

# Using Bab edh-Dhra' artefacts to involve students in Near Eastern archaeology

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## Introduction

The term 'curation crisis' is now widely used by archaeologists, conservators, museum curators and collection managers, who have recognised that repositories and museums are no longer able to cope with the influx of archaeological material acquired through excavations around the world.<sup>1</sup> The burgeoning rate of excavation has, unfortunately, exceeded the resources and facilities dedicated to accessioning, analysing, reporting and preserving archaeological collections, leaving many collections in crisis.<sup>2</sup> Vessels from Bab edh-Dhra' in modern-day Jordan were one such collection that found itself in a curation predicament. Consequently, a unique collection management initiative was adopted to salvage the Bab edh-Dhra' collection by distributing it between a number of international institutions, including the University of Melbourne, for the purposes of display and education. Indeed, the Bab edh-Dhra' material now in Melbourne stands out as a versatile collection that can be integrated into a range of undergraduate university subjects, due to its unique history in both the ancient and modern worlds. In recognition of this, the collection was used with great success in four Near Eastern archaeology subjects at the University of Melbourne in 2017 and 2018.

## The story of Bab edh-Dhra'

Bab edh-Dhra' is an Early Bronze Age (3300–2000 BCE) urban settlement, located in the southern Ghor region of Jordan, along the Dead Sea Plain. Formal excavation began in the 1960s when American archaeologist Professor Paul W. Lapp realised that vessels from the site were appearing in antiquities shops in Jerusalem. A salvage excavation was quickly underway, with Lapp focusing his efforts on a large burial area that had already been heavily looted. These excavations unearthed thousands of mortuary artefacts dating to each phase of the Early



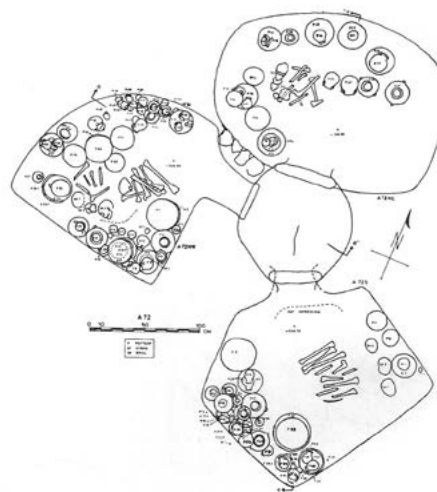
Bronze Age. Ceramic vessels dominated this assemblage, which came to be known as the 'tomb groups'.<sup>3</sup>

Paul Lapp died unexpectedly in 1970, after only three seasons of excavation. His work at the site was not complete, with much still to discover in the cemeteries and an accompanying town site. Lapp had not managed to publish extensively on his findings, thus leaving the artefacts discovered during his excavations in 'unpublished limbo' after his death.<sup>4</sup> The condition of the collection quickly deteriorated, and with plans to recommence excavating at Bab edh-Dhra' in 1975 putting a further burden on an already stressed storage situation, it was clear that a solution to the problem needed to be found quickly.

A unique collection management initiative was developed in 1977 by the Jordanian Department of Antiquities and the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR), which had sponsored the Lapp

**Previous page:** Bab edh-Dhra', Jordan, Ledge-handle jar, Early Bronze Age IA (c. 3300–3000 BCE), ceramic, 23.2 × 26.9 cm (with handles). 1978.0146, purchased 1978, Middle Eastern Collection, Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne. Photograph by Lee McRae.

**Right:** Plan of Tomb A 72 NW, NE and S in Cemetery A, at Bab edh-Dhra', Jordan.<sup>5</sup>



excavations, to distribute the pots from the Bab edh-Dhra' tombs, which had been sitting in storage since their excavation. Archaeologist Nancy Lapp, Paul's widow, headed these negotiations on behalf of ASOR, in which it was suggested that the Lapp 'tomb groups' be distributed to ASOR-affiliated institutions for curation, education and display. This proposal was approved, and by the following year 1,186 pots and ten basalt bowls has been distributed among 24 institutions in the United States of America, Canada, Israel and Australia.<sup>6</sup>

The University of Melbourne was the only Australian institution to receive a tomb group as part of this initiative. The university's Classics and Archaeology Collection contains a complete tomb group (tomb A 72 S, pictured above), comprising 44 ceramic vessels. Most are intact, and take various forms and sizes, including bowls, jars and juglets, many of which are burnished with a red slip. The majority are not decorated, although some do have a single incised band just below the rim.

### Object-based learning (OBL)

An essential element of the collection management initiative was that the Bab edh-Dhra' vessels be used for education and display at their host institutions. It was the intention of ASOR and the Jordanian Department of Antiquities that these artefacts would serve as ambassadors for Jordan and would work to educate students around the world about Jordanian archaeology.<sup>7</sup>

Object-based learning is one way to harness the power of objects for education. This is due to the unique way in which students can generate meaning from their interactions with objects in the classroom. Object-based learning draws from active and experiential learning pedagogies, which focus on the primacy of the student in the learning process. Objects are used to strengthen this learning process, as they have been shown to encourage

active over passive learning.<sup>8</sup>

OBL, being highly interactive, gives students the opportunity to guide their own learning as they handle objects, and exploits the benefits of 'learning by doing' for long-term understanding.<sup>9</sup> Its effectiveness derives from the use of many senses while handling an object, as this promotes the acquisition and retention of new concepts, knowledge and skills.<sup>10</sup>

### The University of Melbourne

The appointment of a classics and archaeology curator at the Ian Potter Museum of Art in 2005 led to a renewed use of the antiquities collection in exhibitions and teaching at the University of Melbourne. A major exhibition, *The dead don't bury themselves* (2016–17), highlighted the history of the Bab edh-Dhra' collection. Although the original goal of the Bab edh-Dhra' initiative was for the collection to be used in education, at the University of Melbourne it was not until the development of this exhibition that the true educational potential of this material was realised. Due to their unique past, the Bab edh-Dhra' objects offer many levels for interpretation and consideration in the classroom, ranging from the archaeology of death and mortuary practices, to the looting and subsequent excavation and management of the site's artefacts. Coincidentally, all these topics are covered in the Ancient World Studies subjects at the University of Melbourne. The collection was subsequently incorporated into several Near Eastern archaeology classes at the university.

As part of my PhD research, I evaluated the use of the Bab edh-Dhra' objects in OBL and its success as an educational tool. In 2017 and 2018, the Bab edh-Dhra' objects were used in four Near Eastern archaeology subjects, which catered to third- and fourth-year undergraduate students. At the end of each class, students were asked to complete an open-ended

response questionnaire. The aim was to evaluate the student experience, determine the collection's usefulness as an educational tool, and clarify student opinions on OBL generally. Responses were divided into four main categories: skills acquisition, impact on knowledge and understanding, positive features of OBL, and negative features of OBL.

### Skills acquisition

Students were encouraged to look, describe, interpret, negotiate and make meaning from information presented to them in the form of the Bab edh-Dhra' vessels. This activity aimed to increase visual literacy in students, whereby they combined observational and analytical skills to derive meaning from the object.<sup>11</sup> Students commented in the questionnaire that the experience enabled them to identify the salient features of the vessels, such as their structure, design and size, and to relate these features to the vessels' possible uses in the ancient world. In response to the open-ended question 'Please list any skills that you used/learnt during your interaction with the Bab edh-Dhra' tomb group', 67 per cent of students identified an increase in their ability to analyse objects as a result of the tutorial, and 16 per cent felt that the class helped them develop their observational skills. A further 27 per cent also saw an improvement in their ability to actively handle an object and make meaning from it.

### Knowledge and understanding

The majority of students reported an increase in their knowledge and understanding of topics relating to the ancient world and modern-day archaeology as a direct result of their work with the Bab edh-Dhra' collection. When asked 'In what way did the activities pursued with the Bab edh-Dhra' material impact on your knowledge and understanding of the study topic(s)?', a student from a class

on collection management practices and archaeological ethics felt that the class 'was important because it showed students the importance of conservation and preservation of artefacts'. A student from a class on ceramic analysis commented that the vessels 'contributed to my understanding of how artefacts are used as evidence'. When the material was used in a class on Early Bronze Age grave goods, students received a 'greater understanding on how to interpret the use and significance of pottery'.

Students also increased their appreciation, awareness and interest in Jordanian archaeology and, in particular, gained a 'greater understanding of the sophistication of early Jordan civilisation'. Often, students linked the physical nature of interacting with the vessels to their ability to acquire and retain information learnt in class.



### Positive features of OBL

The development of knowledge and understanding and the ability to interpret primary sources were identified by students as being the most positive features of OBL. Students felt that 'having 3D objects allows for a better understanding of the objects and increases engagement with how and where they were found'.

The authentic nature of the artefacts intrigued students, and for them provided a 'more immersive experience where you can see and touch what you are talking about first-hand'. Students felt that OBL was an 'invaluable tool', which 44 per cent of students found both engaging and enjoyable. Overall, when asked to list the positive aspects of their OBL experience, 19 per cent of students reported that OBL complemented, enhanced and even exceeded other forms of learning. As one student said, 'on slides, or in books, it's difficult to imagine the size or intricacies of ancient objects'. OBL provides a way around this barrier by giving students the opportunity to work at first hand with objects from the past.

### Negative features of OBL

Students' responses to OBL classes using the Bab edh-Dhra' material were overwhelmingly positive, but some also reported problems with the experience. Questionnaire results revealed common shortcomings in the tutorials, which often centred on logistical difficulties. Problems with the tutorial's organisation, learning process and environment were mentioned and linked to the limited time available, and overcrowding in the classroom. Students wanted to have more time to examine all the objects in depth, and found it difficult to see the objects when groups of students crowded around them. In many cases, the number of students was greater than the number of objects on display. Logistical difficulties can be some of the most significant barriers to the use of objects in

tertiary education.<sup>12</sup> Further support for this method of teaching would improve the student experience and ensure that the benefits of OBL are fully realised.

### Conclusions

Student responses to the questionnaire were very positive and served to verify the efficacy of OBL in teaching and learning, and in involving students in Near Eastern archaeology. The Bab edh-Dhra' objects were useful educational tools that enriched the students' knowledge and understanding of archaeological concepts and ancient history. By using the collection, students were able to improve their understanding of ancient ceramics, Jordanian archaeology, post-excavation collection management, and archaeological ethics. Students emphasised the development of analytical, observational, critical and communication skills during the tutorial, and highlighted the enjoyable nature of their experience. By examining the objects for themselves, students were able to experience how archaeologists use ancient artefacts, providing them with a better understanding of the field and the type of thinking needed for in-depth archaeological enquiry.

Use of the Bab edh-Dhra' vessels in subjects covering a range of topics in Near Eastern archaeology at the University of Melbourne provides an example of the versatility and educational potential of university collections. An exploration of the various applications and uses of archaeological collections can therefore aid in improving their use in the classroom, so that students can experience these objects in new and interesting ways.

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The Classics and Archaeology Collection is managed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art. It is possible to search the collection database at <http://storeroom.its.unimelb.edu.au/ipm/>.

Third-year University of Melbourne undergraduate students handling and discussing vessels from the Bab edh-Dhra' collection in the Object-Based Learning Labs in the Arts West building. Photograph by Gemma Lee.

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- 3 Morag M. Kersel, 'Storage wars: Solving the archaeological curation crisis?', *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2015), pp. 49–50.
- 4 Kersel, 'Storage wars', p. 50.
- 5 After R.T. Schaub and W.E. Rast, *Bab edh-Dhra': Excavations in the cemetery directed by Paul Lapp*, vol. 1, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989, Fig. 76.
- 6 Kersel, 'Storage wars', p. 51.
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- 8 Arabella Sharp, Linda Thomson, Helen J. Chatterjee and Leonie Hannan, 'The value of object-based learning within and between higher education disciplines', in Helen J. Chatterjee and Leonie Hannan (eds), *Engaging the senses: Object-based learning in higher education*, Farnham, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2016, p. 102. On OBL at the University of Melbourne, see Andrew Jamieson, 'Object-based learning: A new way of teaching in Arts West', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 20 (June 2017), pp. 12–14.
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- 10 Alberto Gallace and Charles Spence, 'A memory for touch: The cognitive psychology of tactile memory', in Helen J. Chatterjee (ed.), *Touch in museums: Policy and practice in object handling*, New York: Berg, 2008, p. 179.
- 11 Linda K. Friedlaender, 'Enhancing observational skills: A case study; Collaboration between a university art museum and its medical school', in Boddington, Boys and Speight (eds), *Museums and higher education working together*, p. 147.
- 12 Hannan, Duhs and Chatterjee, 'Object-based learning', p. 164.

