Welcome to Near Eastern Studies 207. Students in the course spend part of the term in a regular classroom, studying the history of ancient Israel and Palestine. But they also participate in a hands-on workshop in which they are encouraged to imagine that they have just discovered these ancient objects, using clues about the design, shape, and materials to gumshoe their way into a deeper understanding of the humans and cultures that created them long ago and far away.

“The challenge of teaching the ancient world is that it’s a reality far removed from the students,” says Associate Professor

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Yaron Eliav, who teaches the class. “It is far removed geographically, chronologically, contextually, and culturally. But being able to touch something, to have physical contact with the past, is part of a process of exploration that students can only find in a few places.”

“The expectation at a lot of schools is that you take a greatest hits of archaeology course,” says post-doctoral fellow Jordan Pickett, who leads discussion sessions for Near Eastern Studies 207. “You learn about Howard Carter and King Tut or Leonard Woolley in Mesopotamia, but you aren’t necessarily pushed to think like an archaeologist. That makes a really big difference.”

The class is part of a larger project to transform the teaching of ancient history and archaeology to undergraduate students. The project is led by Eliav and Charles K. Williams II Distinguished University Professor of Classical Archaeology Sharon Herbert, a former director of the Kelsey Museum. The project received grants adding up to almost a million dollars from U-M’s Third Century Initiative — the largest grant ever given by the University to a humanities project — and includes video clips, interactive slideshows, a museum-friendly app, regular videoconferences with international partner institutions, and the immersive, hands-on experience of working directly with objects that are over two millennia old.

The objects that students work with have been loaned — over 30 of them, in total — by Lawrence (A.B. ’64) and Eleanor Jackier, collectors who saw the impact that getting objects into the hands of students could have on their education. “We use these objects to break the monotonous confines of a course where you come to a class, you hear a lecture, you do an assignment,” Eliav says. “We’re somewhere else, we’re at a museum, we’re downstairs, we’re doing things, we’re touching things. And students have responded to it in vast numbers, and we want to get even more of them to explore the Kelsey Museum and to really see the world around them differently.”

Near Eastern Studies 207 gives students firsthand access to ancient materials over 2,000 years old in order to “foster an archaeologist’s mindset,” says Associate Professor Yaron Eliav. The class allows students to imagine for themselves what it might have been like to discover these objects in the field for the first time.