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INDICE

Nicolò Marchetti <i>Editorial</i>	7
Luca Forni <i>Bronze Age Terracotta Anthropomorphic and Zoomorphic Figurines from the Murghab Region (Turkmenistan): New Evidence and Interpretations</i>	9
Sara Fusari <i>Il “feticcio di Abido”: nota iconografica e iconologica</i>	21
Leif Hansen, Dirk Krausse, Roberto Tarpini <i>Nuovi scavi e ricerche nella regione circostante l’abitato “principesco” tardohallstattiano della Heuneburg</i>	45
Francesco Roncalli <i>Alle soglie della scrittura? Osservazioni sulla stele di Casalecchio di Reno</i>	67
Vittoria Cardini <i>Inse diamenti e cultura materiale di età achemenide sul Medio Eufrate</i>	81
Pietro Baraldi, Marta Natalucci, Andrea Rossi <i>Il blu egiziano a Kainua: dai pigmenti alla policromia su terracotta</i>	95
Paolo Baronio <i>I caratteri dell’urbanistica etrusca ad assi ortogonali in area padana: nuove considerazioni sull’impianto di Kainua-Marzabotto alla luce delle recenti indagini metrologiche</i>	113
Giuseppe Monte <i>Produzioni e circolazioni di oggetti di bronzo nell’area ionico-adriatica fra l’età tardo-arcaica e l’età ellenistica</i>	143
Paola Cossentino <i>Lo scavo di Palazzo Belloni: contributo preliminare alla conoscenza della cultura materiale di età coloniale a Bononia</i>	163
Clementina Rizzardi <i>Il programma iconografico absidale di Sant’Apollinare in Classe fra sinopie e mosaici: antiche e nuove interpretazioni</i>	185

EDITORIAL

It is a truism that development often entails destruction of historical landscapes and heritage, both archaeological and monumental. Already since the end of the 1960s, the construction of large dams provided substantial short and medium-term economic improvements in previously low productive regions, while their natural and cultural landscape were, on the other hand, deeply affected by the massive modifications occurring to the riverbeds and the surrounding areas involved, without any serious attempt at comparing the benefit-cost ratio on the long term. Today Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries are witnessing an ever-growing number of large dam projects: new dams are currently being built in Turkey, Iraq and Iran, as well as in Egypt and Sudan and, soon, Ethiopia. In Turkey, for example, the whole of the Euphrates river course (including its northern sources, the Karasu and Muratsu rivers) is now largely submerged by the dams of Bağıştaş I, Bağıştaş II, Alpaslan, Keban, Karakaya, Atatürk, Birecik and Karkamış. Many important sites, such as the famous Roman cities of Zeugma and Samosata along the Euphrates have been submerged, and only a fraction of them were excavated prior to flooding.

Assessing the loss of archaeological heritage due to the flooding of large swathes of territory with the resulting formation of artificial basins should be a priority for governments and the public. The mitigations put into place by public bodies (including Ministries and universities) consist of different types of survey methodologies (random survey, intensive survey, searching) and archaeological excavations at selected sites: the results can be shown to be incomplete, often patchy in fact if not wanting at large. Since in most cases one cannot stop the construction of these works which are internationally funded and nationally supported at top government level, it is stringently necessary to integrate the evidence so-produced through alternative methods, such as post-flooding damage assessment as well as remote sensing through a variety of sources, even a few decades old (i.e. geographical and archaeological datasets and sources, including multi-temporal Landsat satellite imagery 1984-2016, declassified CORONA imagery, spatial datasets provided by local dam authorities and the FAO organization, archaeological survey databases and excavation reports).

It is most urgent to quantify the impact of dams, even already existing ones, on the archaeological heritage: the evidence provided by that research will ideally contribute to raising awareness on the issue of endangered heritage due to development projects and on the needed and connected documentation protocols and strategies. That assessment will ideally serve on the one hand as a cautionary element when evaluating the archaeological evidence from flooded and “surveyed” areas, on the other as an additional critical tool for future policy makers, both at development and conservation levels. Even in the case of areas which were known to be submerged by prospective dams, past surveys carried out were demonstrably faulty at best: for example, when we consider that same Middle Euphrates area in Turkey, we see that less than one fourth of the area was surveyed intensively, while in another third (sometimes even a little more than half of the area) only remains visible from a distance were grossly recorded and the rest went unsurveyed altogether.

Nicolò Marchetti