



PROFESSOR DAVID  
GORDON LYON  
(FOURTH FROM LEFT)  
AT THE HARVARD  
EXCAVATIONS IN  
SAMARIA, 1908

# Ivy League Gem: The Semitic Museum At Harvard

By Jill Letteney

The Semitic Museum at Harvard University has over 40,000 ancient artifacts and more than 120 years of rich history under its roof. The museum was designed as a tool essential for appreciating ancient Judaic culture and a source of nationalism for discriminated Jews internationally. Today, it is both a historic landmark that signifies the beginnings of Jewish academic life at Harvard and a modern-day center for archaeological research and publication. Through its ongoing exhibitions, the Semitic Museum

links the past to the present, while paying homage to ancient Semitic peoples and cultures.

Professor David Gordon Lyon founded the Semitic Museum in the latter part of the 19th century. Lyon envisioned the museum as an international resource for the study of ancient Semitic languages, cultures and art. The museum was designed to enhance instruction in the Semitic Studies Department (now known as the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations). Lyon turned to international financier Jacob H. Schiff to help fund the construction of the building and the collection. Born in Germany to a distinguished rabbinical family, Schiff hoped the museum would help in “renouncing and combating anti-Semitism in Europe, and social prejudice and ostracism in free America, through a more thorough study and better knowledge of Semitic history and civilization...” On the dedication day of the building in 1903, Schiff proudly quoted Goethe: “Happy he who is glad because of those he sprang from.”

Today, the Semitic Museum shares its building with the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and the Center for Jewish Studies. In concert with its academic support, the museum sponsors archaeological excavations and mounts educational exhibits. In the first floor gallery, The Houses of Ancient Israel: Domestic, Royal, Divine explores daily life in an ancient Near Eastern agricultural society and illustrates the societal hier-



**A CUTAWAY MODEL OF THE IRON AGE HOME IN HOUSES OF ANCIENT ISRAEL: DOMESTIC, ROYAL, DIVINE**

archy of the time. The central focus of the exhibit is the ancient Israelite mud brick house, a full-scale replica furnished with authentic artifacts dating to the Iron Age.

In addition to Israel, Egypt has been well represented in the galleries for many years. Models, wall panels and maps document fieldwork conducted in Giza, the location of the Sphinx and the pyramids of Khufu, Khafre and Menkaure. A small exhibit entitled Ancient Egypt: Magic and the Afterlife is located in the second floor galleries and features colorful mummy coffins, scarabs and funerary amulets. Currently, the museum is in the early stages of planning a full-scale exhibit representing ancient Egypt, using cutting-edge digital technology and modern display techniques.



**THE SEMITIC MUSEUM AT HARVARD**

Sharing gallery space with Egypt is Nuzi and Hurrians: Fragments of a Forgotten Past. The objects on view from Nuzi were excavated from 1927-1931 on a museum-sponsored dig near Kirkuk, Iraq. The exhibit displays a number of cuneiform tablets, some of the earliest forms of writing known to humankind. The museum recently made headlines by initiating a project to create a fully restored model of its partial Nuzi lion statue using 3D scanning and printing technologies.

Other ongoing exhibitions include the Cesnola Collection from Ancient Cyprus, which features ceramic vessels excavated from underwater archaeological expeditions in the Mediterranean, and Monuments of Mesopotamia, a collection of full-scale, plaster casts such as the Code of Hammurabi and The Victory Stele of Essarhaddon.

**Need To Know.** For more information on the Semitic Museum, visit [www.semiticmuseum.fas.harvard.edu](http://www.semiticmuseum.fas.harvard.edu) or email [semiticm@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:semiticm@fas.harvard.edu).

*Jill earned her master's degree in Museum Studies from Harvard University in 2009 and has conducted collections research for institutions such as the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Semitic Museum at Harvard University. She specializes in collections management, public programming and educational outreach. She is currently working as a freelance writer and editor in Somerville, MA.*