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*Athanasius Kircher, Pietro Della Valle,
and the Mesopotamian Collection in Turin*

ELENA DEVECCHI

The collection of Mesopotamian artefacts currently housed in the Museo di Antichità of Turin constitutes the largest collection of Mesopotamian artefacts in Italy.¹ It consists of cuneiform tablets, Assyrian reliefs, and fragments of inscriptions from Khorsabad/Dūr-Šarrukin and Nineveh, cylinder seals, stamped bricks, and a few more inscribed objects.²

These objects came to Turin between 1847 and 1921. During that period, they were housed in the Royal Museum of Antiquities, whose Egyptian collection formed the core of the now world-renowned Egyptian Museum. While the earliest Mesopotamian acquisitions entered the museum mainly as occasional

¹ This research developed from my collaboration with the project ArCOA “Archivi e Collezioni del Vicino Oriente Antico”, which aims at studying, publicizing, and promoting the Italian collections of ancient Near Eastern artefacts (see Peyronel *et al.* forthcoming). I would like to thank especially Stefania Ermidoro for suggesting that I investigate a possible connection between Kircher and Della Valle. The abbreviations MAT and CGT correspond respectively to the publication numbers of the bricks in Archi *et al.* 1999 and of the cylinder seals in Bergamini 1987.

² The cuneiform tablets and the other inscribed objects are edited in Archi, Pomponio 1990; Archi *et al.* 1995; Archi *et al.* 1999; they are also available at https://cdli.ucla.edu/collections/turin/turin_it.html. For the cylinder seals, see Bergamini 1987.

gifts, important additions were facilitated by Ernesto Schiaparelli, who directed it from 1894 until 1928.³

In 1896, Schiaparelli acquired a group of objects that included mainly Egyptian items, together with a few Near Eastern antiquities from the Kircher Museum in Rome, which at that time was being phased out of existence; its collections were dispersed among several Italian museums.⁴ In retracing the historical journey of three stamped bricks that are now in Turin, I hope this note will complement the interests of our honouree, whose research has touched upon related topics.⁵

The fascinating institution known as the *Musaeum Kircherianum* owes its name to the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680), who set it up in the Jesuit College in Rome in 1651. Often regarded as the first museum in the world, it housed a collection of antiquities, scientific tools, and curiosities “from all parts of the world” and soon became a must-see attraction for the many pilgrims and travellers who visited Rome in the 17th century.

Kircher himself was an extraordinary figure. One of the most learned persons of his time, whose vast erudition and multifaceted interests are witnessed by more than forty books he wrote on all kinds of topics, Kircher conceived the museum more as an encyclopaedic collection that should serve scholarly and educational purposes, rather than as a *Wunderkammer* for the astonishment of its visitors.

Over its centuries-long history, the Kircher Museum’s fortunes rose and fell until it finally ceased to exist at the end of the 19th century. In 1896 Schiaparelli acquired from the museum a small group of Mesopotamian objects that are described in the contemporary archival records as follows: «1 iscrizione cuneiforme in pietra, 3 iscrizioni su tavoletta di terracotta, 1 bassorilievo (testa virile), 2 cilindri (persiani)». ⁶ They have been identi-

³ For a brief history of these acquisitions, see Bergamini 1995.

⁴ Among the several publications devoted to Kircher’s museum, see especially the essays collected in Lo Sardo 2001 and Godwin 2009.

⁵ See Contini, Graziani 2016 on Pietro Della Valle as well as Caterina *et al.* 2017 and Graziani 2019 on the history of other Italian collections of ancient Near Eastern artefacts.

⁶ See the list published by Mineo 2003: 110-111.

fied respectively with a stamped brick of Sennacherib from Nineveh (MAT 789), one stamped brick of Ur-Namma from Ur (MAT 788) and two stamped bricks of Nebuchadnezzar from Babylon (MAT 791-792), the head of a royal guardsman from Khorsabad, and two cylinder seals, one Old Babylonian and the other Neo-Assyrian (CGT 70020 and 70030).⁷ The bricks of Ur-Namma and Nebuchadnezzar were at some point trimmed to the size of the inscriptions.

While the history of Schiaparelli's acquisition is well documented by archival records now kept in the State Archive of Turin and in the Archive of the Museo delle Civiltà - Museo Preistorico Etnografico "Luigi Pigorini" in Rome,⁸ it is more challenging to explain how and when some of these objects came to be included in the holdings of the Kircher Museum in the first place.

The earliest mention of Mesopotamian objects in the museum's collection appears in an inventory dated May 6, 1874.⁹ According to this document, a showcase contained a «testa in bassorilievo di Re Assiro tratta dagli scavi di Ninive» together with Etrurian, Egyptian, and even modern artefacts.¹⁰ Later sources do not mention any reliefs portraying Assyrian kings from Nineveh in the museum, thus the item in question is probably the misidentified head of a royal guardsman from Khorsabad now in Turin. Another error in identification might have led to «tre mattoni di forma quadrangolare con iscrizioni geroglifiche» being counted among the Egyptian objects; rather, these items might have been three bricks bearing cuneiform inscriptions.

Finally, we find a more detailed and reliable list of Mesopotamian antiquities in a guide to the museum published in 1879 by Ettore de Ruggiero, one of its last curators. The list includes seven objects that correspond to those acquired by Schiaparelli in 1896, described as follows:

⁷ Bergamini 1995: 316.

⁸ See Mineo 2013: 107-113 for the documents kept in the Archive of the Museo delle Civiltà - Museo Preistorico Etnografico "Luigi Pigorini" in Rome.

⁹ Fugazzola Delpino, Mangani 2003: 292-319.

¹⁰ Fugazzola Delpino, Mangani 2003: 276, 298.

170. Testa di re assiro (di alabastro). Apparteneva ad un'intera figura, che ritrovata in alcuni scavi fatti a Khorsabad, fu donata dal P. Bresciani al Museo nel 1847.
171. Mattone con iscrizioni in lingua e scrittura babilonese, relativa a un re di Babilonia del 604-661 av. Cr.
172. Simile al precedente.
173. Simile con iscrizione cuneiforme relativa al re di Ur, Uruk, che visse tra il 2600 e 2200 av. Cr.
174. Iscrizione cuneiforme.
175. Cilindro persiano con figure mitologiche.
176. Simile di pietra bianca.¹¹

De Ruggiero's guide gives us a secure *terminus post quem* for dating the presence of these items in the museum, but, with the exception of the head of an Assyrian "king" (actually a royal guardsman) from Khorsabad, donated by a certain Father Bresciani, it is of no help for reconstructing their acquisition history. Lacking any precise information about the origin of most objects in the "oriental collection", which also included Egyptian antiquities, de Ruggiero assumed that almost all of them reached the museum via Jesuit missionaries who travelled in the East, but he does not mention any documentary source supporting this hypothesis.¹²

Going back in time, there is no mention of Mesopotamian antiquities in the first catalogues of Kircher's museum by Alfonso De Sepi and Filippo Bonanni, which appeared respectively in 1678 and 1709.¹³ But this is not surprising, since those authors did not aim at providing exhaustive accounts or detailed information about the items housed in the museum, especially with regard to the "exotic" ones.¹⁴ Likewise, archival documents that bear witness to the museum's holdings during the earliest phases of its history are silent on the presence of Mesopotamian items in Kircher's museum.¹⁵

¹¹ de Ruggiero 1879: 141; see also Curto 1990: 105-107.

¹² de Ruggiero 1879: 133. Elsewhere, the author laments the lack of early records useful for reconstructing the history of the museum's collection (de Ruggiero 1878: xxx).

¹³ De Sepi 1678; Bonanni 1709.

¹⁴ Cardelli Antinori 2001: 79.

¹⁵ Bartola 2004; Lallemand-Buysens 2012.

Furthermore, it should be considered that not necessarily all items collected by Kircher were put on display and counted among the museum's belongings. Indeed, a more complete picture can be gained by consulting also Kircher's books, where one finds references to several items that do not appear in early catalogues and archival records. As a matter of fact, a suggestive piece of information about the early presence of at least one Mesopotamian object in Kircher's collection can be found in Kircher's last book, *Turris Babel*, that appeared in 1679. Here, the Jesuit polymath provides a very detailed, albeit quite fictitious description of the Tower of Babel, based on the accounts of one of the first and most famous European travellers in the East: Pietro Della Valle (1586–1652), a Roman nobleman who travelled extensively in the Near East between 1614 and 1626, and became one of the first Europeans to visit ancient sites such as Babylon, Ur, Ctesiphon, and Persepolis.¹⁶ Della Valle and Kircher were in close contact since the Jesuit's arrival in Rome in 1633, and they exchanged letters and ancient manuscripts, especially in relation to Kircher's study of the Coptic language.¹⁷ In *Turris Babel*, Kircher quotes long excerpts from Della Valle's accounts and uses the drawings made by the Flemish artist who accompanied the traveller to illustrate his own book. Most important for us, Kircher states that Della Valle gave him a specimen of the bricks he found in Babylon's ruins, which Della Valle identified with the remains of the legendary tower described by Herodotus and by the biblical sources: «Haec Petrus à Valle, qui & laterem unum bitumine adhuc paleisque arundinaceis mixtum, tanquam singulare & antiquitatis primaevae maximum donum, museo meo inferendum, ad perpetuam rei memoriam contulit».¹⁸

¹⁶ The most important sources for reconstructing Della Valle's adventures are the diary and the letters he wrote during his trips; for the letters, see Della Valle 1650-1663.

¹⁷ Fletcher 2011: 31-32, 531-533; Stolzenberg 2015: 88-93, 124-126.

¹⁸ Kircher 1679: 95; see Rivosecchi 1982: 112-113; Godwin 2009: 92. The ruins explored by Della Valle probably did not correspond to the remains of the building described by Herodotus, *i.e.* the ancient ziqqurrat of Marduk, but to those of the so-called Summer Palace of Nebuchadnezzar (Invernizzi 2000: 647; Invernizzi 2001: 51).

Thanks to Della Valle's accounts, we can trace the history of that brick back to the very moment when it was found in Babylon. In his diary and a letter, Della Valle describes in great detail the building materials and the construction techniques that he observed in the ruins of Babylon, which he visited and literally excavated with a pick on November 23, 1616.¹⁹ It is worth quoting his description of these discoveries, since it gives a vivid picture of Della Valle's "proto-archaeological" approach to ancient monuments:

La materia di che è composta tutta la fabrica è la più curiosa cosa che vi sia, e da me fu con diligenza osservata, rompendola con picconi in diversi luoghi. Son tutti mattoni molto grandi e grossi di terra cruda, seccati, come io credo, al sole, a guisa delle tappie di Spagna; e son murati, non con buona calce, ma pur con terraccia; e per più fortezza, tra mattone e mattone, mescolate con quella terra che serve di calce, vi sono come a solaio certe cannuccie palustri spezzate, ovvero paglie dure da fare stuoie. A luogo a luogo poi, vi sono mescolati in diverse parti, massimamente dove più importa per sostegno, molti mattoni della medesima grandezza, ma cotti e sodi, e murati con buona calce, o con bitume: però li crudi sono senza dubbio assai più. Di questi mattoni, cotti, e crudi, co'l bitume attaccato, e di quelle cannuccie che hanno in mezo, io hebbi gusto di pigliarne, e ne porto meco per mostrarli in Italia, a gli antiquari curiosi, che certo mi par che sia una bella antichità.²⁰

Unfortunately, neither Della Valle nor Kircher mentions the presence of cuneiform inscriptions on Babylon's bricks, but Della Valle's description of baked bricks «di terra rossetta», «cotti e sodi, e murati con buona calce, o con bitume», fits exactly the external features of one of Nebuchadnezzar's bricks (MAT 791) that arrived in Turin at the end of the 19th century, during the dispersion of Kircher's collections.

Even though Kircher refers to only one brick received from Della Valle, it is very well possible that another brick of Nebu-

¹⁹ See the diary and the letter written in Baghdad on December 10 and 23, 1616 (Invernizzi 2001: 136-142).

²⁰ On Della Valle as an "archaeologist *ante litteram*", see Invernizzi 2000; Invernizzi 2001: 40-41.

chadnezzar from the Kircher Museum (MAT 792) had the same origin.

Probably, also Ur-Namma's brick from Ur (MAT 788) came into Kircher's museum through Della Valle. In fact, we know that the explorer visited Ur on June 19, 1625, and collected a brick from a building made of «buonissimi e grandi mattoni cotti, la maggior parte de' quali erano iscritti e bollati in mezo con certe lettere incognite e che paiono antichissime. Io presi e portai via con me uno di questi mattoni (...)».²¹

Perhaps Della Valle, who died only one year after Kircher opened his museum, personally gave to the Jesuit only one brick from Babylon; the other two might have entered the collection after Della Valle's death, when the traveller's own collection was partially dispersed.²²

If this reconstruction is correct, the bricks of Nebuchadnezzar and Ur-Namma mentioned by de Ruggiero in his guide from 1879 had belonged to Kircher's museum since its earliest days.

Furthermore, if they were collected and brought to Italy by Della Valle in the first quarter of the 17th century, the bricks of Nebuchadnezzar and Ur-Namma now in the Museo di Antichità of Turin would deserve a special status among the Mesopotamian antiquities that are housed in museum collections worldwide: in fact, they could be the very first cuneiform objects ever seen in Europe, long before the *kudurru* known as "caillou Michaux" arrived in Paris in 1786.²³

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²¹ See the diary and the letter sent from Aleppo on August 5, 1625 (Invernizzi 2001: 207-212). Curiously, Della Valle does not seem to realize that the inscriptions on the bricks he sees in Ur were written using the same script of the cuneiform inscriptions he had copied a few years earlier during his visit of Persepolis (Invernizzi 2001: 31).

²² See Invernizzi 2010: 57-58.

²³ See Thomas 2016.

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