

# THE OPEN COURT

JANUARY

1936

*Vol. 50*

*Number 936*

# THE OPEN COURT

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science,  
and the Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea.

FOUNDED BY EDWARD C. HEGELER

Volume 50

JANUARY, 1936

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*Published Quarterly*

THE OPEN COURT PUBLISHING COMPANY

149 EAST HURON STREET

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Subscription rates: \$2.00 a year, 50c a copy. Remittances may be made by personal checks, drafts, post office or express money orders, payable to *The Open Court Publishing Company*.

While the editors welcome contributions, they do not hold themselves responsible for unsolicited manuscripts.

Address all correspondence to *The Open Court Publishing Company*,  
149 East Huron Street, Chicago, Illinois.

Entered as Second Class matter March 2, 1934, at the Post Office at Chicago, Illinois under Act of March 3, 1879.

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Printed in the United States of America.



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JAMES HENRY BREASTED

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Volume L

January, 1936

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## BREASTED THE HISTORIAN

BY A. T. OLMSTEAD

JAMES HENRY BREASTED was a great man and, therefore, many sided in character. As philologist, archaeologist, and administrator he was equally outstanding; others may attempt an evaluation of his significance to these fields; for many he was pre-eminently the great historian.

Today it is difficult for us, knowing as we do the importance of the oriental world, to realize what he accomplished almost single handed. When, in 1894, he began his career at the University of Chicago, there was not one professor of ancient history in an American university. Courses in Greek, Roman, or Oriental History were given, if at all, by some instructor in the classics or in Semitic languages who happened to have a free hour; the situation was not without its advantages: it recognized the close connection of ancient history with ancient languages and literatures, it resulted in a history which subordinated the politics so emphasized by the professional historian in other fields to the culture, and it produced ancient historians like Professor Breasted.

But truly historical research was still in the future. Historians by profession had definitely abandoned ancient history to the philologist and the theologian, to them true history was limited to the later western peoples. When one young graduate student, suspecting there might be a future in the ancient history of the Near East, attended his first meeting of the American Historical Association, he was treated courteously but inspected curiously as a strange animal who had wandered into the wrong zoo.

Breasted's *History of Egypt* was first published in 1905. Received at first with little attention, after a bit its sales began to increase until it became the accepted guide book for tourists in

Egypt, and its author was recognized as the first American historian in this field. It was a new kind of history, based, indeed, on the most exacting scholarship as revealed in the accompanying Records of Egypt with new collations of almost every text, but written with an understanding sympathy for the men of this far-off world and with a literary skill which made it for every reader, in very truth, the "living past."

Meanwhile, interest in this ancient world was growing; a few chairs of ancient history were established; in 1909 the American Historical Association recognized the new field by a special section to honor the German historian, Eduard Meyer. Next year, with only local talent, the youthful practitioners of the new discipline attempted another session at Indianapolis. Plans were carefully prepared in advance for "spontaneous discussion." At the close, when the youngsters were wondering whether they had put ancient history across, a handsome man with a magnificent crest of white hair walked over and said: "Boys, that was a fine program. I heard you were having an ancient history session and I came down from Chicago. I'm Breasted."

Already recognized as one of America's outstanding historians, he would have been welcomed by his ranking colleagues. Instead, he dined and talked with us, discussed our problems, praised our work, made tactful suggestions, and thrilled us with his experiences in the Orient. That the annual sessions of the Ancient History section have become noted for their liveness is in no small part the result of those hotel room meetings.

By a curious coincidence, nineteen years later we met again in Indianapolis. The president of the American Historical Association was James Henry Breasted, the first historian of antiquity to be so honored by his colleagues. At the dinner in his honor, the former youngsters met as recognized professionals. His presidential address announced the new Oriental Institute. So far had ancient history advanced in those nineteen years.

For Professor Breasted, they had been years of triumph and of disappointment. Public interest in the ancient Near East had been growing rapidly, in no small degree through his own efforts, and the results of excavations had betaken as of right the front page in the newspapers. His *Ancient Times*, for a generation the ancient history textbook in countless high schools and colleges, taught thou-

sands of young minds that the ancient world was as fascinating as the modern for whose understanding the ancient world offered so much practical wisdom. For more mature readers, the same living story was told in his *Conquest of Civilization*.

One picture stands out in my memory. We were chatting of new discoveries not yet published when suddenly he mentioned a letter from a high-school student and his detailed answer. Mrs. Breasted, seated near by, commented: "He spends so much precious time on those letters." The reply was like a trumpet call: "One never knows what young soul may be inspired to something great; I may not be able to answer all letters in person, I must answer letters from these eager young students." There was the true Breasted, whose faith was in the youth of the future.

That faith was sorely tried. While the public was ever more eager for archaeological news, while ancient history assumed its true place in school and college, oriental research was declining, fewer opportunities were open to the young scholar. "In my desperation," he once confided, "I thought of a great organization to train and support the youth who wished to enter this field and thus save Oriental studies in America."

Again and again his dreams of such an organization seemed about to become realities, and then came disappointment. The World War wrecked one such plan. Still the dream persisted, and he followed it with dogged persistence until in his last years it came true through the generosity of Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

When the new Oriental Institute was announced, it was declared on every side that it meant an archaeological monopoly, that no other institution could compete. This was not his belief and his faith has already been justified. Today, the University of Michigan has a similar Institute, devoted more especially to the Graeco-Roman Orient, and in close cooperation with our own. Reports of the work of these two Institutes and of the Yale expedition to Dura-Europus were given at the recent Ancient History section of the American Historical Association. Chicago has its Field Museum expedition at Kish and its Presbyterian Theological Seminary dig at Beth Zur; other fruitful expeditions of the Metropolitan Museum, the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, the Schools at Jerusalem and Baghdad, the Institute for Persian Art, are only a few of the projects which have been stimulated by this new interest.

His triumph was not without its shadows. At the height of his reputation, in the full maturity of his powers, Professor Breasted deliberately turned his back on the personal research, which to him was the breath of life, and devoted his last years to administration of the great organization which was to provide his young men with a future. He regretted his enforced abandonment of teaching: "My head is now all woozy because I can not sharpen it on the minds of those bright young men," he congratulated those who still held classes. He might express his detestation of "this atrocious administration which keeps me from real work," but the next moment he was enthusiastically praising a new discovery in the field or inquiring the work of the last research fellow, and always there was talk of the future.

The historian of that future must assess his contribution to American thought. Already it is clear that few scholars in all history have so influenced the thinking of his generation. To him as to no other man we owe the unveiling of the far distant past. What that unveiling of millennia of written history, that doubling in geological time of man's existence in the dim prehistoric past, that realization of man's first steps in the "Conquest of Civilization," those significant and sometimes terrifying parallels with the present will mean to the expanding human mind we cannot fully realize. Through his writings and his personality, his direct influence has been highly significant, but equally significant for the future will be the survival of that influence through the group of young scholars for whose life-work he abandoned his own beloved research.