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CHRIS DAVIS: Hello, everyone and welcome to the *CARC Podcast*, the *Career and Academic Resource Center Podcast*. I am Chris Davis, the associate director of the Career and Academic Resource Center. And it is my great pleasure to be speaking today with Peter Der Manuelian. He wears many hats at Harvard. He's the Barbara Bell Professor of Egyptology. He's the director of the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East or "HMANE" as I believe it is known in short form.

He is the director of the Giza Project. He is someone that I've worked with for many years in terms of the faculty aide program, which is something that we've talked about here on the *CARC Podcast* before. Peter has been a faculty participant of the program for many, many years. And it is my great honor to be speaking with him today. Hello, Peter.

PETER DER MANUELIAN: Great pleasure, Chris. It's nice to see you face-to-face on Zoom, even though this is audio only. But we can at least see each other during the conversation.

CHRIS DAVIS: Absolutely. Absolutely. Thank you so much for taking the time today. Yeah, I thought our conversation today could touch on a few points. I would love for our students to learn a little bit more about the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East, your work there. Also, the Giza Project has come up several times in the faculty aide projects that our students have done work for you over the years. So I'd love to talk a little bit about that, as well, and also to hear your input as an instructor participating in the faculty aide program.

But first of all, if you could tell our students a little bit about you and your work here at the University.

PETER DER MANUELIAN: Sure. Happy to do that. So I'm an Egyptologist. I study Pharaonic Egypt. So that's roughly 3,000, 4,000 years of history or so. From the pyramids on down, basically. And in fact, the Giza pyramids-- the famous ones-- are the place that I focus on and specialize in. And a lot of these different hats that I wear overlap in many different ways. I grew up in the Boston area and became a high school volunteer at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, which has a great Egyptian collection.

And then, eventually, I found employment there. And from being a curator over there across the Charles River, I was very lucky to get the first Egyptology position that Harvard endowed and was ready to fill. And that was about 2010. So in 2010, I moved from the MFA over here to Harvard. And my goal has basically been to put Harvard back on the Egypt map or put Egypt back on the Harvard map, whichever way you want to look at it.

And so we have a lot of different activities going on, and they overlap in a lot of ways. The Giza Project is something that started at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston with Mellon Foundation funding. And that's because there was a Harvard MFA expedition to Egypt and the Sudan that ran for over 40 years in the first half of the 20th century. And the director was a man named George Reisner, whose biography just finished writing and publishing after about 15 years of work.

So that's a load off my back, and I'm delighted that that's finally out. Basically, the Giza project tries to round up all the archeological material about the Giza pyramids. And it isn't just the three pyramids, but there are huge cemeteries of tombs of the elites of the Old Kingdom or Pyramid Age. So think about 2,500 BCE or so. And all of these tombs had decorated wall carvings, relief sculpture, paintings, statues, ceramics, stone vessels, all kinds of objects.

And George Reisner, the excavator, worked and really unearthed or cleared about 2/3 of the site. There were Italian, German, Austrian, and Egyptian missions there too, but he really did the major portion of it. And as a founding father of scientific responsible archeological method, he developed all kinds of recording systems. And thank god he did because that means we can work with this material today. So there are thousands of glass plate photographic negatives, diary pages, maps and plans, sketches, drawings, and all of this.

And the Giza Project has a simple goal, which is to put all this stuff online but to cross-reference it in an intelligent way. So if you're interested in tomb 2010, the system will say, well, I have 50 photos and 36 diary pages mention that tomb. And here are three published articles. And four statues came from there, and here they are and here are the museums they're in. And on and on and on. In more recent years, we've gotten into 3D modeling and immersive VR experiences and things like that. So we're always trying to make the site more accessible.

That's the Giza Project, and that's ongoing. I've had Egyptologist PhDs and grad students and undergrads and museum docents and volunteers and all kinds of people working on that. And your program has been terrific in assisting with that too. Mostly more on the archival side because not only is there great archeological data, but there's wonderful people involved here. And learning more about Reisner and his staff and their friends and their lifespans and what they did has just been a fascinating side trip for me and for many of the students who have come and helped with the project.

So there's no end of letters to organize and file and rename and transcribe and put in some kind of sequence. And that work is ongoing. The Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East is a slightly different story. That was founded and this building that I'm sitting in right now was completed in 1903 by George Reisner's mentor and professor at Harvard, and his name was David Gordon Lyon. He was the country's first Assyriologist. So cuneiform texts, Biblical Hebrew, Akkadian, all of these different languages from Egyptian hieroglyphs that Reisner eventually got interested in.

And the HMANE used to be called the Harvard Semitic Museum, but now it's the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East. And we tried to house all of the collections that we can-- sometimes from gifts, sometimes from excavations, sometimes replicas or even 3D-printed models that we've created-- to try to educate not just Harvard students, but the Cambridge and world communities about all these fascinating cultures of the Ancient Near East. So everything from Egyptians to Assyrians, Babylonians, Israelites, Phoenicians. I'm leaving many of them out.

But we have some interesting collections here, and we try to use them as part of the teaching mission in our classes here.

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CHRIS DAVIS: We're having an audio conversation here, but so much of the work that you do and have done is very visual. I would encourage folks to explore, for example, the Giza Project website. I had watched a lecture that you had given, I believe, at the University of Chicago last summer where you contextualized this so beautifully and also demonstrated the Giza Project's digital-- the dynamic qualities that it has to convey in the condition that they currently are in or as they were in ancient Egypt, the tombs and the places in the Giza area where these excavations took place.

And yes, it was funny because during that lecture, you had mentioned George Reisner's collection of mystery books, and that immediately touched off the faculty aide project that I believe we'd had several years ago where I think one of our students had-- obviously, he was a very distinguished gentleman with a very long track record of doing work in Egypt, as you had mentioned. But that was a very interesting part of his personality that was interesting that you had explored.

But, yeah, so much of the work is visual. We can't convey it in an audio-only conversation. But I think there's a lot out there for students who are interested in Egyptology to explore. And the Giza Project is 20-plus-year making, right? In terms of the digital archival work that you've done and the MFA started doing and that exists to this day and is more robust than it's ever been before. Is that correct?

PETER DER MANUELIAN: Absolutely. Yeah. We did start with the basics with scanning photos and typing up diaries and making databases of objects and things. Now, it's more about the linking and the back-end coding and the web design. But then more into the personalities involved and the archival work. So I'm always chasing down descendants of these archeologists who worked on the project and finding hidden troves of photographs or archival letters and collections all over the world that need to get organized.

And so many of your students have come and helped so much to try to rename these files, put disparate pages together into a coherent letter, even do some research on who these people were. And those novels that you mentioned, that was a great project. So Reisner was a workaholic and his only avocation was to read detective novels. And he collected quite a gathering. He had several thousand of these. And he willed them in his last bequest to Harvard, so they're here in the Harvard Library.

And the reason I got interested is because he actually graded them. If you turn the inside front cover, there's usually an A, B, C, or a D, and even some snarky comments sometimes when they were bad. So one of the projects we had was rounding them all up and having one of the students take a look through all of them, figure out, are there any particular authors that he had many of their books, and if so, what were their novels like?

And I was trying to get into Reisner's head by figuring out which detective novels really appealed to him. That was all part of the work that went into the biography that I published last year. So I hope that was great fun for the student who was involved in that. Now we have other types of projects working on letters and things. And one is ongoing right now, which is actually a tragic suicide of a field director and artist and trying to understand what led him to this tragic moment.

And we found a treasure trove of letters in England, and now we're getting a fuller picture of this person's personality. I really didn't know much about him at all except for his sad death in 1920. So we're putting all those letters together too. So there's real archeology, but there's also reading other people's mail and diving into archival research and personalities and figuring out what makes an expedition like this tick. There are ups and downs and trials and tribulations, as you can imagine.

CHRIS DAVIS: Now, you mentioned a little earlier the book that you have been writing, are writing about George Reisner. Could you talk a little bit about that? I want to make sure our students know the importance that George Reisner has in the history of Egyptology, his role in Harvard, the fact that, as you mentioned, his work in Egypt spanned many decades, I believe, from 1905 to the early 1940s until his death.

PETER DER MANUELIAN: It's called *Walking Among Pharaohs: George Reisner and the Dawn of Modern Egyptology*. And it took me a long, long time to write because I was just so fascinated in this story. And like concentric circles when you toss a pebble into the pond, there are just more and more people who got so interesting to me and I started chasing them down and all these different events. So it's really not just about his life, but about the excavations, the different sites he worked at, the people involved.

And he cuts across just about everyone from other scholars to university presidents to millionaires to celebrities to politicians. They all come through. You can imagine, if you're working at the pyramids, the most famous archeological site in the world, sooner or later, everybody comes by for a visit. And it's amazing he got any work done at all. But he really was a pioneer in archeological method with this kind of documentation.

So that meant taking photographs before and after, taking daily diaries, giving everything a number. He would have been the ultimate database junkie if we had all of these databases around back when he was working. And he really had a quite well-oiled machine with all of his various staff members. Also, the Egyptians who worked with him and for him were tremendously important for the dig too. And they were taking the photographs, handling the accounts, running the works. And he leaned on them for just about everything that he did too.

So one of the things we're trying to do to redress some of the colonialism of that era is give the credit where the credit is due. And so there was a family of foremen who worked for him for generations, and we've been trying to sing their praises to process the 73 books of Arabic expedition diaries that these people kept, which is a priceless treasure trove that I discovered in Egypt in 2006. And I have another project working on that now too.

So tremendously rich body of data, not just archeological, but personal and historical. And you can go at it from so many different ways, from the history of archeology to modern political history of 20th-century Egypt. Because remember, at that time, the British are running the country in Egypt and the French are running the antiquities service. And here's an expat American trying to do archeology. And in those days, you split the fines 50/50 between the Egyptian government and whatever foreign expedition was working.

So that's why the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has, legally, now, this great collection. Reisner was famous for not just this Old Kingdom Pyramid Age history at Giza, but he also worked down in the Sudan, what's called Ancient Nubia. And he really opened up that whole field as a separate field of study. So now we have Nubiologists, people excavating all over Sudan when it's safe. Sadly, the situation now is really quite challenging.

But he worked at many of the pyramid fields in the Sudan as well. There are more pyramids in ancient Nubia than there are in Egypt, as a matter of fact. And so Boston ended up with the greatest Nubian collection outside of Khartoum today. So those are really the two pillars of his great contributions-- Nubian archeology and Old Kingdom pyramid archeology at Giza.

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CHRIS DAVIS: Although, I think, as I heard you say, it seems like he looked at the Nubian stuff through the lens of, primarily, his work in Egypt and that may have given a dated perspective to some of that. Is that correct?

PETER DER MANUELIAN: Absolutely, yeah. He's, in some ways, a controversial figure, or some might say a product of his time. Very progressive in the sense of how he involved his Egyptians in the so-called skill positions of the expedition, but also looking out through a typical Western lens, in many cases. So more so with Nubian archeology than Egyptian, he wasn't really able to wrap his head around the fact that you'd have a great Black African civilization in ancient Nubia.

He always thought they must be wandering Libyans or Egyptians who went down South and lent culture and sophistication to this civilization, which we know now isn't the case. But because his recording systems were so meticulous, we can set aside where he went wrong and where he misinterpreted things and we can set it right because he was so careful about the photographs, and the notes, and the numbering systems, and the object collection, and paying attention to every last detail, which is really the lasting legacy more than some of the misinterpretations that he did along the way.

CHRIS DAVIS: That's fascinating. Peter, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about, as we alluded to earlier-- I'm sure there have been a slew of research, researchers, research assistants that have supported your work or contributed to your work over the years-- but if you could talk a little bit about the faculty aide students from DCE that have worked with you over the years, what that experience has brought to the work that you've done. If you could talk a little bit about your experience with faculty aide students over the years, I'd appreciate that.

PETER DER MANUELIAN: Sure. So very often, as I mentioned, I stumble upon a great discovery of 50 or 100 letters or photographs or things some of these people connected to the Harvard MFA expedition. And they're fascinating people in their own right, so it's great fun to read their letters and dive into their personalities a little bit. I can just mention a few names. There was a Bostonian by the name of Oric Bates, and he ended up being the first African archeology curator here at Harvard at the Peabody Museum right across the street from where I'm talking to you now.

And he got very interested in the ancient Libyans. And I've been chasing down his letters and know some of his descendants, as well. So when I get a stack of archives like this, first thing to do is to scan everything and then to try to combine-- if you have a three-page letter, you want to combine it into a single-page PDF and then give the file a name by year and month and day and who's it from and who's it to. So there's a lot of just basic organization work that has to happen so that these things, then, all appear in chronological, sequential order.

And then I can get a handle on what I've got and I can start to make a list of this person's life. OK, in 1913, they were over here. In 1920, they were back in the US. 1925, they had these people on their team and they were working at this site. So many of the students have helped with organizing that kind of material and are trying to get a handle on who these people were or are doing internet research to try to find descendants.

I'll give you one example. The biggest hole or gap in all of my research is George Reisner's wife Mary because the two of them were together all the time. So I don't have letters back and forth between husband and wife, which really would have enlivened the picture a little bit. It was really only at the end of his life that he sent his wife and daughter home to the states to escape World War II. And he, unfortunately, never saw them again.

But in the absence of her perspective on all this, I always thought, well, she must have been sending letters home all the time to her parents in Indianapolis or four or five brothers, all of these siblings. Where are these people's descendants, and did they keep the hundreds of letters that Mary Reisner must have been sending them saying, we just got back from the Sudan and we found all this great stuff or I'm having a great time or this is driving me nuts? What was her perspective on all of this?

And so I'm still hoping one day that descendants of Mary Reisner's family-- Mary Putnam Bronson Reisner-- will turn up and I will find this treasure trove of letters giving us a whole new window on the expedition from the perspective of the spouse.

CHRIS DAVIS: No, that sounds exciting. Peter, I want to close with asking you more of a general question in terms of the field of archeology, the field of Egyptology. To students who might be non-traditional students who might be interested in those fields, what would you share with them based on the state of the current research, the state of those fields in higher ed currently? Is there any advice or input you would give to students who are perhaps interested in either archeology or Egyptology as a field of study?

PETER DER MANUELIAN: Sure. I would say, these days, develop your skill set as broadly and diversely as you can. You may know that higher education seems to be under attack in some ways in this country, which is a sad thing, and the humanities, as well. Egyptology is a fascinating thing to study, but go in with your eyes open because it's tough to get a job that will pay all of the bills. So people try to find creative ways to combine different aspects of the field, whether it's curating shows or writing books or leading tours or finding a university adjunct position or things like that.

So there are ways to make it work. Sometimes part-time, sometimes full-time. In terms of broadening the skill set, it's always wonderful if you can bring to the table that you're a database expert or you've got museum curatorial experience or you worked in a registrar's office at this museum or you've got archival handling experience or an expert in website design. Or maybe you've got some fluent Arabic and you can do some translating or German letters or French letters or Italian letters, for example.

So all of these skills that you assemble, you never know when they're going to come in handy and be that extra thing on the resume that appeals to someone. So I'm always looking for people who are meticulous, well-organized, can handle archives, can work responsibly with materials like this, and put it in good shape and good order. Those are skills that apply far beyond Egyptology to all kinds of potential career paths. So it's not wasted time to develop all those skills.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you, Peter. I appreciate that very much. Well, on that note, I will say thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me today and to talk about your work in this field, which I think is so interesting. And hopefully, our students will enjoy this conversation. Thank you for your time, Peter. I really appreciate it.

PETER DER MANUELIAN: Great pleasure, Chris. Fun to talk with you. And let's keep the partnership going and keep those students working on these exciting projects.

CHRIS DAVIS: Absolutely.

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CHRIS DAVIS: You have listened to the *CARC Podcast*. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Resource Center here at Harvard Extension School. And I hope you will join us again.