

Regional

Scholar asks how Mesopotamians lived, felt

It is a tragic irony that one of the most troubled areas of the world is also the cradle of Western civilization: the Middle East. Despite its turbulent present, there are scholars who know that there is much to learn about the region and its cultures by studying its exalted past.

One of those scholars is Allison Thomason, a professor in the department of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. A native of Riverside, Calif., she obtained her bachelor's degree in Old World archaeology and art from Brown University in Rhode Island, a master's in Near Eastern languages and civilizations from The University of Chicago and a doctorate in history in art archaeology and history from Columbia University in New York. As many other people who have dedicated their lives to academia, Thomason's interest in her field began early on.

"It started with my middle school social studies teachers," she said. "They sort of got me interested. That is when you start studying world history. Then I got to excavate in my undergraduate career and that's when I fell in love with objects and material culture." From the beginning she said that she enjoyed art works from around 900 B.C. in Mesopotamia.

"They were the Neo-Assyrian reliefs," she explained. "They are just incredibly detailed and have so much information in these interesting scenes."

After her junior year in college she went to England and was able to look at the reliefs close up in a British museum. That is where she said she fell in love with the topic. Her work today intersects three disciplines: archeology, history and art.

"I am sort of the ancient historian here in the department at SIUE," she said. "I have to cover Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, and all points in between. You have to be able to understand archeological artifacts and how excavations work in order to appreciate where the objects you are studying are coming out of."

As many other people interested in history, she kept tracing back what she was learning until she decided that she needed to begin from the beginning and that is why she specializes today in ancient civilizations.



Dr. Allison Thomason in her office.

"I am just so amazed by the development and complexity of the Mesopotamian and Near Eastern civilizations of such an early time period in history," she said. "The pre-classical even. I thought, well the Greeks and Romans got it all from the Near East, so I wanted to study the Near East."

The Mesopotamian area has been called the cradle of civilization not only because of its art, but also that is the area of the world where we see the first examples of domestication of plants and animals. One

wonders if the two things go together. Did the ability of humans to exploit nature and know nature help to generate art?

"Those experiments with early agriculture and food production took thousands of years and they were just experiments," Thomason explained. "But I think that allowed societies to increase their population and basically have specialists develop in other labor occupations besides farming. So the thinkers became the religious specialists, the people who could organize

people became the political specialists, and the artists became the pottery specialists or sculpture specialists. So that is how I always understood it and envisioned it."

When asked which of all the pieces she has studied has impressed her the most, she answered by thinking back to her doctoral dissertation at Columbia, when she visited the British Museum and the British School of Archeology in Iraq.

"There were little ivory carvings made out of elephant ivory and there were little

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

plaques and inlays in little miniature boxes that were inlaid into wooden furniture. And while the wood didn't survive, we have all the plaques because ivory survives quite well even if it is burned," she said. "And they are carved into amazing images and they were collected by kings."

Thomason said that she will never forget when she was sitting in the office of one of the most preeminent archeologists of Mesopotamia, the late Max Mallowan. In his office were still his books and some of the artifacts he excavated. One of Thomason's professors, who was a student of Mallowan, opened a drawer and there were all these ivory artifacts that she was able to touch.

"And that tactile sense, that smooth feel, they were almost luminescent to me," Thomason said. "There are hundreds of ivories and even today I fetishize them, I have to say. They still just draw me in. I can't touch them now because they are in museums, but I love them."

When asked about her next big project she said that she is working on textiles and how textiles felt against the skin of people in Mesopotamia.

"Did they comment upon that? Did they notice it? Did they notice different textures?" she said she wonders. And that led her to study the archeology of the senses in Mesopotamia during her sabbatical.

"So not only what was it like to see Mesopotamian works – monumental or minor – but what was it like to be a Mesopotamian. I've always wanted to study that. I think that's what archeologists do. What was it like to live back then? That's what we want to do and want to know," she said. "What does it feel like? So I've embarked on this archeology of the sense of Mesopotamia."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.

Photo by Michael Nathe