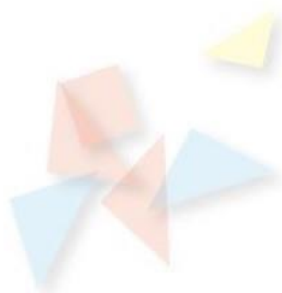
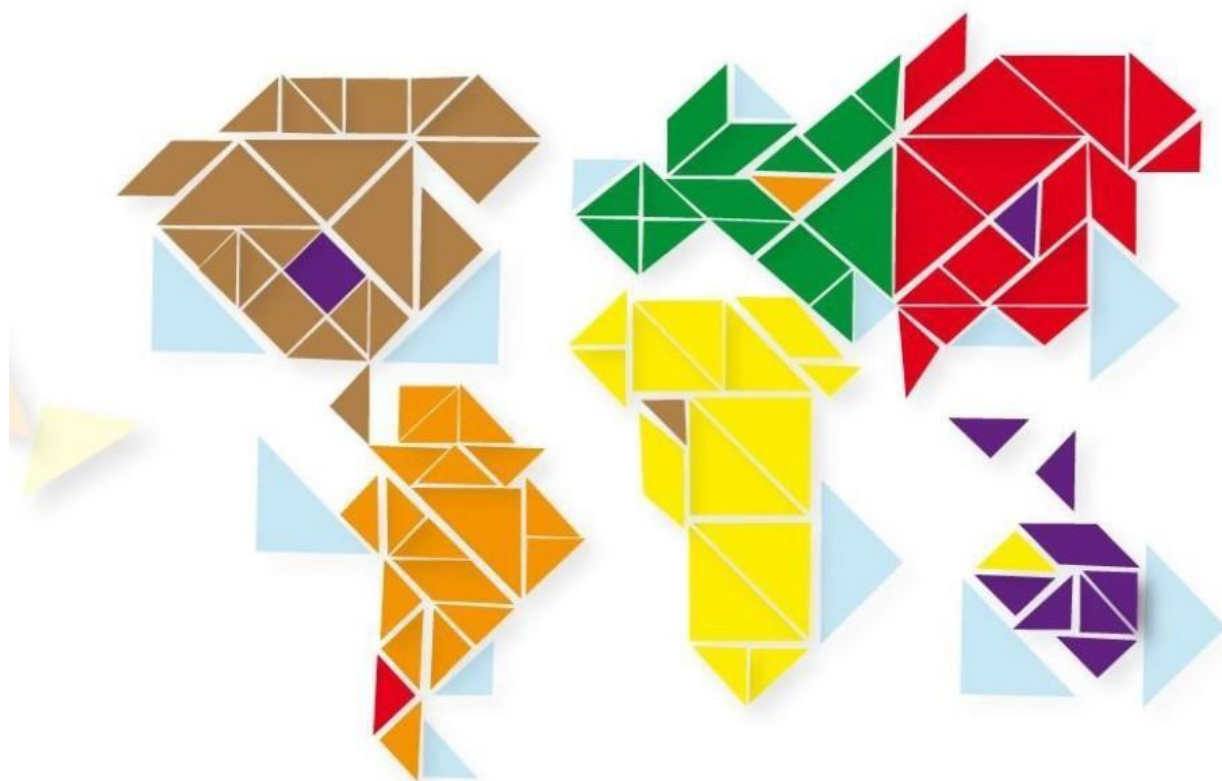


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A cura di Valeria Saggiomo e Antonia Soriente.

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ARCHAEOLOGY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A COVENANT FOR THE FUTURE

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Abstract

Based on the experience of some archaeologists of the University of Naples "L'Orientale", this contribution aims to offer a concise overview of the major challenges and problems faced by archaeology in different areas of the globe, some of them shaken by serious conflicts and suffering from underdevelopment, poverty, and inequality.

Il presente contributo, basato sull'esperienza di alcuni archeologi dell'Università di Napoli "L'Orientale", vuole offrire una panoramica sintetica delle maggiori sfide e problematiche che l'archeologia affronta in diverse aree del mondo, alcune delle quali scosse da gravi conflitti e/o afflitte da problemi di sottosviluppo, povertà e ineguaglianza.

Keywords

Global archaeology, conflict, preservation, sustainable development, cultural heritage

Introduction

Archaeology, besides enhancing cultural resources and the resulting gains, can positively affect the promotion of sustainable development and environmental education. Moreover, archaeology can efficaciously support projects of economic development, and particularly by means of interventions,

when necessary, during the execution of works, both public and private, that may imply the removal of soils of archaeological relevance, thus preventing losses in terms of cultural heritage, at the same time ensuring the application of best practices in economy.

The ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, Yemen and Ukraine have highlighted how armed conflicts could have a devastating effect on the preservation of cultural heritage, including intentional destruction of monuments, collateral damage of war-related actions, neglect of preservation and, last but not least, the organized looting and illicit trafficking of archaeological objects, which increase exponentially in conflict situations and today occur at an unprecedented scale.

Within the present contribution several scholars of the University of Naples "L'Orientale" will present some specific case-studies related to their fieldwork activities (Figure 1).

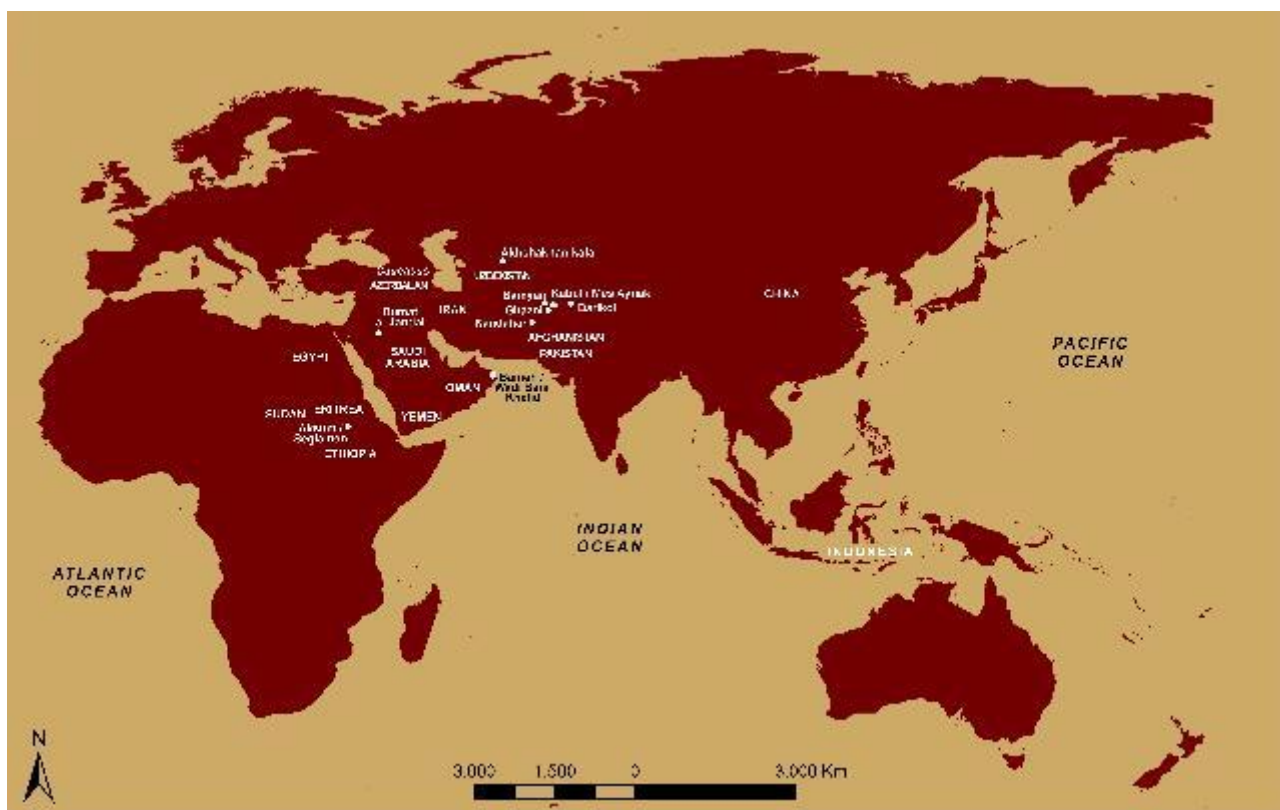


Figure 1

Archaeology and heritage management in Ethiopia. Scattered thoughts on research, sustainable development and university cooperation

Ethiopia is a vast and diverse country, home to more than 80 ethnic groups speaking about 90 languages and dialects, and characterized by extremely different social structures, economic strategies and belief systems. This results in a rich and variegated mosaic of peoples and cultures with a very long history that starts from the earliest stages of human evolution.

Ethiopia has the world's oldest evidence of tool making and among the oldest evidence of hominids and hominins. Favorable geographical and environmental conditions allowed the early emergence of complex societies involved in long-distance exchange networks and characterized by peculiar cultural features. The country has nine sites included in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites List.

This richness attracts a good number of tourists a year (that the government intends to increase with the vision of making tourism one of the prominent economic resources), as well as several archaeological and anthropological research projects. Most of them are long-established programs conducted in close collaboration with federal and local institutions and include capacity-building and sustainable development-oriented activities in the field of cultural heritage investigation, protection and promotion.

From 1993, the University of Naples "L'Orientale"¹ conducts archaeological investigations in the areas of Aksum and Seglame, in the region of Tigray. There, evidence of the appearance and development of complex societies involved in regional and interregional trades and diplomatic interactions are attested starting from the early 1st millennium BCE (Figure 2).

The project, in close collaboration with Addis Ababa and Aksum universities, is aimed at: a) reconstructing the population history and ancient human-environmental interaction dynamics of the study-area; b) setting shared, sustainable strategies of heritage protection and tourism promotion; and c) contributing to the capacity building of the country by providing training in archaeological field procedures to Ethiopian students in Archaeology and Heritage Management.

Alongside the research-oriented aspects – some of which are addressed to the long-term analysis of present problems such as demographic pressure and environmental degradation, the program has so far contributed to the implementation of the Archaeological Map of Aksum for site preservation and urban planning, to the organization of touristic itineraries and museum displays, to the training and tutoring of local guides, students, instructors and junior researchers (Figures 3a-b).

¹ From 1993 to 2003 the project has been conducted by the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and Boston University under the scientific direction of Rodolfo Fattovich and Katherine A. Bard. From 2010 it's conducted by the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and the ISMEO (Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l'Oriente) under the scientific direction of Rodolfo Fattovich from 2010 to 2013 and of Andrea Manzo from 2014 onwards. The project is funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and the ISMEO.

From 2005 onwards as part of the “Italian Contribution to the Education Sector Development Program” sponsored by the Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione e lo Sviluppo, institutional development and capacity building engagements were emphasized. These include training of master’s students in Archaeology and Heritage Management in Addis Ababa University. Italian and Ethiopian Professors prepared curricula, gave lectures, supervised theses during the trainings. The training also encompassed methodological mentoring in both field and laboratory techniques. Through this program the collaboration has produced university lecturers as well as culture, heritage and tourism experts for Culture and Tourism Offices at federal and regional levels. Addis Ababa University students were sponsored for field training in Aksum and Seglamen under the University of Naples "L'Orientale" archaeological expedition.

Through the same collaboration, the M.A. level training is upgraded into a PhD level training. In 2018 professors of the two universities prepared the PhD curriculum, defended the curriculum in validation workshops and eventually launched the degree program. In 2021/22 the first batch of 5 PhD students started classes, followed by 2 PhD students in 2022/23 academic year. The collaboration between Addis Ababa University and University of Naples "L'Orientale" in Archaeology and Heritage Management can be considered as one of the most successful, exemplary and sustainable.

In November 2020 Ethiopia started to face a severe internal conflict and civil war, whose progressive escalation has also inevitably impacted the whole cultural heritage sector, from research, to conservation, to tourism promotion, as well as the fluidity and continuity of international cooperation programmes involving universities.

The diversion of activities has been a key aspect in ensuring project continuity. The focus has been on analyzing data, implementing digital archives and initiating programs of systematic study of archaeological collections held in accessible museums around the country. The plan to build an archaeological museum and cultural centre at Seglamen, in the vicinity of Aksum, for the purpose of increasing the offer to the tourists visiting Aksum and launching a community-based heritage promotion project has been reconverted into the creation of a virtual museum, with the hope that this will help raise international awareness of the richness and significance of the archaeological heritage of this area, which requests protection from vandalism and illicit trafficking (Figures 4a-b).

Collaboration with Addis Ababa University has continued without significant interruption despite the pandemic, thanks to the possibility of organizing online meetings. But unfortunately, because of the conflict in the north of the country, training and tutoring activities for students and young researchers based in Tigray have been completely disrupted. In this regard, programs to create “corridors for

researchers” in the unfortunate event of political or environmental crisis would be a most useful tool to ensure continuity of training and capacity building activities.

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Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

The University of Naples "L'Orientale" in the Arabian Peninsula

The archaeological activities in the Arabian Peninsula led by the University of Naples "L'Orientale" date back to 1980, when Alessandro de Maigret created the Italian Archaeological Mission in the Arab Republic of Yemen. For forty years, that is, until the beginning of a strong political instability that is still ongoing, the Italian Mission operated directed toward scientific research and cooperation in the cultural field, with the creation of the Yemen-Italian Centre for Archaeological Research and through on-site training courses, presence of Yemeni students in Italy and restorations (de Maigret 2005). More recently, thanks to the steady increase in the availability of sensors and high-definition images for remote sensing from satellite footage, the chair of Archaeology and Art History of the Ancient Near East at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" has initiated a series of geoarchaeological and remote sensing analyses in the areas of Yemen, aimed at the study of those prehistoric and historical contexts that the Italian Archaeological Mission of A. de Maigret investigated in the 1980s and 1990s. The intent is both to implement the study of those contexts, only partly rediscovered, and to conduct analyses for archaeological mapping and cultural heritage management in regions where political instability, and war, have caused damage in some cases irreversible. All this with the hope that cooperation with Yemeni institutions can soon resume and be properly directed toward the preservation of Yemeni cultural heritage.

In the wake of this tradition, A. de Maigret himself inaugurated, in 2009, the Italian Archaeological Mission in Saudi Arabia (directed by the writer since 2011). The Mission, among the very first European ones to operate in the Kingdom (after the French one in Madā' in Sāleh and the German one in Taymā), was born with the achieved aim of investigating the historical core of the oasis of Dūmat al-Jandal, believed to be the ancient Adummatu (Loreto 2018a, 2021), the famous capital of the

queens of the Arabs and the kings of the tribe of Qedar mentioned in the sources of the Neo-Assyrian rulers and that for two centuries, between the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, opposed Assyrian imperialism in Arabia (Loreto 2017). Since then, the activities of the Archaeological Mission have multiplied (Figure 5), involving broader areas of scientific research and implementing the Italian presence thanks to the most recent Italian Restoration Mission, inaugurated in 2013 thanks to the convinced support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (Figure 6). To date, research activities involving Italian experts and students, on the one hand, and the staff of the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Saudi universities on the other, are aimed at the study of the North Arabian region of al-Jawf, both in the prehistoric and historical fields. On the other hand, cooperation activities aimed, in a broader sense, at Heritage Management involve training courses and restoration and maintenance activities at the archaeological sites where the Missions operate, with special emphasis on the training of Saudi students and collaborators and the participation of local schools in archaeological activities, with the recent support (seasons 2021-2022) of The Barakat Trust (Figure 7).²

More recently, still in the Saudi context, in 2015-2016 and then in 2022, the University of Naples "L'Orientale" took part in a series of research activities aimed at investigating the coastal areas of the Kingdom, with particular interest in maritime archaeology and the recovery of its underwater heritage. In particular, the archaeological investigation of an 18th-century merchant shipwreck off the Saudi coast in the northern Red Sea, near Umluj, with a project co-directed by the writer and Chiara Zazzaro, professor of Maritime Archaeology at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" (Zazzaro et al. 2016).

Last but not least is the presence of "L'Orientale" in the Sultanate of Oman. In fact, the archaeological activities that belong to a tradition of studies peculiar to "L'Orientale" in Naples, that is, straddling East and West, and that have found illustrious support in Maurizio Tosi (1944-2017), led to the birth, in 2013, of the project "Ichthyophagoi: their culture and economy. Landscape and people during the Iron Age in coastal Oman", aimed at defining the coastal (Figure 8) and mountain (Figure 9) exploitation of those regions of the Omani Peninsula that Greek and Roman authors defined as the lands of the Ichthyophagoi (Loreto 2018b, 2020).

² Link to the official websites: <https://italiana.esteri.it/italiana/sedi/missione-archeologica-italiana-in-arabia-saudita-dumat-al-jandal-antica-adummatu/>; <https://italiana.esteri.it/italiana/sedi/missione-italiana-di-restauro-in-arabia-saudita/>.

Links to the field activities: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOy_gYHVj2g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOy_gYHVj2g;);
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNVOnknVJTo&t=31s>.

In conclusion, after more than four decades, the activities of the University of Naples "L'Orientale" in the Arabian Peninsula, strongly supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International cooperation, represent part of a broader picture that inscribed Italian Institutions in a fruitful international cooperation whose main objectives stretch from scientific research to cultural heritage management and, last but not least, training of local experts and rousing a local effective awareness of such historical contexts.

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Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

Asia and its ancient landscapes: archaeological research from the deserts of Ancient Chorasmia to the valley of Uddiyana

As a recently hired tenure-track Researcher at the University of Naples “L’Orientale” I would like to take the opportunity, with this brief note, to introduce to the public and to my colleagues those archaeological projects that have been the focus of my current involvement in the field, (but not only directly associated to field activities), and that in consequences are now related to my base in Naples.

In 2010, I have started digging in Karakalpakstan, a northern Republic of Uzbekistan, as Field Director of the Karakalpak-Australian Expedition to Ancient Chorasmia (KAE) under the direction

of Alison V. G. Betts, University of Sydney. The focus of our work has been the royal Chorasmian site of Akchakhan-kala (Figure 10). Its excavation led to the discovery of an extraordinary corpus of wall paintings, one of the largest and one of the most ancient which had survived in the whole of Asia (commissioned and painted around the first century BC to the first century AD). Along with other key data, this find is shedding a new light on the pre-Sasanian phases of one of the greatest of the world religions, Zoroastrianism.³ The KAE was founded in 1992 thanks to an agreement between the University of Sydney and the Institute for the Humanities, Karakalpak branch of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, Nukus. Fieldwork at Akchakhan-kala was first carried out a few years later year by Svend Helms (†2010), former director of the British Excavations at Old Kandahar (1976-1978), Alison Betts, Vladimir N. Yagodin (†2016), and Gairatdin Khozhaniyazov (†2020). It has continued, with some breaks due to other field activities, to the present day. Fieldwork has been supported by several grants issued by the Australian Research Council, the last of which was bestowed for work to this writer as Co-PI together with Betts, Frantz Grenet (Paris), and Makset Karlybaev (Nukus).⁴

Besides Akchakhan-kala, the KAE investigated other important sites during its more than 25 years of activity. For instance, I personally directed, in cooperation with Shamil Amirov (formerly Nukus), excavations at the site of Angka-kala Malaya, sponsored in this case by the “Excellence Initiative Programme” of the University of Bordeaux (Minardi and Amirov 2017), and surveys and excavations on the “Black Mountains” (*Kara-tau*) of the Sultan-uiz-dag, the only mountainous chain of the region, which was used in antiquity as an extended necropolis. The goal was to search for other evidence to achieve a preliminary assessment of the potential of Chorasmian archaeology in respect to the study of ancient Zoroastrianism besides what done in the past by Soviet archaeologists; it was an effort that achieved very positive results and that now deserves further research efforts in order to make the subject better understood and analysed.⁵

In 2020, I also became a member of the ISMEO/Ca’ Foscari Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan, directed by Luca M. Olivieri (Venice). This mission, which will celebrate its 70th year of continuous activity in 2025, was founded by Giuseppe Tucci. It was directed, among other illustrious names in Italian archaeology, such as Domenico Faccenna and Pierfrancesco Callieri, by Maurizio Taddei.⁶ Those names are intertwined with the history of “L’Orientale” and of its close collaborative relationship with the ISMEO. Scholars such as Anna Filigenzi (see her note in this article), and Pia

³ For more on these paintings, their archaeological and historical context, and on their value with respect to the reconstruction of the history of early-Zoroastrianism, see among other studies: Minardi 2018; 2020; 2021; Minardi *et alii* 2020; Grenet and Minardi 2020; 2022.

⁴ Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project Grant DP170101770.

⁵ Preliminary results are currently in the process of publication.

⁶ For an outline of the history of the Mission, Olivieri 2006. See also Olivieri 2009.

Brancaccio (Drexel), who trained and studied at our university, had participated in the fieldwork, and still cooperate with the Mission; students of “L’Orientale”, from the undergraduate to the PhD level, have been using the rich material culture unearthed at the sites of Swat for their theses and dissertations.

In 2020, the archaeological investigation of the Mission focused on the remains of a Śāhi fort and a subsequent Ghaznavid watch-tower (VII to X centuries) built on the remains of what plausibly was the Kushan acropolis of Barikot (Olivieri and Minardi 2022), the ancient city of Bazira (Figure 11). In 2021, excavations in the lower city led to the discovery of a Buddhist apsidal temple of Indo-Greek foundation, one of the oldest known to date in Pakistan, later transformed into a *chaitya* containing a stupa (Figure 12).⁷ Even more recently, in 2022, the operations addressed an area north of the apsidal temple where data about a lesser-known stage of the site (Macrophase 7, i.e., 400-650 AD) revealed evidence of building activity related to Buddhism at the time of the “Iranian Huns” reign of Uddiyana.⁸

Between Swat, ancient Uddiyana, and the Republic of Karakalpakstan, Ancient Chorasmia, rests a vast space. It was once occupied by important Eastern Iranian polities that had in common with these two widely separated lands the fact that they had united under the aegis of the Achaemenid until the arrival of Alexander (Iori 2019; Iori and Olivieri 2020; Minardi 2023). Among these regions, such as Sogdiana and Bactriana, Arachosia was one of the most relevant, especially because it corresponded with those territories acknowledged as the “Indo-Iranian borderlands”. Thanks to a grant (2019-2021) from the Shelby White and Leon Levy Program for Archaeological Publications at the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East, I was able to assemble, study and digitalize the personal excavation archive of Helms, director of the British mission at Old Kandahar between the years 1976 and 1978,⁹ which was kept in Sydney by Betts (Figure 13). This unpublished material is in the process of being prepared for publication. It will appear as a monograph in the ISMEO *Nuova Serie Orientale Roma*. Although, in this case, it is not possible to talk about fieldwork, this project is a veritable *ex post* archaeological work.

It is now my intention not only to contribute to support the traditional tie between “L’Orientale” and the ISMEO Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan, thanks to my direct in-field

⁷ Olivieri, Iori and Minardi 2022.

⁸ A preliminary information note about these data has been presented by the writer at the “Workshop on the Mediaeval Nomadism” held at the Orientale University, 23rd November 2022: “The East Huns in Uddiyana: builders and patrons of Buddhism. A case study from the urban context of ancient Bazira”.

⁹ Work originally undertaken under the auspices of the Society for Afghan Studies, then Society for South Asian Studies. This latter merged into the British Association for South Asian Studies (BASAS) in the late 2000s. For the material already published, mainly refer to Helms 1997.

involvement, but also to continue to pursue my research in those territories that corresponded to Ancient Chorasnia with new archaeological activities springboarded by my familiarity with the area. I hope that my historical research, based on indispensable fieldwork and first-hand data, involving the Iranian ecumene, the Indo-Iranian borderlands, and the north-west of the Indian subcontinent, and highlighting their diachronic historical links, will translate into innovative approaches in my teaching activities and in the future training and research involvement of students at our university.

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Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

Afghanistan: Archaeology in the cross-hairs of conflicts

Afghanistan is known to most for an endless story of conflict. In particular, since August 2021, with the return of the Taliban to power, the spotlight has been turned back on a country on the brink of economic collapse, from which many are trying to flee and in which even the richness and plurality of its cultural heritage generates clashes. But how fragile is this heritage and why? And what is the ethical boundary of the international community's actions in favour of its protection, in the face of the extremely fragile living conditions of so much of the country's civil society? Answering the first question is easier.

Afghanistan's cultural heritage is vulnerable on several fronts. It has suffered willful destruction, cloaked in an instrumental narrative that was directed both at the international community, accused of caring more about futile remnants of the past than people's lives, and at local communities, as a manifesto of a re-established order of values: what is really ours and what Western cultural hegemony imposes on us. This is how we lost the colossal Buddhas of Bamiyan, destroyed by explosive charges in 2001 (Figure 14). And yet, this was the most striking action, at the height of a season of vandalism and looting, which had already involved, especially during the 1990s, the Kabul National Museum, as well as many archaeological sites, devastated by a brutal pillage that fed a guilty and conniving antiques market for years. Then there are the indirect victims of conflict: sites, museums and artefacts destroyed by terrorist attacks directed at other targets.

Add to this the intrinsic vulnerability of monuments and architecture, mostly made of perishable materials such as clay, stucco, wood, or of wall paintings, also executed on fragile clay plaster mixed

with organic substances (Figure 15). Without proper protection, these materials quickly perish once exposed. But this is only one problem within a problem. Archaeological remains like these are difficult to recombine and interpret, because for the most part they come to us already fragmented and semi-dissolved in the archaeological layers (Figure 16). This implies, or would imply, the adoption of slow and accurate excavation practices and conservation techniques, just as documentation should be particularly accurate, because of many forms only a few traces remain. The detection and future memory of their existence are entrusted solely to the attention of the excavators and their graphic, photographic and topographical records.

It is often difficult to communicate to the general public how long and difficult is the chain of technical and scholarly actions that transform a find into a historical and cultural document. In Afghanistan, there is little scope to ensure this virtuous chain. The focus is generally on the quick and conspicuous result, which attracts investment because of its visibility. Thus, it happens that some monuments are restored too heavily and without sufficient care for the archaeological stratigraphy. The link between landscape and monument is reconstructed, physically and symbolically, but at the cost of chronological data, cultural phases, in a word, history. Similarly, hastily excavations affect important sites such as Mes Aynak, which sits on top of the world's second largest known copper reserve, now in the focus of mining projects. Mes Aynak (Figure 17) was a proto-industrial city, certainly active from the 2nd-3rd century CE to the 8th (?) century CE, but possibly with earlier and later phases. It consists of a constellation of civil settlements, areas of copper mining and smelting, and Buddhist (and probably not only Buddhist) religious settlements. Due to its archaeological complexity and richness, the site has sometimes, and rightly, been referred to as the Pompeii of Asia. The site could be a privileged observation point to shed light on the political and economic interactions between lay and monastic communities, on the ancient techniques of mining and on the effects of this on the environment. Not to mention the quantity of artefacts of all kinds, which could tell us a great deal, if only excavations had been aimed from the outset at understanding and not at recovering artefacts to be secured in museums. But the pressure of expectations about the economic gain that the mining could generate does not leave too much room for hope of saving the site in its entirety.

In this context, the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan has continued to work on the recovery, study and sharing of documentation, and to collaborate remotely with colleagues from the Afghan Institute of Archaeology, especially on rescue excavations at sites threatened by uncontrolled building expansion or looting (Figure 18). These actions represent our answer to the ethical question.

Culture works against destruction, oblivion, lack of representativeness, suppression of identities.
This, too, is what Afghanistan will need to rebuild its future.

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Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18

The Archaeology of the Caucasus between revolutions, world wars, nationalism, and recent conflicts

Throughout history, the Caucasus region, comprising both areas extending northward and southward from the main Caucasus Mountain range, has been a crossroad of cultures; in the most ancient time it can justly be viewed either as part of the frontier of the ancient Near East, or the southeastern boundary of the Eurasian steppes and its nomadic populations. It is also the area where Islam and Christianity collided, along with expansionist interests of many empires, from the Roman, the Arab, the Persian, to the Ottoman and the Russian ones.

The Caucasus is also characterized by an exceptional and almost unparalleled ethnic, religious and linguistic mosaic. The myriads of peoples living in the region **have** a very long and vivid historical consciousness, and archaeology and ancient history are exceptionally alive and meaningful (Kohl, Tsetskhladze 1995, 149).

For most of the 20th century, the whole area was under the strict political and ideological control of the Soviet Union. The local political leaderships and the main Soviet cultural and scientific institutions (universities, the Hermitage and Pushkin museums, the Academy of Science) supported the study and preservation of the local cultural heritage, directly financing or leading several remarkable fieldwork and restoration projects. In the decades after the Second World War an impressive amount of archaeological research was carried out, concentrating on different stages of the long history of the area, mostly from the Early Bronze Age to the early Christian period.

However, the abundance of research and results had also some negative outcomes. For example, some of the most remarkable – and problematic – achievements were linked with the investigation of the ancient evidence of the Kingdom of Urartu (the first historically attested state in Soviet Union); remarkable evidence of this ancient kingdom was investigated in what was at that time the Socialist Republic of Armenia. In occasion of the 2750th anniversary of the foundation of the capital Yerevan (calculated with the foundation of the Urartian fortress of Erebuni located in its outskirts), the local political leadership greatly supported the excavations and subsequent restoration of the ancient ruins (Figure 19). Unfortunately, the massive restoration project was mainly done without respecting the original evidence, with just the main aim of turning the ruins into an impressive outdoor museum.

After decades of rigid but peaceful coexistence, the fall of Soviet power rapidly aggravated ethnic, religious, and territorial disputes, creating the ideal terrain for a whole series of regional armed conflicts. It dramatically emerged how ethnic and cultural differences were not overcome by decades

of communism and its utopia of a New Soviet Man, which resulted in an explosion of conflicts after the collapse of Soviet authority.

Several of these local conflicts were fueled by territorial claims, which were also justified by a political reading of the past, and many misinterpretations have been proposed, also by academic institutions and scholars (Kohl, Tsetskhladze 1995).

Therefore, many peoples of the area have promoted the idea that they "always" existed in a manner that blurs necessary distinctions between culture, language, and race (Kohl, Tsetskhladze 1995, 151). The Urartian kingdom was once more one of the most discussed subjects. As its main sites were largely attested in the territories of present-day Armenia, Iran and Turkey (the last one having the majority of them), a sort of international "competition" emerged between these countries and their modern identification with the past. This situation was particularly evident in Armenia, where the ancient extension of the Urartian kingdom roughly corresponded with the Armenian kingdom of Tigran II in the 1st century BC (Figure 20) and also with the extensions of several large Armenian communities in Anatolia prior to the genocide during the 1st World War. This association created the ideal base for false interpretation of the past by few radical Armenian nationalist groups, which promoted a forced cultural appropriation of the Urartian history; this view of the past was however opposed by some of the most distinguished scholars of Armenian history, such as Boris Piotrovskij and Igor Djakonoff (Diakonoff 1984, 128).

The dangers that the cultural heritage face when threatened by international political issues has emerged once more in the last few years after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which resulted in Azerbaijani victory, with Armenia ceding most of the territories it had occupied since 1994, after one of the bloodiest and most significant ethnic conflicts raging within the former Soviet Union.

Cultural heritage was greatly affected by this conflict, especially when it was considered the marker of national and cultural identities. One of the most dramatic episodes is represented by the cemetery near the town of Julfa, in the Nakhchivan exclave of Azerbaijan, that originally housed thousands of khachkars – uniquely decorated cross-stones characteristic of medieval Christian Armenian art – was completely destroyed in the late 1990s (Figure 21).

Moreover, many sites and buildings greatly suffered by war-related effects. For example, the once-flourishing town of Aghdam came under the control of Armenian forces in 1993. After the capture, according to eyewitnesses, the city was plundered, destroyed and burned. The Aghdam mosque, the

only building left standing in Aghdam (Figure 22), has been vandalized with graffiti and used as a stable for cattle and swine.¹⁰

MC



Figure 19



Figure 20

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/11/world/europe/nagorno-karabakh-armenia-azerbaijan.html>;
<https://apnews.com/article/azerbaijan-handover-region-armenia-2d0d88c012fdd16732cecd35d134cabf>.



Figure 21



Figure 22

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Captions

Figure 1: Map of the main areas of research of “L’Orientale” University.

Figure 2. View of the Stelae Park at Aksum. For the advanced engineering and sophisticated technical skills in the realization of the **stelae**, Aksum is listed since 2008 in the Unesco World Heritage Sites List (© Dil Singh Basanti).

Figure 3a-b. Ethiopian and Italian students practicing archaeological procedures during the field school at the site of Seglamen (© Photographic Archive of the Italian Archaeological Expedition at Aksum of the University of Naples "L'Orientale").

Figure 4a-b. Sketch and digital model of the Archaeological Museum and Cultural Centre at Seglamen planned by the Italian Archaeological Expedition at Aksum of the University of Naples L'Orientale in collaboration with Fasil Giorghis Consulting Architects and Engineers (© Photographic Archive of the Italian Archaeological Expedition at Aksum of the University of Naples "L'Orientale").

Figure 5. Aerial view of the archaeological park of Dūmat al-Jandal, ancient Adummatu (al-Jawf region, Saudi Arabia) during the October 2022 archaeological field works. Revolving around the imposing late antique Mārid Castle (VI cent. CE), the historical core of the site is **included** in the UNESCO Tentative List (©Missione archeologica italiana nel regno dell'Arabia Saudita).

Figure 6. View of the Mārid Castle from the Nabataean settlement (I cent. CE) located along its eastern flank, where hydrogeological consolidation works are ongoing (October 2022 field work season) (©Missione archeologica italiana nel regno dell'Arabia Saudita).

Figure 7. Site visit by local schools during the excavation inside the late antique (IV –VI cent. CE) historical core of Dūmat al-Jandal (©Missione archeologica italiana nel regno dell'Arabia Saudita).

Figure 8. Excavation and schools' site visit during the December 2016 field works at Bamah (northern Sharqiya region), a coastal site dated to the VII cent. BCE located along the north-eastern seashores of northern Oman, known as the land of the fish-eaters (©Missione de L'Orientale nel Sultanato dell'Oman).

Figure 9. Wādī Banī Khālid (northern Sharqiya region), a settlement context in the **Omani** al-Hajar mountain environment, where human exploitation dates back to the I millennium BCE, testified by fortified settlements linked to the coastline (©Missione de L'Orientale nel Sultanato dell'Oman).

Figure 10. Akchakhan-kala, 2022: the ramparts of the site overlooking the desert (©Minardi).

Figure 11. Barikot, 2020: the acropolis and its terraces (©Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).

Figure 12. Barikot, 2021: the apsidal temple and other structures (©Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan).

Figure 13. Old Kandahar, 1977: digging out a jeep from a ditch, with the citadel in the background (©Old Kandahar Project).

Figure 14. Bamiyan: the “Big” Western Buddha (55m in height) before and after destruction: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Taller_Buddha_of_Bamiyan_before_and_after_destruction.jpg

Figure 15. Mes Aynak (Logar province): excavation of a colossal clay statue of the Buddha-to-be.

Figure 16. Tapa Sardar (Ghazni province): a clay polychrome head emerging from the archaeological layer (1970s fieldwork); © Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan.

Figure 17. Mes Aynak (Logar province): partial view of the excavated areas; photo by the author.

Figure 18. Qol-e Tut (Kabul area): excavation of a colossal Buddha head; courtesy Z. Paiman.

Fig. 19. The opening of Erebuni museum and its fortress for the 2750 anniversary of Yerevan (<https://www.yerevan.am/en/erebuni-yerevan/>).

Fig. 20. Map of Greater Armenia as shown in the History Museum in Yerevan.

Fig. 21. Armenian cemetery in Julfa, 1915 as seen in 1915 (Wikimedia commons).

Fig. 22. The Agdam mosque and the destroyed surrounded landscape (Yerevantsi - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=67407426>)