

ARCHEOSTORIE™  
JOURNAL *of* PUBLIC  
ARCHAEOLOGY


**VOLUME 1 / 2017**

*Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty*

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## Section

## NEWS

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# Being an archaeologist in Kurdistan. Interview with Luca Peyronel

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It was definitely not easy living in Erbil during the military offensive against Daesh. War was just a few steps away, though there was also an euphoric sensation of freedom in the air. Luca Peyronel was there during those days and he is going to describe them, suggesting also what archaeology can and must do nowadays in the war-torn Middle East.

“Our life was divided between home, the excavation site, and the laboratory. We really didn’t go anywhere else: concern was strong. And it was important to keep a level head. We could hear the sounds of war, or we thought we could. They were receding day by day, as the offensive approached Mosul, but they were still a constant presence.”

Luca Peyronel - associate professor of Archeology and Art History of the Ancient Near East at the IULM University of Milan, and member of the Advisory Board of *Archeostorie* - has recently returned from Erbil where he directs the archaeological mission surveying the plain around the Iraqi Kurdistan capital. This year he spent a month and a half there, while last year he had been allowed only two weeks, for security reasons. But he was there right during the days of Daesh’s withdrawal.

“There was a widespread feeling that ‘we are chasing them out.’ I experienced it myself when, at a certain point, while I was chatting with a Department of Kurdish Antiquity official, a group of people came running up to him and triumphantly announced that his village had been freed and his house was still standing! It was a moment of authentic elation, although nobody knows if the official will really be able to go back home. But those days everyone was beginning to recover, ridding themselves of overwhelming burdens.”

***The chronicles have described Erbil as a quiet town, even if only in appearance.***

That’s right. People can live there normally, go to the bar, to the restaurant, to the movies and to the mall, even if all the entrances are guarded by security forces. There is a desire to dispel and exorcise everything. Exorcise the fear of war but also the difficulties and sacrifices that everyone has to make, since the war has transferred all the country’s resources to the Army. After the euphoria of the years of development, Iraqi Kurdistan is now heavily affected by the aftermath of the conflict. Everything is at a standstill. The Archaeological Museum itself has had to suspend its expansion plans: the laboratories are not finished and, basically, we worked on a sort of construction site.



### ***Were you working in the Museum?***

Yes, right there. The same group of buildings includes the Museum, the headquarters of the Department of Antiquities, and the laboratories where we and other foreign archaeological missions are hosted. At the time there were also two French missions, a Polish mission and a German mission which, like us, are each surveying a portion of the Erbil plain, as well as an American mission which is carrying out a massive and extensive reconnaissance of the entire plain. Working side by side is truly interesting: a tireless exchange of views and advice among ourselves but also with the Kurdish archaeologists who work in the building next door. New ideas for joint projects are always coming up. It is the first time that I have enjoyed such an intense scientific collaboration, and it is really beautiful and advantageous.

### ***What have you been researching this year?***

We were finally able to start digging. In our research area there are two main sites, Helawa and Aliawa. The preliminary excavations in Helawa truly amazed us: just below the surface we immediately found fifth millennium BC layers, the Late Chalcolithic, both at the top of the artificial hill formed of more than twenty-two meters of stratification, the tell, and along the slope on the south side. That was the time when the first cities begun to be formed in the Middle East, but Helawa is not as vast as other Mesopotamian centers of the same era. With its eight hectares, it can be classified as a sort of proto-city, although - as the surveys on the plain would seem to indicate - it was situated in a densely populated territory. On the northern slope of the tell we found something quite different: the ruins of the mid-second millennium BC, and - right underneath - the fifth millennium layers yet again. It would seem that the city was abandoned and then repopulated - 2,500 years later. And another leap in time brings us to Aliawa, which seems to have been inhabited mainly since the first millennium BC. But the surface surveys carried out this year and - even more so - in previous years, gave up findings from all ages up to the

early Islamic age: we really expect to be able to reconstruct much of the history of that territory.

### ***Don't you think it's weird to be dealing with archaeology while people are fighting only a few dozen kilometers from you?***

Yes, a bit, but there is also an awareness of doing something truly meaningful. Because of the precarious political situation, Kurdistan history and archaeology were almost completely unknown until a few years ago: there were no archaeological maps, site mappings or chronological sequences. Many archaeological missions shifted to Kurdistan because of the war in Syria and the tranquility that Kurdistan seemed to guarantee. Also because it is a land of great historical importance: it was the heart of the Assyrian Empire, and Alexander the Great passed through there to clash with the Persian army.

What we are doing now is mapping a territory as has never been done before, and the threat of Daesh makes our work even more relevant: we document to protect, to prevent illegal diggers, the iconoclastic fury of Daesh, and war from forever erasing historical memory. We are trying, insofar as possible, to build an awareness of the importance of the past among the local population. These are a few, simple and small steps, very different from what we could do in the West; however, they are very important. In Erbil we met other Italians working there - aid workers for refugee camps, doctors, people with other jobs - and we were all in perfect harmony: all aware of doing something useful and important.

### ***What then, in your opinion, is the future of archeology in the Middle East?***

First, we must ensure protection of the sites, and promptly preserve everything right after excavation. Then we must immediately tell of what we are doing, in order to actively engage the people living in those places. In a word, we must defend the territories. Today from war but tomorrow, once the war is over, from the threat of frenzied urbanization and infrastructure works. We have already seen what happened in Lebanon, where cement

and concrete was thrown up everywhere once peace was reached. We must prevent that from happening elsewhere.

This too is public archeology: we could call it 'basic public archeology.' Starting practically from scratch, but strong in the new awareness achieved by the modern global archeology. It is a reversal of perspective: scientific research is no longer the main purpose of excavations; rather, the starting point is the modern necessity to protect the territory. Re-focus on the territories, their histories and their peoples. This can - and in my opinion must - be done. With the utmost urgency. Because the man-nature-culture link is indivisible. If it is broken, the very essence of human civilization is violated. And there can be no future.

***How important is disclosure of results?***

Very much so. For us, archaeologists dealing with Middle East, the dissemination of the research now plays a concrete ethical role against Daesh destruction. And that is not all: by telling of these places through our research and our excavations, we can help local authorities to reach an increasingly wider audience, informing and transmitting positive cultural values. We must then be prepared

for reconstruction: saving the memory of the past will mean giving a positive message to the world.

***Can your experiences also be important for the West?***

They are evidence, bringing to light unknown or little-known historical-archaeological realities. Knowledge of Mesopotamia, based on the Western tradition, is strongly distorted, filtered by the tales of the Greek writers or by the Bible. Bringing attention to these places in the East and doing it in a correctly scientific way is, therefore, crucial because our civilization is rooted in that world.

***Do you feel you are a cultural mediator?***

Absolutely. My university job has two sides to it: one aspect is related to field research in the Near East, another to ArcheoFrame, the archaeological communication and valorization lab which produces documentaries and multimedia products about our history. We archaeologists are never merely researchers working in the field; we are also professionals who can act as a bridge both with the Departments of Antiquities and the institutions operating in the territory: 'communication' must be our watchword, always.

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