

# What Lies Beneath

**I** LIKE TO COMPARE THE PENN MUSEUM to an iceberg. What you see in the galleries is merely the tip, and what lies beneath is considerably larger. For every object on display, there are hundreds more in storage, part of the Museum's rich legacy of excavation and research. A tour of the basement storerooms can be mind-blowing.

When I joined the Penn faculty six years ago, I began to explore the Museum's vast holdings, with an eye for the Late Antique and Byzantine—periods under-represented in the galleries. What I found astonished me: a treasure trove of rare Byzantine gold coins, an unpublished collection of lead seals purchased a century ago, hundreds of textiles from Late Antique Egypt, gorgeous examples of Byzantine jewelry, gemstones, and glassware. And more. These have formed a key component of my teaching ever since.

The biggest surprise of all was the Beth Shean depot. Penn had excavated the important Biblical site in the 1920s and 30s, and the Museum houses more than 8,000 artifacts from Beth Shean. Of these, approximately 3,000 date from the Late Antique period (*ca.* 250–750 CE), when the city bustled with a heterogeneous population of polytheists, Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Just as important as the artifacts, the Museum Archives house the documentation—the excavators' notebooks, drawings, photographs, and unpublished reports—from which it is possible to reconstruct the Beth Shean excavations, day-by-day, find-by-find. It is a veritable goldmine.

For this special issue of *Expedition*, I asked several graduate students from the School of Arts and Sciences who have researched the Beth Shean materials to report their progress. Their short articles represent the first fruits of a larger endeavor, to re-examine the Late Antique city from the perspective of the Penn Museum's historic excavations and impressive holdings. Of course there is still much to do. To return to my initial metaphor, what you see in the following pages is the tip of the Beth Shean iceberg.

In addition to the student contributors, I extend my warm thanks to the Keeper of the Near East Section, Katherine Blanchard, and Senior Archivist Alessandro Pezzati for their invaluable assistance during our investigations, to editor Jane Hickman for the invitation to guest edit this issue, and to my Jerusalem colleague Gaby Mazor for participating in this venture. 🏠



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Ousterhout (center) examines drawings in the Museum Archives, with graduate students Stephanie Hagan, Jordan Pickett, and Daira Nocera.