

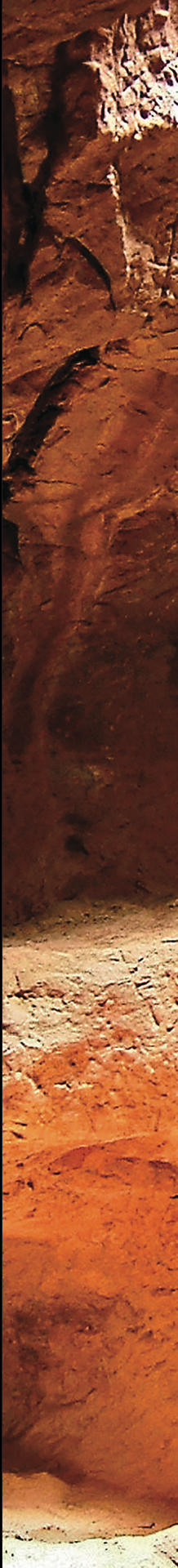
AT A CROSSROADS OF CULTURE

CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION IN
A REGION KNOWN FOR CONFLICT



On November 19, 2022, the Penn Museum will open the doors of the new Eastern Mediterranean Gallery, subtitled "Crossroads of Cultures," showcasing the stories of interconnectedness among peoples and ideas in this region—a place of origin for the alphabetic writing system and Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

BY VIRGINIA HERRMANN,
ERIC HUBBARD, LAUREN RISTVET,
AND JOANNA S. SMITH





This page: Inventing the Alphabet: The letters we use descend from the world's first alphabet. Some of the earliest alphabetic inscriptions were written at this turquoise mine at Serabit el-Khadim in Sinai, Egypt, featured near the entrance to the Gallery. Photo by David Rohl. **Facing page:** Ivory box lid from Kourion-Bamboula, Cyprus; 49-12-245.



Spanning Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Palestinian Territories, and Cyprus, this region is marked by periods of intense political exchange, and by innovation and creativity along cross-cultural lines. The gallery, with its 400+ artifacts from the Middle Bronze Age (2000 to 1600 BCE) through the Ottoman Period in the 1800s, focuses on re-routing the narrative identifying this region as a site of conflict.

The interactive gallery is organized into three themes—coexistence and connection, power and conflict, and creativity and change—and suggests a rich and complex identity for this region. It presents interpretations of layers of excavated material representing different temporal periods and sheds light on a world of knowledge about the Eastern Mediterranean never before seen in museums across North America.

Expedition Guest Editor Ava Cappitelli sat down with exhibition curators Lauren Ristvet (LR), Joanna S. Smith (JS), Virginia Herrmann (VH), and Eric Hubbard (EH) to discuss the gallery's role in highlighting the potential for human achievement when people collaborate across geographic, political, and religious lines.

What are the main stories this gallery will tell?

LR: The gallery will tell the story of connectivity of ideas and peoples in different ways to create new things. It deals with trade and migration, the development of political empires, and looks beyond to regions larger than this area. There is a focus on religion and the development of the alphabet and how these very much elaborated and spread within the region. The gallery tells the story of creativity, and how it continues to change the area.

How will this gallery complement the Middle East Galleries? Do any of the themes cross over?

LR: The Middle East Galleries are focused much more on chronology and place. The large story there is the journey to the city—how cities developed and changed over long periods of time, with a focus on specific excavations. This gallery is more thematic, with a looser chronological structure.

We are excited to make links between this gallery and other galleries across the Museum. Perhaps the most important connection we have here is with Egypt, and the Greek and Roman galleries next door. Cyprus is also a focus and a lovely place to look for connections to the Mediterranean.

Facing page:
Early Iron Age clay
sarcophagus lid
depicting a female
face, excavated at
Beth Shean;
29-103-789.

JS: Not only is it conceptually about connection and crossroads, but the location of the space shows it: you come in from one side and naturally come from the Middle East Galleries, but you exit into the Rome Gallery, and

“Not only is it conceptually about connection and crossroads, but the location of the space shows it... The Eastern Mediterranean Gallery is a physical connector for the Museum.” —JOANNA S. SMITH

close by are the Egyptian Galleries. The Eastern Mediterranean Gallery is a physical connector for the Museum.

VH: There is a history to the formation of this collection as a distinct part of the Near East Section that comes out of interest in the biblical world and excavations carried out specifically to learn more about the history of religion and the lifeworld of the bible. We wanted very much to acknowledge that history and make connections to that interest that is still relevant to people of different faiths, while putting the collection in the bigger framework of the Eastern Mediterranean.

What was the development process? Can you speak to how you worked together to develop the themes, and then the respective areas you each worked on, and then how you wove everything back together?

LR: We spent a lot of time looking at the collection and looking for stories that fit into the theme of connection





TRADING AT SEA: Merchants sailed the Mediterranean, stopping at bustling cities in Cyprus, Syria, and elsewhere along the way in ships like this one, modeled on a shipwreck from the late 1300s BCE near Uluburun, and another found nearby at Cape Gelidonya, both in Turkey. Archaeologists found objects like the ones included in this Eastern Mediterranean Gallery display at the Uluburun shipwreck site. Gallery rendering of the Eastern Mediterranean Gallery, opening on Nov. 19. Image by Penn Museum Exhibits Team.

and then divided it up. I was responsible for what we called coexistence and connection, Virginia [VH] focused on power and conflict, Eric [EH] on religion in the creativity and change sections, and Joanna [JS], because of her expertise in Cyprus, came together with all of us. We each chose objects, wrote text, decided on stories and spent time presenting these to each other. And then we spent a lot of time working together to see how everything could come together thematically.

VH: We had great assistance from Penn graduate students, including Paul Verhelst, Madeleine Nelson, David Mulder, and James Shackelford, who had specialties in different areas that really complemented our strengths, and we also got input from curators from other sections. Because this region is tied into Egypt, it's tied into material from Greece and Rome and the Near East Section, it was really essential that we also had expertise from other curators in the Museum.

LR: One of the things that was exciting to me was that Pat McGovern [Consulting Scholar in the Near East Section and Director of the Museum's Bioarchaeology Program], worked on one of the sites we're really featuring at the Baqa'h Valley in Jordan, so it was great to incorporate his ideas and analyses into that work and have that connection.

JS: Yes, and the CAAM [Center for the Analysis of Archaeological Materials] feedback as well, and bringing in their materials, analyses, and x-ray photographs of objects, some of which are featured in the gallery.

VH: And then because our alphabet section reaches all the way to East Asia, we needed input from Asian Section curators like Adam Smith as well.

EH: Though we worked somewhat independently in developing the stories within the three main themes,

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—VIRGINIA HERRMANN

they wove back together in satisfying ways as the team developed floor plan and exhibit flow. The different sections build on each other, and we ultimately blur our own thematic boundaries. For me, that was another interesting way to speak to the crossroads concept.

How will this gallery disrupt our assumptions and perceptions of what we know about the region?

LR: One of the main goals of this exhibit is to get people to rethink what they know about this place.

When dealing with the Eastern Mediterranean now, so much is narrated through either the Israel-Palestine conflict or through the Syrian civil war. This is not only a place of conflict, but very much a place of people living together, of coexistence. We wanted to think about innovation. One of the things we do, because of the material we have, is to provide a very different context to stories in the Hebrew Bible, which visitors may be familiar with, so it helps us rethink religion. Another thing I think we do, which is exciting for me, is not just tell the story of the Hebrew Bible but really consider this space as important in the Byzantine Empire, in early Christianity, and in early Islamic empires.

VH: People often think of this area in relation to recent conflicts that are tragic and upsetting. But, because this area has a strategic position between Africa and Asia, it has been a site of imperial contestation for millennia, so people have frequently been under the imposition of outside traditions and have had to decide whether they were going to resist or embrace and adapt them for themselves. There is a lot of resilience here that is much older than most people imagine. Also the Eastern Mediterranean is the birth site for three major religions and the alphabet. These innovations did not emerge in a vacuum. They are a product of intense cultural and political exchange that this region is really marked by.



**OBJECT HIGHLIGHTS:
VIRGINIA HERRMANN**

"I'm most drawn to these little stamp impressions on jar handles from 8th- and 7th-century BCE Judah inscribed with the Hebrew word "lemelech" meaning "belonging to the king." While humble-looking, they contain illuminating significance for the politics, ideology, and economics of that biblical kingdom."



Jar handles from Gibeon, Palestinian Territories, excavated in 1960 and bearing inscriptions including the Hebrew letter equivalents lmlk ("lemelech"); clockwise from top, 60-13-99, 60-13-95, 60-13-74.



In the Early Iron Age, residents of Gibeon (El-Jib) cut a deep cylindrical pool descending almost 90 feet into bedrock to access fresh water. At the bottom archaeologists uncovered layers of household and possibly sacred refuse, including female and animal figurines, as well as the impressed wine jar handles shown on the previous page. Examples of each will be on display in the Eastern Mediterranean Gallery; PM Image 62640

What will make this gallery unique in North America?

LR: There are a number of things that make this gallery really special. One is how we are defining it geographically, including Cyprus, which I don't think anyone else has done in this way. The material we have is special—and from important excavations. There is not a lot of material from this time and place available in North America from well-documented excavations, and where there is, curators usually focus on only one excavation. They don't give us this fuller story or chronological focus.

VH: This is one of the largest collections of excavated material from this region that you can see in North America, and having these well-documented excavations be the source gives us a huge advantage in interpreting and contextualizing these objects.

JS: On top of the fact that the material is excavated, is the layering of the material. As sites develop over time there are layers and layers of deposited material. The objects also have layers of history. One end of the gallery uses this concept of a palimpsest of text, a document that is reused. It was erased and written on again, but you can still see the old text under the new. The gallery features this idea of vertical layering in both large and small objects, as with recarved stone

objects. At the other end of the gallery is a mosaic, a design composed of different tesserae. Here we find interconnectedness by horizontal proximity. There are thus two concepts of overlap and of connection, in the gallery, for the sites, and among the objects through time and space.

LR: This is the only gallery in North America, and I would suspect Western Europe, to deal with political and colonial contexts, so, similar to what we did in the Africa Galleries, we're really confronting that. In our introductory section Uncovering the Past, we begin with an interactive "Dig into the Archives" for context; we don't shy away from the fact that these excavations were part of very particular moments in time and that they have modern significances that are sometimes uncomfortable.

EH: Yes, the Archives help us understand how and why the collections were created and under what circumstances. The collections that make up the gallery come from Penn Museum-led excavations from 1921 through the 1980s—six decades that saw contentious and violent intervals including a World War, and the drawing (and redrawing) of national borders. With the Archives section we wanted to acknowledge that archaeology played a role in the politics of memory and heritage in this place—and continues to do so.



**OBJECT HIGHLIGHTS:
ERIC HUBBARD**

"All the incense censers on display that span the three major chronological periods for the religion section. We wanted to show the commonalities in spiritual practices over time, like incense burning, while highlighting how these objects transformed within specific cultural contexts in decoration, style, and meaning."



Incense censers across time and place: (left to right) Clay offering stand from Beth Shean, 1150–925 BCE, 29-103-830; limestone censer from South Arabia, 3rd to 1st century BCE, 30-47-32.





LR: Beth Shean is the first excavation post-World War I. It was under the British Mandate of Palestine. We have documents that go into how Penn Museum officials were part of creating what is going to be the framework of antiquities law within the Mandate.

EH: Yes, under the Mandate, this area and its material past became accessible to western European and American scholars in a way that it was not under the Ottoman Empire. Scholars particularly interested in unearthing the region's biblical connections poured in to make it one of the most active areas of excavation in the world. The archives help illustrate how the collection from Beth Shean reflects that interest in that moment, as well as the way the excavators' research intersected with the work of empire happening around them.

We also wanted visitors to get a sense of what went into excavating the objects, so we pointed to the stories of the dig staff and hired local laborers who made these excavations possible, yet whose vital role has been historically overlooked.

VH: The wonderful Hellenistic, late Roman/Byzantine, and early Islamic material from Beth Shean has only rarely been displayed before in the Museum's history, and then separately from the earlier Bronze and Iron Age material. It's important to understand that the traditional approach of dividing the history of this

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region into the biblical history and then the Greco-Roman period and then the Byzantine-Christian period and then the Islamic period is a colonial framework. We are deliberately trying in the new gallery to disrupt that idea that "this part of history is relevant for these people and that part of history is relevant for other people," instead of seeing it as a continuous story that belongs foremost to the people of that region.

How will the gallery speak to different audiences, from scholars to families and school groups?

JS: There are a number of features that are interactive aspects—you can play with a screen in the gallery that relates to dress and color of sculptures. But others emphasize your presence in relation to some of these objects, for example at one end of the gallery there's a reconstruction of a pithos, a large vessel, that could fit a whole person inside, so people can understand the size and scale of some of these objects in relationship to themselves. The reconstruction of part of an ancient ship gives you the sense of the size and scale of a vessel that people would have traveled in to ship some of the goods

LR: One thing that is exciting is that this is a place of enormous significance for a lot of people in Philadelphia, even people who wouldn't normally go into museums, because of its link—of course—to Christianity, Judaism, and

Islam. It gives the Museum a really wonderful opportunity to reach out and bring in people in different ways.

VH: We should also mention the engagement of people's senses. There is a wonderful smell interactive that gives people a sense of the smells of incense that you would encounter in a religious setting in this region. And we have tactile reproductions so people can feel the different writing materials that have been used through history—from impressing cuneiform on clay tablets to writing with pen and ink on parchment. Then they get to interact with touchscreens to see the development of world empires or the spread of the alphabet more dynamically.

This is such a rich collection—what is the most significant object to each of you that will be on display?

JS: Near and dear to my heart—and the way I got started on working on the Cypriot collection—are cylinder seals. They are very small objects, but they are a very personal part of identity, and were worn and used to make impressions in clay. The small stone seals would be passed on and re-carved for new people.

There are some larger pieces that I think are incredibly significant. I have to give a call out to the Egyptian garrison doorway. I love the way that it has been incorporated, giving people a sense of the physical space of a building.

VH: Even when I used to go into the old gallery, one of the things I was most drawn to were these little stamp impressions on jar handles inscribed with the Hebrew word “lemelech” meaning “belonging to the king.” They are from 8th- and 7th-century BCE ancient Judah, and they are really humble-looking objects but they contain so much illuminating significance for the politics and the ideology and the economics of that biblical kingdom. At the same time, there is so much that is still not well-understood about this marking system and why it uniquely appears in Judah.

LR: I will second everything said so far, but I want to call out our sarcophagi—the Beth Shean sarcophagi—because I really do find that they are amazing. There are wonderful sarcophagi lids on display in Israel but we are the only museum to have them in North America. They help us tell a complicated story about people in empire: how do locals respond to a new imperial context; how do they change different techniques? Along the same lines, one thing that was fun for me to work on were the funerary portraits of the Roman period from Beth Shean, Palmyra, and Cyprus. We are going to do a project on the pigments on these in the future; thinking about Roman pigments on statuary has been really fun.

EH: For me, it's a three-way tie between all the incense censers on display that span the three major



OBJECT HIGHLIGHTS: JOANNA S. SMITH

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This small (2 cm) stone seal, found in Tomb 19 at Kourion-Bamboula, Cyprus, in 1939, has been re-carved for a new individual; 49-12-298. Line drawing showing detail by Joanna S. Smith.

Temple at the Sanctuary of Apollo Hylates in Kourion, Cyprus. The Greek general Ptolemy became king of Egypt after Alexander the Great died in 323 BCE. Ptolemy later won control of Cyprus and appointed official governors. Photo by Carole Raddato/CC BY-SA 2.0.



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chronological periods for the religion section. We wanted to show the commonalities in spiritual practices over time, like incense burning, while highlighting how these objects transformed within specific cultural contexts in decoration, style, and meaning.

Another is a small, unassuming clay model shrine from Cyprus that shows the beginning of a preference by the community it came from to display images of their gods or deities in a way that we’re not used to associating with ancient societies. Here we see several communities begin to direct their worship towards a standing stone or perhaps a sacred space, rather than

rendering the divine in a human or physical form.

The Phoenicians were one such community and we associate this little shrine with the Phoenician goddess Astarte. Inside the shrine is an image which shares both the features of a standing stone and a figural image of goddess. So, it’s a fascinating piece that points to a mix of traditions circulating in the Iron Age.

And last, a telegram cable which says a lot about the complicated context in which the first excavation of Beth Shean began. It’s a 1919 message from the Occupied Enemy Territory Administration (a short-lived government run by the British military) to the field director of the Museum’s excavations in Egypt, Dr. Clarence Fisher, denying him permission to excavate in Palestine given the area’s political precarity. This is just months after the War ended, and to me it shows the eagerness with which the Museum—and other institutions—were trying to get into the region to begin their work.

Lauren Ristvet, Ph.D., lead curator, is the Dyson Associate Curator, Near East Section, and Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology. Virginia Herrmann, Ph.D., co-curator, is co-director of excavations at Zincirli, Türkiye. Eric Hubbard, co-curator, is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Anthropology. Joanna S. Smith, Ph.D., co-curator, is a Consulting Scholar in the Mediterranean Section.



OBJECT HIGHLIGHTS: LAUREN RISTVET

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On this fragment of a limestone mortuary stone with a relief bust of a bearded man in a tunic and mantle, the black pigment around his hair and eyes is partly preserved. The slab bears a Palmyrene inscription to the right of his head. Excavated in 1890; B8906.

