candidate at NMC for the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI), will coordinate the research group’s efforts.

The project is one of 14 chosen to address big data questions in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

The international team is led by:

Heather D. Baker (PI), University of Toronto,

Christian Chiarcos (Co-PI), University of Frankfurt,

Robert K. Englund (Co-PI), University of California, Los Angeles,

Émilie Pagé–Perron (Coordinator), University of Toronto.

More Information:

T-AP Digging Into Data
https://diggingintodata.org/awards/2016
Twitter @digcuneiform

The event was well attended and a great success, with over $3,000 in donations, which will be allocated towards weekly educational workshops that teach newcomers English, as well as cultural exchange events and field trips in the GTA.

NMC-CESI was also recently nominated, for Student Life’s ‘Outstanding Initiative’ and ‘Program of the Year Award’, and received an honorable mention.

Thank you to all those who volunteered and made this event possible!
FINDING HAMA: ON THE IDENTIFICATION OF A FORGOTTEN QUEEN BURIED IN THE NIMRUD TOMBS

Tracy L. Spurrier
University of Toronto

When Queen Mullissu-mukannishat-Ninua passed away and was buried in her tomb, she left a curse to those who would dare disturb her final resting place. Despite her warning, late 1980s excavations in the Northwest palace of King Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud conducted by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities revealed the existence of her burial, and those of a number of other Neo-Assyrian royal queens. These were extraordinary finds, containing gold and elite goods rivaling those in King Tutankhamun’s tomb in Egypt. Unfortunately, this discovery was made on the eve of the Gulf War which overshadowed the excavations; consequently, these burials, and the queens themselves, did not get the full recognition—or in some cases even the identifications—they deserved.

The tombs, located in the ancient Assyrian capital city of Kalhu, offer a unique opportunity for scholars to go beyond exclusively studying the material culture of this period, to studying the ancient people themselves through their physical remains. Not many burials have been excavated in this region, or for this time period; thus the Nimrud queens’ tombs—which contain the remains of over a dozen individuals, found in four chambers, three stone sarcophagi, two clay coffins, and three bronze coffins—are an exceptional discovery.

Over the past three decades, a number of publications have examined various individual aspects of the tombs—the texts, skeletons, jewelry, grave goods, coffins, royal women, genealogy, history, etc.—but most do not combine data sets and studies to fully reconstruct the lives of the particular individuals buried in them.

By taking a multidisciplinary approach examining the archaeological, skeletal, and textual data from these tombs in tandem, as well as the post mortem history, I argue that it is possible to identify the woman buried in one of the bronze coffins who was found wearing one of the more famous artifacts from the Nimrud tombs: a crown of gold leaves, flowers, grapes, and female winged genies.

This is Queen Hama, wife of Shalmaneser IV, daughter-in-law of Adad-nerari III, as indicated by a gold stamp seal pendant that was likely placed around her neck at the time of her burial. A reconsideration of available archaeological evidence presented here proves that this was a primary interment, and that she was the sole occupant of Bronze Coffin.

For the full journal visit:
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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO’S GLOBAL IMPACT: 3D TECHNOLOGY USED BY NMC’S CRANE PROJECT

As part of UofT’s Boundless campaign, recent video footage was shot to showcase 3D technology used by NMC’s CRANE Project.

Filming was done by Brought To You By, a local production company, to highlight the work conducted by CRANE to emphasize the University of Toronto’s global impact.

Digital work being produced by Stephen Batiuk (CRANE Project Manager) will be included, as well as Giles Morrow (Archaeology Centre) demonstrating the photogrammetry equipment at the Archaeology Centre to photograph artifacts from NMC’s Archaeology Lab supplied by Stanley Klassen (Collections Manager).

The final presentation will promote some of the exceptional work being produced at the University of Toronto and will be seen by diverse national and international audiences.
The chronicle of Zuqnin is a universal history, the first of its kind in the Near East, written by a monk living in the monastery of Zuqnin near Amid (modern Diar-Bakr) in 775. Parts III and IV (488-775 CE) were previously published (at PIMS) by Prof. Amir Harrak in translation only, but Parts I and II are published in edition and translation. In these two parts, the chronicler compiled a variety of sources some of which survived only in his work. He began with the biblical account of the creation, and then proceeded to include, among many other sources, the genealogy of Adam, of Jewish origin, the story of the Magi, of Persian background, the story of Alexander the Great and the Sleepers of Ephesus, which both found their ways in some details in the Qur’an (surah al-Kahf), accounts from three ecclesiastical histories and chronicles written in Greek, and finally a short chronicle that details a bloody war between the Sassanians and the Byzantines between 495 and 506 CE. This part of the chronicle ends with a positive note, a treaty of peace signed by these two archenemies!

The manuscript is palimpsest, which means it is made of reused parchments, but the under text (folios from an ancient Greek Bible) reappeared; confusing the Syriac.

The edition of the Syriac text was arduous, time consuming, and at times very frustrating, although a late digital version of the chronicles greatly helped. Prof. Harrak hopes that the Syriac text will be used by students, scholars, and the interested public for centuries to come!
"Preserving the heritage and advancing global knowledge of Coptic Studies," is the theme of the University of Toronto Faculty of Arts Endowment Campaign for Coptic Studies which launched the 31st of March 2017.

Greetings and endorsement of the campaign were expressed last month by Professor Stephen Emmel, Secretary, International Society for Coptic Studies, H. G. Bishop Makar, President, Board of Directors St. Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Church, Scarborough, Ontario, and Professor John Magee, Vice-Dean Humanities, University of Toronto Faculty of Arts, with keynote speaker Dr. Frank Feder, Project Director and Senior Researcher, Digital Edition and Translation of Coptic Sahidic Old Testament, Göttingen University, Germany.

Dr. Feder presented The Digital Coptic Old Testament and steps taken towards the virtual reconstruction of the unique linguistic, literary, and religious monument and how its manuscripts are dispersed in museums, libraries, and monasteries around the world.

In most cases the manuscripts have survived in fragments only, and, for over 100 years scholars have struggled to reconstruct the Coptic Old Testament.

In order to accomplish this gigantic task (likened to a jigsaw puzzle!), the Göttingen project will make full use of the technical advancements of the digital age. Its research focuses on developing a web platform and building a comprehensive database of the Coptic Biblical manuscript.

In the future, anyone interested will be able to browse the manuscript that has been virtually reassembled as codices (books), the text will be available in German, English, and Arabic translations.
The university is now one of the only places in the world where students can learn Ge’ez.

Tens of thousands of ancient Ethiopic manuscripts – maybe more – have collected dust for over a century because they are written in what is now a rarely studied language, Ge’ez.

But a new course at the University of Toronto is teaching a new generation of students to understand the ancient Semitic language so that one day they can access this long-lost trove of knowledge.

Professor Robert Holmstedt of the department of Near and Middle Eastern civilizations welcomed 25 students and members of Toronto’s Ethiopian community to the first day of an introductory course on Ge’ez, which like Latin, is only used in religious services, in this case for the Ethiopian Orthodox and Catholic churches.

With this course, U of T becomes one of the only places in the world where students can learn the fundamentals of Ge’ez. The program came about through several significant donations, including from The Weeknd, the Ethiopian community and the Faculty of Arts & Science.

Department chair Professor Tim Harrison has said that he hopes, with continued support, U of T will eventually add more courses and be positioned to launch the first Ethiopian studies program in North America.

Since the subject is so rarely taught, Holmstedt had to invent course materials and revise one of the only Ge’ez textbooks in English, the 40-year-old Introduction to Classical Ethiopic: Ge’ez by Thomas O. Lambdin. Ge’ez is a window into an ancient culture and offers insights into other Semitic languages, he said.
“I like giving students access to things that 99.5 per cent of the world doesn’t have access to,” he said. “It’s part of advancing our knowledge and the pursuit of truth. This is the very nature of the university. We can’t leave this behind.”

Michael Gervers, a history professor at U of T Scarborough, helped launch the course with a $50,000 donation and a call to Toronto’s Ethiopian community to contribute.

The call was answered and the donation matched by none other than Toronto native and Grammy-award winning artist Abel Tesfaye, a.k.a. The Weeknd.

The campaign for the language course has a $200,000 goal and has received support from the Faculty of Arts & Science and the Bikila Awards organization, a local Ethiopian community group named after Olympic marathoner Adebe Bikila.

On Monday, just as he had promised, Gervers sat in on the class, hoping to be one of the first to learn the language at U of T.

Although he has been studying ancient Ethiopia for 40 years – he has swung from ropes to explore rock-cut monasteries in Ethiopia and created a database of tens of thousands of photographs of Ethiopian art and culture – Gervers does not know the language.

Amharic-speaking students helped him with his pronunciation when he was asked to recite a letter of the alphabet.

The course’s first students included members of the Ethiopian and Eritrean communities, students with an interest in Ethiopian culture, medievalists and students in comparative linguistics.

Before any of the students can uncover the secrets of ancient Ethiopic texts, they must learn the basics. In their first class, they were introduced to Ethiopic letters and to the present tense of verbs like “to sit.”

Hours of memorization come next. Holmstedt urged his students to carry a ringlet of flashcards so they can learn the alphabet on the go.

“Walk around campus memorizing words instead of looking at your phone,” Holmstedt said.

Gervers said he hoped the Ge’ez course would be the first of many classes that would form the basis of an Ethiopian studies program at U of T. He has proposed a graduate-level course in the history of Ethiopia.

“Ethiopia is usually left out of the curriculum because it’s so different,” he said. “There is no point of entry through European languages like English, French, Spanish or Italian.”

The campaign will need additional funding to add further courses in Ge’ez – and even more to kickstart Ethiopian studies.

For many students in the course, the subject isn’t only academic.

Sahlegebriel Belay Gebreselassie, a third-year undergrad in international relations and political science, has an “intimate personal connection” with the class.

“It’s a part of learning my history, my language,” he said.
The Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations is committed to imparting students with the knowledge and leadership skills to meet the most pressing challenges of the 21st century.

Our alumni work in a wide range of fields in communities all around the world, including education, journalism, industry, public policy, and the arts. Every gift helps to sustain the growth and calibre of our internationally renowned programs.

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