

MESOPOTAMIAN COLLECTIONS IN ITALY: THE PROBLEM OF PROVENANCE INSIDE THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN WEST AND EAST

Since 1995, the ICEVO = Istituto di Studi sulle Civiltà dell'Egeo e del Vicino Oriente of Italian CNR has been working on a research project aimed at identifying, recording and cataloguing the Italian public and private collections, which include Aegean, Cypriote and Near Eastern pieces.

The project (you can see www.icevo.cnr.it) to be carried out in agreement with the hosting Museums concerned, aims to record, study and edit in a systematic those collections which are as yet unpublished or little known. The purpose is also to reinterpret known material in the light of progress made in research, and to contribute to our knowledge of the ways and means by which this particular way of collecting antiquities developed in Italy. This short note is concerning with the problem of provenance of Mesopotamian materials as mirror of the controversial archaeological activity in Iraq from XIX century until now. The following list of Mesopotamian nineteenth-century collections is organised according to a chronological order. Save Perugia, all Italian collections include one or more Assyrian reliefs coming from the Neo-Assyrian palaces. The major part of the reliefs is acquired in the second half of the same century, only just after the first French and English excavations and through the intermediation of some diplomats-archaeologists: Paule-Emile Botta and A.H. Layard.

from 1838 (glyptics)	Musei Vaticani, Roma	Assyrian reliefs/glyptics/cuneiform tablets
1847	Museo Egizio, Torino	Assyrian reliefs
between 1849-1856	Sede Arcivescovile, Firenze	Assyrian reliefs
1860 c.	Museo Civico di Archeologia Ligure, Genova	Assyrian reliefs
from 1872	Museo Archeologico, Firenze	Assyrian reliefs/glyptics
1886-1887	Museo "P. Giovio", Como	Assyrian reliefs/glyptics
from 1893 at least	Museo Barracco, Roma	Assyrian reliefs/glyptics/bronzes/cuneiform inscriptions
end of XIX century	Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Venezia	Assyrian reliefs
end of XIX century	Museo Archeologico, Perugia	glyptics

So, from its beginnings, the practice of archaeology in the Middle East is strictly linked to the political and cultural realities. The development of the discipline of Mesopotamian archaeology cannot be isolated from this colonialist enterprise. Mesopotamia represents the Otherness, a phenomenon within Western archaeological thought, a product of the poetics of a Western historical narrative. The material available for collection comes to us from the Other which is essentially different and distant. It is interpreted in the light of understood parameters. Collecting but also exhibition of collections in big European museums achieve the construction of otherness. This conception also affects the typology of the antiquities chosen during this initial phase of Near Eastern archaeology. So the "gigantic" objects which come from the Middle East (reliefs, sculptures, inscriptions) are an expression of ancient centralised "slave" states, of typically Oriental despotism (ancient and modern). So, the provenance of objects is not an indispensable information. The materiality of objects or their visual and narrative language mean more than their original setting.

Museo del Tesoro della Collegiata di S. Orso, Aosta	glyptics
Museo Egizio, Torino	glyptics
Museo Civico di Palazzo Te, Mantova	pottery/glyptics/sculpture/bronzes
Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche, Faenza	pottery
Museo Archeologico, Firenze	pottery/terracotta figurines/ glasses
Musei Vaticani, Città del Vaticano	glyptics, pottery, terracotta figurines/bronzes
Museo dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale, Napoli	glyptics

After the II World War (from 50's), many archaeological objects coming from Iraq appear on antiquarian markets of Europe and North-America, though existing a law (No. 59) on Iraqi antiquities as from 1936. Often, materials preserved inside Italian museums are obtained by purchase on antiquities markets of Bagdad, but also London and Paris, the two main international centres for the high-end antiquities trade. Traditionally, the antiquities market functions without the transmission of information relating to the provenance of purchases. So, provenance is not seen as an issue. The situation changes when many museums, some of them motivated by their having signed the International Council of Museums code of ethics. In some cases that date is arbitrarily set around 1970, date when the UNESCO convention on the means of prohibiting and preventing the illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property was opened for signature.

No provenance is still the norm today even for objects of considerable worth, but it becomes more of an issue at that level as the chance of the dealer losing the object through a claim for repossession by a true owner increases. In the meantime, there is provenance information in the market now than ever before, but objects with provenance still form a small fraction of all the objects on the market. During and after the Second Gulf War, an huge quantity of antiquities has been looted and stolen from museums and archaeological sites and appeared on the market through illicit trafficking. Many projects are devoted to monitor this flow towards Europe, America and Japan. Due to this catastrophic situation, ICEVO decided against studying or publishing archaeological materials presumably coming from Iraqi territory.

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This article should be cited like this: S. Di Paolo, Mesopotamian Collections in Italy: the problem of provenance inside the dialectic between West and East, *Forum Archaeologiae* 55/VI/2010 (<http://farch.net>).