

# The Oberlin Near East Study Collection (ONESC): Revitalizing an Archaeological Collection through Student Collaboration

Julian Hirsch, Oberlin College

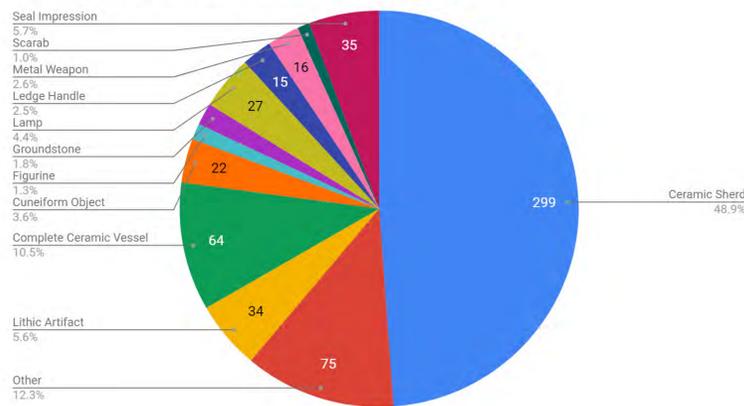
(jhirsch@oberlin.edu)



## The Oberlin Near East Study Collection

Housed in Oberlin College's Religion department, the Oberlin Near East Study Collection encompasses a wide variety of archaeological material from the Southern Levant. Its roughly 650 artifacts encompass a vast time span from the Epi-Paleolithic to the Modern Period with most objects coming from the Iron Age. As a teaching collection, the objects were used to vivify Biblical texts for generations of students in Oberlin's School of Theology and later in the College's department of Religion. Starting in the 1980s, the collection began to receive only limited use with its contents being largely forgotten.

Percentage and Count of Significant Artifact Categories



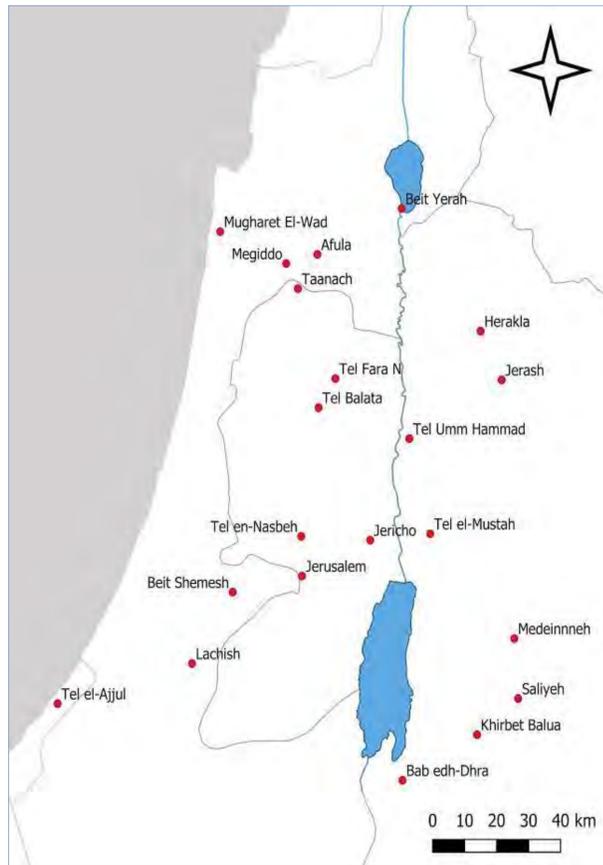
## Collection History

ONESC's material was collected from numerous sites of Biblical and archaeological importance between 1931 and 1980. Its main collector, Herbert G. May, served as an epigrapher and photographer for the University of Chicago's Megiddo expedition where he worked from 1931-1934. During his time in Palestine, May travelled extensively and collected material from contemporary excavations such as Lachish, Jericho, el-Wad and Megiddo. He taught at Oberlin from 1935 until 1973 and incorporated his collection into Biblical Studies courses as examples of Biblically related material culture.

May returned to Palestine and Transjordan many times and continued collecting throughout his later trips. His contacts in the field of Biblical studies helped bring sherds from Nelson Glueck's travels and a sizable number of artifacts from Haverford College's excavations at Beit Shemesh to Oberlin. May's successor, Harry Thomas Frank made contributions in the 1960s and 1970s and in 1977 secured for Oberlin the ceramic contents of a Bab edh-Dhra' tomb excavated by Paul Lapp.

## The ONESC Initiative: Our Work

The ONESC Initiative is a student led group which, in collaboration with Oberlin faculty and staff, is working to bring about the digitization and revitalization of Oberlin's collection of Near Eastern artifacts. To that end, objects are being recorded, photographed, and accessioned. Students have also begun to unravel the history of the collection by conducting oral histories and engaging in archival research. This research has begun the process of provenancing and contextualizing the collection. The generated data and research from these efforts will eventually be made available online for public and institutional use.



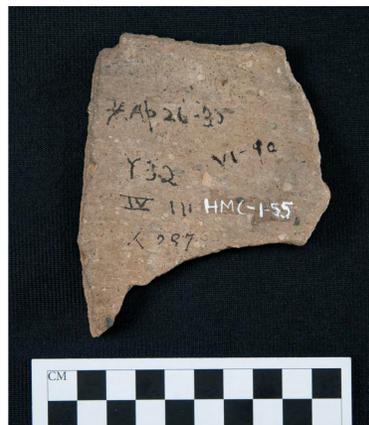
Sites represented in the Oberlin Near East Study Collection.



Students accessioning artifacts (photo credit: author)



ONESC 224: Foundation Cone of unknown provenance. This is 1 of 22 Cuneiform artifacts in the collection. (photo credit: author)



Artifact with many former accession and field numbers as well as date of collection. In many cases, the information preserved on an object is the only clue we have to its history.

ONESC Number	HMC No.	Water Term 2017 No.	Alternative Accession and Field Number #1	Alternative Accession and Field Number #2	Alternative Accession and Field Number #3	Acquisition History	Box No.	Current Object Location	Provenance	Object Type	Replicas or Original	Material	Max_L	Max_W	Max_Depth
01	1-5		19	412		HGM 1967		Archaeology 1 Lab	Purchased Jerusalem, 1967	Carinated Bowl	Original	Clay	12.7	12.7	
02	1-82		23					Archaeology 1 Lab		Jar	Original	Clay	11.4	11.4	12.7
03	1-3		12			HGM 1967?		Archaeology 1 Lab	Dead Sea Plain	Juglet	Original	Clay	6.4	6.4	7.5
04	1-83		VI-24	33-4-138	372	HGM 1941		Archaeology 26 Lab	Beit Shemesh	Cooking Pot	Original	Clay	14.2	14.2	15.1
05	1-1		22					Archaeology 12 Lab		Bowl	Replica	Clay	12.3	12.3	11.1

ONESC's database was made using free Google software. The database is comprehensive containing categories for object type, measurements, historical accession numbers, provenance, and more. The data entered into this sheet will eventually be transferred to an OMEKA website where it will be combined with artifact photos resulting in ONESC's total digitization.

## Outcomes for the Collection

- Collection accessioned
- High resolution photographs
- Increased stability in new storage boxes
- Use in classes and club programming
- Increased awareness of collection's history
- Important objects such as the Bab edh-Dhra' tomb group have been reidentified
- Group of faculty and staff invested in its long-term use

## Outcomes for Student Participants

The project's participants have gained skills in:

- Artifact Handling and Curation
- Object Photography
- Artifact Analysis and Identification
- IRB Applications
- Archival Research
- Digitization

Students who worked with the initiative have gone on to work on archaeological projects in the Middle East.

## Looking Ahead

Once completed, our work will ensure the longevity of ONESC as a hands-on study collection used to teach classes in multiple departments. The groundwork laid by the database we are building will create conditions under which original student research can be carried out on the collection's history and contents.

We are particularly interested in answering why our collectors chose particular artifacts and how they came to acquire them. By asking these questions, we will be able to contextualize the collection as related to the evolving fields of Biblical studies and the archaeology of the southern Levant in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is also our hope that this project can inspire institutions with similar historical biblical archaeology collections to begin thinking about their digitization as a means of promoting student research and engagement with the archaeology of the Ancient Near East.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all Oberlin Faculty and staff involved in this project. Thank you to the Foundation for Biblical Archaeology scholarship for making my attendance at this conference possible. In particular, thank you to Dr. Cynthia Chapman, Dr. Amy Margaris, Dr. Jeff Blakely, Heath Patten, Ed Vermue, and the 10 student volunteers who have given their time to work on this collection.