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THE FIRST ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPEDITION
TO MESOPOTAMIA. RECENTLY RETRIEVED DOCUMENTS
CONCERNING THE 1930 SURVEY TRIP TO IRAQ

A noteworthy collection of finds from the first Italian excavation in Mesopotamia, carried out by Giuseppe Furlani, Doro Levi and Fausto Franco in 1933 at Qasr Shamamuk (ancient Kilizu), is currently held in the Archaeological Museum of Florence. A history of the expedition and of the Florentine collection has already been given elsewhere¹, and a selection of these finds has recently been exhibited at the Museum². The excavation was preceded by an exploratory trip to Iraq by Furlani, Levi and Franco in Spring 1930.

Furlani published a report and a few notes on the 1933 excavation³. Part of the original photographs of the excavation are still available, consisting of 82 photos taken by Levi, with handwritten notes on the reverse side⁴. However, very little information has been available to date about the first survey trip in 1930. Short notes on this trip were given by Furlani and Levi, respectively in the foreword paragraph of the only published excavation report⁵ and in an article entitled “Tra i segni della potenza d’Assiria e di Roma”, in the daily newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* of 17 June 1933⁶.

Only a few documents related to this trip are held today in the Historical Archive of the Superintendency for the Archaeological Heritage of Tuscany (*Archivio Storico* of the *Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Toscana*, hereafter AS-SBAT) and consist mainly of administrative documents. As for a report written by Levi, only the protocol letter to which the report was attached is still held in the archive⁷. The only interesting document related to the trip is a list of the objects purchased by Levi in Baghdad from the antique dealers Antonio Samhiry and Thomas Maymarian. The list is actually the main source of information about the provenance of many objects belonging to the Mesopotamian collection of the Museum of Florence⁸. Apart from the above mentioned files, there was no knowledge of other documents held in the Museum archives useful to reconstruct the history of the 1930 expedition.

It was a very pleasant surprise, therefore, when at the end of 2012 I recognized a photo-album by Levi regarding that expedition, together with other books and notebooks, in a box in the Museum’s storerooms. The box had been flooded, together with many other items of the Museum, during the flood of the river Arno in November 1966.

The album is greatly damaged. It is composed of 44 sheets (33x25 cm), on which 11.5x8.5 cm or 8.5x6 cm photos were glued. Today, the number of photos

available is 231. However, the traces on the sheets indicate that they were at least 314. Most of the photos are still glued on the sheets and only a few are loose among the sheets. Of note is that at least all the loose photos have handwritten notes on the back and that photo-captions are often handwritten on the sheets themselves. All the photos are at least partly damaged and, in some cases, the damage is so huge that the photo subject is no longer recognizable. The album will be restored, therefore, in order to clean it and preserve it as much as possible.

To date, the album has been digitized as it is, also taking single shots of the photos that do not need special cleaning and restoration⁹.

Furthermore, a check has been carried out at the Historical Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome (*Archivio Storico* of the *Ministero degli Affari Esteri*, hereafter AS-MAE). Indeed, a report written by Levi was known to have been held in an archive of the Ministry, which controlled all Italian activities abroad during the 1930s¹⁰. This report¹¹ is attached to a letter dated 16 April 1931, from Doro Levi to Raffaele Guariglia, an Italian diplomat, and later Minister of Foreign Affairs, after the destitution of Mussolini in

¹ ANASTASIO 2012, 11-23.

² *Archeologia in Oriente. La collezione vicinorientale del Museo Archeologico di Firenze*, Museo Archeologico di Firenze, 18 May-1 September 2013.

³ FURLANI 1934a; IDEM 1934b; IDEM 1934c.

⁴ ANASTASIO 2012, 23-60.

⁵ FURLANI 1934b, 19. More recently, notes have been published in PECORELLA 1984, PETRICIOLI 1990, ANASTASIO, GUIDOTTI, VALENTINI 2012.

⁶ An excerpt from this article is in PETRICIOLI 1990, 324.

⁷ AS-SBAT n. 381, dated 14 April 1931.

⁸ AS-SBAT no number, by D. Levi, on 8 August 1930.

⁹ The album was digitized by Fernando Guerrini, photographer of the SBAT, who used a Nikon D800 camera with 7360x4912 pixel, Nikon Micro Nikkor 60 mm lens with polarizing filter and two lamps with polarizing filter. In cases such as this, the standard process used by the SBAT Photo-Laboratory is to digitize each sheet and not the single photos, so that both the photo and any caption on the paper support can be kept in the same shot. Photo shots are preferred to scanning because of the shorter time needed; also, when professional cameras and lenses are used, the end result is just as high-quality as a scanned image.

¹⁰ PETRICIOLI 1992, 326.

¹¹ AS-MAE Aff. Pol. Italia 1931, busta 5, fascicolo 13.

1943. On the strength of the features of this report, it is highly credible that it is a copy of the report attached to the above mentioned AS-SBAT n. 381, lost in the Florentine archive: 20 photos were attached to both documents (unfortunately, they are also missing in the AS-MAE file). Furthermore, the AS-SBAT protocol letter is dated 14 April 1931, and the AS-MAE report 16 April 1931. The latter report is a typescript document of 21 pages, listing all the sites visited in Iraq, according to the complete travel itinerary. This itinerary fits the sequence of the sites portrayed in the photo-album retrieved in Florence, even though the latter also includes sites beyond Mesopotamia: Kairo and some sites in Palestine before the arrival in Iraq, and Palmyra, Balbeek and Istanbul after the end of the trip in Mesopotamia. It is not possible to reconstruct the exact arrival and departure dates in Mesopotamia, but the report mentions that the trip was carried out in "Spring 1930". In the photo-album, only a few captions give the dates of the shots, but they fit in with this information: for instance, some photos taken in Babylon are dated 10 April 1930, while photos of Sippar are dated 5 May 1930.

Fig. 1 shows a synthetic map of the travel itinerary, illustrating the sites reported by Levi. According to Levi's notes, the journey was divided in two parts: a first part devoted to the "field survey of the Babylonian and Assyrian monuments", and a second part to the "exploration of the Greek, Roman and Early Christian civilization"¹². It is possible to recognize four main stopovers during the itinerary. The first three were based in Baghdad and were directed firstly to the southern region, then along the Diyala valley and again south, in the region of al-Suwayrah. The fourth stopover was based in Kirkuk and aimed at exploring sites in Assyria, in today's Iraqi Kurdistan.

During the first stopover, the following sites were visited, in this sequence: Ur (Tell Mukayyar), al-Ubaid, Eridu (Abu Sharain), Uruk (Warka), Nippur (Nuffar), Babylon, Borsippa (Birs Nimrud), Kish (Tell Ukhaimir), Sippar (Abu Habba), Dur-Kurigalzu (Aqar Quf), Ctesiphon and Seleucia (figs. 2-19).

Levi was particularly impressed by the ruins visible at Eridu, which was in fact considered the most promising site for a possible excavation. It is worth mentioning that Levi reports that several inscribed bricks were collected on the slopes of the mound, as well as sherds and lithic instruments, and that at least the bricks were sent to the Archaeological Museum of Florence¹³. This is an important detail, because it allows us to understand that not all the objects held today in Florence and registered as belonging to the 1930 expedition were purchased from the antique dealers in Baghdad (indeed, their actual amount is too high and sounds strange when compared to the objects reported in the list of the above mentioned dealers Samhiry and Maymarián). Specifically, at least two bricks dating back to the reign of Amarsuena of Ur,

Museum n. 94055 and n. 94056, can be ascribed to this field collection¹⁴. Finally, it should be noted that this part of the journey ended with a visit through the region of Umma, modern Tell Jokha, because it too was considered suitable for excavation purposes, although it was not actually possible to stop at this site during the trip.

A long paragraph of the report is dedicated to the visit of ancient Babylon (figs. 9-10), where excavations had been carried out by the German expedition. There are several photos in the album, especially from the area of the Ishtar Gate, and great attention is paid to the moulded figures on the walls, particularly the *mushkhush* dragon, that is picturesquely called "the Unicorn of Babylon" (*il Liocorno di Babele*) by Levi.

Another visited site was Dur-Kurigalzu (Aqar Quf), whose ziqqurat is illustrated in one of the photos (fig. 18). It is clear from the report that this site was also considered as a potential target for an excavation. However, Levi mentions that the site was rich in Islamic ruins and that the Iraqi authorities would only have authorized research projects that also took into account the investigation of these monuments. This was beyond the goals of the Italian expedition, in which there were no experts in Islamic archaeology. After the stop at Dur-Kurigalzu, the expedition moved to the area of Tell Omar, but did not stop at the site.

The second stopover was along the eastern river-side of the Diyala. Unfortunately, only in a few cases is it possible to venture a guess on the identification of the sites quoted by Levi¹⁵. This is also due to the fact that the spelling used by Levi is often misleading, as also occurs for the sites in the other regions, which were not yet known in literature. A good example is Qasr Shamamuk itself: it is quoted by Furlani as Qasr Šemāmok in his later articles, but is written as Kasr Schmuka in Levi's report of 1930.

In detail, Levi writes that the trip was along the eastern side of the river valley, in the direction of Mendeli. The expedition only stopped at sites that had not been visited yet by the Americans, who were already working in the region. The visited sites were, in

¹² Respectively «...all'esplorazione superficiale dei ruderi dell'antica civiltà babilonese-assira» and «...all'esplorazione della civiltà greca, romana e protocristiana» in the original text of AS-MAE, p. 31.

¹³ AS-MAE report, p. 3: «...lungo tutti i fianchi della collina artificiale di rovine sono sparsi numerosissimi mattoni con bolli, di cui abbiamo raccolto un certo numero, scegliendo i bolli meglio conservati, mattoni ora depositati al Museo Archeologico di Firenze».

¹⁴ CONTI 2007, cat. 216; inventory n. 0353 in the caption is actually 94056.

¹⁵ I would like to thank Mark Altaweel and Simone Mühl for their useful suggestions that allowed me to tentatively spot some sites.

sequence: Bismaia, Bug Ber, Egerum (80 km from Baghdad), Tell Sabah (93 km from Baghdad), Tell Zebai (110 km from Baghdad), Borahan (140 km from Baghdad) and, on the way back, Abu Zubi. If we consider the spellings used, the features of some of the sites described and the rough location, consistency can be seen with some of the sites later surveyed by Robert McC. Adams: in particular, n. 562 (Bismaya), n. 366 (Tell Sebe'e), n. 286 (Tell Borahan) and n. 384 (Tell Abu Zambil) in the 'Register of Archaeological Sites'¹⁶.

Specifically, two sites – Tell Sabah and Borahan – were carefully surveyed, because they were considered good targets for an excavation, both for logistical reasons and for the surface finds. Borahan was particularly appreciated for the presence of water sources in its vicinity, while Tell Sabah is mentioned because a brick fragment was found with the name of the *patesi Eshnunaki* inscribed on it.

Before leaving Baghdad and moving north, a short survey was carried out in the area of al-Suwayrah, around 50 km south of Baghdad. Here, the site of Abu Sijar was considered an interesting target. Mlahan and Medeinah are also mentioned as visited sites. To my knowledge, it is not possible to identify these sites. Only Abu Sijar can be identified with the Abu Shujair spotted on the *Archaeological Map of Iraq* of DGA 1967, but this would mean that the visit led Furlani, Levi and Franco very far from Baghdad and from al-Suwayrah itself.

As well known, the only excavation finally carried out by the Italian expedition was Qasr Shamamuk in Assyria, surveyed during the fourth stopover, when the pivotal centre for the trips was Kirkuk (although it is curious that there are no photos of Kirkuk in the album, while there are many of Mosul).

The visited sites were, in sequence: Nuzi (Yorgan Tepe), Kilizu (Qasr Shamamuk), Ninive (Kuyunjik and Nebi Yunus), Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad), Bavian, Imgur-Enlil (Balawat), Kalhu (Nimrud), Ashur (Qalat Shergat) and Hatra.

Apart from Qasr Shamamuk, which was actually selected for the excavation, the other site in which Levi's report shows a strong interest is Hatra (Fig. 20). This is due to the presence of ruins and monuments considered striking, especially for their position "at the extreme border of the Roman Empire"¹⁷. Additionally, this site was still archaeologically intact compared to other similar sites such as Palmyra and Baalbeck. It took years, however, before an Italian expedition¹⁸ actually started an excavation project on this site! Speaking of Palmyra and Baalbeck, it is worth noticing that many photos in the album are dedicated to these sites. Unfortunately, this is the most damaged part of the album, which ends with photos of Istanbul.

The data gathered from the photos retrieved and from the report allow us to reconstruct the itinerary of one of the first modern archaeological expeditions

to Mesopotamia. Specifically, the photos show the state of many sites before their excavation, or at the time of their earliest investigations. Italian research in this region had finally led to an excavation, after an unsuccessful attempt to organize an expedition to Seleucia and Ctesiphon in 1910¹⁹. The 1933 excavation at Qasr Shamamuk, although comprising a single campaign, collected an outstanding assemblage of finds from the Assyrian and Parthian necropolis. Unfortunately, due to political reasons that were in no way related to the research, the excavation lasted just one campaign. It is certainly a good omen, therefore, now that research in Iraq has flourished again after a long gap²⁰, that these data may be returned to the scientific community, adding one more piece to the history of archaeological research in Mesopotamia.

¹⁶ ADAMS 1965, 135-167.

¹⁷ AS-MAE report, 19: «...con la suggestione che conferisce loro la posizione all'estremo confine dell'Impero romano, si ergono tali rovine di Hatra come il terzo e ultimo grande complesso di edifici tardo-romani dell'Asia anteriore conservati in tutto il loro elevato...».

¹⁸ VENCO RICCIARDI 1988.

¹⁹ PETRICIOLI 1992, 321-323. The project to excavate Seleucia and Ctesiphon was conceived following a proposal by the Italian consul at Baghdad, Leopoldo Zunini. Even though the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had authorized the expedition and granted financial support, the expedition never took place due to the beginning of the Italo-Turkish War (September 1911 - October 1912).

²⁰ Qasr Shamamuk is currently being excavated again by a French team, directed by O. Rouault and M.G. Masetti-Rouault. A contribution by O. Rouault and M.G. Masetti-Rouault, entitled "Recent Researches in the Erbil region: 2011 excavations in Qasr Shermamok/Kilizi (Iraqi Kurdistan)", is in press in the proceedings of the 8th ICAANE, Warsaw, 30 April- 4 May 2012.

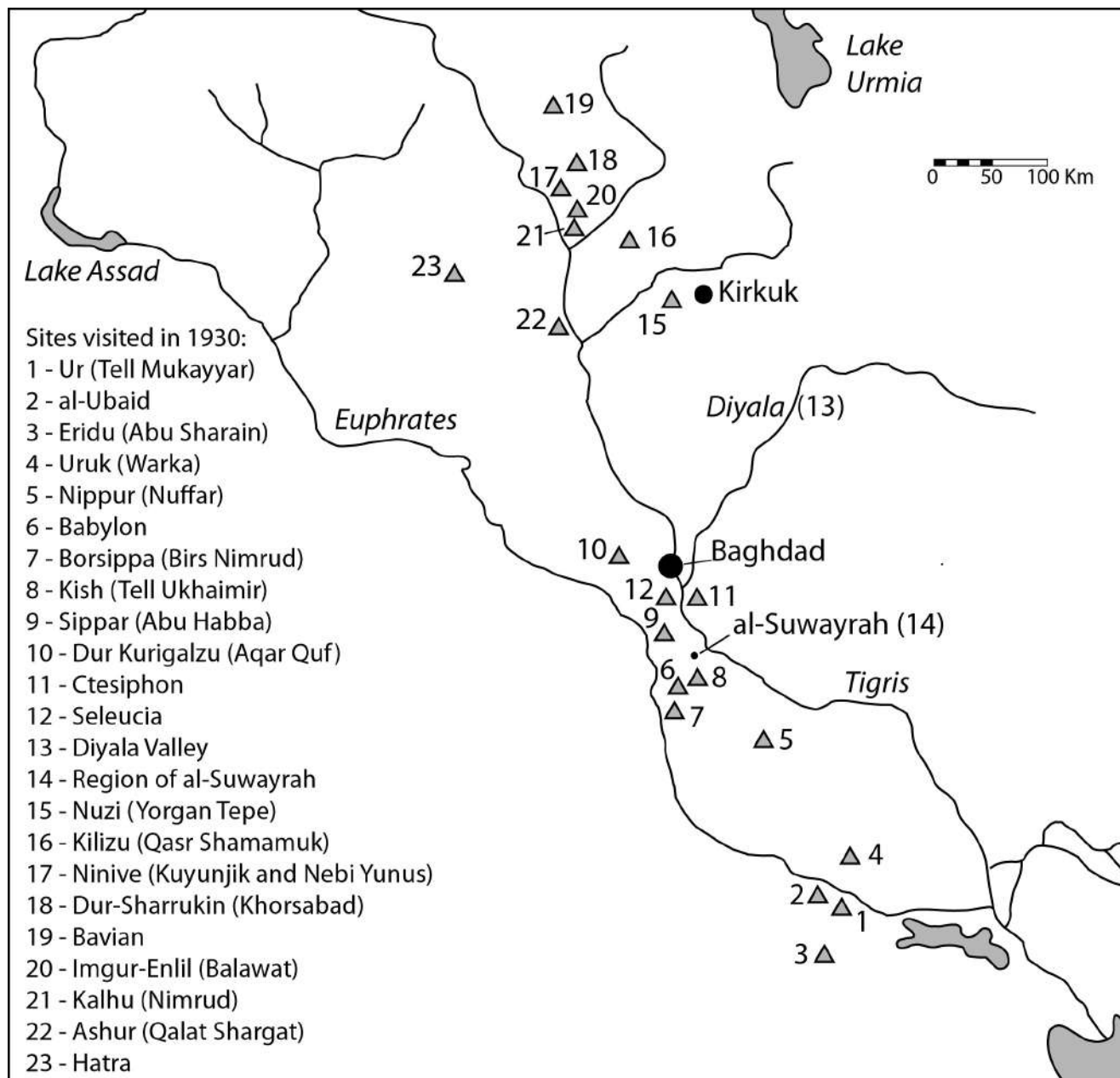


Fig. 1 - The travel itinerary of the 1930 expedition.



Fig. 2 - Baghdad. A street in the centre of the town.



Fig. 3 - Departure from Baghdad.



Fig. 4 - Ur. Fausto Franco and a watchman of the site.



Fig. 5 - al-Ubaid.



Fig. 6 - Ur. View of the ziqqurat.



Fig. 7 - Uruk. View of the ziqqurat.



Fig. 8 - The Euphrates at al-Hilla.



Fig. 9 - Babylon. Walls in the area of the Ishtar Gate.



Fig. 10 - Babylon. The basalt statue of the so-called Lion of Babylon in the foreground.



Fig. 11 - Kish. View of the excavation area.

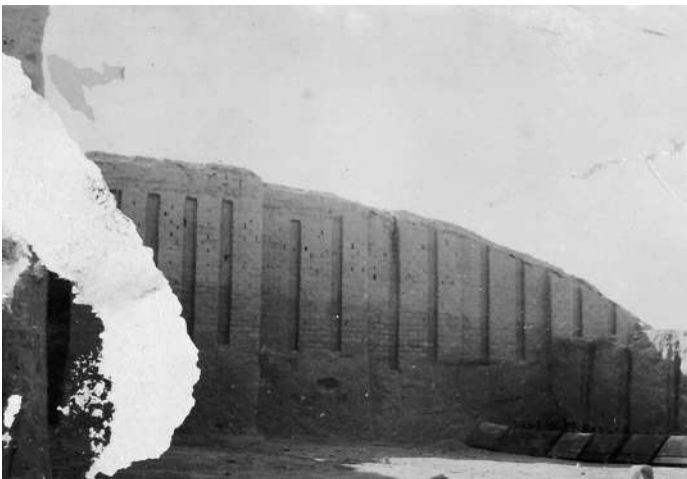


Fig. 12 - Kish. Detail of the preserved brick-walls.

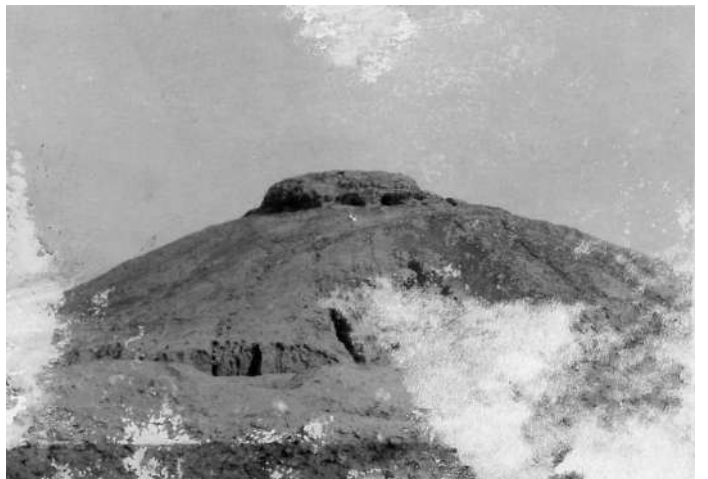


Fig. 13 - Kish. View of the ziqqurat.



Fig. 14 - Ctesiphon. The Taq-i Kisra.



Fig. 15 - Ctesiphon. The Taq-i Kisra.



Fig. 16 - Ctesiphon. A Tomb.



Fig. 17 - Ctesiphon. The central gate of the palace.



Fig. 18 - Dur-Kurigalzu. View of the ziqqurat.



Fig. 19 - Ashur. View of the ziqqurat.

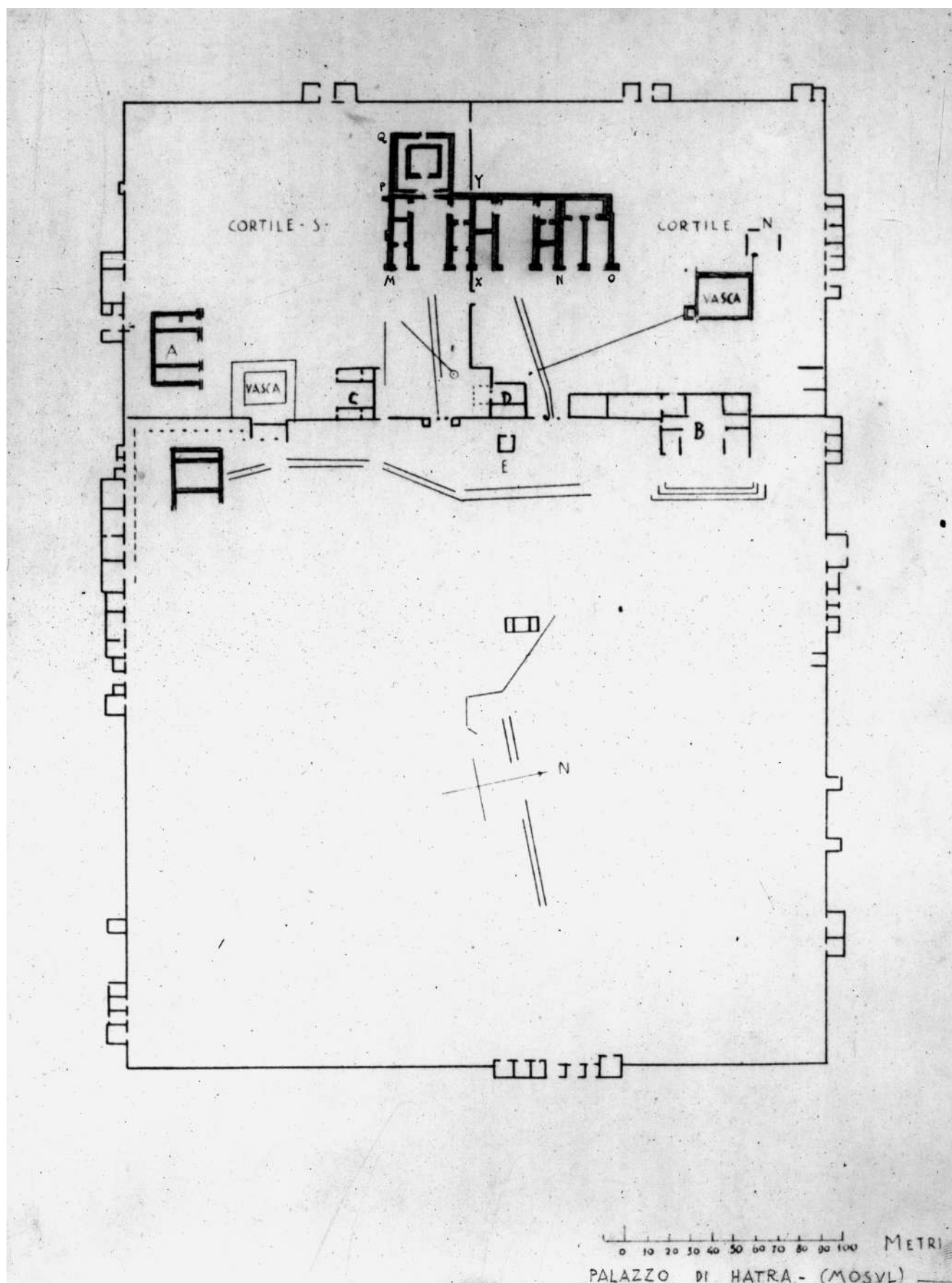


Fig. 20 - Plan of Hatra drawn by Fausto Franco. By courtesy of Biblioteca civica Bertoliana di Vicenza.

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