Welcome to HMSC Connects! where we go behind the scenes of four Harvard museums to explore the connections between us, our big, beautiful world, and even what lies beyond. My name is Jennifer Berglund, part of the exhibits team here at the Harvard Museums of Science and Culture. And I'll be your host. I'm speaking today with Adam Aja, Assistant Curator of Collections at the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East. Among his many tasks at the museum, he manages a collection of roughly 40,000 objects. But aside from his work with collections, Aja is an archaeologist. Today, I wanted to ask him what it's like to hunt for treasures from our ancient past, and how he got into it. I also wanted to learn more about the value of archaeological collections like the one he manages. Here he is. How did you become interested in archaeology?

I began in archaeology in college. So that's where my love affair began. I took an internship with a museum while I was at university. We would go out till construction sites, explore for a couple of weeks to see if there was any, any material of historical importance on the site before they began construction. And I was immediately smitten. It was sort of the perfect combination of the physical activity and an intellectual exercise for me. And I love puzzles and it's kind of a big 3D puzzle through time. I don't think anybody that pulls something out of the ground that hasn't seen the light of day in thousands of years cannot be smitten. It's it's exciting to discover this. And then when you find those rare pieces that are complete, or a personal piece that would have been worn by an individual, like a piece of jewelry or earrings, or part of a necklace, or a weapon, or a whole vessel that's kind of wedged in the corner of a foundation that had been last time, and you and you reveal that. It's, it's exciting. It's simply exciting. And it doesn't matter if it's a simple mundane piece, or something elaborate and exciting. And I've been working in this field a long time. I think my first excavation in the Middle East was 1991. So I still get excited about it. It's still that same moment of discovery is exhilarating.

What's the strangest thing you've ever found?

I've been working a long time, and so I've seen a lot of different things, everything from the mundane to the bizarre. You usually find a lot of ceramic shards. This is the discarded trash of the ancient world. I'm particularly proud of my discovery of the Philistine cemetery at Ashkelon. But I also found a four-
horned altar made out of basically mud covered with plaster, which was very bizarre and rare. But perhaps the strangest thing might be the puppies buried in cooking pots below the floors of houses.

Jennifer Berglund 03:41
What?

Adam Aja 03:43
It's a little strange.

Jennifer Berglund 03:45
Yeah, that's strange and sad.

Adam Aja 03:47
Yeah, we found the puppy. They weren't, they were in cooking pots, but they had not been eatin they were articulated. So they're, the bones were in the places they would have been as if it had simply been put in whole and decayed, it wasn't just part of a meal. This isn't very common, but recurred several times on the site that I was excavating. We don't know why this was a practice, but it was a practice in multiple locations, multiple homes in this area in the Iron Age, at the site of Ashkelon. It's probably some ceremonial event, rather than practical. It being hidden below the floor wouldn't be something that people would see, so it wasn't an object of visual meaning, so there must have been some sort of symbolic meaning behind it that we simply don't have any real understanding since they don't have text that we can read to explain why this was done. And we don't know about this practice in a lot of other places. There are some other parallels that we've been able to identify, but it's just one of these bizarre practices that you encounter. They also buried some donkey skulls on the corners of buildings as well, and that was kind of strange.

Jennifer Berglund 05:03
On the corners of buildings. That's very strange.

Adam Aja 05:05
Like on a foundation around the foundation of the house. So donkey skulls, and these puppies. A little weird.

Jennifer Berglund 05:12
Totally weird. Super fascinating though. Aside from your work at the museum, and as an archaeologist in the field, are you a collector of things?

Adam Aja 05:33
I'm not really a major collector in any in any way. I have a variety of interests. So I've acquired things related to those interests that have scattered around my home, or from my travels. I also enjoy making and building things, so I have an odd collection of random bits that I can tap into for supplies when I'm perhaps making something like a costume for my daughter. But like most scholars, I also have collections of books and things like that, but no major collection.
Jennifer Berglund 06:02
Were you ever a collector as a child?

Adam Aja 06:06
No, no, not really. Unless you count my collection of Star Wars action figures.

Jennifer Berglund 06:11
Well, that counts.

Adam Aja 06:12
Oh, good. Okay. Well then I'm definitely a serious collector when I was nine.

Jennifer Berglund 06:19
How many did you have?

Adam Aja 06:21
I don't know. I had a large set. Oh, and I did also have the Star Wars collection. One of those trading cards. Yes. Right. You put them in order and curate your own little display, right?

Jennifer Berglund 06:35
Like Star Wars baseball cards?

Adam Aja 06:37
Like Star Wars baseball cards, right. Right. When I was a big Star Wars fan when I was a kid, I still am as an adult, I suppose.

Jennifer Berglund 06:45
Yeah, as you should be. As everyone should be. Why are archaeological collections important?

Adam Aja 06:54
Archaeological collections can remain important years after they've been removed from the soil because technology and science continues to advance. And we don't know how new discoveries can be applied to these old collections. In fact, that's one of the great strengths of the HMANE collection is that we have these almost abandoned or previously published archaeological collections that we continually tap into for new study. For example, I use a portable X-ray fluorescence device to examine archaeological metals. This is something that can discover the elemental composition of that metal. You can discover alloying agents and this is something that did not exist when these early collections were identified. You could make a visual inspection of these objects, and you could guess at what their composition was, but now you can, we can know definitively what they are because we're applying these new techniques. And because a lot of this material is fragmentary, these archaeological collections are not all museum quality display pieces. It's easy to take samples from the fragments to do this scientific examination, whereas display museum pieces, most museum curators are not willing to cut a piece off of a complete statue in order to understand its composition, or its manufacturing techniques or taking something. But these archaeological collections can still be used for that. And
also, many archaeological collections have not been published completely. A lot of projects publish a portion, or representative sample, of the collection, but don't have the ability to publish all aspects of it. Perhaps the collection was abandoned, someone left the field, and so it hasn't been published. And so we can return to these old collections and gain new information. Advance the publication, advance the knowledge of them. Some regions are not safe to go to. We have a large amount of material from northern Iraq around Kirkhope, Iraq, that's not particularly safe for a lot of Westerners to go to, and we can provide access to archaeologists and scholars who want to study this material, but can't go and conduct new archeological excavations in those regions, so there's a lot of knowledge still to be gained from exploring old collections.

Jennifer Berglund 09:27
Can you talk about the value of the HMANE collection in particular? What's particularly special about it?

Adam Aja 09:35
Our collection has a real strength in ceramics. Ceramics are the ubiquitous garbage of the ancient world. It's everywhere. Right now we have glass and plastic, and when you you're done with your garbage, you pitch it. You throw it out this curbside collections that are taken away. In the ancient world, they had ceramics. They did have glass at later time period, but they a lot of ceramics, and they would throw these out into the streets, they would reuse them. So these broken ceramics are all over the place. We have a lot of sherd collections, but we also have some whole vessels. We also have blown glass, a lot of blown glass, we have statues, we have figurines. The collection was really founded on the idea of teaching Semitic languages and cultures, but also Semitic languages, so we have a lot of inscribed material with Semitic languages on them, in particular, a great collection of Cuneiform tablets. This is the language of what is now basically modern day Iraq, Acadian. A huge collection of cuneiform tablets, but we also have some of this early purchase of David Gordon Lyon that he went to the Middle East and acquired. These were antiques of his time, and this is jewelry, costumes, tools, weapons, from the turn of the century, sort of the 19th, early 20th century material. So both antiquity and antiques, all pertaining to the history and culture of the Middle East.

Jennifer Berglund 11:15
We have been working together to prepare a new exhibit called Mediterranean Marketplaces, and it was kind of your brainchild. So, can you describe what it's going to be about and your thinking behind the themes and it's design?

Adam Aja 11:31
Mediterranean Marketplaces is really built upon one main feature of an existing exhibit. This old exhibit was called Houses of Ancient Israel, and it was installed in 2003. The museum was known for this exhibit in particular because it had this house reconstruction, an Iron Age house was almost full scale, cutaway view in the gallery, and the time it come to replace the show. The house was popular and important and unique to our region, but I wanted to reframe the show. So wasn't just focused upon the construction of home and the organization of a family in ancient Israel, but could really serve a bigger picture for us. And I really wanted to broaden this picture, but also highlight some of our unique collection of objects, or bring up more authentic pieces. The exhibit is really focused upon the
movement of goods, people and ideas around the ancient Mediterranean. So where modern consumers have access to the internet for shopping, the ancient people also had access to complex markets in in their time, and they could really produce goods that were distributed around the region. So the house now will serve as the representation of the place of production and also consumption for these agricultural products. But it's just one piece of a much bigger picture.

Jennifer Berglund  13:02
Another thing that you have that we're going to have on display are some amphora from a shipwreck. Can you, first off, define amphora, and talk a little bit about where they came from?

Adam Aja  13:16
An amphora is a word that refers to a transport vessel. Not a vessel as in a ship, but a vessel as in a ceramic jar. These were what I call the cardboard boxes of the ancient world. You could pack just about anything in them from liquids to solids and grain, and these were stacked in holds of ships and transported around the Mediterranean. The ship is actually going to be reconstructed sort of a cutaway view, and we are going to stack a large number of these amphora in them. These amphora came from two shipwrecks that were excavated on the bottom of the Mediterranean, sort of between Israel and Egypt, by a former director of the museum and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute, which were the major sponsors. And I'm really excited that we finally, for the first time, we get to exhibit these pieces in the museum and this kind of unique display--a nice parallel to the house. You have to have this big house reconstruction on one side, and a ship reconstruction on the other side of the gallery to balance each other out. In addition to that, we'll then look at some of the transformative ideas that moved around the Mediterranean as well along with these goods, sort of things like iron working and glassblowing, and the development of coinage. And so that gives us an opportunity to exhibit pieces related to those ideas, sort of some metalwork, we'll have actually have some, some of our coinage displayed for the first time since the 50s. And some beautiful glass. But this this ship reconstruction is really going to be a nice highlight for us and great new piece and really exciting to show these shipwrecked objects. For me, there's one highlight in the ship in particular and it's this Chalice. This Chalice would have been used for burning aromatics, offerings for a good journey, or a safe journey. And this would have been part of either the captain or the ship's cruise personal effects, and clearly our ships did not have a successful journey, and all the crew probably died. And so it's kind of a poignant reminder of, of the dangers of long distance travel. These people died and doing this and we were actually able to capture some of their personal effects.

Jennifer Berglund  15:33
So you talked about some of the objects that will be featured. Do you have a favorite in the exhibit?

Adam Aja  15:39
I don't have a particular favorite. That sort of stands out above everything else, with the exception of maybe that Chalice that I mentioned. That that piece is just a nice representation of what happened to the ships that we're looking at, the hopes and dreams of the sailors to, to make a great profit, to have a safe journey, and how those hopes and dreams had been dashed, and sort of this must have been a devastating loss for the owners of the ships. Obviously, there was the tragedy of the crew that went down. I wish we had the opportunity to excavate more of the ship, all the objects that were on display
for us were actually visible on the surface and we're simply scooped up by the rover, but they never excavated down below these amphora to see if there's any wood preserved below the mud. So the wrecks are still there, the opportunity exists. There's still a lot to be discovered down there. Iron Age wrecks are some of the the oldest wrecks that have been identified in deepwater. And I hope at some point that archaeologists will be able to return to the site. But the other ship is only one aspect of our show. I think people are gonna find a lot of personal interest to them. If you're interested in ancient coinage, there are some great pieces. We have some beautiful glass that's there. Some objects of beauty in what I'm calling sort of the luxury cabinet--the luxuries that would also have been traded around the region. There's some unique pieces there. There's some great metal, a little metal cat statue, and we have weapons. It doesn't seem that important or exciting to some, but I'm pretty excited about, we have a crucible, which is ceramic, where you would melt the copper, and then pour it into a mold. And so we have examples of that. There's some nice jewelry I think people will appreciate as well. And of course, if you were happy with the house, if you enjoyed the house, if you're familiar with our house, a lot of the objects that were originally on exhibit in the house, we're bringing back again.

Jennifer Berglund 17:44
That's great. Including some of the amphora, right?

Adam Aja 17:47
Including some of them amphora.

Jennifer Berglund 17:48
Yeah, but actually positioned in the house, which is really cool.

Adam Aja 17:51
You'll see him in the house. Right. So like as if the farmers bought some of the wine that came from the coast.

Jennifer Berglund 17:58
It's a full story. What do you hope visitors come away from the exhibit understanding?

Adam Aja 18:06
I hope that our visitors will come away with an awareness and appreciation for the fact that the people of the Mediterranean, or the ancient Mediterranean, were not just some dirty peasants huddled around a fire and never leaving their squalid little hovel. They lived sophisticated lives. They were connected to a broader world, much as we are today. So, in fact, we're indebted to these ancient people for many of the things that we still rely upon today, like written language, and coinage, and glass, and such. So, in the end, I hope that I can help make people feel connected to the past. I suppose that's what I've spent my career doing is trying to find these, these details of the past that can excite people in the present about what came before them. I want people to feel a connection to the ancient Mediterranean and the collections that we curate.
Today's HMSC Connects! Podcast was produced by me, Jennifer Berglund, and the Harvard Museums of Science and Culture. Special thanks to Adam Aja and the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East for their time and expertise. See you next week!