Good morning and thanks for being here. Today I’m going to be presenting my talk titled “An admirable scheme: the symbiotic relationship of archaeology and art at the Met in the 20th century”, but the overall title of our session, from site to museum, really encompasses the broader places and themes for encountering ancient near eastern art. I think in our series this morning we have looked at field work through Haider’s paper, and the analysis of the objects themselves with Anastasia’s paper, but my talk, which I suppose should represent the ‘museum’ portion of from site to museum, really traces the history of how these objects came to the museum, specifically focusing on the interplay and interaction of art and archaeology in the early 20th century. The title of my talk “an admirable scheme” comes from a 1931 letter by Joseph Breck, who was the head curator of the Decorative Arts department where the Near Eastern art resided prior to the formation of the Near Eastern Art department.
Breck was writing to Herbert Winlock, the head of the Egyptian department, to express his support for the development of an archaeological excavation project at the site of Ctesiphon in Iraq. Winlock, who would the following year become the Museum’s director, was instrumental in providing support and man power for the museum’s first foray into excavation in the Near East. I chose this letter and this quote because I feel it highlights the informality of the relationship between archaeology and the museum at that time. This personal letter touches on some of the themes I hope to cover today, such as the role of personality in shaping the museum and archaeology, specifically in the choice and execution of excavations. The letter discusses the reassignment of one of the Egypt expedition’s staff members to the new project in Iraq, which was a cost-saving measure for the new, unestablished excavation. This offer is nod to the extremely difficult financial situation facing the world and the museum in the 1930s. So, keeping in mind this admirable scheme, we can begin to look at the ways that archaeology was part of the history of the museum, specifically the Near Eastern Art Department.
When I started my research on the Ctesiphon excavations (a video of which you are seeing here) the question I kept coming back to was Why archaeology? Why was the Metropolitan museum of ART, specifically the NE department even involved in excavations? This spawned other questions, Why Ctesiphon? Why the focus on ‘later’ period sites? What I want to show here today is that the involvement in excavations, specifically Ctesiphon, was a perfect storm of personality, favorable political situation, opportunity, and public interest. I would argue that the success of the early excavations created the firm bedrock for continued archaeological involvement by the department (that continues to this day). Archaeological investigation provided new materials that had not been previously known, helped create public interest, and also was integral to the mission of acquiring an encyclopedic collection.

The way I’m going to take you through the question of “Why archaeology?” is through the lens of the 1931-1932 excavations at Ctesiphon in Iraq. The Met’s complex collecting history and its involvement or non-involvement in various archaeological projects, is interesting but outside the scope of this paper. Instead today I’m going to focus on just one particular excavation that happened at a crucial juncture the ANE department’s history.
Ctesiphon is most famous for the arch of the Taq-I Kisra which was a Sasanian winter palace. The site is located on the Tigris, about 20 miles south of Baghdad. During the 6th century the site of Ctesiphon functioned as a capital of the Sasanian empire.
The Ctesiphon excavations were conducted from November 4, 1931 to February 15, 1932. The project was a joint expedition between the German State museums and the Metropolitan Museum. The Germans, through the German Oriental Society had received a concession, or a permission to dig in the late 1920s. They conducted the first season of excavations in the winter of 1928-1929. They uncovered numerous stucco reliefs, an early Christian church and the partial remains of Sasanian period houses.
The site is actually made of several mounds and during the 2nd expedition in 1931/32 the German/American team conducted excavations at the palace and four other main areas. They excavated well-decorated Sasanian houses at the sites of Umm ez-Za‘tir, Ma’aridh and Tell Dheheb, and early Islamic period houses at the site of the modern village of Selman Pak.
The excavators were primarily interested in the finds of stucco reliefs, like this large disk. It is 3.5 feet wide and decorated on both sides. It was probably originally part of a window intended to be viewed from both sides. These were found in fragments during the excavation and reconstructed later in Berlin. Much of the correspondence preceding the excavation centers around the idea that it might be possible to acquire stuccos, and the reports from the field also report on the desire to find the decorative reliefs.
It’s not possible to understand the Met’s involvement in archaeology without understanding the larger cultural, political and historical context. Archaeology is a culturally embedded practice that relies on the physical presence in places and is absolutely dependent on international collaboration and cooperation. The interwar period was a time of formation of new nation states as well as continued colonialism and the constantly shifting situation often placed archaeologists in the precarious position of renegotiating with new governments, new antiquities departments or new western collaborators and competitors. The Met’s involvement at Ctesiphon was a result of both the German political/financial situation and the British mandate era policies in Iraq.

The German State Museums had approached the Met to collaborate due to their own financial difficulties. The collapse of the German banking system in 1931, combined with the general financial instability of the times made it difficult for them to raise the money needed and the German government was unable to support the excavation. To be fair, the Met was facing financial difficulties as well with the stock market crash and Depression. The archival material here at the Met clearly shows that it took some convincing to get the Trustees to agree to sponsor the dig, but they were eventually persuaded by the potential of the finds and the rare opportunity it presented to dig in Iraq as well as the relatively bargain price of participation.
Following World War 1, Iraq was under the control of the British Empire. First under British occupation, then under the British mandate period, before being recognized as an independent state in 1932. In the 1920s and early 30s, the western control of the country, specifically the influence of Gertrude Bell and other westerners on the antiquities legislation, created favorable conditions for westerners to engage in excavations in the country, with a reasonable expectation of acquiring objects for export. An excerpt of a letter here from Winlock to a trustee discusses the opportunity that the Ctesiphon expedition presents.

He writes “I know the last Director General of Antiquities and some of the excavators in Mesopotamia personally, and if their judgment of the conditions in Irak is correct, they are now more favorable than they will be in the not far distant future, and such opportunities as this cannot be expected to occur indefinitely” The system of antiquities laws was favorable during this time in that it allowed the system of ‘partage’ to take place. This system allows for the division of finds between the sponsoring institution and the museum in Baghdad.
Although the 1924 antiquities law technically allowed for the representative of the Iraq government to take any pieces they deemed necessary or important for the Baghdad museum, in practice the finds were almost always divided 50/50 between the expedition and the museum. At the time of the Ctesiphon excavations the director of antiquities was a German, Dr. Julius Jordan, and so the museum was fairly certain they would receive a favorable division of the finds. In our second session today Lamia will be talking about the various directors of the Baghdad museum, giving some perspective from Iraq. The end result was though, that at this time, archaeology was a way to not only further our understanding of the past, but also to acquire objects. A selection of the Met’s share of objects can be seen here.
But even if the political situation and the antiquities laws were aligned, the question of why choose a site of the Sasanian and early Islamic periods? In the late 19th century excavations of early sites popularized the history and archaeology of the region, and spectacular finds like the Lamassu and the Assyrian court reliefs that we have here at the Met were certainly part of this interest. By the early 20th century however, more was known about the history and archaeology of the region and some interests shifted. This spread from the Illustrated London News in January 1931 shows an exhibit of “Persian Art” that took place at the Royal Academy. The archival material at the Met clearly shows the impact that shows like this had on the interest in these periods. On this Statement dated June 1931, the “Persian Exhibition in London” is cited as a justification for becoming involved in the excavations at Ctesiphon. Since Ctesiphon was a Sasanian capital, it represented the Persian empires, even though it was in Iraq rather than Iran.
It wasn’t only factors outside the museum that influenced the decision to become involved in excavation and archaeology. In the 1930s the Met was facing a shifting landscape. The era of big donors was coming to an end, the financial crash and Depression were dramatically affecting the finances of the museum as well as the donors and trustees.

At the same time the museum was becoming increasingly specialized into departments, and in 1932 the department of Near Eastern Art was formed and became separate from the Decorative Arts department where the NE art had previously been held. The department covered all time periods, including Islamic art. The Islamic department did not become a separate department until 1963. The formation of new departments was probably a result of the professionalization of the museum at this time. Curators and staff were now more likely to be specialists and trained in their respective fields. The move toward specialized staff created an environment where the needs of the newly formed departments could be more carefully shaped by their members, giving individual staff members new influence.
One of the most important influences from within the museum was Herbert Winlock. Winlock had been the head of the Egyptian department and ran the museum’s excavations in Egypt. He was an influential figure at the museum and was promoted to director at the start of 1932 while the Ctesiphon expedition was in the field. He was a strong supporter of the ‘scheme’ from the beginning as I showed with the opening letter where he offered up one of his staff, Walter Hauser, to join the new Iraq excavations. The other two major players in this early excavation plan were the aforementioned Hauser and Joseph Upton. These two men were interested in field work, and were originally hired not as curators but as field staff. Their interest and willingness to engage in field work was a large part of the new Near Eastern Art department’s continued involvement in archaeology. Both Hauser and Upton would become staff of the NE department. Another archaeologist, Charles Wilkinson, would also play a major role as he joined future excavations of the department and would later lead the department himself. At the time of the Ctesiphon excavations, the head of the new department, Maurice Dimand, was not a field work specialist. However, he clearly supported archaeology as a useful tool for his department.
Dimand recognized that the Ctesiphon excavations, and later the Qasr-I Abu Nasr and Nishapur excavations in Iran, presented an opportunity to acquire objects that might not otherwise be available. In this statement he specifically mentions the acquisition of stuccos which “are not available in the market” – This short statement probably does not represent Dimand’s complete views on archaeology, but it clearly shows that he believed archaeology to be an important tool for building the NE art collection. Although Dimand and the NE department forged ahead with their archaeological projects, it’s clear that even within the museum there wasn’t a mandate to participate in excavations and that excavation was very much dependent on the independent departments and their individual staff. Winlock as head of the Egyptian department was heavily involved in excavations, in research, publication and the acquisition of objects of the museum. In contrast, the Greek and Roman department was acquiring objects through the art market. As I’ve outlined in this paper, there are many reasons for the choices to get involved in archaeology or not (including things like permits and permissions), but it’s clear that within the museum different modes of object acquisition were being practiced and even practiced within the same department as departments both excavated and bought objects. In the case of Ctesiphon, the staff sometimes even bought objects from the local people while they were in Iraq.
The tension between archaeology and art or archeology and museum was explicit, even this early in the history of the field. As I already mentioned, the pursuit of stuccos and decorative reliefs was a major aim of the excavation. The documentation also mentions a desire for glazed ceramics. As a result most, if not all, of the undecorated ceramics were disregarded. In very few cases were vessels reconstructed or even attempts made to collect all the pieces for a reconstruction. There was a clear divide in the excavator’s minds between the ‘scientific’ goals of the excavation and the needs of the museum. This is evident in this excerpt from a report from Ctesiphon’s field director, Ernst Kuhnel, reporting from the field to the Met about the ongoing excavations. He writes “from a scholarly point of view, we can be satisfied with the present results of the excavation; from the museum point of view, I am not quite satisfied as yet. We are reaching, however, the more prolific places."

Despite Kuhnel’s claim to be pleased with the scholarly output of the excavations, the American archaeologists felt the scientific aspects of the excavation were poorly conducted and neglected. The archival correspondence between the excavators Hauser and Upton and Winlock, the Met’s director, express their disappointment with the methodology and archaeology as practiced at Ctesiphon. Hauser in particular was disappointed with the way the excavations were conducted, as they did not meet the standards he was used to after working in Egypt with Winlock.

In the end, the Met decided not to re-partner with the German State Museums the following year. This was in part due to the poor standards, changes in the political situation (rise of Hitler in 1933), a new independent Iraq, and new opportunities that presented themselves in Iran/Persia.
The decision to not continue at Ctesiphon may have affected the choices of the objects that would eventually come to the Met. Here we see a gallery view from the late 1930s with a display of the Ctesiphon stuccos. The Berlin museums have more than 16 thousand objects, including extensive archaeological study collections from the Ctesiphon expeditions. By contrast the Met has only 466 objects from the excavations. Again, there are probably multiple reasons for this disparity. First, the desire to not continue the collaboration probably influenced the selection. Since the team was not interested in continuing to work together it makes sense the Met would not want to have the responsibility and expense of publishing the full excavations. Another factor was surely the cost of transport. The materials were all taken to Berlin after the division in Baghdad. Dimand, the head of the new NE department, selected the pieces that would come to the Met from those in Berlin. He was not an archaeologist by training and his background probably influenced the choice of the objects, namely focusing on the stuccos.
The excavation was clearly viewed as a success and an important milestone for the new department. It was listed in the 50th anniversary publication among the other “important persons, happenings and dates”
The Ctesiphon finds were not as spectacular as the materials featured in the London Persia Exhibit that was shown in the Illustrated London news, but they were still interesting enough to get a mention in the NYTimes along with recent Egyptian finds.
After the decision to leave Iraq and Ctesiphon behind, the department, and its staff moved their attentions to Iran and Persian archaeology. Until 1930 the French had a monopoly on excavation in Iran. The opening up of archaeology to other countries spurred an archaeological boom. The new favorable antiquities laws also created conditions where the Met could sponsor their own dig, without having to seek out any partners. This view of the galleries, also from the late 1930s, shows the materials from Nishapur in Iran, one of the Met sponsored excavations that followed Ctesiphon. As you can see in this image the archaeological character of the objects is clearly referenced by the inclusion of the photograph of the excavations. This excavation was also published in much more depth than the Ctesiphon expedition as the Met’s staff had control over the entirety of the expedition from excavation, to object selection, through publication. Although the Ctesiphon excavations were perhaps not conducted to the Met staff’s standards, the new Iranian excavations offered an opportunity to undertake excavations on their own terms and, as a result, clearly reflect the archaeological perspective of the NE art department staff.
In the end, I would argue that the choice to participate in excavations by the fledgling NE department was not necessarily a highly orchestrated plan or vision for the department, but instead was a result of the geopolitical situation, the favorable divisions of finds that were happening in the various countries, and the result of the particular individuals within the museum who were excavators themselves and keen to continue their work. Later the Met excavations would shift away from direct involvement to a more monetary and hands off role in excavations, without organizing the permits themselves to a more backseat role as participants and observers and occasionally beneficiaries of the excavations. You can see the results of the department’s involvement in excavations throughout the galleries to this day.
Many Thanks to:
James Moske and the Museum Archives Department
Yelena Rakic
Kim Benzel
Ancient Near Eastern Art Department
Marcie Karp and the Academic Programs Staff
And my fellow Fellows

Video excerpted from video displayed in “The Heritage of the Old Kings. Ctesiphon and the Persian Sources of Islamic Art” Exhibit, Pergamon Museum, Berlin