



The History of the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology as a Research Paradigm¹

GIORGIO BUCCELLATI²

It is the privilege of academia that ideas should be deeply wedded with institutions. Establishing the Institute of Archaeology was, certainly, more than just adding another unit, subdivision, or department within the University structure. It was very much giving shape to an idea. The effort has remained unchanged over the years. This talk will thus chronicle events in order to explain how, through the Institute, we have all become better archaeologists.

IT IS NOT OFTEN that we can be personal about an institution, except perhaps on special occasions, like an anniversary.

Which is, of course, our case tonight. But the Institute has always been personal. Since its inception, the Institute was an *idea*, well more than an

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² Founding Director of the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA.

institution. So, let me take you on a *personal* journey: our intellectual history.

I do not mean it as an anecdotal *chronicle*, a plain recounting of events and personalities—although there will be some of that. I mean it more as a *history* that aims towards a deeper *disclosure*. I want to share with you the *shaping of a vision*, one that had profound intellectual roots, and has, from those roots, blossomed into a luxuriant tree. It reflects the sentiment of an intellectual search, inevitably autobiographical in the details, for which I trust in your indulgence.

I call it a “research paradigm.” By that I mean that the Institute was, on the intellectual level, what *research* is, on a personal level, for all of us, individually and jointly. Research is not aimless vagabonding. It is very much goal-oriented. In a similar way, the Institute did not start just because there was a slot to fill, a department that was missing in a bureaucratic checkerboard.

Definitely not. The Institute started because many sensed it as a valid intellectual goal.

GESTATION

It is, you know well, our fortieth anniversary: the Institute came into existence in 1973.

But, let me begin . . . before the beginning. Do you know how long the gestation period of the Institute was? No less than *eight* years.

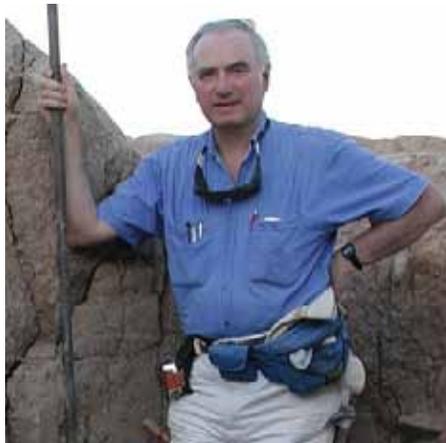
We can set the start date of that process at November 29, 1965. That was the date of the first draft of a proposal for the establishment of an Archaeology Interdepartmental Graduate Program. I had just arrived at UCLA two months before, fresh from my Ph.D. in Chicago, and was immediately co-opted into that exciting project. Spearheaded by Clem Meighan, it took three and half more years, and three more proposals, for the program to be agreed upon and approved, on March 27, 1969, with Clem serving as its first chair. I succeeded him in 1971.

Involvement in this process turned out to be, for me, like an apprenticeship in . . . midwifery! I got to know not only about archaeology, but specifically about *archaeologists* at UCLA. There were two major . . . (let us say) *persuasions*, split along divisional lines: the social sciences (essentially Anthropology) and the humanities. It happened that I was institutionally, but also temperamentally, in both,

since I held a dual appointment in History and in Near Eastern Languages. And I developed a close personal relationship with some of the key players—the senior stars: Clem Meighan, Henry “Nick” Nicholson, and Wally Goldschmidt on the social sciences side, Marija Gimbutas and Pierre Delougaz on the humanities side; and the junior colleagues: Jim Sackett and Jim Hill on one side, David Packard on the other. There was, shall we say, a powerful converging of diverse but equally deep-seated convictions, a converging that was so colored by personality as to develop into an effervescent, not to say conflictual, dynamism (as Jim Sackett undoubtedly remembers well . . .).

Identifying a commonality of interests turned out to be my challenge. I took it up with the enthusiasm of youth and inexperience. And therein I actually found a source of strength. I came more and more to see the Institute not as a ground for political compromise, but rather as the arena for a constructive confrontation of complementarities. The Institute was to be an *idea* as much as (in fact, more than) an institution. It seemed to me that sharpening diverse points of view, rather than watering them down, would create a robust and lively collegiality, one, it has been said, of *men and women who think otherwise*.

If this approach was *possible*, it was because there was a fundamental mutual respect, one that could identify strengths alongside weaknesses. And if this approach was eventually *successful*, not just conceptually but also in fact academically and institutionally, it was because, as such, and seen in this light, it called for *little* funding. Which—you guessed it—made it appealing to the administration!



Giorgio Buccellati, Founding Director of the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology.

But I am far from downplaying the role of the administration in the establishment of the Institute. UCLA Chancellor Franklin Murphy had a strong personal interest in the prospect, and was actually pushing for its realization. He genuinely shared the intellectual vision. And with his charm and influence in Sacramento and on the UC Board of Regents, he reached out from the top, as I was trying to do from the bottom, to the stars in our firmament. His enthusiasm was shared by Vice-Chancellor Elwin “Sven” Svenson and by the Executive Vice-Chancellor, David Saxon.

From the establishment of the graduate program in 1969, four more years passed, for a total of eight years since archaeologists first set out to achieve institutional definition at UCLA. The Institute was finally approved by the UC Regents, and on July 3, 1973, I was asked to serve as the Institute’s first director.

MIGRATIONS

The main selling point remained the intellectual excellence that (we believed) was already ours, and only needed the added strength of institutional interaction. We did not start out with “things,” but only with people and a common idea. My office at the time was in the History Department, on the 8th floor of Bunche Hall: physically, the Institute was truly, for several months thereafter, a drawer in that office. From Bunche, we migrated first to Math Sciences (I had a small office there next to the mainframe computer, the only computer at the time—and the Institute was given a larger room upstairs), then to Kinsey Hall. For the final move to the Fowler Building in 1990, we are indebted to Chris Donnan, who, in the design phase of the building, proposed that the ground floor be reserved for the Institute, and to Merrick Posnansky, who defined how the space was to be organized. While I am stressing the intellectual dimension of the Institute as an idea, it was abundantly clear that, in the first seventeen years, we felt like a soul without a body. But collegiality had shown its vitality, and the acquisition of this new body was indeed a validation of the soul behind it.

PUBLICATIONS

There was one exception, that is, one entity that came full-fledged within the Institute: the *Archaeo-*

logical Survey. It had been established by the Department of Anthropology, and it had its own quarters in the basement of Haines Hall. It was, in effect, an autonomous entity, with its own publication series, and it remained such for several years to come. But it contributed in one important respect to the development of the Institute in its wider sense: the publication arm of the Archaeological Survey became, effectively, the Institute’s publication unit, which grew over the decades into what today is the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press.

Setting up this publication unit of the Institute was a development that could take place with the very limited budgets at our disposal. You must know that in the 1970s, “desktop publishing” did not refer to computer software, but to a production and marketing set-up that took advantage of “advanced” *typewriters*, of cost-effective offset printing that made it possible to have small print runs, and of judicious advertising aimed at what was in any case a very restricted market. Ernestine Elster was our first Director of Publications, and in the first year (1976) we published as many as four volumes of the new series *Monumenta Archaeologica*. Appropriately, volumes 1 and 2 were authored respectively by representatives of the two foundationally different strands of our Institute, Marija Gimbutas and Clem Meighan, who, just as significantly, also served together as the associate editors of the series.

It is amusing, and instructive, to recall a memo I received on April 7, 1982, in which the administration stated that a letter I had written “persuaded [them] that a word processing system would be a cost effective solution to several problems in the Institute of Archaeology. Your estimates of cost savings are probably conservative.” In 1982, there were no PCs, no Macs. Our first computer, entirely devoted to publications, was a CP/M computer—something you probably have never even heard of.

PROGRAMS

Then there were other aspects that I could develop without true budgetary allocations. The first was the organization of *joint projects with the faculty*. One consisted of thematic courses in the form of seminars in which two or more colleagues took part. There was a memorable one on style that Jim Sackett and I offered together, through which we developed not only a close personal friendship but also the

most lively interaction between anthropological and humanist sensitivities.

Another aspect was the participation in *joint field projects*; thus, both Clem Meighan and Wally Goldschmidt joined Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati and me during our first excavations seasons at Terqa in Eastern Syria.

Finally, there was *public outreach*. In December 1965, just one month after the first proposal for a graduate program in archaeology was laid out, the UCLA Friends of Archaeology had been established, and in subsequent years they created a strong base of support, which was indicative of the great interest archaeology could stimulate in the community. It was with their help that a vigorous program of public lectures could be maintained.

There was also adult education through UCLA Extension. At first there were regular courses that the Institute organized. (I did one on the role of the individual in ancient societies, with a final roundtable discussion in which the then-Secretary of State of California, Jerry Brown, took part, commenting on our topic from the point of view of contemporary politics.) Beyond individual courses, we set up a certificate program that would improve a structured approach to the field and opportunities for our graduate students to have additional teaching practice in the classroom.

A new support group was also set up: the *Fellows of the Institute*. They took on a larger financial commitment, which was initially to help especially in providing subsidies to publications. And the friend and mentor who was helping me in defining this approach to fundraising was the one who was happily to become the very eponym of our new construct: Lloyd Cotsen.

LLOYD COTSEN

Truly, a friend and a mentor.

What I have learned from Lloyd has been to look for substance. A memorable period we spent together was on the occasion of a trip I took as a Guggenheim Fellow to study the nomads of the Syrian steppe. When I invited him to join me, I said that this was an offer he could not refuse. And he didn't, of course. For an entire month we traveled from the Tigris to the Mediterranean coast: Lloyd and my son Federico were the official photographers. We studied the people and the landscape, and

visited countless sites. Everywhere, we engaged in long conversations about the customs, the geography, the stratigraphy: the *substance* of those conversations was quite archaeological. The trip took place shortly before Lloyd's marriage to Margit: and thus our conversations revolved also around the *substance* of family and love and friendship.

And you see now why and how *the* Cotsen Institute is all about substance. Through the beautiful synergy with Chip Stanish and Gregory Areshian you see how much of Lloyd there is, besides his name, in this Institute, which is ever a living venture, so much more than an institutional construct. I see his inimitable grin behind all of them—the latest being the Lloyd Cotsen Prize for Lifetime Achievement in World Archaeology. The point I have been making—that the Institute is in the first place an idea—takes on an even sharper definition now that it is the *Cotsen* Institute. The name is not an extrinsic badge, because *his* commitment has been and is to nurture, without intruding.

THE INTELLECTUAL ENVIRONMENT

In this respect, becoming *the* Cotsen has been the culmination of a process, the validation of the trends that had set the whole thing in motion. Let me dwell now for a moment on what seems to me to have been the intellectual engine behind our Institute, as it morphed from a pre-Cotsen to a Cotsen status.

The years when the Institute came into existence were those when the self-consciousness of archaeology was developing in ways altogether new, with the claim that it was a "*new* archaeology," "losing its innocence," shedding its nature as an "undisciplined discipline." A great interest in *theory* sprung up, to the point where it could become an end in itself, with a posture of great dependence on various philosophical schools, not to say fads.

So it is appropriate to ask: where were we on *that* theoretical map? I would say that we were not on that theoretical map *per se*. Not because of lack of interest and involvement. But because we were on a *different* theoretical map. One that more broadly charted deeper and more lasting concerns. Upstream of what came to be called the "New Archaeology" and, later, upstream of post-processualism, there was the more basic concern of a search for meaning. It was rooted in the more fundamental distinction between the social sciences and the

humanities, a divide that called for bridging and integration. To take seriously this challenge meant that we could by no means be “innocent” of theory! There were, in fact, sophisticated, if less litigious and less verbose, confrontations with the substance of theory understood as a delineation of parameters and standards that would help make sense of the data in a clearly arguable manner. We were bringing a quiet but rigorous measure of method, of discipline, and, yes, of theory to our common concern to embrace cultures that were separated from our human experience by a loss of continuity, cultures that had effectively become broken human traditions, without any live, competent interpreters.

This is not the place or the moment to delve into this matter, other than for painting the picture of the Institute as that intellectual construct to which I was referring. If we did not become identified with a particular school of archaeological theory, it was because our frame of reference was wider, more encompassing—and rightly so.

A THEORY OF INFERENCE

Let me suggest a relatively simple way to describe the situation as I see it. We may say that the *narrower* theoretical schools came to focus more and more on a *theory of inference*. Borrowing heavily from other disciplines, and relinquishing the focus on archaeology as such, theory came to mean more and more the imposition of models that, yes, illuminated the data, but the data that were selected with the model in mind. A theory of inference meant aiming for higher and higher levels of explanation, which led to impressive reconstructions of social organization and the like. This meant becoming sensitive to and dependent on generalized systems of principles, that had a broad theoretical validity, and like a magnifying lens could unveil unsuspected patterns and correlations in the data. Inference is indeed an extremely powerful tool, and the theoretical scaffolding that was built to strengthen it was just as valuable. But it might lead to an undesirable short-circuit.

To explain this, let me suggest a parallel—with linguistics. Some forty years before the surge of theoretical interest within archaeology, in the 1920s, the discipline of general linguistics was developed,

and it turned out to have a profound impact *on* philosophy, rather than the other way around. It, too, explored and expounded generalized systems of principles that offered a powerful new way of looking, inferentially, at the concreteness of natural languages. In archaeology, on the other hand, no such general theory did really develop, especially not one that would focus on the building blocks of archaeological analysis—emplacement, deposition, stratigraphy. It was as if the linguists had *short-circuited* phonology, morphology, and syntax to go directly to semantics, semiotics, and style.

A THEORY OF OBSERVATION

What was ignored, in the theoretical push within archaeology that started in the 1960s, was what I would call a *theory of observation*. The *theory of inference* had taken over, and there developed, as it were, a theoretical paralysis vis-à-vis observation. This disregard of observation, it seems to me, turned out to be the Achilles’ heel of this early archaeological theory and its several epigons. A theory of inference is indeed of central importance, but not if it disregards the basic foundations of a theory of observation.³

But back to the Institute. We never went into an epigonic mood not because we were a-theoretical, but because we had a wider net of interests. I dwell on this because it is not accidental that the two phenomena coincided in time: the start of the Institute and the profound transformation within the discipline. It all goes back to the emphasis I placed on the *idea* of the Institute. The merit of the Institute was, I believe, to keep the interaction of broad and yet poignant sensitivities alive. Especially, to keep the centrality of the effort to attribute meaning at the primary level, that of observation. Clem may have objected to Marija’s theoretical framework, and Marija may in turn have been impatient with Clem’s, but they both respected each other’s great concern with a fully articulate assessment of the *excavation data*. If a theory of observation may properly be developed, it is on those grounds, on that sensitivity.

3 A full-fledged approach to a theory of excavation, i.e., of emplacement, deposition, and stratigraphy, might be proposed as a signature of the Cotsen Institute. For my part, I am developing this theory in a book to appear for Cambridge University Press in 2014, for which I have proposed the title of *A Critique of Archaeological Reason*.

THE TECHNICAL SCAFFOLDING

In this light we may also look for a moment at the *technical* side. Let me mention two aspects at the two ends of the chronological spectrum: radiocarbon dating and conservation.

If there ever was a Nobel Prize winner in archaeology, it was Willard Libby, who had come to UCLA in 1959, one year before being awarded the prize for his discovery of carbon dating. He retired three years after the establishment of the Institute, but he had had time to lend his support for the creation of the Institute: his interest in archaeology dated back to his years in Chicago where he had used dated material from the Oriental Institute for his experiments. It was his one-time research associate, Rainer Berger, who continued the association of the Institute of Geophysics with our Institute.

As for *conservation*, you all know that the new master's program administered jointly with the Getty has opened a door on an immensely rich potential, at the highest professional level.

The perspective I wish to take here is that in this respect as well, the Institute has aimed at integrating the technical dimension within the wider intellectual scope of archaeology. My interaction has been with faculty and students in both fields, and uniformly I have experienced this more holistic dimension of their preparation and their professional personas, never restricted to that of merely technical experts.

BACKDIRT

The all-encompassing *geographical spread* of our faculty, our students, our research projects, and our publications is a testimony to this dimension. *Backdirt* has become the window that showcases the immense reach of the Institute's interests. It was Tim Seymour who first proposed the name to Merrick Posnansky. And it is beautifully emblematic. It says that we are ever close to the reality of the soil, of the data as we retrieve them from the ground. And it speaks to the caring concern with which we attend to what has been exposed, giving it a new voice and protecting it as a document. That *Backdirt* covers, literally, all corners of the earth; that, in so doing, it offers a brightly lit stage for our many ventures—all of this is very much in keeping with the intellectual posture I have been describing. The number of projects from all over the world that are housed in the

Institute is so great and varied that I cannot review them here or even list them. I wish rather to stress, once more, the way in which the Institute remains a cohesive intellectual home, and not just a collection of pieces.

The Institute has remained, in fact it has become more and more a home that nurtures thought. You might say: well, isn't this true wherever there develops a conversation among scholars? Why do we need an institutional setting that frames the conversation? To appreciate the answer you have to come to the twice-weekly meetings—the Wednesday Pizza Talks and the Friday Seminars. The degree of faculty and student participation and real interaction is enviable—and, indeed, envied. It is the Institute at its best, an intellectual home—and I have been trying to clarify to myself, “what is it that makes it so?” I would say, and see what you think of it, that we have here the setting where a *comfortable critique* can unfold. Yes, that is how I would characterize it: a *comfortable* place for an ongoing discourse, and for a constructive critique. I do not use the word comfort in the sense of superficial ease, but rather as referring to a known environment, physical and human, where we can present and debate ideas. Where we can all *grow*.

It is of course the goal of the university as a whole. The university itself should be an idea. For the Institute we can claim it as a reality. We are indeed a *living seminar*, in the etymological sense of the word, a place where seeds can grow. Which speaks to the level of integration between students and faculty. The element of *comfort* I stressed is perhaps especially apparent in this regard: we learn from each other more easily when defenses are shed, when trust develops. That is when a constructive critique, instead of a defeatist criticism, becomes the best tool for intellectual growth; when debate is positive even when it is negative. . . .

CONTINUITY

If we include the gestation period, we can say that the Institute is almost half a century old, and in my presentation I have referred only to the formative period, with which I was more directly involved. But the beautiful thing about it is that I have, in fact, never ceased to be *directly* involved. With Marilyn, we have such a rich interaction with our more recent colleagues and friends, too many to name, and yet

too personal to subsume in a generic collective: we re-live the atmosphere of the early days. The Cotsen Institute still beckons as a frontier, with the unique dynamics of live exchanges. The students are truly our youngest colleagues. And that defines another important characteristic of the Institute, the synergy not only across fields, but also across ages. The corridors, the labs, as much as the classrooms are the places where we meet, the young and—well—us, the “old,” all equally integrated in the spirit of a common quest. There is reciprocal empowerment when respect is at the root of difference. There is a vibrancy in the halls of the Cotsen Institute, the vibrancy you feel pulsate in a living organism.

The human chemistry that makes this possible does not just happen. It is all of us, isn't it? My talk is choral in the specific sense that it includes all of you here now, as well as those who have gone before us. I have mentioned by name some of the early protagonists of our story, and you will allow me to include the rest of you *unnamed* in the choral dimension of this evening. Except for Chip, who has masterfully shepherded the leap forward into the Cotsen era, and now for Gregory, who has added his quiet and determined *savoir-faire*: with their top-level scholarship and immense human richness they are making it possible for me to present to you such a bright and optimistic picture which I feel is, indeed, factual and realistic.

TWO VIGNETTES

Let me close with two vignettes, in two different archaeological settings.

First, an ancient Babylonian text. It is a late text by Mesopotamian standards, written around 1100 B.C.E., and it describes with irony and wit various aspects of the human situation. At one point it depicts, we might say, an ancient would-be archaeologist:

*Go up on any of the ancient tells and walk
about,
see the skulls of people from ages ago and from
yesteryear:
can you tell the difference?*

“Archaeology has been with us, you see, ever since humans left traces for other humans to find. This bond across centuries is rooted in the awareness of what a human trace is: culture as evidenced

by material remains. The instant recognition of a common past does not need scholarly support. But sorting out the *differences* does, and this is where archaeology as a discipline begins.”⁴ We, today, *can* tell the difference. Our old Mesopotamian friend could not.

As for the second vignette. Only last week, Marilyn and I took part in a very intense and extremely interesting National Geographic conference in Guatemala devoted to a “dialog,” as the title of the conference stated, between the Maya and other civilizations. The last session was unforgettable. There were some twenty archaeologists, and we all went to Tikal. There, sitting at the very top of Temple IV, overlooking the crown of the jungle canopy and the cusps of the other temples jutting out from under the treetops, gazing at the far horizons of what had been the hinterland of a thriving city—there, the question was posed as to the continuity of Maya civilization. Guatemala rightly calls itself the heart of the Maya world. Is this heart still pulsing? Did it ever stop?

In so many different ways, that is the question that haunts us humans, that waits for a reasoned answer from archaeology. Are we *in balance with our past*? What is its relevance for us now? And for the future?

What is unique about archaeology, and distinguishes us, for instance, from history, is the dimension not only of remoteness, but of *brokenness*. Do the traditions we extract from the ground survive only as fossils, are they only *broken* traditions? Or aren't we really unleashing strands of a once live tradition, to make it live again as we re-embed it in *our* sensitivity? Can we both define patterns, *qua* social scientists, and re-appropriate experience, *qua* humanists?

This is precisely, I feel, the research paradigm of the Cotsen Institute. The technical term is “hermeneutics,” which means that we *interpret* the past not on the basis of a fantastic whim, but rather through a reasoned discourse that holds itself to well-defined and arguable standards. A reasoned discourse that sees the fossil as it once was, a carrier of life. And as it still is: a carrier of meaning. ✱

4 G. Buccellati, “An Archaeologist on Mars,” in S. Gitin, J. E. Wright, and J. P. Dessel, eds., *Confronting the Past: Archaeological and Historical Essays on Ancient Israel in Honor of William G. Dever* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), p. 17.

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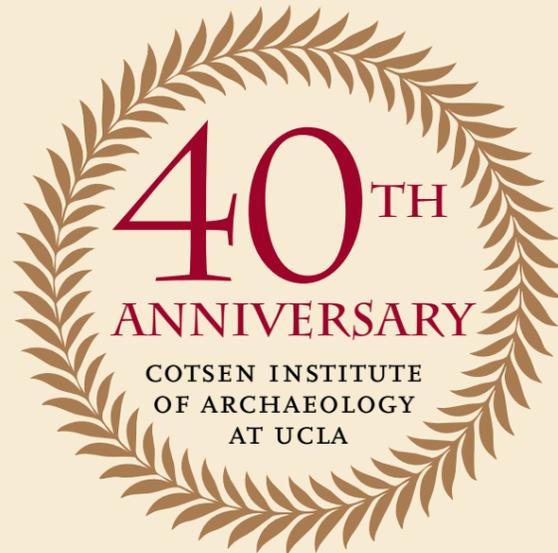
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Front cover: Stones arranged in the shape of a Viking Age ship discovered in Iceland as part of the Mosfell Archaeological Project. The site is being excavated by Jesse Byock and Davide Zori.

Back cover: Excavation of a recently looted Ramadas cemetery in Peru. Photo by Mariana Ladrón de Guevara.

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¹ Those listed provided \$300 or more in support of the Institute.

Message from the Director of the Institute

This year we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA. It is with great pride that I read the essays by some of our former directors in this anniversary edition of *Backdirt*. Professors Buccellati, Posnansky, Sackett, and Leventhal all took over at critical periods in the Institute's history. At forty years, we are larger than ever, with more faculty and a greater range of research programs throughout the world. We have the finest set of graduate students in our history, and our support group is more loyal than ever. But, like good scholars of the past, we learn from our former directors that one thing never changes—we are great because of our deeply committed set of faculty, friends, staff, students, and volunteers who value archaeology as both a scholarly discipline and a way of life.

I want to take this opportunity to also thank several generous donors who continue to make it possible for our Institute to flourish. Last year, we received a bequest from the late Joan Silsbee to endow the Silsbee Chair in African Cultural Archaeology. Zaruhi Sara Chitjian endowed a new Armenian program from the Harry and Ovsanna Chitjian Family Foundation. Most recently, Marilyn Beaudry-Corbett and Don Corbett endowed a new chair in Mesoamerican Archaeology. Together with our existing endowments, these funds will help us continue to be the world leader in archaeological research, publications, conservation, and training programs. The next forty years look great!



CHARLES STANISH
Director, Cotsen Institute of Archaeology
Lloyd Cotsen Chair in Archaeology



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