Rodolfo Fattovich (1945–2018)

Rodolfo Fattovich died in Rome on the morning of 23rd March 2018. Up to his retirement in 2014 he taught Ethiopian Archaeology, Egyptian Archaeology and for many years also Egyptology at the Università degli studi di Napoli “L’Orientale” (previously Istituto Universitario Orientale). He was also a research fellow and visiting professor in the Department of Archaeology of Boston University, visiting scholar in the African Studies Center of Boston University, and for many years visiting professor of Archaeology at Addis Ababa University.

He was a honorary member of ISMEO-Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l’Oriente, and a member of several scientific societies, such as the International Society for Nubian Studies, International Society of

Egyptology, Society of Africanist Archaeologists, Forum for African Archaeology and Cultural Heritage, British Institute in Eastern Africa, Sudan Archaeological Research Society, Istituto Italiano per la Civiltà Egizia, Istituto Italiano di Antropologia, Istituto Italiano di Paleontologia Umana, Istituto Italo-Africano, Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO), Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (IsIAO), Centro Studi e Ricerche Ligabue, Centro Studi sul Deserto Orientale. In 1989 he was awarded of the "Giorgio Maria Sangiorgi" prize for History and Ethnography of Africa by the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei.

Rodolfo studied Egyptology and Prehistoric archaeology in Trieste, where he was born on 17th November 1945, and Rome. Actually, his fascination for Egyptology started even before entering the university. In particular, he used to mention the fact that his very precocious interest for the earliest phases of the Egyptian culture emerged when he received a copy of the "Egyptian Grammar" by Alan Gardiner as a gift when he was still a Lyceum student, and he was stricken by the photo of the Narmer palette in the book. Rodolfo had the chance to have as a teacher already in the Classical Lyceum Francesco Petrarca of Trieste Claudia Dolzani. After her habilitation as university professor of Egyptology, Claudia Dolzani continued being his teacher also at the University of Trieste, where he obtained his MA with honors in 1969 with a dissertation on the Texts of Pyramids. After that, Rodolfo moved to Sapienza University of Rome, where he continued his studies with Sergio Donadoni for Egyptology and Salvatore Maria Puglisi for Prehistory. In Rome, Rodolfo specialized in Predynastic Egypt. Since then, Rodolfo was particularly attracted by the African roots of the Egyptian cultures, and the relations between Egypt and inner Africa. In the meantime, he was encouraged by Lanfranco Ricci, an eminent specialist of Ethiopian studies, to focus also on the archaeology of the Ethio-Eritrean highlands. Actually, when Ricci wanted to start developing the field of Ethiopian Archaeology in Italy, Donadoni and Puglisi suggested his name. At that time, the archaeology of protohistoric and historic Ethiopia was a field of study traditionally related to Near Eastern and, more specifically, Arabian Archaeology. The main and deeply innovative contribution that Rodolfo gave, was precisely to point out the bonds with the African Nile valley traditions characterizing the pre-Aksumite phase in northern Ethiopia and Eritrea (1st millennium BC): Rodolfo showed that the pre-Aksumite pottery, whose study he started in the National Museum of Ethiopia and in framework of the archaeological expeditions directed by Francis Anfray at Yeha (1971 and 1972) and Ricci at Seglame and Bieta Giyorgis (1974), was indeed representing the latest echo of ceramic traditions originating at least four millennia earlier in Egypt and Nubia.

It was therefore foreseeable that, after becoming an assistant professor of Ethiopian Archaeology at the Istituto Universitario Orientale in 1975 by the will of Lanfranco Ricci, Rodolfo would try to investigate more systematically the relations between the Nile valley and the regions S-E of it by means of a specific research project in an intermediate area such as the Kassala region, in the lowlands of Eastern Sudan, just across the border with Eritrea. After systematically going through the few collections available for that region in the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum, the Italian Archaeological Mission to the Sudan (Kassala) started fieldwork in 1980 and continued up to 1995. At that time the Kassala region was practically unexplored from an archaeological point of view and therefore a proper cultural and chronological sequence needed to be elaborated. In doing this, Rodolfo was tightly collaborating with the American-Sudanese expedition of the Southern Methodist University (Dallas) and the University of Khartoum directed by Anthony Marks and Abbas Mohammed Ali. The joint seminal paper published by the three scholars in "African Archaeological Review" 2 (1984) is a result of this collaboration, which also resulted in the exchange of team members of the expeditions. This allowed a common descriptive approach, as well as the merging of the data of the surveys, and the elaboration of a comprehensive analysis of the settlement pattern of the region, whose study represented the PhD research of a young student from Southern Methodist University, now a colleague, Karim Sadr, who was a member of the Italian Expedition for several years. In this way, a regional sequence beginning in the 6th millennium BC and ending in the 16th century AD, as well as the main economic and cultural turning points of it, such as the emergence of an agropastoral adaptation at least since the 4th millennium BC, the rise of hierarchic societies in the 3rd millennium BC, and the emergence of an increasingly mobile style of life since the 2nd millennium BC, were outlined. In particular, the involvement of Eastern Sudan in a broad exchange network extending from Egypt to southern Arabia in the 3rd–2nd millennia BC, led Rodolfo to suggest in papers presented at the International Conferences of Egyptology of Munich and Turin, and later on in an article in the volume "Egypt and Africa" (London 1991), that the region may have been part of the land of Punt, from where Egyptians imported exotic commodities since the 5th Dynasty. Of course, to properly investigate all these issues, the research team in Kassala always had a strong interdisciplinary connotation. Indeed, the Kassala project was always felt by Rodolfo as "his project", the most determinant and crucial at the beginning of his scholarly life because it was the first to give him a broad scientific reputation in Italy and abroad, and also because all his research interests were somehow intertwined in this project.

At the Istituto Universitario Orientale Rodolfo entered in a very vibrant and inspiring academic community, with scholars like Maurizio Taddei, Claudio Barocas, Maurizio Tosi, Alessandro de Maigret, Yaqob Beyene and, some years later, Paolo Marrassini, to remain in the fields of archaeology, Egyptology and Ethiopian Studies. It was in this framework and with the active support of prestigious Italian scientific societies, such as the Istituto Italo-Africano and the IsMEO (later on IsIAO and now ISMEO) that systematic projects of archaeological investigations on both sides of the Red Sea were conceived and launched in the late Seventies and early Eighties, together with Maurizio Tosi and Alessandro de Maigret: indeed the expedition in the Kassala region was a part of all this. It was also in the same framework that the research project of the Italian Expedition at Naqada in Upper Egypt, co-directed by Rodolfo, Maurizio Tosi and Claudio Barocas, started in 1977, with the aim of investigating the formative phases of the Egyptian state by resuming fieldwork at a site already known as crucial for the issue because of the excavations conducted there by F. Petrie in 1894–1895. The Italian team focused on the South Town, where tokens and sealings, at that time the earliest evidence of administrative activities in Egypt, were collected. But for Maurizio and Rodolfo, Naqada was also a potentially crucial site for understanding the relations between earliest Egypt and the Red Sea via the Wadi Hammamat and, through the Red Sea, the connections with the Horn of Africa, the Near and Middle East.

Always related to the issue of the origins of the Egyptian state and the incorporation in it of the Delta, as well as to the one of the relations with the Near East was the Italian Expedition at Tell el-Farkha (Eastern Delta of the Nile), of the Centro Studi e Ricerche Ligabue, co-directed by Rodolfo and Sandro Salvatore, which operated from 1986 to 1990. The expedition brought to light traces of Old Kingdom mud brick structures, perhaps estates, and just few traces of the earlier phases of use of the site, whose exploration had to be suspended because of budget shortage and technical problems. These phases were extensively investigated by a Polish Mission in more recent years.

From 1993, after the end of the Ethiopian civil war, Rodolfo went back to Ethiopia, where he co-directed up to 2002 with Kathryn A. Bard (Boston University) an Italian-American joint research project at Bieta Giyorgis, the hill overlooking the main stelae field at Aksum. Indeed, a couple of sites on top of Bieta Giyorgis were already partially investigated by him with Lanfranco Ricci in 1974, when they were focusing on two Late Aksumite and Post-Aksumite churches on the southern edge of the hill, while an extensive cemetery with monolithic stelae more to the North was reserved for future investigations. It was precisely in this cemetery (Ona Enda Aboi Zewge) and in the settlement

nearby (Ona Nagast) that the earliest traces of the Aksumite culture (the Proto-Aksumite phase) and possibly state, dating from the 4th/3rd century BC, i.e. four centuries earlier than previously thought, were brought to light by the Italian-American team. The fresh data from Bieta Giyorgis also supported the hypothesis by Rodolfo about the links between the cultures of the Ethio-Eritrean highlands and those of Eastern Sudan and the Nile Valley. In two articles published in 1987 and 1989 respectively in "Journal of Ethiopian Studies" and "Archéologie du Nil Moyen", Rodolfo had already traced some aspects of the Aksumite funerary rituals back to the cultures of Eastern Sudan, such as the use of monolithic stelae as funerary markers. The Proto-Aksumite stelae of Ona Enda Aboi Zewge were now supporting this view. From the very beginning, the project at Bieta Giyorgis was also characterized by a strong paleoenvironmental approach, by the interest for reconstructing the man-environment dynamics and the environmental history, also in order to understand the complex processes which led to the present situation in northern Ethiopia and Eritrea, characterized by environmental hazards and by the challenge of planning strategies for sustainable development. For this reason, not only archaeozoology and paleobotany, but also off-site and landscape archaeology, as well as geoarchaeology played a crucial role in the project. Extensive reports of the research activities were regularly published in the journal "Rassegna di Studi Etiopici", while the final report, on which Rodolfo was intensively working in the last years, is finally nearing completion.

In the meantime, also his commitment for the capacity building of Ethiopia, which started in the early Nineties, when for many years he was a visiting professor of archaeology at Addis Ababa University for the Italian Cooperation, continued: he, together with his colleague and very good friend Kassaye Begashaw, were crucial in launching the undergraduate and MA programs in archaeology and heritage management at Addis Ababa University, which led to the establishment of a full-fledged Department of Archaeology and Heritage Management. More recently, Rodolfo was also crucial in the first phase of the program of the Italian Cooperation aimed at establishing a PhD program in Archaeology and Heritage Management at Addis Ababa University. The program, which will hopefully start in the coming years, leaves his deep imprints.

In the same years, Rodolfo was increasingly concerned about the issue of the heritage management in the Aksum region, as shown by the book "The Aksum Archaeological Area: A Preliminary Assessment", coauthored with K.A. Bard and some specialists of heritage management, and published in Naples in 2000. Later on, he was involved in the World Bank projects conducted in 2005 and 2006, aimed at recording and mapping the sites and monuments of

the Aksum region, facing the challenges of an impetuous urban development, and at forming tourist guides, as well as, from 2005 to 2009, in the UNESCO technical committee for the restitution of the Aksum stele looted by the Italians in 1937.

The interest for the relations between Egypt and Africa, very evident at the beginning of his career, continued to be crucial for Rodolfo up to the very end. Feeling that more intensive research had to be conducted on the western side of the Red Sea, at the end of the Nineties he wanted to start a research project at the site of the port of Adulis, in Eritrea. Being impossible for him to do so for several reasons, with a grant he got from the ISIAO, in 2000, he resumed investigations at Mersa/Wadi Gawasis, the harbor on the Egyptian Red Sea coast from where the Middle Kingdom expeditions to the Land of Punt were launched, discovered in 1976 by Abdel Moneim Al-Hakim Sayed, an Egyptian colleague with whom Rodolfo established scientific and personal links. Also this project took place in the framework of the strong bond with Kathryn A. Bard and Boston University. These investigations with the contemporary French project at Ayn Soukhna brought to light undisputable evidence of the Pharaonic involvement in the Red Sea, which was still questioned at that time. Crucial elements were collected on the ancient Egyptian shipbuilding and maritime technology, on the organization and management of the expeditions. Indeed, Mersa/Wadi Gawasis brought Rodolfo back—at least ideally—to Kassala, as the harbor provided several elements confirming his hypothesis of the involvement of Eastern Sudan—but also of Eritrea-Ethiopia and Southern Arabia—in the Punt exchange network. In this perspective, the invitation to give the Raymond and Beverley Sackler Foundation Distinguished Lecture in Egyptology, in the British Museum in 2011, whose title was “Egypt’s trade with Punt: Recent discoveries on the Red Sea coast”, and the related International Egyptological Colloquium, entitled “Mariners and traders: connections between the Red Sea littoral, Arabia and beyond”, truly represented the achievement and the crowing of a life of research for Rodolfo. A report of the first five field seasons of the project at Mersa/Wadi Gawasis, “Harbor of the Pharaohs to the Land of Punt”, was published in Naples in 2007, a second report of the fieldwork up to 2011 is nearing completion and a posthumous book coauthored with K.A. Bard, “Seafaring Expeditions to Punt in the Middle Kingdom. Excavations at Mersa Gawasis, Egypt”, has just been published.

The last archaeological project that Rodolfo promoted is the one at Seglamen, a pre-Aksumite site where he was already working with Ricci in the early Seventies, and where he decided to go back in 2010. There, he collected crucial data on the pre-Aksumite phase in the Aksum region, again apparently deprived of any consistent South Arabian cultural trait, except for the epigraphic

and artistic production, and pointed out some elements of continuity between the pre-Aksumite and the Aksumite phases, like e.g. the use of stelae as funerary markers, in turn perhaps rooted in much earlier traditions also connected to the Eritrean-Sudanese lowlands. A first report of the fieldwork conducted at Seglamen, published in Naples in 2010, was coauthored by him and his team members.

Reports of the research projects at Seglamen and at Mersa/Wadi Gawasis were also regularly published in the “Newsletter di Archeologia—CISA”, an online journal of the Università “L’Orientale”, promoted and directed by his colleague Bruno Genito. Rodolfo, always concerned about the availability of publications to colleagues of the African countries and thus very enthusiastic about open-access contents available on the web, supported the establishment of the journal as a member of the technical-scientific board, and later on as president of the Centro Interdipartimentale di Servizi di Archeologia (CISA) of “L’Orientale”. For the same reason he also wanted to have technical reports and working papers of the projects at Aksum and Mersa/Wadi Gawasis published and available for free download in the web pages of the CISA.

As made evident by all the research projects he conducted and by his service as president of the CISA from 2006 to 2013, his interest in the computer applications to the archaeological research is a further distinctive trait of the scientific activity of Rodolfo. But it should be also stressed that he did not consider new technologies only as tools to easily find or to better record artifacts and ecofacts, nor to visualize nicely data. On the contrary, Rodolfo, who at the very beginning of his career, in 1975, published the article “Note di Ecologia Umana”, in the journal “Atti del Museo Civico di Storia Naturale di Trieste”, in which a strong systemic approach already emerges, always pushed for using these new tools also to find new ways to interpret the data. In this perspective, we should consider his interest for the use of the Genetic Algorithms and, more recently, for Agent Based Modelling applications, suitable for simulating the behaviors of complex systems, including that of the past societies, a field of research conducted at “L’Orientale” in the framework of a collaboration with the University Federico II, for which Rodolfo was very enthusiastic up to his last days. Anyway, in his view, all this had to be done always starting from and finally going back to the materials, artifacts and ecofacts, that archaeologists collect and study, to avoid building perhaps nice, but ultimately useless and exclusively theoretical models. This clearly emerges from his contribution to the proceedings of the Italy-United States workshop “The reconstruction of archaeological landscapes through digital technologies”, held in Boston in November 2001, whose organization he strongly supported and inspired.

These few lines, briefly outlining the trajectory of the scientific life of Rodolfo, highlight his innate curiosity and capacity of opening new fields of research in areas and on issues which were previously largely overlooked because regarded as borderline or even marginal in the perspective of the traditional academic disciplines like Egyptology, Nubian and Ethiopian Studies. His intuition, largely shared with his good friend Maurizio Tosi, was that, “marginal” regions and apparently “marginal” issues were in fact crucial for getting a better understanding of more general dynamics affecting the “core areas” nearby. It should be remarked that the “borderless” approach which characterized Rodolfo’s research, also emerges in his curiosity for the different possible methods and approaches for studying the human past, including the digital technologies, as well as for the relations between past and present and for the contribution archaeology can provide to sustainable development, not only in terms of the potential economic exploitation of the cultural heritage, but also with the study of the emergence of traditional knowledge and techniques, for understanding the long term processes of man-environment interaction, and of environmental and social resilience.

Despite the fact he used to repeat that he wanted to be an archaeologist and not a professor, he was certainly a very inspiring teacher, also characterized by an innate human touch and a strong commitment to the young generations of scholars. Indeed, the involvement of students and young colleagues in the research projects and fieldwork always represented a characterizing trait of Rodolfo, as for him research and teaching could not be separated. Myself, Donatella Usai and Cinzia Perlingieri, started our careers as assistant archaeologists in the Kassala project, while Luisa Sernicola and Federica Sulas were first in the field with him at Aksum, Chiara Zazzaro at Mersa Gawasis. But the team was always open to the participation of students from other countries and institutions, like Aminata Sackho and Karim Sadr in Sudan, Bar Kribus and Akin Ogundiran in Ethiopia.

In Ethiopia, in addition to the contribution he gave as visiting professor at Addis Ababa University, in 2008 Rodolfo established the Italian-Ethiopian archaeological field school at Aksum, in the framework of an agreement between “L’Orientale” University and Axum University, later on also extended to Addis Ababa University. Moreover, he always made every effort to offer opportunities to promising Ethiopian students to complete their training abroad with the PhD or Master courses. Among them, Alemesege Beldados Aleho (PhD at “L’Orientale” and now Addis Ababa University), Temesgen Burka Bortie (PhD at “L’Orientale” and now Addis Ababa University), and Temesgen Nigus (PhD at “L’Orientale” and now University of Dilla).

Indeed, his “borderless” approach to archaeology is precisely made evident by the fact that the students he tutored become not just archaeologists, alternatively specialised in Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia, and in particular ceramologists, as it could be expected in consideration of his background, skills and research interests, but also lithicists, paleobotanists, geoarchaeologists, archaeo-metallurgists, maritime archaeologists, specialists of computer applications to archaeology, who started their training and university education with him and, also thanks to him, could discover their true vocations.

Indeed, I think that, together with the more than 200 articles and monographs, some of them certainly seminal or pioneering works, his inspiring, open-minded and curious approach to the study of the past, the constant commitment to the young generations of scholars, and the attention to the present conditions and problems of the inhabitants of the regions that he studied are the most long-lasting and relevant traits of his human and scientific legacy.

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