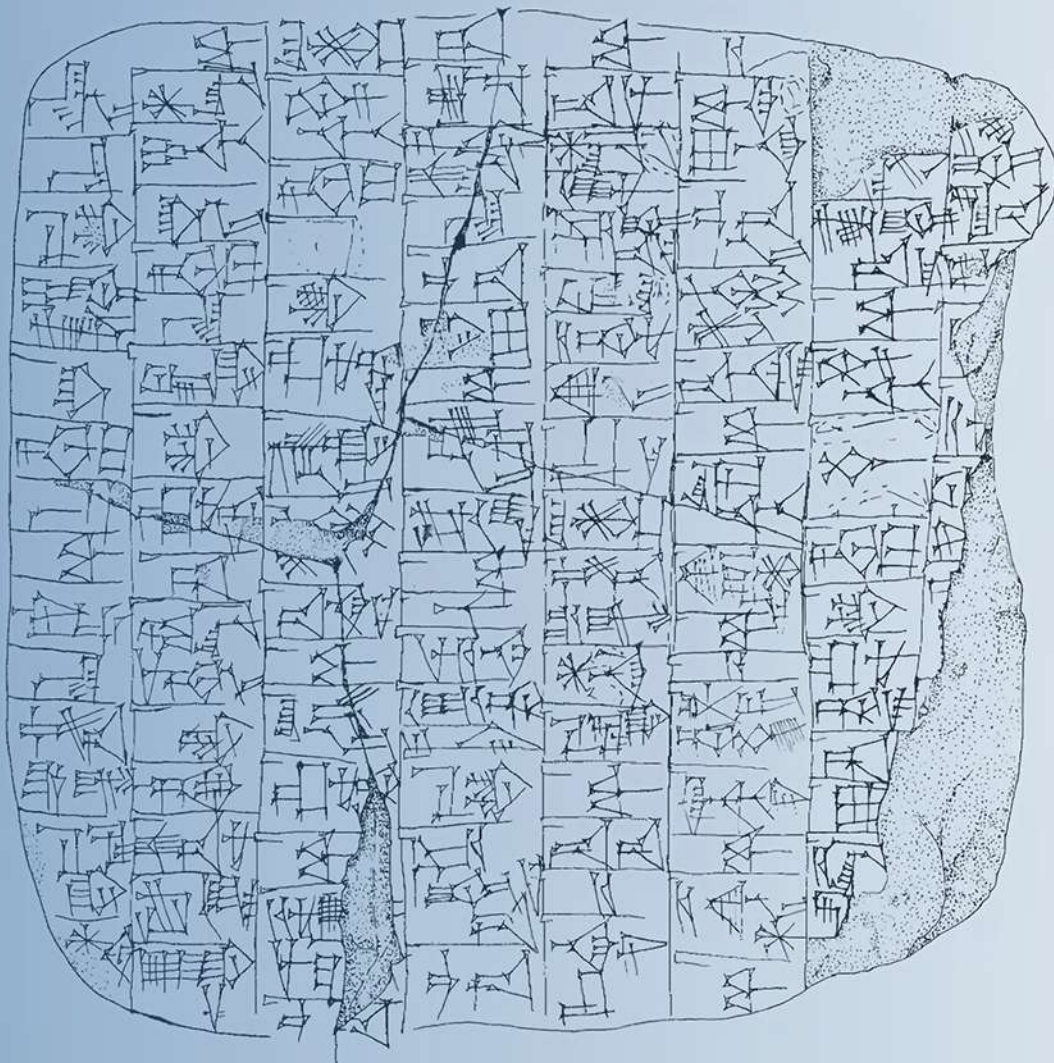




nîġ-ba dub-sar maḥ

Studies on Ebla and the Ancient Near East
presented to Amalia Catagnoti

Edited by
Elisabetta Cianfanelli and Fiammetta Gori

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The Italian archaeological expeditions to the Near East in the first half of the 20th century and their photographic legacy

Stefano Anastasio

Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio, Firenze

I met Amalia when I was a student at the University of Florence, where she was a lecturer in Ancient Near Eastern philology. Our paths crossed again only a few years ago, when I was working at the Archaeological Museum of Florence. It was such a pleasure for me to give her as much as help as possible in making her still ongoing project on the study of the museum's cuneiform collection feasible. Since this is the collection of the first Italian archaeological expedition to Mesopotamia in 1930, I thought of proposing a contribution to the present volume related to this topic and extending the subject to the more general theme of Italian archaeological research in the Near East before the Second World War. Although this topic has already been studied, many issues still remain to be investigated, such as the fortune of photographic collections during expeditions.¹

Italian archaeological fieldwork in the Near East developed in the first half of the 20th century. The occupation of the Dodecanese following the Italo-Turkish War of 1911 and the definition of an area of Italian influence in southwestern Anatolia, established in the Treaty of London of 1915, were the main events that turned the attention of Italian politics, until then focused on colonial enterprises in Africa, to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. The rhetoric of the Mediterranean seen as *Mare Nostrum*, started to be clearly defined and corresponded to a precise 'imperialist' design from the mid-1920s: the myth of 'civilising Rome' justified and nourished projects aimed at giving Italy 'a place in the sun' even in territories that until then had been of almost exclusively British, French, and German interest.²

Archaeological research hence became an important tool that could respond to multiple needs. First of all, archaeological expeditions would have made it possible to recover the traces left by the Roman Empire and revive its splendour. They would also have demonstrated Italy's 'civilising' function among the populations of the regions investigated. Lastly, and from a much more practical and tangible point of view, they would have allowed intelligence and diplomacy activities in territories where Italy wished to affirm its presence, whether with military occupation or simply linked to economic or business activities.

It was in this context that, especially between the 1920s and 1930s, Italy organised some expeditions that provided the ground for the rich and fruitful post-war archaeological excavations. The expeditions were very different in terms of their duration and results, but all had some common features, the main one being the dependence, both formal and substantial, on the directives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Ministero degli Affari Esteri*, hereafter MAE).

The scenario is divided into three main regions: Anatolia, Transjordan, and Mesopotamia (Fig. 1).

¹ For the Near East in particular, see LEVI 1964, D'ANDRIA 1986, PETRICIOLI 1990, PETRICIOLI 1996, GRECO 2012, and TROILO 2021.

² For an extensive bibliography on the subject see, for all, PALADINI 2008, with bibliography.



Fig. 1 – Map of the main archaeological sites mentioned in the text.

A fundamental figure for the onset of this activity was the Minister of the MAE, the Marquess of Sangiuliano who, at the beginning of his second ministerial mandate in 1910, approved and financed a project for the excavation of the Taq-i-Kisra near Ctesiphon: the project was not carried out due to the outbreak of the Italo-Turkish war,³ but the outcome of the war, which was favourable to Italy, allowed Sangiuliano to promote a new project in 1912, this time in Turkey. The *Missione archeologica italiana nell'Anatolia meridionale* was supposed to explore the interior of the Anatolian Plateau, with a view to possible future commercial and mining (coal) activities and to the exploitation of forest resources. After the Italian military occupation of Adalia (Antalya) in 1919, the archaeological expedition conducted several surveys that started from Antalya and moved towards Caria to the west and, inland, towards Konya.⁴ The expedition lasted until 1922, when the new nationalist political climate inaugurated by the Republic of Mustafa Kemal, decreed its end. This is not the place for a detailed account of the history of the expedition,⁵ but it is certainly worth mentioning that the Italians were never allowed to carry out archaeological excavations, in the absence of official concessions. Their activity was almost exclusively confined to conducting surveys on standing monuments, with very little archaeological analysis and material collection. The archaeologists' work was in fact always completely subject to the directives of the MAE, and their attention was increasingly turned to organising the presidium in Adalia and to intelligence activity, rather than to pure archaeological research. Despite this, there is considerable documentation that still awaits to be studied.

³ PETRICIOLI 1990, 321.

⁴ Several Italian archaeologists, architects and philologists took part in the expedition at different times: more specifically, Giuseppe Moretti for the exploration of the region southeast of Adalia, Amedeo Maiuri for Caria and Biagio Pace for the surveys in the interior towards Konya.

⁵ A large amount of news about the surveys and conservation works was published in several contributions in the *Annuario della Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene*, in particular from issue 1 (1914) to 8/9 (1929). The first official Italian excavations in Anatolia were conducted no earlier than 1934 by Giulio Jacopi, who carried out a small excavation at Kirktepel in Cappadocia, followed by an excavation at Aphrodisias in 1937 (D'ANDRIA 1986, 104, with bibliography).



Fig. 2 – A sheet of the SAIA Photo-Archive with photo prints of the archaeological remains of Adalia (© Archivi SAIA H/1193, H/1194).

The photographic documentation is particularly worthy of note and its importance can also be seen in the photographs reproduced in the scientific and propaganda publications of the time. The photographic archive of the *Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene* (hereafter SAIA) holds the main batches of photographs, referring to the surveyed regions: Lidia, Caria, Licia, Phrygia, Ionia, Pamphylia, with significant batches for some particular sites, such as Adalia (Fig. 2) and Perge.⁶

It is a repertoire that certainly deserves thorough study and would enable a still 'grey' area in archaeology to be addressed, *i.e.*, the authorship of photographs of early archaeological expeditions. Paradoxical as it may seem, it is easier to get to know the names of photographers of late 19th century expeditions than those of the expeditions of the first half of the 20th century. Professional photographers had been included in the staff of leading Near Eastern archaeological expeditions at least since the late 19th century, when taking photographs was a task that required great specialisation (progress in technology has made photography accessible even to non-experts in more recent periods). In the case of the Italian expedition to Anatolia, it is clear that the photographs were taken by different

⁶ I would like to thank Ioannis Bitis, keeper of the SAIA photographic archive, for the information provided.



Fig. 3 – A photo of the Roman Nymphaeum of Amman published by Renato Bartoccini in *La Rivista illustrata del Popolo d'Italia* 8/4, April 1930, 51.

photographers; in many cases, they were most probably the archaeologists and architects engaged in the surveys, but exact information is scarce.⁷

Photography also played an important role in the archaeological expedition to Transjordan, directed by Renato Bartoccini.⁸ This project began after the Anatolian expedition, in 1927, but was the first to conduct official archaeological excavations, specifically on the citadel of Amman (Fig. 3).⁹ Also in this case, the expedition was conceived for responding to specific political objectives and for economic and commercial interests, while its scientific interest admittedly served a secondary purpose.¹⁰ Over the course of a decade, the expe-

⁷ Roberto Paribeni mentions a draftsman, Azelio Berretti, but not the photographer(s) of the 1914 campaign (PARIBENI 1921, 2). Giacomo Guidi gives some news about the survey in Caria of 1921, but only to specify that some photos were taken by photographers external to the expedition: "the photographs accompanying the descriptions are partly due to the photographer of the Museum of Rhodes, Husni Effendi, and partly to the custodian of the Scuola di Atene Raffaello Parlanti" (translated from the Italian text in GUIDI 1924, 345).

⁸ When mentioning this expedition, different names are used in the documents, although the most frequent is *Missione Archeologica Italiana in Transgiordania* (otherwise in *Amman*).

⁹ A first excavation campaign was conducted in 1927 by Giacomo Guidi, replaced the following year by Renato Bartoccini, who led the expedition until its end in 1938. On the history of the expedition see ANASTASIO – BOTARELLI 2015, with bibliography.

¹⁰ A letter sent from the MAE offices to Roberto Paribeni refers to the appointment of Bartoccini as director of the expedition, and clearly states that "... No mission abroad can be viewed as an end in itself; in my opinion, today especially, it must be of service to general politics rather than have a technical purpose" (translated from the Italian text in ANASTASIO – BOTARELLI 2015, 31).

dition unearthed most of the monuments that tourists visit today on the Amman Citadel, and made numerous reconnaissance trips in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. On the one hand the scientific results of the excavations do not stand out for the accuracy of the method used and, above all, they lack adequate publications.¹¹ However, Bartoccini's work is notable for the great quality of the photographic documentation. Bartoccini himself, in a 1940 article, is aware of this when he recalls that "... the excavation work has been recorded in 50 drawings by the architects Ceschi and Schettini, as well as over 500 photos. We also performed surveys on 4000 km of hard desert tracks, two trips through Palestine and three in Syria, up to Palmyra. During these travels, the Mission took more than 2000 photos ...".¹²

Undoubtedly, Bartoccini had the merit of being part of a group of European and American archaeologists, who in the 1920s and 1930s began to systematically use photography to document their excavations: from this moment onwards, excavations were no longer documented by isolated, 'iconic' shots, according to a tradition that began with the photography of Gabriel Tranchand in Khorsabad in 1852.¹³ They were now real collections of photographs ordered and catalogued, halfway between reportage (especially in the case of the surveys) and scientific catalogue. In the case of Bartoccini, the photographs were glued on sheets and ordered by excavation campaign and monument, according to 'standard' sequences (panoramic views, then excavation details, then objects etc.). They allow us to reconstruct a huge amount of valuable information that would otherwise have been lost. It is a method that developed in those years mainly due to the fact that photography had become increasingly accessible, both in terms of instrumental resources and costs, and became even more popular in the immediate post-war period.¹⁴

Today, the photographs of the expedition are partly held at the University of Perugia, and partly at the *Centro di Documentazione dell'Archeologia Africana* of the University of Macerata: while the documentation of Perugia has already been studied and published, that of Macerata still awaits complete cataloguing and analysis.¹⁵

Another archaeologist who experimented the use of photography on excavations, more or less simultaneously with Bartoccini's work, was Doro Levi. In addition to being one of the major names in post-World War II Italian archaeology, and director of the *SAIA* from 1947 to 1976, Levi must also be remembered as a pioneer of the use of archaeological photography. In fact, he is the author of the photos of the *Missione archeologica di Mesopotamia*, i.e., the first Italian archaeological expedition to Mesopotamia. The expedition was launched in 1930, with a survey in Iraq aimed at identifying one or more sites where an excavation campaign could be started. Giuseppe Furlani, the highest Italian authority on Semitic philological studies, was appointed director, assisted by Fausto Franco as architect and Doro Levi as archaeologist (Fig. 4).

Although in his report to the MAE on the results of the survey, Levi had indicated other sites as ideal for excavation, the survey was organised in Qasr Shamamuk, the Assyrian Kilizu,¹⁶ not far from Erbil. The choice was clearly dictated by the desire to have an

¹¹ It is a significant fact, for example, that the only existing material documentation excavated during a decade of research is that of a small batch of Mamluk ceramics excavated in 1930 and sent to Faenza, to enrich the collection of the International Museum of Ceramics.

¹² Translated from the Italian text in BARTOCCINI 1941, 9.

¹³ PLACE 1867, vi. On Gabriel Tranchand see PILLET 1962.

¹⁴ On the theme, see the useful timeline published on Luminous-Lint (<http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/home/T3/>; last viewed on April 6th, 2024).

¹⁵ ANASTASIO – BOTARELLI 2015, 4. The documentation of Macerata is particularly notable for a large number of photographs dedicated to surveys outside Amman, and the never accomplished project of a complete photographic survey of Petra.

¹⁶ As first choice, Levi pointed to Abu Sharain, the ancient Eridu. Other places reported are Ctesiphon, Seleucia, Hatra, mainly because they featured remains of Hellenistic and Roman times. Qasr Shamamuk was visited and mentioned by Levi, but without particular emphasis (ANASTASIO 2012, and ANASTASIO 2013; the report is kept at the historical archive of the MAE; repository details: 'Aff. Pol. Italia 1931 busta 5 fascicolo 13').



Fig. 4 – Fausto Franco and a guardian at Ur, in a photo print of Doro Levi's album of the 1930 survey trip to Mesopotamia: before (left) and after (right) the conservative intervention (photos licensed by Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze, Direzione regionale musei della Toscana; photo by Barbara Cattaneo).



Fig. 5 – Doro Levi's photo prints of the 1933 expedition to Qasr Shamamuk (photo licensed by Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze, Direzione regionale musei della Toscana; photo by Stefano Anastasio).

Italian presence in the region where the *Agenzia Italiana Petroli* (AGIP) had planned to start oil drilling in those years. For the same reason, after the AGIP project was abandoned in early 1934, the archaeological expedition was interrupted after just one campaign in Spring 1933, although this had brought to light a rich Assyrian and Parthian necropolis. Owing to the scanty publications¹⁷ and to the excavation documentation that was almost completely lost during World War II, it is precisely the preserved photographs taken by Levi that allow us to reconstruct the history of the expedition. The Archaeological Museum of Florence holds a photographic album of the 1930 survey and a batch of photographs from the 1933 excavation (Fig. 5).

Unfortunately, all these photos were partially ruined during the flood of the Arno river in 1966. The photo album, which suffered the greatest damage, was recently restored, making it possible to identify the subjects of most photographs.¹⁸ The cleaning operation made it necessary to remove the photographs from the sheets. This enabled all of Levi's autograph notes on the back of the photos to be read and to identify the subject of almost all the photos preserved. His notes revealed the list of places visited, not only in Iraq, but along the journey that also touched Syria, Lebanon and Palestine.¹⁹ Compared to Bartoccini's photographs, Levi's also feature a greater attention to the excavation finds, which he identifies with both short descriptions and excavation numbers. This is a detail that, cross-referenced with the published excavation data – no matter how few they are –, has made it possible to match many objects with those of the photographs, and recognise some that were found in the graves.

After World War II, Italy resumed excavations in the Near East, inaugurating a productive and successful period of research, all abundantly documented with photography, which in the 1950s became a common and widespread tool in all expeditions. It is important, however, to pay attention to this pre-war season: it was pioneering in the use of photography and preserves information of key importance to interpret many finds that still lie unpublished in the warehouses of museums.

¹⁷ FURLANI 1934a, FURLANI 1934b, and FURLANI 1934c.

¹⁸ The restoration was carried out in 2017 by Barbara Cattaneo, at the laboratory of the National Library of Florence (CATTANEO 2019). A description of the photos of the album, prior to restoration, can be found in ANASTASIO 2013.

¹⁹ Following the order of the photographs, the Iraqi sites are the following: Baghdad, Tell Ubaid, Ur, Diwan-yah, Uruk, Hilla, Nippur, Babylon, Borsippa, Sippar, Kish, Ctesiphon, Seleucia, Aqar Quf, Tell Sabah (Diyala), Sidawa, Qasr Shamamuk (written: Kasr Shmucha), Mosul, Ninive, Ashur, Hatra, Erbil. The photographs of the album are kept in the photo-archive of the Archaeological Museum of Florence, under Ids 59786-59963 (pre-restoration) and 67110-67245 (post-restoration). The photos of the excavation of 1933 are Ids 49170-49228.

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