

Eating and Drinking  
in the Ancient Near East

Proceedings of the 67<sup>th</sup> Rencontre Assyriologique  
Internationale, Turin, July 12–16, 2021

Edited by Stefano de Martino,  
Elena Devecchi and Maurizio Viano

dubsar 33

Zaphon



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Altorientalistische Publikationen  
Publications on the Ancient Near East

Band 33

Herausgegeben von Kristin Kleber und Kai A. Metzler

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Zaphon  
Münster  
2024

Illustration on the cover: designed by Maria Letizia Ferri,  
Department of Historical Studies, University of Torino.

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All the essays published in this volume have undergone a peer-review process.

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2024 Zaphon, Enkingweg 36, Münster ([www.zaphon.de](http://www.zaphon.de))

Printed in Germany. Printed on acid-free paper.

ISBN 978-3-96327-272-1 (book)

ISBN 978-3-96327-273-8 (e-book)

ISSN 2627-7174

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# ArCOA Project

## The Ancient Near Eastern Collections in Italy from Study to Public Fruition

*Luca Peyronel / Tatiana Pedrazzi / Stefano Anastasio / Elena Devecchi /  
Silvana Di Paolo / Stefania Ermidoro / Valentina Oselini / Irene Rossi\**

### **1. Aims and methodology: study, fruition, and knowledge dissemination of the collections**

ArCOA (Archivi e Collezioni dell'Oriente Antico) is a project focusing on the collections of ancient artefacts from the Near East and their related documents housed in Italy. It was launched with a pilot study on Mesopotamian objects in Lombardy's museums in 2020 and was then enlarged to include collections from all the Italian territory. It is led by the Università degli Studi di Milano and the Istituto di Scienze del Patrimonio Culturale del Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (CNR-ISPC), under the scientific coordination of Luca Peyronel and Tatiana Pedrazzi, and is carried out by an interdisciplinary team including archaeologists, philologists, museum curators, computer and multimedia experts, with the Università degli Studi di Torino acting as the principal academic partner.

The project has three main research goals related to the study, public fruition, and knowledge dissemination of the collections.

The first goal deals with mapping all the collections in Italian museums and in various public and private institutions through a dedicated Database in which the information could be stored and accessed through a unified digital archive (§2).<sup>1</sup> The following criteria were adopted to include a collection in the ArCOA digital

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\* Luca Peyronel (LP), Università degli Studi di Milano; Tatiana Pedrazzi (TP), Istituto di Scienze del Patrimonio Culturale, CNR, Milano; Stefano Anastasio (SA), Ministero della Cultura; Elena Devecchi (ED), Università degli Studi di Torino; Silvana Di Paolo (SDP), Istituto di Scienze del Patrimonio Culturale, CNR, Roma; Stefania Ermidoro (SE), Istituto di Scienze del Patrimonio Culturale, CNR, Roma; Valentina Oselini (VO), Università degli Studi di Milano; Irene Rossi (IR), Istituto di Scienze del Patrimonio Culturale, CNR, Milano.

<sup>1</sup> The chronological and geographical span considered by ArCOA ranges between prehistory and the beginning of the Hellenistic period in south-western Asia and in the Eastern Mediterranean, with a macro-regional distinction between Cyprus, Northern and Southern Levant, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Iran, and the Arabian Peninsula.

archive: (a) it must be kept in a place in the Italian territory and it must be under the national administration and subject to the Italian law; (b) it must be stored in public museums and institutions; (c) if a collection is property of a private institution, it is included only if it is accessible for scientific research and public fruition.<sup>2</sup> Regarding collections in public museums, a threefold distinction is adopted: national, regional and municipal museums, according to the state of cultural heritage.<sup>3</sup> Permanent exhibitions of materials in university museums, other institutions, companies and foundations – both of public, private or mixed status – are also surveyed and included in the archive. A separate case concerns the category of artefacts belonging to ecclesiastical property: in particular, with regards to the property of the Catholic Church, which is certainly the most numerically significant on Italian territory, the State exercises protection, but the activities of valorisation and promotion are regulated by specific agreements between the Ministry of Culture (MiC) and the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI).<sup>4</sup> Concretely, this is also reflected in the cataloguing and accessibility aspects of these assets, so much as to justify their specific identification within the database.<sup>5</sup>

In general, artefacts that reached Italy after the 1980s are included only if their acquisition can be traced by clearly demonstrating their provenance from previous collections legally declared. At the present state of the project, personal collections have also been excluded from the Database, and only donations to public institutions have been selected and catalogued.<sup>6</sup> However, the ArCOA project

<sup>2</sup> According to these criteria, some collections have been so far excluded, such as the Ligabue collection (Fales, 1989; Favaro, 2017) and two ample collections of cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals kept in catholic institutions: the Pontificio Istituto Biblico (van Buren, 1940; Westenholz, 1975; Cagni, 1976; Mayer, 2005) and the Università Pontificia Salesiana (Archi / Pomponio, 1981), even if they are known through publications and catalogues.

<sup>3</sup> On the administrative organisation of the cultural heritage and the new assessment of the Ministry of Culture – as resulted from the legislative reform implemented in Italy between 2014 and 2017 – see Barbati *et al.*, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> In 2020, 262 museum collections belonging to ecclesiastical institutions were listed in the report released by the Italian National Institute of Statistics: ISTAT 2022 (the 2021's census is currently in progress; [www.istat.it](http://www.istat.it)). The ancient Near Eastern antiquities of the Musei Vaticani and those kept in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana are not considered in the project, as they belong to the public museums of the Vatican City State: Vattuone in Dolce / Nota Santi, 1995: 318–323; Amenta, 2009; Amenta *et al.*, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Chizzoniti / Fumagalli Carulli, 2008; on the legislative sector related with the ecclesiastical goods, Roccella 2006. Data derived from the registering of catholic dioceses' cultural heritage in Italy can be gathered from the constantly updated web portal BeWeB (<https://beweb.chiesacattolica.it/>).

<sup>6</sup> The Michail collection is one of the largest in Italy, including 81 cuneiform tablets, several inscribed artefacts and sealings (Pettinato, 1997). The relevant Sinopoli collection includes several Mesopotamian sculptures, cylinder seals, foundation clay cones, and one

reports the presence of ancient Near Eastern materials in the country, monitoring the current situation, especially in relation with the strong increase in trafficking of antiquities from lootings and illegal activities in Near Eastern countries during the last two decades. Cooperation with the authorities in charge of cultural heritage is also active by reporting the existence of private collections in which artefacts coming from the Near East are kept.

Data are filed in English, and the protocol includes the autoptic inspection of the artefacts to verify and integrate what is already available in publications and in the museum's sheets and the acquisition of images and 3D models. The digital archive has been created by the CNR's ArCOA team and it is a relational database hosted at the CNR (§2).

The second goal consists of making the public aware of the cultural heritage and the ancient civilizations of the Near East by communicating to a wider audience the objects, the stories of the collections, the personages involved in the acquisition, the documents attesting the routes and travels in the Near Eastern countries, the sites and their context of provenance. The ArCOA website has been designed and will be online in 2024, giving the opportunity to interact with the Database and offering a user-friendly interface with textual information written according to storytelling principles, 3D models of the artefacts, a web-GIS to explore the collections in Italy and the ancient centers of the Near East.

The third goal is to build a network of researchers, institutions and associations interested in the communication and enhancement of the collections to realize activities of public engagement and inclusive participation.<sup>7</sup>

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Neo-Assyrian relief (Biga, 2012; Dolce, 2012; a complete catalogue of the artefacts is currently in preparation by M. G. Biga and R. Dolce). After Giuseppe Sinopoli passed away in 2001 the Ministry of Culture acquired the collection, and the Greek pieces are permanently displayed in the Museo Aristaios located inside the Auditorium – Parco della Musica of Rome. As correctly pointed out by Ermidoro (2011) who has listed several private Italian collections, the nature itself of this kind of collections (the artefacts are usually not accessible, the number of artefacts can easily increase or decrease, only a part of the artefacts are declared by the owners, the origin of the pieces cannot be verified to exclude their provenance from trafficking) make mandatory their exclusion from the digital archive, according with the ethical principles adopted by the ArCOA project.

<sup>7</sup> The formal adhesions and the successful cooperation in the project by the two museum institutions hosting the largest collections of ancient artefacts from Western Asia – the Museo di Antichità – Musei Reali di Torino and the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze – clearly testify for the strong commitment of the Ministry of Culture towards an enhancement of these collections, recognizing their potential as a powerful means to strengthen cultural dialogue. The cooperation with the Musei Reali di Torino has been included in a former agreement already signed by the University of Turin and the Musei Reali di Torino (2019). The Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze is a partner of the ArCOA project through a specific agreement (June 2021) signed by the Direzione

The project also has positive spin-offs in terms of University education, as it offers the possibility of involving students in learning and training activities related to the implementation of the database and to the setting of valorisation issues through storytelling activities.

LP / TP

## 2. The tools. The ArCOA digital archive, GIS and website

The ArCOA system has been designed in compliance with the principles of Open Science, so that the tools developed, and the data produced within the framework of the project, will be openly accessible and reusable by the scientific community, to foster the knowledge of the Near Eastern collections hosted in Italy. Three interrelated digital and ICT's tools have been developed within the project: the ArCOA digital archive, the ArCOA GIS, and the ArCOA website.

The ArCOA digital archive has been conceived as a tool able to capture the complexity of Near Eastern collections and the heterogeneity of related materials hosted in the Italian museums. These multiple layers of information are organised in the most effective way for the varied purposes of the project, which is targeted at the scientific analysis of the materials and at the reconstruction of the collections' history, but also at their dissemination beyond the academic audience.

The ArCOA digital archive model consists of nine entities, characterised by specific properties and mainly linked by many-to-many relationships (Fig. 1). The database, designed by Irene Rossi and developed by Salvatore Fiorino of the CNR-ISPC, is based on the open-source DBMS MySQL, implemented via the MariaDB replacement.<sup>8</sup> It is populated through a user-friendly data-entry interface, which was created by Nicolò Paraciani of the CNR-ISPC as a web application based on the Laravel open-source framework.<sup>9</sup> The interface is accessible to project participants via authentication.<sup>10</sup> The data-entry interface manages editing and consultation of the records of the nine entities of the database model, which are: *Bibliography*, *Collection*, *Collector*, *Conservation place*, *Document*, *Image*, *Object*, *Site*, and *3D model*. Relations with the records of the other entities can be created in a specific tab. The fields of each record are filled in with free text or with the values of the drop-down menus, according to the field typology. A dedicated section of the interface is devoted to the management of the lists of controlled terms, that is the values of the vocabularies appearing in the drop-down menu fields; based on agreed-upon taxonomies, their use ensures uniformity of description and coherent search results. Once created, a record can be edited, cop-

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Regionale per i Musei della Toscana, the CNR-ISPC and the Università degli Studi di Milano.

<sup>8</sup> <https://mariadb.com/products/community-server/>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://laravel.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://arcoa.cnr.it/>.

ied, or deleted, depending on the specific role of the user and the associated rights. A search functionality provides parameters on which to filter the records of an entity, based on the AND logic operator on all the specific fields of that entity.

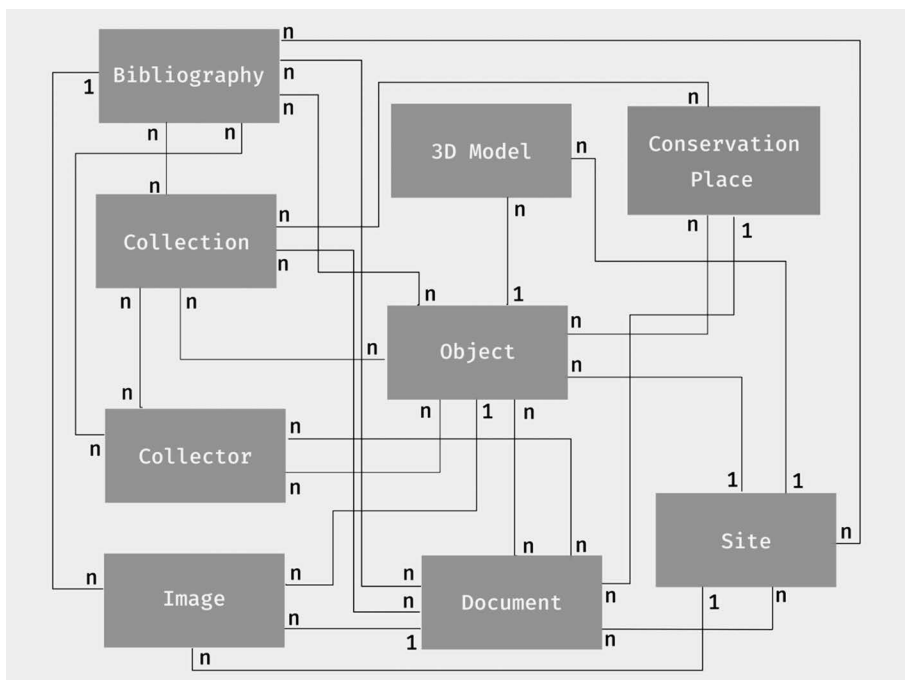


Fig. 1: ArCOA database model. ©ArCOA.

The central entity of the ArCOA digital archive model is the single *object* – be it an uninscribed or inscribed piece – preserved in an Italian institution. We can consider as a case study the bricks stamped with cuneiform inscriptions of different Mesopotamian kings, which constitute a common class of inscribed objects in Italian collections. A list of bricks recorded in the archive can be retrieved by performing a search of *object* records by the *object class* field: the bricks are indexed under the term ‘Building elements’. In the list returned by the query, two bricks appear to be related to the *conservation place* Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Venezia. Both bricks are inscribed with cuneiform inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar II. The material, chronological, and contextual features of these pieces are recorded as structured metadata in the fields of the relevant *object* card, feeding the queries (Fig. 2). Attention is paid also to the textual features of the bricks, allowing to record script, language, genre and epigraphic sigla. Moreover, a description field allows to discursively describe the item and provide insights on specific aspects, such as – for inscribed records – on textual features and translation. Dedicated fields were also envisaged to host external matches pointing to other projects describing the same item, which may complement and enrich

the ArCOA record and increase its interconnections within the digital ecosystem. For the Cuneiform materials, for instance, links will be provided with web archives of Mesopotamian texts such as Oracc<sup>11</sup> and CDLI.<sup>12</sup>

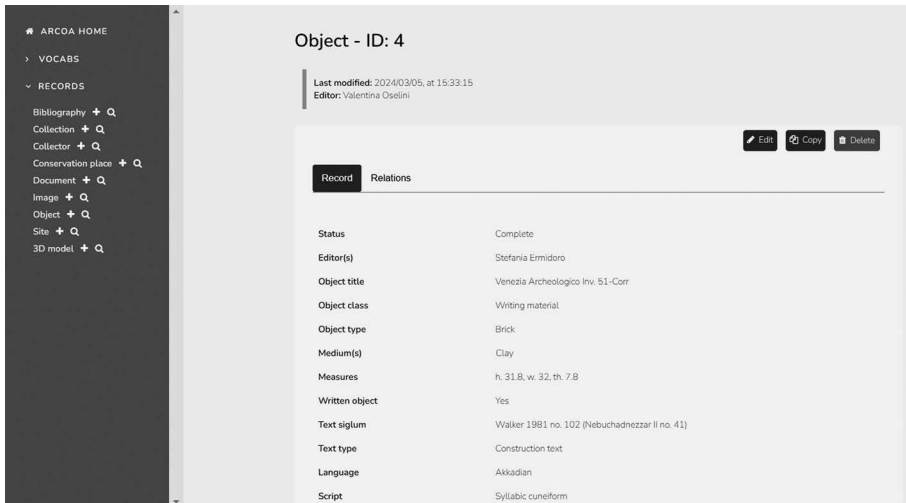


Fig. 2: ArCOA digital archive, main data of an object record (Venezia Archeologico Inv. Corr-51). ©ArCOA.

Inside the Archive, the *Object* can be related with other entities' records which complete its description. Central to the ArCOA project's aims is the relation with the institution hosting the piece (*Conservation Place*) and with the historical collections of which the piece is or was part (*Collection*): their study is especially interesting for their formation history, involving the figures of the collectors who originally brought the pieces to Italy or subsequently acquired them (*Collector*). The acknowledgement of the provenance of the piece (when known) as a related *Site* record, allows to detail the 'journey' of the object until its current location. In addition to secondary literature (*Bibliography*), archival sources (*Document*) are recorded in the archive, being a core element of ArCOA together with the *Object*, as the title of the project shows. Such documents provide first-hand information on the objects and on the history of collections' formation.

For instance, the two bricks with cuneiform inscriptions described above represent tangible proofs of the work and discoveries of Austen Henry Layard, who uncovered Nimrud and made some of the most extraordinary discoveries in Nineveh. The two bricks were destined in 1891 to the Civico Museo Correr and are now displayed in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Venezia (Fig. 3).

<sup>11</sup> *Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus* (<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/>).

<sup>12</sup> *Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative* (<https://cdli.ucla.edu/>).





Fig. 3: Brick with stamped royal inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Venezia (Inv. Corr-51).

In the ArCOA database, the specimens have been connected to the *collector* Austen Henry Layard and to his previous *collection*, as well as to the *documents* that allow us to retrace the modern journey of these materials, from the moment of their shipment from Layard's residence in London to Venezia, to their acquisition and the management of the practical issues related to their exhibition. Indeed, Layard's gifts were on public display in the Correr Museum ever since 1899. In 1939, following 'friendly negotiations', they were placed in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale to unite in a single location all the archaeological collections kept in the city of Venezia. The documents that bear witness to these occurrences are kept today in the Museo Correr. They are included in the ArCOA archive, appearing with a description related to the entire dossier. Through the *bibliography* related to this entry, the user may find an article that provides a full con-

textualization of the bricks and of the related documents. Moreover, the latter can also be found as *images*.<sup>13</sup>

The relevance of visual materials (*Images* and *3D models*) is evident as ArCOA is committed, as extensively as possible, to the autoptic check of the archaeological pieces and documents preserved in Italian institutions and their photographic documentation, also in the form of 3D models and RTI images, to support the scientific study as well as to engage the general public with virtual fruition experiences. The ArCOA Project has initiated a campaign of 3D scanning and modelling carried out by Daniele Bursich on the most significant objects. The archive stores the metadata of the 3D model and the link to the location where the model can be accessed.

The general data about the collections were organised in the ArCOA GIS, based on the open-source Quantum GIS system (QGIS), continuously updated and integrated, in step with the compilation of the ArCOA digital archive, allowing for the realisation of thematic and distribution maps that can be used also on the website. One shapefile layer is related with the geolocated conservation places, standardised in a WGS 84 / UTM zone 33N reference system. The institutions have a specific ID number and a nickname. Data in the attribute table includes geographical information (city and coordinates), the categories, the total amount of artefacts in each collection, and the number of objects by classes, following the list on the digital archive (written objects, cuneiform tablets, inscribed bricks, other inscribed objects, glyptic, pottery, terracotta figurines, etc.). The various *Object classes* can be filtered to produce ad hoc thematic maps, both on a national and regional scale, considering the proposed case studies. Moreover, further point and polygon shapefiles corresponding to the sites and regions of provenance allow to correlate the artefacts kept in the Italian collections with the original provenance.

The information and visual material collected in the digital archive will be accessible on the ArCOA website, which is under construction by the Università degli Studi di Milano team member Daniele Bursich. To allow this, the ArCOA digital archive, which has been developed by and is hosted by the CNR, will integrate an API service for automatic querying of the database, which will provide the dissemination web portal with the data recorded. At the same time, the individual records will be openly consultable via their URIs on the public web pages of the archive itself and will be also exposed in a dedicated OAI-PMH repository. The website, intended in English and Italian, consists of four inter-related paths: the *Homepage*, the *Conservation Places*, the *Collections* and the *Collectors*, linked to specific pages and insights. The GIS also will be accessible from the website as a web-GIS interactive map, where visitors can view the

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<sup>13</sup> This case-study paragraph is authored by Stefania Ermidoro (cf. Ermidoro, 2020).

*Collections* in their *Conservation places*, follow the routes of antique *Collectors* and display the *Objects* provenance *Sites*.

IR / VO

### 3. A survey of the Ancient Near Eastern collections in Italy

A first step in the project was the creation of a digital library in the ArCOA repository, where all the existing publications dealing with the collections were uploaded. The bibliographical references are stored and managed by using Zotero Standalone, which is a tool accessible to all the project members, easily available also offline, and that matches with the ArCOA DB.<sup>14</sup> This work updated the survey carried out by the former Istituto di Studi Miceneo ed Egeo-Anatolici, then Istituto di Studi sulle Civiltà dell'Egeo e del Vicino Oriente of the CNR within the research Progetto Collezioni, which led to a preliminary evaluation of the collections and their related publications.<sup>15</sup>

The ArCOA survey identifies 49 conservation places where at least one object is kept. They have been grouped according to region, from north to south, and have been subdivided into seven different categories depending on the organisation administering them, namely, National/State, Regional and Municipal museums, Universities, Foundations, Private Companies, and Ecclesiastical collections (see also §1) (Fig. 4).

A preliminary estimate (updated to June 2022) indicates a number exceeding 4000 artefacts (Fig. 5).<sup>16</sup> In contrast with the most famous European and overseas institutions, counting on massive quantities of archaeological material from Near Eastern countries, the Italian collections are relatively small but widespread almost over the entire territory, except for a few regions in southern Italy.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.zotero.org/>.

<sup>15</sup> Di Paolo, 2005; 2012. The survey of S. Ermidoro was based on her dissertation on cuneiform documents in Italy discussed in 2008 at the University of Venice: Ermidoro, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> In the current census several university collections that include artefacts coming from archaeological excavations carried out during the last century have not been considered. They are mostly formed by pottery sherds, lithics, a few other small finds and often also by replicas of original pieces used for didactic purposes. At this phase of the Project, only some university museums in which Near Eastern artefacts are available for public fruition were inserted in the digital archive, such as the Museo del Vicino Oriente Egitto e Mediterraneo of the Sapienza Università di Roma: Nigro, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> However, a systematic survey of museums in some regions of southern Italy has been planned in 2023, and it cannot be excluded that some other small collections could be identified.

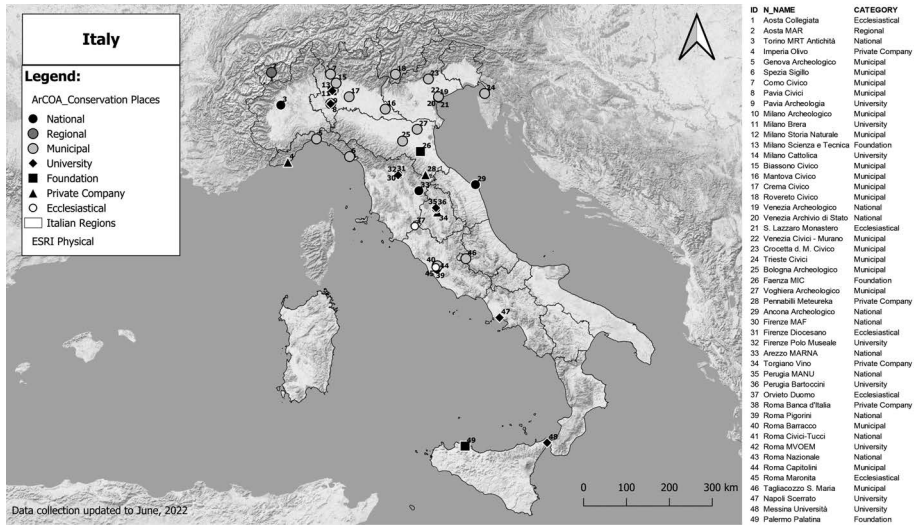


Fig. 4: Distribution map of the Italian institutions where collections are hosted. Map by V. Oselini with QGIS, ©ArCOA. Base map: ESRI World Physical Map, March 2019 (obtained through QuickMapServices QGIS plugin).

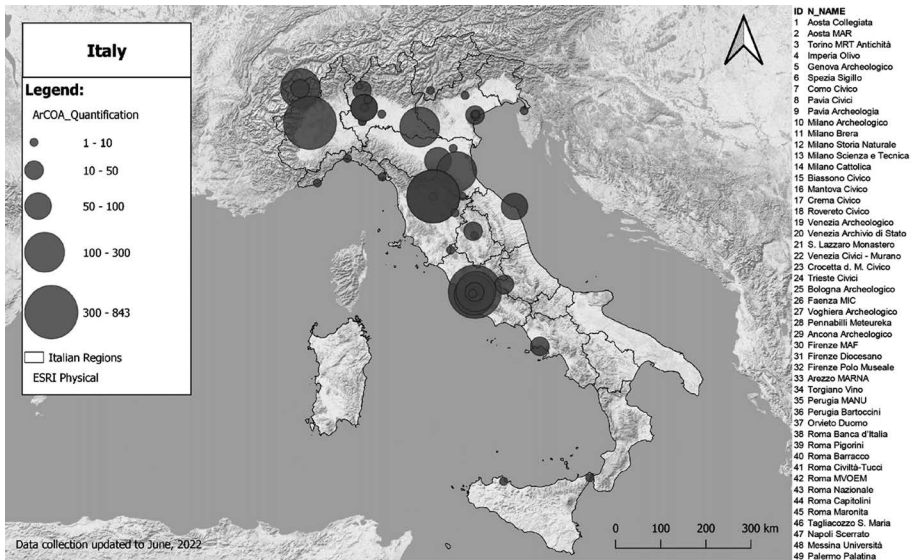


Fig. 5: Distribution and quantification map of the Near Eastern archaeological materials hosted in Italian institutions. Map by V. Oselini with QGIS, ©ArCOA. Base map: ESRI World Physical Map, March 2019 (obtained through QuickMapServices QGIS plugin).

Their variety allows reconstructing the different phases of the formation of the Near Eastern collections in Italy, as well as to trace interesting relations between Italian voyagers, intellectuals, scientists, archaeologists and important foreign personages involved in the study of the ancient Near East. This aspect is

particularly relevant for the ArCOA project, since the approach chosen for the communication of the collections privileges a dynamic narrative which aims at highlighting ties between artefacts, museums, places of origin, and personages. The key concept in the valorisation process is the emphasis on the ‘journey’ of people and things and the ‘relations’ established with the ancient Near Eastern civilizations, through the acquisition, study and dissemination of materials arrived on Italian territory.

The lack of any direct investigations by Italian expeditions in Mesopotamia before World War II, with the only exception of the *Missione Archeologica* in Mesopotamia directed by Giuseppe Furlani and Doro Levi, who carried out a single-year campaign (1933) at Shemomok/Shamamuk in the Erbil plain, prevented the formation of large museum collections of Near Eastern artefacts, as happened in France, Great Britain, Germany and the United States.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Italy did not participate in the process of appropriation of artefacts and artworks that characterizes the pioneering archaeological research of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was not involved in the post-World War I phase of protectorates when the European and American museums and institutions obtained a wealth of archaeological materials through the partition system of findings. However, minor streams of mainly Mesopotamian artefacts reached Italy through donations and the flourishing antiquity market characterizing the period before and in-between the two World Wars.<sup>19</sup>

The discoveries of the great Neo-Assyrian capitals and Sumerian civilisation led to the acquisition of objects from the contemporary and stunning excavations, directly in the territory of provenance or through exchanges, gifts and purchases on the European antiquity market. With the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and until the late 1960s, thanks to the spread of the scientific method and stratigraphic excavation, the perspective and way of acquiring archaeological material from ongoing excavations changed. European institutions put more emphasis on the rediscovery of ancient civilisations and the exhibition of objects representing them. Therefore, also the Italian collections associated with scientific investigations in the field, as is the case of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze and the Museo delle Civiltà – Sezione Giuseppe Tucci di Roma, increased. Moreover, the development of disciplines of ancient oriental studies in several universities enlarged the incoming flow of imported materials for teaching purposes and the consequent creation of proper university museum collections.

During this period, the religious institutions collected many objects as well, especially from the ‘lands of the Bible’, with the aim of growing historical-reli-

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<sup>18</sup> Furlani, 1934a; 1934b; Anastasio, 2008. The materials taken to Italy from Qasr Shemamok, according to the partition allowed at that time, are kept in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze and have been studied and published by Anastasio *et al.*, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Di Paolo, 2005; 2012. See also Ermidoro, 2011, specifically on the cuneiform documents.

gious studies and analysing ethnocultural phenomena related to the Christian and Catholic spheres.<sup>20</sup> Some collections formed as early as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have specific themes, as in the case of the Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche (MIC) in Faenza, which focuses specifically on pottery and is the result of donations and exchanges between Italian, European and extra-European museums.<sup>21</sup> Finally, donations by private citizens who, prior to the legislation in force at the present time, legally acquired various types of materials from the Near Eastern regions, constitute a part, albeit a minority, of current museum exhibitions.<sup>22</sup>



Fig. 6: Distribution and quantification map of cuneiform tablets housed in Italian institutions. Map by V. Oselini with QGIS, ©ArCOA. Base map: ESRI World Physical Map, March 2019 (obtained through QuickMapServices QGIS plugin).

The largest collections in Italy, consisting of more than 700 items, originated in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically, they are the oriental collections at the Museo di Antichità in Torino and at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze, respectively related to the formation of the Museo di Antichità e Egitto

<sup>20</sup> *I.e.* the Pontificio Istituto Biblico in Rome, the Musei Vaticani, and minor institutions, such as the Santuario e Museo di Maria SS. dell'Oriente in Tagliacozzo, which nowadays is a Municipal museum, or the Monastero della Congregazione Mechitarista dei Padri Armeni in S. Lazzaro near Venice (Di Paolo, 2005: 148–150).

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.micfaenza.org/en/>; see also Anastasio *et al.*, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> For instance: Garovaglio collection at Civico Museo Archeologico Paolo Giovio di Como (Uboldi / Meda Riquier, 2010); Sissa collection at Museo Civico di Palazzo Te di Mantova (Giovetti, 2000); Barracco collection at Museo Barracco, Roma (Biga *et al.*, 1996).

of Torino, and to the first Italian Archaeological Expedition in Mesopotamia, by Furlani and Levi at Shemamok (see §6).

The bulk of the Italian collection consists of cuneiform tablets and inscriptions (Fig. 6, see §4). Other significant categories are pottery, seals and cylinder seals, terracotta figurines (see §5) and Neo-Assyrian reliefs, although a rich variety of classes of artefacts is also represented (e.g., lithic, weapons, jewels, and so on).

Among the inscribed materials, the bricks with royal inscriptions fascinated the early collectors in the same way that cuneiform tablets did. Many of them were brought to Italy by acquisitions or donations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. More than 60 bricks, both complete and fragmentary, are nowadays hosted in fourteen institutions, and are presented in §4 (Fig. 7).

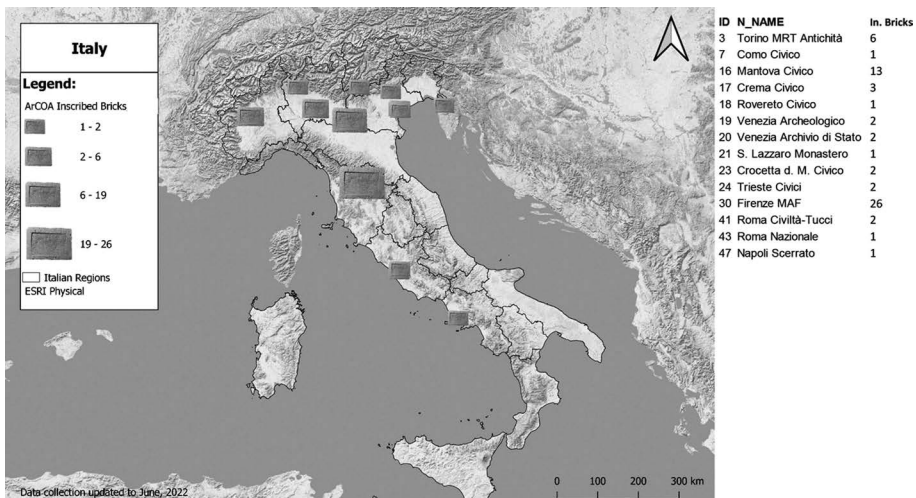


Fig. 7: Distribution and quantification map of inscribed bricks hosted in Italian institutions. Map by V. Oselini with QGIS, ©ArCOA. Base map: ESRI World Physical Map, March 2019 (obtained through QuickMapServices QGIS plugin).

Fragments of Neo-Assyrian carved slabs, which were very popular “souvenirs” of travellers and collectors, are kept in seven museums in northern and central Italy, testifying to the intense relations of some Italian personages with the most important antiquarians, intellectuals, and pioneers of archaeology who were already carrying out excavations in the Near Eastern regions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to mention also the presence of some gypsum replicas of Neo-Assyrian reliefs in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, realized by

<sup>23</sup> Dolce / Nota Santi, 1995. Museo di Antichità (Musei Reali) di Torino, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Venezia; Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze; Museo Civico di Archeologia Ligure di Genova; Civico Museo Archeologico Paolo Giovio di Como; Museo Barracco in Roma; Museo Diocesano di Santo Stefano al Ponte in Firenze; several reliefs and fragments of Assyrian inscriptions are also collected in the Musei Vaticani.

Domenico Brucciani from Neo-Assyrian reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II and Ashurbanipal kept in the British Museum of London. The moulds were gifted by Alessandro Castellani to the director of the museum Giuseppe Fiorelli, who was also directly in contact with Layard.<sup>24</sup>

More than 250 cylinder and stamp seals have been filed during the first survey of the collections, with the main groups housed in the museums of Torino, Firenze, Perugia and Napoli. Since the beginning of oriental studies, they represented objects that attracted the first collectors, often constituting the original nuclei of Mesopotamia artefacts in the Italian collections (see §5)<sup>25</sup> (Fig. 8).

Terracotta figurines, hosted in Northern and Central Italy collections, mainly in Lombardy (Fig. 9), consist of anthropomorphic figurines and a few animals, for a total of about 170 pieces, principally coming from the Northern Levant and Mesopotamia, and in a minor number from Iran.

Pottery is also widely represented in different institutions. The most relevant group is the Near Eastern ceramic collection at the Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza, which includes both complete vessels and potsherds, dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE to the Iron Age, coming from the Levant, Mesopotamia, Anatolia and Iran.<sup>26</sup> The Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze also hosts more than 200 exemplars, mainly from excavations at Shemamok, dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE (Hassuna, Halaf, northern Ubaid, and Ninevite V periods), to the mid-late 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE (Middle Assyrian period) and the Iron Age, specifically to the Neo-Assyrian period.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, pottery from the 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian excavations in Syria and Iran is stored in the MNAO of Rome.<sup>28</sup> Other minor collections are spread in northern and central Italy as well.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The copies have been recently shown in the 2019 exhibition ‘Gli Assiri all’ombra del Vesuvio’: Graziani, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> This category is presented by Silvana Di Paolo in §5.

<sup>26</sup> Anastasio *et al.*, 2020; Torcia Rigillo, 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Anastasio, 2008: 561–563.

<sup>28</sup> Di Paolo, 2005: 147. Now Museo delle Civiltà – Collezione Arte Orientale “Giuseppe Tucci”.

<sup>29</sup> A hundred ceramics from Troy are preserved at the Museo Pigorini, Roma (Di Paolo, 2005: 143–144). More than thirty vessels constitute the Sissa collection in the Museo Civico di Palazzo Te, Mantova (Giovetti, 2000). Some pottery from Bab edh-Dhra’ is at the Museo del santuario di Santa Maria, Tagliacozzo (Di Paolo, 2001). A group of ten Anatolian vessels in the private Museo del Vino in Torgiano, near Perugia (Uncini, 1991); Urartian juglets, a bowl and a pot, two 3<sup>rd</sup>-millennium painted jars from Iran and a 3<sup>rd</sup>-millennium jar from the Levantine area are in the Monastero di S. Lazzaro in Venezia (Morandi, 2003); two small collections are at the Museo dell’Olivo di Imperia, and at the Museo Archeologico di Voghiera (Di Paolo, 2005: 152–153).



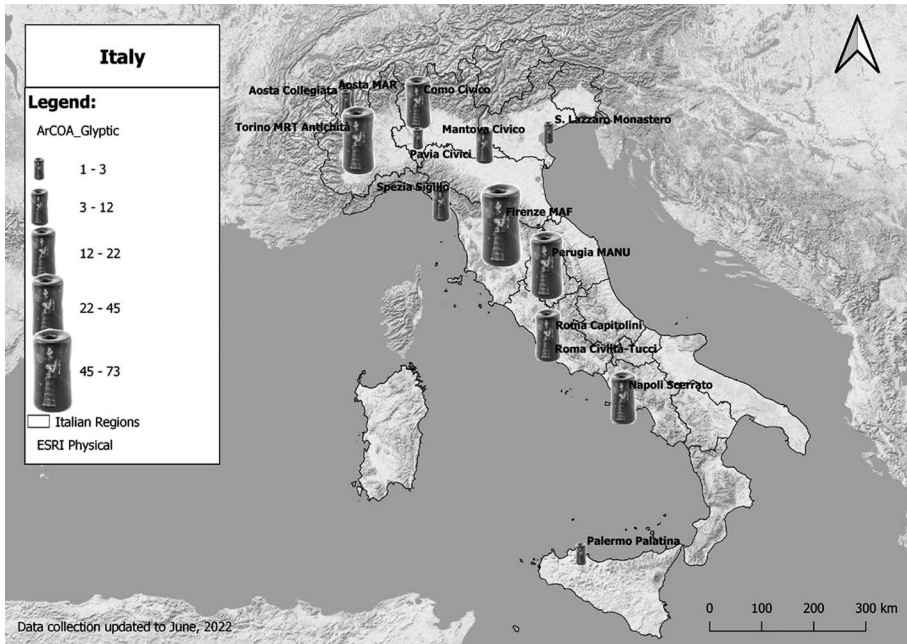


Fig. 8: Distribution and quantification map of cylinder and stamp seals hosted in Italian institutions. Map by V. Oselini with QGIS, ©ArCOA. Base map: ESRI World Physical Map, March 2019 (obtained through QuickMapServices QGIS plugin).

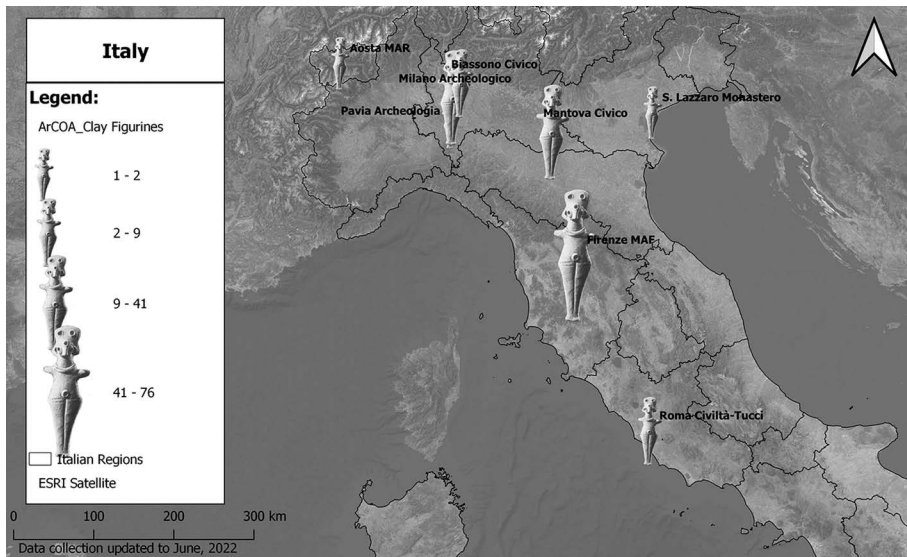


Fig. 9: Distribution and quantification map of the clay figurines hosted in Italian institutions. Map by V. Oselini with QGIS, ©ArCOA. Base map: ESRI World Imagery Map, data July 2022 (obtained through QuickMapServices QGIS plugin).

#### 4. Cuneiform texts and written documents. An updated overview

As part of the ArCOA project, a specific research strand is devoted to the epigraphic material in cuneiform script.

An essential preliminary task consisted in verifying the census of Mesopotamian epigraphic material kept in Italian public and private collections published by S. Ermidoro in 2011, which aimed to map their presence and location throughout Italy, regardless of the size and nature of the collection. The total number of identified assemblages was fifty-six, totaling more than two thousand objects divided among tablets, bricks, cones and fragments of other inscribed items, such as alabaster slabs and stone vessels. Eighteen of the surveyed collections were public, while the remainder were privately owned by various kinds of institutions (private museums and universities, research foundations, individuals, and church-owned collections).

An update of the situation described in 2011 proved to be necessary because research undertaken during the last ten years led to a new assessment of the size, chronological, geographical, typological composition, and acquisition history of some collections included in the census.<sup>30</sup>

The material of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze is currently being (re)studied by a team coordinated by Amalia Catagnoti,<sup>31</sup> whose work has already highlighted that the collection consists of 251 items including clay tablets, bricks and cones, while the 2011 census listed a total of 200 inscribed objects. The Florence assemblage is rather unique and particularly important among the Italian collections, not only because of its richness but also because it is the most varied in terms of chronology and typology of the items it gathers.

Similarly, Federico Giusfredi and Maurizio Viano are preparing a new edition of the Ur III texts kept in the library of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano,<sup>32</sup> where only 65 of the 71 tablets originally donated by Giustino Boson to the University could be retrieved in the holdings of the collection.<sup>33</sup>

Several cuneiform artefacts of the Museo delle Civiltà-Sezione Giuseppe Tucci in Roma have been edited for the first time. Among them, there is also a Middle Elamite door-knob that was not included in the 2011 census and is now published by Gian Pietro Basello.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See Ermidoro, 2020 for an example of recent research into the acquisition history of the Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian bricks kept in the Museo Archeologico and in the Archivio di Stato in Venezia.

<sup>31</sup> Catagnoti, 2022; see also Bramanti, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> *Editio princeps* in Boson, 1936.

<sup>33</sup> See Giusfredi / Spada, 2018: 148, which also provides a new edition of the only Old Babylonian tablet belonging to the collection.

<sup>34</sup> Basello, 2013; see also Mayer, 2012 for the edition of a sealed Nuzi document and of a Middle Babylonian administrative text, and Bramanti, 2015 for a general overview of the collection and the edition of a Neo-Babylonian brick.

Finally, the collection of the Musei Reali di Torino was thoroughly restored and catalogued in view of the opening of a new archaeological gallery, inaugurated in February 2022 (see below §6.1).

In addition to this, it should be noted that since 2011 the total number of Italian public institutions housing materials with cuneiform inscriptions has been enriched thanks to donations of private collectors.

In 2014, the Museo Archeologico Regionale di Aosta received from Aurelio Carugo a collection of Egyptian and Mesopotamian artefacts, including six cuneiform tablets, that were previously kept in Ivrea and are now on display in a room named after the donor.<sup>35</sup>

In 2017, the Museo Civico Archeologico di Bologna received a collection that previously belonged to Monsignor Nevio Ancarani and is currently being studied by a team coordinated by Nicolò Marchetti and Gianni Marchesi. It includes cuneiform tablets (administrative and legal texts, letters, and scribal exercises) and clay cones, dating from the pre-Sargonic until the Achaemenid period.

Finally, the small corpus of Elamite bricks kept in Italian museums has been increased thanks to Carla Maria Burri's legacy to the Museo Civico di Crema e del Cremasco<sup>36</sup> and a donation by the late Egyptologist Edda Bresciani to the Museo Orientale Umberto Scerrato di Napoli.<sup>37</sup> Both donated respectively three and one Middle Elamite bricks bearing different inscriptions of king Untaš-Napiriša, that probably originated from the ziggurat of Tchogha Zanbil.

As of today, it is planned to enter in the database materials from 32 collections, for a total of more than two thousand objects divided between tablets, bricks, cones, and fragments of other inscribed items (Figs. 6–7). The collections are located in 12 different regions across Italy, mostly in the North: the most represented region is Lombardy, with eight collections in five different cities. There are only two public collections in Southern Italy: one in the Museo Orientale Umberto Scerrato di Napoli and another in the Università di Messina. Although these texts cover a very broad chronological span, ranging from the proto-cuneiform texts of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE to the Seleucid period, the Third Dynasty of Ur is the best represented historical period in Italian collections. As for their provenance, the epigraphic materials held in Italian public collections may be ascribed to all regions of ancient Mesopotamia, having been written in cities of the Southern alluvium, Babylonia and Assyria; the presence of a small corpus of inscribed objects from Elam is also noticeable. Regarding the represented typologies, the Italian collections include mostly archival texts, but royal inscriptions written on

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<sup>35</sup> Ronc *et al.*, 2011; three Ur III tablets now in Aosta have been studied by F. Pomponio (2011 and 2013) when they still belonged to the Carugo collection in Ivrea.

<sup>36</sup> Basello, 2016; Civitillo, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Caterina, 2018: 4; Basello, 2018.

various types of supports (bricks, cones, and fragments of alabaster slabs) are also rather well represented.

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### 5. The collections of seals and clay figurines in Italy

Among the categories of objects represented in the Italian collections, we would like to draw attention particularly to seals and clay figurines.<sup>38</sup>

Some ancient Near Eastern cylinder seals arrived in Italy before the formation of the first glyptic collections, closely linked to the nascent Oriental studies in Italy: as heirlooms with a sacral or talismanic value<sup>39</sup> or as ‘new’ objects arousing the curiosity of collectors such as Bertel Thorvaldsen, who formed his collections of gems including a chalcedony Assyrian seal during his stay at Rome in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>40</sup>

The collections of ancient Near Eastern seals preserved in public museums are distributed throughout the Italian territory between Aosta and Napoli (Fig. 8). The largest groups are in Northern and Central Italy (Piemonte, Toscana, Umbria), whereas other objects are distributed from north to south, in the Museo Archeologico Regionale di Aosta, the Museo di Antichità di Torino, the Civico Museo Archeologico Paolo Giovio di Como, the Musei Civici di Palazzo Te di Mantova, Museo del Sigillo di La Spezia, Museo delle Civiltà-Sezione Giuseppe Tucci and Musei Capitolini di Roma, Museo Orientale Umberto Scerrato di Napoli.

The cylinder seals kept in the Museo Civico di Palazzo Te di Mantova belonged to the private collection of Ugo Sissa (1913–1980), who in 1953–1955 and 1957–1958 worked at Baghdad first as Chief Architect of the Development Board of Iraq and later of the Development Office and Department for the Summer Stations and Tourism. During his stay in Iraq, in fact, he started a small collection of antiquities, obtained at antique markets or by exploring the surface of tells, as a result of his role in the building project of a hotel for touristic stops in archaeological areas and thanks to his general interest in Mesopotamian history.<sup>41</sup> Palazzo

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<sup>38</sup> All types of sealings are not treated in this article. However, they will be included in the Digital archive ArCOA.

<sup>39</sup> As a Syrian hematite cylinder seal uncovered within a Late Roman tomb located in the area of Basilica dei Santi Felice e Fortunato in Vicenza and now in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze (Felli, 2013: 329–330) or the Mesopotamian specimen dating to Akkadian/Post-Akkadian period found within a reliquary (14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> century) of the Treasure of the Cappella Palatina at Palermo (Rocco, 1980–81: 259–274; Rocco, 1981: 237–240; Purpura, 1986: 45–56).

<sup>40</sup> Fossing, 1929: pl. I:1; Di Paolo, 2012: 29–30, fig. 7. The seal (Inv. No. I1694) is online on the website of the Thorvaldsens Museum at Copenhagen: <https://kataloget.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/I1694>.

<sup>41</sup> Nicolini, 1984: 28.

Te only hosts a few specimens of his large collection of cylinder and stamp seals.<sup>42</sup> A Neo-Babylonian quartz seal with a banquet scene is hosted in the Monastero Mechitarista di San Lazzaro degli Armeni, a small island in the Venetian lagoon.<sup>43</sup> A Common Style seal of faience, part of the Egyptian collection of the Marquis Malaspina di Sannazzaro, is currently in the Musei Civici of Pavia.<sup>44</sup>

The oldest collections of seals were formed between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Information on the acquisition of sixteen seals belonging to Alfonso Garovaglio (1820–1905) and now kept in the Museo Civico Archeologico Paolo Giovio at Como is scanty. He purchased a group of stones on the antiques market at Baghdad during his travel to Mesopotamia in 1887, as recorded in the letters to his daughter.<sup>45</sup> However, it is possible that some seals were already part of his collection.<sup>46</sup> The materials were preliminary published in 1909;<sup>47</sup> most are dated between the Early Dynastic and the Neo-Assyrian periods and include Early Dynastic seals with contest scenes (*Figurenband*), several Old Babylonian specimens, and one Mittani style cylinder seal. One Achaemenid and three Sasanian stamp seals complete the group.<sup>48</sup>

One of the first collections of seals formed in Italy was purchased by the Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell'Umbria at Perugia from Elisa Vincenti. Information about the purchase date and provenance of the stones are unknown, but the first notice of this successful acquisition dates to 1889.<sup>49</sup> Unfortunately, this material is still very little known to specialists, because when included in the largest collection of Etruscan objects in Umbria, it represents an 'anomaly' in this territory and was never sufficiently researched. According to Bruto Telsoni who published this collection in 1905, the lot consists of 50 stones and 17 modern impressions, but it is uncertain whether the latter were obtained from the same seals. Instead, the presence of 'duplicates' within this collection casts doubt on the authenticity of some seals. The largest group consists of Old Babylonian seals mostly made of iron oxides, and ten Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid specimens, including some conoid stamp seals.<sup>50</sup>

The collection of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze was formed over a long period of time. 67 ancient Near Eastern cylinder (35) and stamp seals (32) entered between 1897 and 1967, whereas four other seals are older acquisi-

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<sup>42</sup> Van Buren, 1959 studied 139 pieces, whereas a list of latest acquisitions (153 stones) was added by Ugo Sissa himself.

<sup>43</sup> Morandi Bonacossi, 2003: 79–87, figs. 57–59.

<sup>44</sup> Stenico, 1957; Di Paolo, 1997.

<sup>45</sup> Garovaglio, 1896: 181 and fn. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Regazzoni, 1879: 63; Betti, 2007: 15–16.

<sup>47</sup> Ballerini, 1909: 563–571.

<sup>48</sup> Betti, 2010: 34–38.

<sup>49</sup> Luppetelli, 1889: 40.

<sup>50</sup> Telsoni, 1905: 195–216, especially 196 and 206.

tions. The latter, already present in the large historical Medici and Lorena gem collection and long preserved at the Uffizi, moved to the Museo Archeologico in 1870.<sup>51</sup> The provenance of the material of Firenze is unknown. It was purchased in different areas of the Mediterranean and Middle East, from Baghdad to Greece (Corinth, Crete) and Alexandria of Egypt. However, it cannot be excluded that some pieces, such as the Mittani style seal purchased at Crete, had already arrived on the island in antiquity, being the most common class of imported Near Eastern seals in the Aegean.<sup>52</sup> The two larger groups of seals, acquired in 1897 from Antonio Dazzi and in 1930 from the Italian mission at Qasr Shamamuk, consist of an equal number of seals (altogether 52): they include Uruk seal-amulets, Akkadian seals depicting mythological themes and ‘contest scenes’, 15 stones pertaining to the Old Babylonian period with the usual theme of the seated deity facing a frieze of worshippers, a small group of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian stones with fight and hunt scenes, and worship of divine symbols.<sup>53</sup>

In 1921 in Paris the famous Egyptologist Ernesto Schiaparelli and Father Giustino Boson facilitated the purchase of an Iraqi physician’s collection of cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals by the Italian government. This lot of materials includes a group of c. 40 cylinder seals that since 2010–2011 has been part of the collections of the Museo di Antichità (Musei Reali) di Torino. The cylinders at Torino (which also include some fakes) are mainly dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE.<sup>54</sup>

A glyptic collection specifically acquired for educational purposes in the 1960s is currently kept in the Museo Orientale Umberto Scerrato at Napoli (Fig. 10).

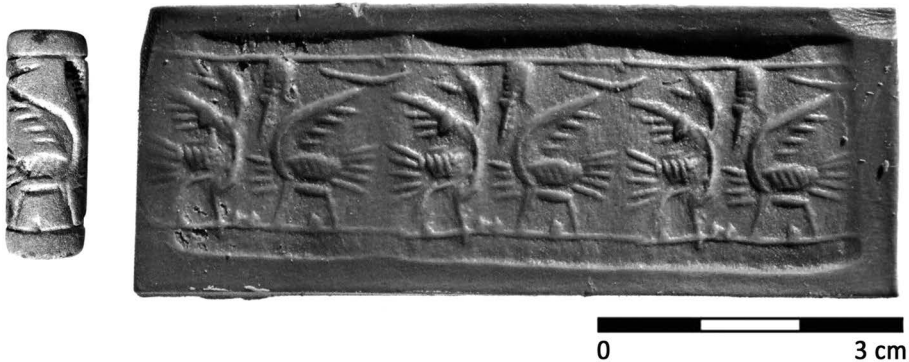


Fig. 10: Neo-Assyrian linear-style faience seal in the Museo Umberto Scerrato di Napoli (MO276). 9<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

<sup>51</sup> Felli, 2013: 301–305.

<sup>52</sup> See, lastly, Tabita, 2021: 16.

<sup>53</sup> Felli, 2013: 311–356.

<sup>54</sup> Bergamini, 1987.

This lot is formed by 31 specimens and includes both cylinder and stamp seals. The former covers a broad chronological horizon and geographical distribution. Several seals originally used throughout Mesopotamia are dated between the Akkadian and Neo-Assyrian periods. Others refer to the Cappadocian and Elamite styles. The stamp seals include Neo-Babylonian exemplars, and four Sasanian specimens.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, two other groups of seals are kept in the Museo delle Civiltà-Sezione Giuseppe Tucci and the Musei Capitolini di Roma. The first lot was acquired by the Museo d'Arte Orientale as part of the wide collection of Japanese graphic art owned by Salvatore Pugliatti (1903–1976), jurist, founder of the School of Civil Law and Rector of the Università di Messina.<sup>56</sup> The seals, covering a long period of time, include some interesting pieces pertaining to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE. For the second lot, the Musei Capitolini obtained a form of loan for use by the Roman business family Santarelli, particularly active in the arts and enhancement of the heritage of ancient Rome. The large Santarelli collection also consists of 600 ancient gems,<sup>57</sup> among which are twenty Mesopotamian seals, dated from the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE to the Sasanian period.<sup>58</sup>

Another well-represented category of artefacts is clay figurines, preserved only in the public museums of Northern and Central Italy (Fig. 9). The former macro area hosts two-thirds of the collections, distributed across four regions (Valle d'Aosta, Lombardia, Veneto, and Emilia-Romagna), predominantly in Lombardia: Milano, Civico Museo Archeologico; Biassono (in the province of Monza and Brianza), Museo Civico Carlo Verri; Mantova, Museo Civico di Palazzo Te (see *infra*). In addition to these materials, there is also the only ancient Near Eastern item that has been attached to the small Egyptian section of the Museo di Archeologia at Pavia founded for educational purposes as a branch of the local University since 1936<sup>59</sup> In Central Italy, the collections of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze and Museo delle Civiltà-Sezione Giuseppe Tucci in Roma are notable not only for their typological variety of figurines, but also for the provenance of several specimens from regular excavations in Syria and Iran. The Museo in Firenze, for instance, preserves two zoomorphic figurines recovered during the excavations carried out at Qasr Shamamuk (ancient Kilizu) in Iraq in 1933 by the archaeological mission of the Università di Firenze, directed by Giuseppe Furlani and Doro Levi, within a research program promoting the first Italian excavations in Mesopotamia.<sup>60</sup> The figurines belong to the lot of finds as-

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<sup>55</sup> Campurra Mazzoni, 1972; Graziani, 2018; Graziani, 2019: 225–232.

<sup>56</sup> Mazzeo, 2010: 631–634.

<sup>57</sup> Gallottini, 2012: 19–20.

<sup>58</sup> Gallottini, 2012: 31–43.

<sup>59</sup> Mora, 1984: 22–24; Di Paolo, 1997: 145–150.

<sup>60</sup> Petricoli, 1990: 325–328.

signed at that time to the excavating institution as an indemnity according to the antiquities law of the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon.<sup>61</sup> Information about the original context where the figurines were found and their dating were lost after World War II. The fieldwork was focused on the excavation of a Neo-Assyrian and Parthian necropolis west of the tell,<sup>62</sup> but other materials dating between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BCE probably come from a sounding or survey carried out in a different area.<sup>63</sup> A more recent inventory project concerning the unclassified materials in the late 1960s<sup>64</sup> allowed the re-examination of these two small clay finds.<sup>65</sup> Preserved in fragmentary form, they could be respectively interpreted as an equid and a breeding animal.

A group of terracotta figurines recovered from the important site of Shahr-i Sokhta in the province of Sistan and Baluchistan (Iran) are currently in storage at the Museo delle Civiltà-Sezione Giuseppe Tucci.<sup>66</sup> These artefacts come from the Italian excavations carried out in 1967–1978 and directed for several years by M. Tosi.<sup>67</sup> Owned by the former IsMEO (Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente) which financed the excavations, the figurines express the cultural development and cults of the first human communities formed during the 4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE and their interactions on the south-eastern Iranian plateau.

Apart from these small lots of clay figurines of known origin, the materials currently in Italian museums are of unknown provenance and were acquired in two ways: 1) by donation or purchase of old private collections; 2) by purchase on antiques markets (between the end of World War II and the 1980s). The first two groups of figurines arriving in Italy pertain to the Mesopotamian cultural horizon: amounting to 87 pieces, including a monovalve mould, they were acquired between 1930–1957. The oldest date back to 1930 when Furlani and Levi purchased them on the antiques market at Baghdad and later acquired by the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze.<sup>68</sup> They are altogether 69 figurines dating to Ur III-Old Babylonian period. The ratio between female and male figures is unbalanced in favour of the former, probably reflecting a choice of the purchasers rather than a real disproportion based on contextualised sets of figurines.<sup>69</sup> The most noteworthy types are the ‘nude female’ plaques belonging to a well-known Mesopotamian production and the plaques depicting men holding

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<sup>61</sup> Segret, 2012: 249.

<sup>62</sup> Furlani, 1934a, c–d.

<sup>63</sup> Ulivieri, 2012: 81.

<sup>64</sup> Pecorella, 1984.

<sup>65</sup> Ulivieri, 2012: 128, nos. 127–128.

<sup>66</sup> D’Amore, 1997: 102.

<sup>67</sup> Tosi, 1968; 1969; 1983; Salvatori / Vidale, 1997; Sajjadi, 2003: 21 and fns. 2–3.

<sup>68</sup> Valentini, 2013: 153.

<sup>69</sup> Roßberger 2018: 526.



curved staffs, such as the ‘bull-eared’ deity and the ‘shrouded god’.<sup>70</sup>

Another small group of Mesopotamian figurines consisting of 18 specimens is hosted at Mantova, in the Museo Civico di Palazzo Te. They were part of the collection of Ugo Sissa and cover a time span from the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE to the Parthian period. The largest group (8 specimens) is dated to Ur III–Old Babylonian period and includes an almost complete monovalve mould used to produce serially ‘nude female’ plaques: only facial features, headdress and jewellery (not showed in the mould) varied and probably were modelled by hand before cooking.<sup>71</sup> ‘Nude female’ plaques are present in this collection, as well as hand-modelled versions. We would also like to mention three figurines crudely modelled in the round assigned by Dominique Collon to the surface concentration of human and animal figurines as well as inscribed bricks of Nazi-Maruttash II uncovered by chance in 1945–1946 in a low mound c. 2 km north-west of the main palace of Dūr-Kurigalzu.<sup>72</sup> The presence of dedicatory inscriptions to Gula on some of the figurines identify this area as a temple dedicated to the goddess, only recently included in a detailed map of all excavated remains at Dūr-Kurigalzu.<sup>73</sup> The figurines at Mantova seem to share with all other specimens from the Mesopotamian site the iconography of supplicants with hands on different parts of their bodies (lower abdomen, leg). They were manufactured as part of the petition for healing indicating the area of affliction with the hand position.<sup>74</sup> The explanation for the specific features of the Mantova figurines probably need further investigation. However, during his stay in Iraq, U. Sissa visited ‘Aqar Quf, taking 70 photos of the ziqurat, brickworks, artefacts and local people.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, it cannot be ruled that the Italian architect picked up any of these figurines, which were also found in other areas of the site.<sup>76</sup>

The more recent acquisitions (starting from the 1970s) are a group of figurines produced in Syria but of unknown provenance (purchased on the antiques markets). Most of them, hosted in the Civico Museo Archeologico di Milano and the Museo delle Civiltà-Sezione Giuseppe Tucci, have been studied and published. The figurines are dated from the Early Bronze IV to the Persian period (c. 2500–330 BCE), albeit with some gaps. The earliest specimens preserved at Milano fall in the category of pillar-shaped anthropomorphic figurines of the Middle Euphrates region, well-known from several specimens retrieved in regular exca-

<sup>70</sup> Van Buren, 1930: 131–135, figs. 172–178, nos. 638, 643–644, 646, 649–652; Barrelet, 1968: 383, nos. 745, 747, 750, pl. XIII, LIII, LXXII.

<sup>71</sup> Collon, 2000: no. 164. On some general aspects of the serial production, see Di Paolo, 2018: 48–55.

<sup>72</sup> Collon, 2000: nos. 160, 165–170; Mustafa, 1947.

<sup>73</sup> Clayden, 2017: 458, fig. 16.01 (T5).

<sup>74</sup> Avalos, 1995: 209–210; Watanabe, 2017: 692.

<sup>75</sup> Urru, 2018: 118, fn. 38; 244–273 (photos), nos. 975, 985.

<sup>76</sup> Clayden, 2017: 466–467.

vations (Fig. 11). Most of the figurines at Milano have a pillar-shaped lower body, a flattened upper body with well-defined shoulders, applied arms, decoration at the neck, head covered with conical headdress or diadem and different hairstyles (necktail, neckbun).<sup>77</sup> The core region of this specific production is the Euphrates valley between Tell Sweyhat and Tell Bi'a, but it shows connections with other regions, such as the Northern Levant (Ebla, Hama), Jezirah (Tell Mozan) and occasionally the Tigridian area (Assur).<sup>78</sup>



Fig. 11: Clay figurine in the Civico Museo Archeologico di Milano (A.990.3.17). Provenance area: Euphrates valley. Second half of the 3rd millennium BCE.

These figurines appear in levels dated to the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE (Periods EME 4–5).<sup>79</sup> The Middle Bronze figurines are uncommon in Italy. A ram of the Carugo Collection in the Museo Archeologico Regionale di Aosta was dated to the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE,<sup>80</sup> but some specific features such as the applied eyes encircling the horns and the presence of an applied and incised band on the neck of the animal seem to indicate a date in the Middle Bronze age I–II. Further studies are needed for the refinement of the chronology of this object. The typical Middle Bronze I–II female figurines widely attested in the Northern Levant, with flattened body, arms brought forward, a bird-like aspect and the headdress stretched out in a comb-like shape, are represented by only one specimen in the Museo Civico Archeologico di Milano,<sup>81</sup> in addition to the figurine in the Museo of Archeologia di Pavia (see above).

<sup>77</sup> Di Paolo, 1999: 34–38 (A1–8).

<sup>78</sup> Sakal, 2015: 269–270 (Type MEFT A 02); Finkbeiner / Novak, 2015: 39–40 (EME 4–5).

<sup>79</sup> For their absolute dating, see the Periodization Table referring to the comparative stratigraphy at inter-regional level (ARCANE Project): [http://www.arcane.uni-tuebingen.de/EA-EM-EL\\_phasing\\_v5-4-6.pdf](http://www.arcane.uni-tuebingen.de/EA-EM-EL_phasing_v5-4-6.pdf).

<sup>80</sup> Ronc *et al.*, 2011: 127, no. 7 (ibex).

<sup>81</sup> Di Paolo, 1999: 52 (B1).

Lastly, it is worth of note the presence of Achaemenid figurines in the Museo delle Civiltà-Sezione Giuseppe Tucci, such as the category of ‘Persian riders’<sup>82</sup> characterized by the well-known combined technique of solid horse and hollow rider with stamped face typical of north Phoenician and north Syrian riders.<sup>83</sup>

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## 6. A focus on some collections in Piedmont, Lombardy, and Tuscany

### 6.1 Piedmont: the collection of the Museo di Antichità di Torino

The Museo di Antichità di Torino houses the largest collection of Mesopotamian artefacts in Italy. It consists of cuneiform tablets, reliefs and fragments of inscriptions from the Assyrian capitals Khorsabad/Dūr-Šarrukin and Nineveh, cylinder seals, stamped bricks, and a few more inscribed objects.<sup>84</sup> The collection was formed between 1847 and 1921: at that time, it was housed in the Regio Museo di Antichità greco-romane ed egizie, whose Egyptian collection formed the core of the now world-renowned Museo Egizio. When the collection of classical antiquities was separated from the Egyptian one in 1940, the Mesopotamian artefacts remained in the Museo Egizio, where they have been kept until they were moved to the Museo di Antichità in 2006.

The first Mesopotamian objects entered the collection during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mainly as occasional gifts from private individuals. The earliest and most famous of these gifts is a portrait of Sargon II from Khorsabad donated by the diplomat and archaeologist Paolo Emilio Botta to his hometown in 1847 (Fig. 12).<sup>85</sup>

A proper “campaign” of acquisitions was carried out by Ernesto Schiaparelli, director of the museum from 1894 until 1927. In 1896, he arranged an exchange of Mesoamerican objects with the Regio Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico di Roma, which gave in return a group of Egyptian and Near Eastern artefacts that originally belonged to the Kircher Museum. This fascinating institution, often regarded as the first museum in the world, was founded in 1651 by the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher and was initially housed in the Jesuit College, where the collection of antiquities, scientific tools, and curiosities “from all parts of the world” soon became a must-see attraction for pilgrims and travellers who visited Roma in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the museum was being

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<sup>82</sup> For this typology and its terminology, see Nunn, 2000: 42; Moorey, 2000: 469–486.

<sup>83</sup> D’Amore, 1997: 107–108, fig. 4.

<sup>84</sup> 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](https://cdli.ucla.edu/collections/turin/turin_it.html). For the cylinder seals, see Bergamini, 1987. The Assyrian reliefs have been the object of several publications: see e.g. Bergamini, 2011. For a brief history of the acquisitions, see Bergamini, 1995.

<sup>85</sup> Bergamini, 2011.

phased out of existence and its collections dispersed among several Italian museums.

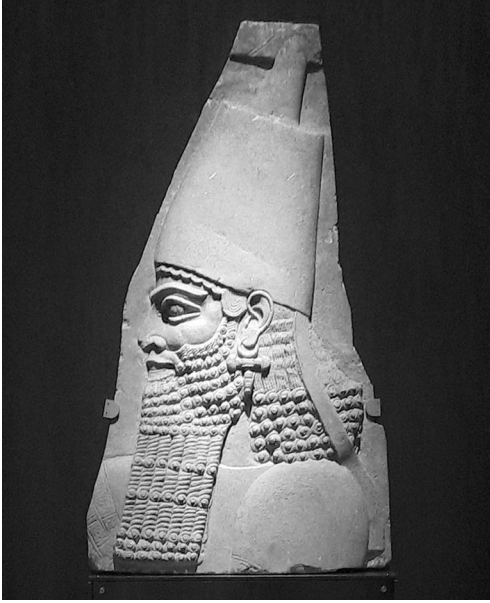


Fig. 12: Neo-Assyrian relief portraying Sargon II from Khorsabad in the Museo di Antichità – Musei Reali di Torino.

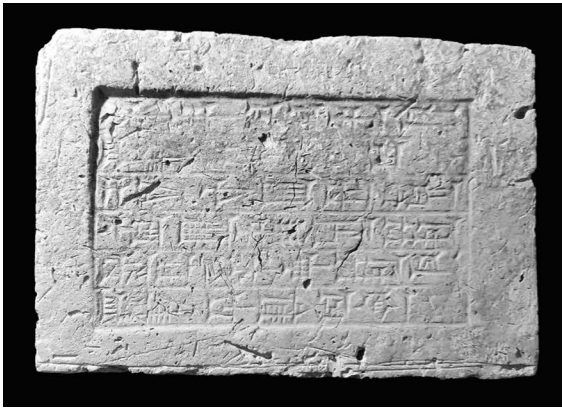


Fig. 13: Brick with stamped royal inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II (MAT 791) in the Museo di Antichità – Musei Reali di Torino and the brick's photogrammetry for the realization of the 3D model by D. Bursich. ©ArCOA.

The Near Eastern items acquired through this exchange have been identified with a stamped brick of Ur-Namma from Ur (MAT 788), a stamped brick of Sennacherib from Nineveh (MAT 789), two stamped bricks of Nebuchadnezzar from

Babylon (MAT 791–792, Fig. 13), the head of a royal guardsman from Khorsabad, and two cylinder seals (CGT 70020 and 70030).<sup>86</sup>

Despite being common artefacts in museums worldwide, the bricks of Ur-Namma and Nebuchadnezzar now in Turin deserve a special mention in the history of Near Eastern collections, since they might have entered the Kircher Museum in a very early phase of its centuries-long history as gifts from an illustrious donor.<sup>87</sup> In fact, it is possible that Kircher received them from Pietro Della Valle, 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. In his last book, *Turris Babel*, that appeared in 1679, Kircher states that Della Valle gave him a specimen of the bricks he found in Babylon's ruins, which most likely was a brick of Nebuchadnezzar. Since Della Valle collected an inscribed brick also during his visit to Ur, one may assume that also Ur-Namma's brick came into the holdings of the Kircher Museum as a gift from the Roman nobleman. If this reconstruction is correct, the bricks of Nebuchadnezzar and Ur-Namma now in the Museo di Antichità di Torino would be among the first cuneiform objects ever seen in Europe, long before the *kudurru* known as "caillou Michaux" arrived in Paris at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The numerically most important acquisition facilitated by Schiaparelli took place in 1921, when the Egyptian Museum bought a lot of 800 cuneiform tablets (dating mainly to the Third Dynasty of Ur and stemming from the archives of Umma and Puzriš-Dagan, with smaller groups of Old Akkadian and Old Babylonian documents) and 50 cylinder seals on the antiquity market in Paris. The purchase was arranged by Giustino Boson, one of the first Italian Assyriologists, who at that time was in Paris and acted as intermediary between the seller (a doctor stemming from Baghdad) and Schiaparelli.<sup>88</sup>

All these objects remained for a long time inaccessible to the wider public. After the collection was moved to the Museo di Antichità, the Assyrian reliefs together with a small selection of tablets, bricks and seals were put on display, but renovation works often prevented access to this part of the exhibition.

Finally, in February 2022, the museum inaugurated a new section devoted to the historical archaeological collections, which also includes two rooms devoted to the ancient Near East (Fig. 14). On this occasion, the whole collection was thoroughly catalogued and restored, and a photographic campaign was under-

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<sup>86</sup> Bergamini, 1995: 316. 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.

<sup>87</sup> See Devecchi, 2022.

<sup>88</sup> The history of this acquisition is currently being reconstructed by Elena Devecchi based on unpublished archival records kept in the Archivio di Stato di Torino.

taken, partly conducted by Daniele Bursich on behalf of the ArCOA project, who produced 3D models of a selected group of items (Fig. 13).

More than a century after Schiaparelli purchased the last important group of Mesopotamian antiquities, the collection finally has the visibility and accessibility it deserves, a big part of it being now freely accessible to visitors, students, and scholars.

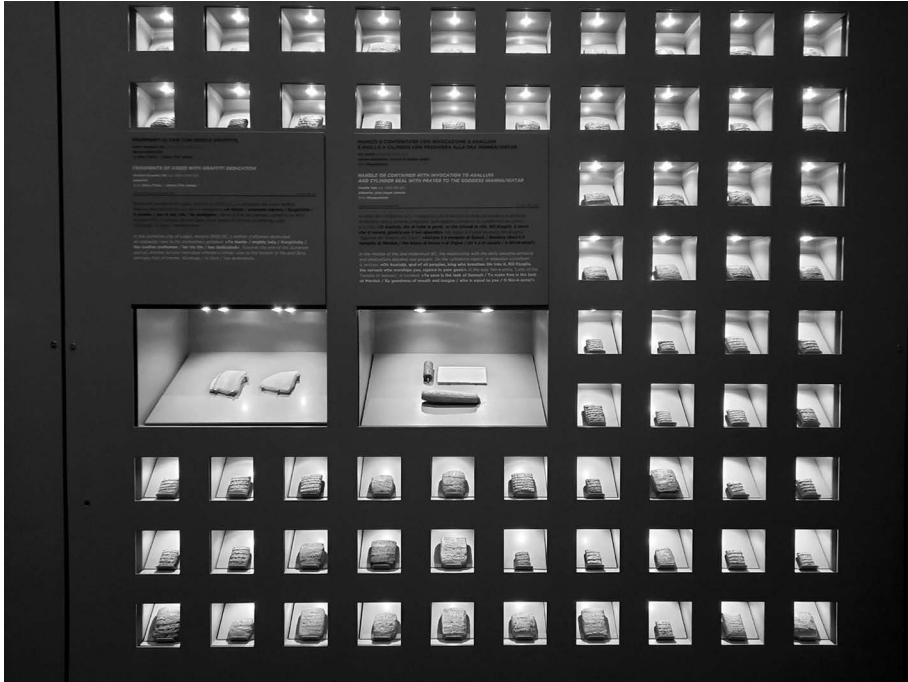


Fig. 14: The cuneiform tablets displayed in the Mesopotamian room of the new section devoted to the historical archaeological collection in the Museo di Antichità – Musei Reali di Torino.

## 6.2 Lombardy: the collection of the Civico Museo Archeologico Paolo Giovio di Como

The Near Eastern collections held in the territory of Lombardy were the focus of the ArCOA project in its first stages. In fact, the project started with a survey of the institutions in Lombardy holding small or large collections of artefacts from the Near Eastern regions (Fig. 15).<sup>89</sup> In detail, collections of oriental artefacts are located in Milan, scattered in different museums and institutions: the Civico Museo Archeologico (44 figurines and 15 cuneiform tablets), the Museo di Storia Naturale (housing one tablet), the Museo della Scienza e della Tecnica (two tab-

<sup>89</sup> As a starting point on the survey of Oriental collections in Italy, see Di Paolo, 2005. On Near Eastern terracotta figurines in Lombardy, see Di Paolo, 1999.

lets), the Università del Sacro Cuore di Milano (72 tablets) and, finally, the Accademia di Brera. At Como, the Civico Museo Archeologico Paolo Giovio houses the Garovaglio collection; at Mantova, the Sissa Collection is in the Museo Civico di Palazzo Te;<sup>90</sup> at Pavia, the oriental artefacts are kept in the Civici Musei (one seal) and in the Museo di Archeologia dell'Università (one figurine).<sup>91</sup> Finally, at Biassono (near Monza), four figurines, two oil-lamps and one tablet are today stored in the Museo Civico Carlo Verri.<sup>92</sup>

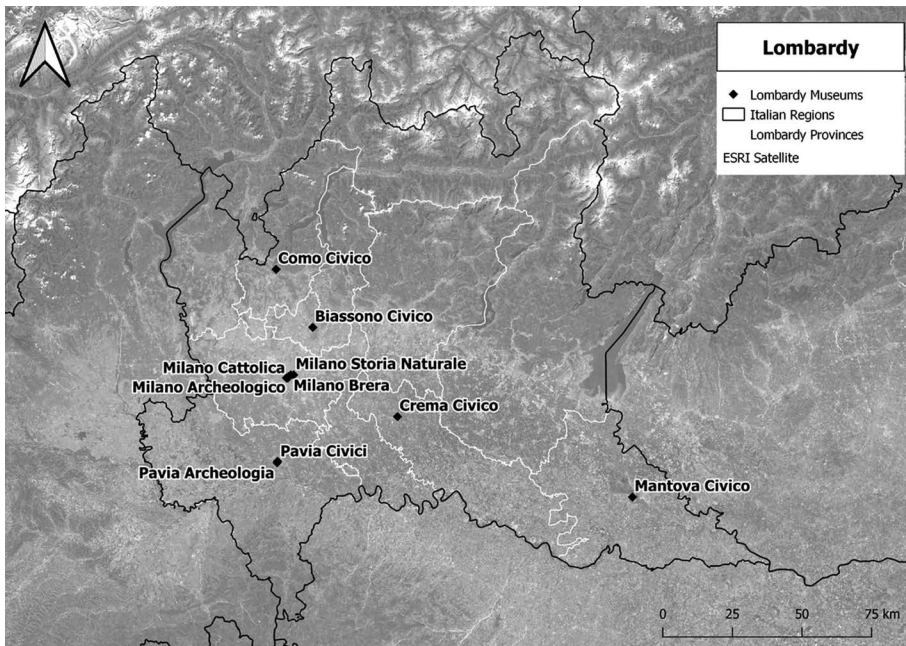


Fig. 15: Map of the institutions hosting ANE materials in Lombardy. Map by V. Oselini with QGIS, ©ArCOA. Base map: ESRI World Imagery Map, data July 2022 (obtained through QuickMapServices QGIS plugin).

The collection of Mesopotamian antiquities in the Civico Museo Archeologico Paolo Giovio di Como consists of two fragments of Neo-Assyrian reliefs, an inscribed brick, an envelope, 10 cylindrical seals, one Achaemenid and three Sasanian stamp seals.<sup>93</sup> This collection derives from the acquisition of the previous private collection of Alfonso Garovaglio, a jurist and lawyer, but also a collector of antiquities and a traveller, who had long been involved in archaeological

<sup>90</sup> The Sissa collection includes ceramics, glyptics, lithic material, toreutics; a fragment of an inscribed alabaster vase, seven tablets, a bulla, an inscribed brick.

<sup>91</sup> Di Paolo, 1997.

<sup>92</sup> Di Paolo, 2005.

<sup>93</sup> Ballerini, 1909: 535–571; see also Betti, 2007; Bergamini, 2010.

fieldwork in the Lake Como area.<sup>94</sup> Some of the Near Eastern artefacts in his private collection were acquired during the journey that Garovaglio undertook to Syria and Mesopotamia between the years 1886 and 1887. In 1869, he had already made a trip to Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, but his travel across the Near East in 1886–1887 is the most important journey of his entire life.<sup>95</sup> The traveller was motivated by the desire to visit the places made famous by the excavations of Paolo Emilio Botta and Henry Layard in the middle of the same century, although he did not hesitate to express his frustration seeing the state to which the wall reliefs were reduced.<sup>96</sup> In that special occasion, Garovaglio also took the opportunity, given by the travel, to purchase archaeological artefacts for his private collection, hosted in his villa in Loveno near Menaggio.

When Garovaglio died in 1904, the objects, passed by testamentary legacy to the Civico Museo Archeologico di Como, inaugurated in 1878, which Garovaglio himself had helped to promote. In his fabulous holiday residency at Loveno, he had set up a small museum, with prehistoric, protohistoric, Phoenician, Etruscan, Greek and Roman artefacts, as well as objects from ancient Egypt, including the sarcophagus and mummy of Isiuret, priestess of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty. All these objects were moved to the Museum.

The different ways in which Garovaglio's collection was constituted can be illustrated by the case of the inscribed objects kept in the Museum, that is the Nebuchadnezzar inscribed brick and the envelope, acquired at different times and in different manners. Although Ballerini in his publication of 1909 states that both items were purchased in Baghdad, we can reasonably assume that the Neo-Babylonian inscribed brick must have already been part of the collection of Loveno, at some time before Garovaglio's journey to Syria and Mesopotamia. On the other hand, the envelope, dated to the Old Babylonian period, was acquired directly by the collector during his travel to Mesopotamia, probably in Baghdad in March 1887, together with the cylinder seals also part of the collection kept in the Civico Museo Archeologico Paolo Giovio di Como, as clearly demonstrated by the letters written by Garovaglio to his daughter Adele (Fig. 16).

The circumstance is recalled in the archive documents, specifically in the letters to his daughter Adele, published in a volume entitled *Viaggio in Siria e Mesopotamia. Lettere Famigliari*, published by the author in 1896, and reprinted in 2005.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, in the letters referring to the visit to Baghdad, where he stayed for a week, from March 25<sup>th</sup> to April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1887, Garovaglio mentioned the Mesopo-

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<sup>94</sup> Uboldi / Meda Riquier, 2010.

<sup>95</sup> Pedrazzi, 2010: 269–283; Uboldi, 2010: 234–267.

<sup>96</sup> According to him, Nineveh was left with only the crumbs of Layard's rich banquet ("cadute dal sontuoso banchetto di Botta, Layard, Smith ... imbandito in Europa", Garovaglio, 1896: 165).

<sup>97</sup> Garovaglio, 1896.



tamian artefacts acquired to enrich his own collection of antiquities at Lovenno. In addition to the cylinder seals, which are also part of the collection now in the Museum of Como, there is mention of an inscribed “brick”, in his words “un mattone in forma di piccolo cuscinetto”, which corresponds to the inscribed clay envelope of an Old Babylonian sale contract.



Fig. 16: Old Babylonian clay envelope – Museo Civico Archeologico Paolo Giovio of Como.

In the same archive documents, Garovaglio also recalls the different ways in which the two fragments of Assyrian reliefs in his collection were acquired. In Baghdad, he received as a gift, from the French vice-consul Siouffi, the fragment of a relief from the palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh, with a theory of guards, as known from the letters to his daughter. On the other hand, the fragment of the head of a slave carrying a weight from the palace of Sennacherib, was acquired by Garovaglio in circumstances and at a time that are not clearly understood: the fragment bears a dedication by Layard to his friend Giuseppe Molteni, dated September 27<sup>th</sup> 1864, when Molteni was the Director of the Brera Gallery; but we ignore when this piece reached the Garovaglio’s collection in Lovenno. Probably, it happened before the trip to Mesopotamia in 1886–87, according to some references in the letters.

### 6.3 A regional case-study: Tuscany

A good case-study at regional level is Tuscany: a region that has a rich museum heritage, with some institutes housing oriental objects. As it might be expected, most of the oriental collections concern ‘late’ period materials, especially Medieval Islamic artefacts, which arrived in Tuscany starting from the Renaissance, when trade relations with North Africa and the Levant were very strong (there are at least 46 public and private institutes that host “oriental” materials in this broad sense). There are some institutes, however, that also host ancient Near Eastern collections, which are heterogeneous in type, history and origin.

A first noteworthy aspect concerns the legal status of the collection and of the museum or institute that houses the collection: it is the legal status, in fact, that usually determines how accessible the objects are to both specialists and the public, due to the different purpose of the institutes.

In the case of Tuscany, two collections belong to State museums (the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze and the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Arezzo), one collection belongs to an Ecclesiastical Museum and one to a University museum. The accessibility of these collections is indeed very different: the objects in the State museums are on permanent display in the case of Arezzo, where some South Arabian statuettes are exhibited. In the case of Florence, which has a much richer and more assorted collection, the objects are not on permanent display but have been temporarily exhibited on different occasions (in 1966, 2013, and 2014), in addition to being published in complete catalogues and appearing, as single or small groups of objects, in other exhibitions in the form of temporary loans (recently, for example, in the exhibitions “From Assyria to Iberia” at the New York MET in 2014/2015, and “Nineveh – Heart of an Ancient Empire” in the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities of Leiden in 2018). All the artefacts are also accessible on request to scholars in storage facilities.

The situation is different for the other two museums: an Assyrian relief and two cuneiform inscriptions that belong to the ecclesiastical collection of the Florence Diocese are known in the literature, but have never been exhibited.<sup>98</sup> The same situation is repeated for the collection of the Museo di Antropologia dell’Università di Firenze, where noteworthy Pre- and Protohistoric lithic industries from various Near Eastern regions, which were collected mostly during the 1930s, merged into the general “Collezione palenologica” of the Museum, yet no item has been exhibited or published so far. In this case, it should be noted that the survey carried out for the ArCOA project has led to the ‘rediscovery’ of these industries and to new attention by Museum staff towards this group of finds. Our hope is that they will soon be studied and published.

The opportunity to have a single database that contains a consistent description of collections that are so different in terms of accessibility will certainly be one of the main project outcomes. The scientific community will thus be able to become familiar with objects that, although already formally known because they have been catalogued and, in some cases, published, have never been seen, not even by specialists.

The particular case of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze deserves special attention: the Museum has an important Near Eastern collection, both for the intrinsic value of the artefacts and for its history. Indeed, the bulk of the collection consists of the findings from the first Italian archaeological expedition to

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<sup>98</sup> The cuneiform inscriptions are displayed in <https://beweb.chiesacattolica.it/>, searching for <tavoletta epigrafica> and <Firenze>.

Mesopotamia, namely the one led in 1933 by Furlani and Levi at the site of Qasr Shamamuk, the Assyrian Kilizu, in Northern Iraq, as well as those collected by the same expedition during a preliminary survey in Southern Iraq in 1930 (Fig. 17).

Other objects from Anatolia, Syria and Iran were added to these finds over time, through donations and exchanges. All this has made the Florentine collection become extremely varied, both in terms of the type of materials, and of their origin and chronology.<sup>99</sup> All the finds have been catalogued and their publication is almost complete (the last volume of the series dedicated to the “oriental collection” of the Museum, that is, the one on cuneiform documents, is currently in progress) but the objects were exhibited only for a short period during the 1960s, but they are currently not on display nor does the museum have an overall online catalogue (this is a feature that distinguishes the majority of collections in Italian state museums).

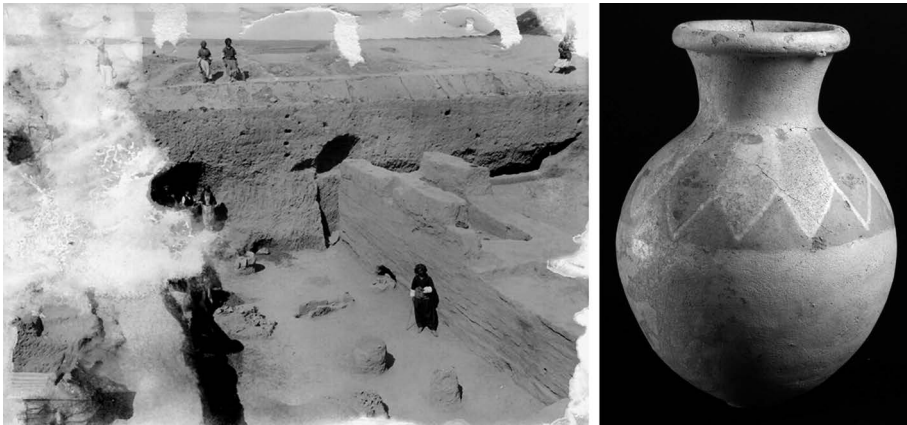


Fig. 17: The Assyrian necropolis of Qasr Shamamuk/Kilizu in a photo taken by Doro Levi at the end of the 1933 campaign and a Neo-Assyrian glazed bottle from the excavations, now at the Archaeological Museum of Florence (inv. 93789; courtesy of Direzione regionale musei della Toscana).

Cataloguing through the ArCOA project, therefore, will allow users to have an updated and consistent database of the collection in a single repository, thus ensuring its best use and accessibility, both for the public and, above all, for specialists.

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<sup>99</sup> The collection has been published in two separate volumes, the first one focused on the 1930–1933 expedition (Anastasio / Conti / Ulivieri, 2012), and the second one dealing with the material from different provenances (D’Agostino / Felli / Valentini, 2013).

## 7. Towards a unified virtual museum of the Ancient Near East in Italy

The ArCOA Project, which started with an earlier and preliminary survey of the Ancient Near Eastern collections held in museums in Lombardy, has become over time a broad, collaborative, open, multidisciplinary project, aiming at the valorisation and wider use of the artefacts from Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East.

This specific segment of the tangible cultural heritage in Italy also has major potential from a social point of view; in fact, enhancing knowledge and promoting the fruition of these collections not only mean generating a useful tool for specialists in the field – archaeologists, philologists, historians. It also means, above all, building an instrument useful to society. In fact, the presence of historically and culturally relevant artefacts of allogenic origin on Italian territory is a concrete expression of cultural diversity, that is believed to be of fundamental value to humankind and that – in the domain of culture – plays a crucial role, similar to the role played by biodiversity in nature.<sup>100</sup> In the spirit of the Faro Conference,<sup>101</sup> the centrality of cultural work aimed at promoting the participatory valorisation of cultural heritage, enhancing the active role of local communities in the processes of recognizing and transmitting shared cultural values, is increasingly evident. From this perspective, a greater and improved knowledge of the collections present in Italy, coming from the Ancient Near East, would trigger positive trends in terms of an inclusive valorisation, on multiple levels.

First and foremost, the artefacts on the Italian territory represent a gateway to the cultural world of the Ancient Near East, allowing us to highlight shared cultural roots, and enhancing the idea of cultural diversity and exchange, encouraging, and fostering positive coexistence processes within a multicultural society.

Second, tracing patterns of movement of ancient objects from the countries of origin allows us to understand the late 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and then early 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian cultural milieu: i.e., the interest in Biblical places, the emergence of early archaeological research in Near Eastern sites, the phenomenon of the cultural journey and the intersection (and interaction) between cultural heritage and the domain of diplomacy.<sup>102</sup> This very rich scenario, consisting of travellers, scholars,

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<sup>100</sup> Seitel, 2001. This concept was clarified as early as 1989, when the “Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore”, approved by the UNESCO General Conference, highlighted the difference between the material and the immaterial cultural heritage, recognising both as having an equal worth and value, as an expression of cultural diversity, plurality, and the necessity of exchange to foster innovation and creativity.

<sup>101</sup> Montella *et al.*, 2016. Signed in Faro, Portugal, by the Council of Europe, on 27 August 2005 (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice/faro-convention>), it has been ratified and the execution of the framework convention approved by Italy only in 2020: <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2020;133>.

<sup>102</sup> Di Paolo, 2012; Savino, 2017.

art merchants, diplomats, antiquarians, has very often represented the fertile background from which some Italian local museum institutions, at least those of medium or small size, have also originated. Therefore, familiarizing the public with the different figures who concretely gave life to the collections also means making the fruition of the artefacts more vivid: the original and ancient history of the artefact is intertwined with the history of its acquisition, through the various stages of the journey from the East to Italy, up to the current location of each object.

And thirdly, revealing, enhancing, and disseminating this poorly known heritage to a wider public also enables the involvement of those communities and social groups living in Italy but coming from the same regions of origin of the artefacts.

Participatory valorisation can also be achieved through modern technologies, which allow the creation of new forms of fruition and thus a wider and more widespread accessibility of heritage. The construction of the data entry allowed us to organise data into a coherent and functional system for the purposes of the project. The three-dimensional restitution (through the realisation of 3D models) of some of the most significant objects – including fragments of Assyrian reliefs, inscribed bricks, and tablets – allows these finds to be enjoyed also by the public unable to physically reach a certain museum. The 3D models, in fact, are gradually being made available on the website under construction, which is intended to bring together in one virtual place all the eastern collections scattered throughout Italy. Through a web-GIS, the user of the website will be able to move through the different Italian locations where the collections are now housed, but also through the archaeological sites of origin of the artefacts, in the Near East.

The website, which will be available online as of 2024, will therefore allow a real dissemination of knowledge of this “foreign” heritage, which, in spite of its profound “cultural otherness”, is nevertheless very closely linked to the shared Mediterranean cultural roots, and to the Italian cultural history of the last centuries. Indeed, the sharing of this common heritage is made possible by emphasizing the relations between Italian scholars and foreign colleagues, the history of the journeys to Western Asia, the accounts and notebooks of travellers, and the development of diplomatic relations.

If, on the one hand, the Near Eastern collections in Italy are obviously scattered over the territory, located in small or large, central or peripheral museums, on the other, new technologies and the resources of the virtual world allow us to bring together the artefacts in a single unified Virtual Museum of the Ancient Near East: seals, tablets, inscribed bricks, figurines, fragments of reliefs and other objects, can be presented and narrated in a contextual and “choral” manner, with attention to their reception by a wide audience in accordance with the principles of storytelling. At the same time, this heritage can also be easily made available and immediately accessible to scholars.

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