

Moving on from Ebla, I crossed the Euphrates

An Assyrian Day in Honour of Paolo Matthiae

edited by
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ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY



ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD
Summertown Pavilion
18-24 Middle Way
Summertown
Oxford OX2 7LG
www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-80327-110-1
ISBN 978-1-80327-111-8 (e-Pdf)

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Cover photo: © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre), Thierry Ollivier

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Foreword

Paolo Matthiae is universally known because he discovered Ebla: he founded and is still director of the Italian Archaeological Expedition to Syria of the Sapienza University of Rome, which worked on the site of Tell Mardikh – modern name of ancient Ebla – since 1964. The Expedition was active for 47 campaigns until 2010, when field activities were nearly completely interrupted for the tragedy which affected and is still affecting Syria. By means of several and important contributions – scientific articles and monographs, but also popular articles and public lectures – based on that ground-breaking discovery, Paolo has masterly contributed to the reconstruction of the history of that capital of north inner Syria, which flourished between 2400 and 1600 BC ca, but he also contributed to the reconstruction of the history of the whole Syrian region, which until the discovery of Ebla was considered only a passage between Mesopotamia and Egypt.

On the occasion of his 80th birthday, however, we wished to remember another, by no means secondary, aspect of his research activity, pivoting on the study of the neo-Assyrian world, and not based on a field activity, but rather on the use of methodologies typical of the discipline of Art History, as they were refined through the contributions provided by Henry Frankfort for the ancient Near East, and by Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli for the Roman and Italic worlds. As Paolo himself frequently recalls, his first analyses about the cultures of pre-classical Syria were based on Frankfort's studies, and, in particular, on the publication by C.L. Woolley of the excavations at Alalakh, in the Plain of Antioch, whereas his studies at the university, putting him in direct contact with Bianchi Bandinelli, were the base for the analytical openings which, overcoming the more traditional formulations of the studies on archaeology, as well as on the history of ancient art, allowed him to deal with great intuition with such distant and different worlds. Thus, as Ashurnasirpal II crossed the Euphrates to reach Syria and the Mediterranean Sea, Paolo in his research sometimes followed the reverse course, crossing the Euphrates and going east, finding in this travel images of his beloved Syria.

The choice of a subject with which Paolo's name is not frequently joined, was accompanied by the choice not to propose – as is usually done – a collection of articles by 'friends and pupils', but rather to organize a meeting of partners, of international scholars who are engaged, with different methodologies, in this same field of studies, proposing their thoughts about the neo-Assyrian world; this thoughts are now collected in this volume we offer to our mentor Paolo Matthiae, in homage for his multifaceted and rich activity and in thanks for making us understand that a scholar cannot and must not be monochord.

We wish to heartfully thank the Authorities of the Sapienza University of Rome, who enthusiastically welcomed our initiative, supported it within the frame of the meaningful events for the identity of the University and welcomed it in the Aula degli Organi Collegiali. We also thank the colleagues who accepted our invitation and all Paolo's friends and former pupils, who convened numerous on the exact day of his birthday – January 9th 2020 – for an event which was the first one for the Sapienza in 2020 and the last live conference in our field of studies before the lockdown for the sanitary emergency of the COVID-19. Our warmest thanks go to Archaeopress, and in particular to its editor Mike Schurer for accepting the volume for publication in one of their series.

Rome,
30/07/2021

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