

Avvenire

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Archaeology/1: The Buccellati spouses, awarded with the Balzan Prize, are the best knowers of the civilization of the Ancient Near East: "With our work, awareness grows among the local people."

"Digging the Hurrians and Building Syria"

"Syria, at the time as today, was very variegated, a bit like Italy. In the north there were the Hurrians, to the West and the South the Semites with the famous city of Ebla. This conjunction of different populations is very characteristic also of today Syria." A Syria that has been prey to civil war since 2011 and knows the phenomenon of Islamic terrorism by Isis. The leap from the third millennium BC to today is dizzying. But it helps to understand many things if you do it with Giorgio Buccellati and Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati, the archaeologists who on July 1 in Bern will receive the Balzan Prize for the section 'Art and Archeology of the Ancient Near East,' awarded to them in 2021 and postponed because of Covid.

The award is motivated by their activities with the local population: a thousand initiatives in the field that not even the war has stopped. And from their pioneering work with technologies at the service of archeology: 40 years ago, they were among the first to introduce digital photography in excavations.

"During these 11 years we have continued to maintain very active relationships, we are the only foreign mission to do so," says Giorgio Buccellati, born in 1937, professor emeritus at the University of California, Los Angeles (Ucla), where he founded the Cotsen Institute of Archeology, in which he directs the Mesopotamian Lab. The couple discovered the Hurrian city of Urkesh, located in northern Syria nearby the Turkish border, where they have been excavating since 1984. Urkesh is especially important from an archaeological point of view "because from the excavations it turns out to be one of the oldest cities in history. It dates back to 4000 BC. The same period of urban development in the south with the Sumerians," explains the archaeologist. But who were the Hurrians? "I would define them as an 'elusive' population, there are few written documents for the most ancient periods."

The inferences that can be made about their social and political structure, therefore, concern above all the observation of the environment. It emerges that between the Hurrians and the Sumerians "there was a big difference in the approach to the territory. The Sumerians lived in a flat environment, where irrigation was central to economic development." Each city was therefore limited as a territory. In the north, however, there was sufficient rainwater. And there were the reliefs of the plateau: "For this reason, from a social and political point of view, the Hurrians had relationships less based on face-to-face contact within a small territory and more on family, 'ethnic' relationships. A different conception of social solidarity within the political group."

The importance of the city in the third millennium is testified by the fact that "the daughter of the Akkadian Naram-Sin, considered the Napoleon of the time, married the Hurrian king of Urkesh," remembers Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati, professor emerita at the California State University and visiting

professor at the Cotsen. “The relations with the north are also very important, with Turkey as far as the Caucasus. There are no written traces, but ceramics and tradition of hearths,” explains the scholar, who is a specialist in the archeology of the Caucasus, in particular Georgia.

Apart from a few quick visits in the Syrian capital Damascus, where they will be in October, from 2011, as mentioned, the excavations are forbidden to the archaeological mission of the Buccellati couple. They carry out their work above all on the computerized data from their home in Val d’Ossola. They have made it the headquarters from which they radiate the initiatives they put in place, also thanks to the support of their collaborators, to raise awareness among the local population and thus face conservation problems, due to many factors: the climate, given the rains and the great heat; vandalism, fostered by the chaos of the civil war; terrorism, which destroys for ideological reasons. As in 2015 in Palmira, where they killed Khaled al-Asaad, curator of the excavations and a great friend of the Buccellati spouses. “We, as the West, have done practically nothing to fight this aspect – notes Giorgio Buccellati, bitterly –. Archeology, on the other hand, is a very effective way to do this. We propose a pride of the past which is precisely what ISIS denies.”

Therefore, a number of activities were maintained on the field. Tours with buses, to bring tourism to the site which is necessarily local and which has also been slowed by Covid. Then, exhibits in the small towns near the site. And the lectures that some Syrian archaeologists give in the villages in front of an audience of 20-30 people. Encounters that “indicate our desire to be present and close. We also sent greeting video messages,” underlines Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati. All this to encourage local people to identify themselves with a past “which is theirs, but not theirs.” The Hurrians, in fact, have no ethnic ties with the five most important groups, including the Kurds and the Arabs. “We managed, however, to show them how territorial affinity is equivalent.” In short, the Hurrians are not the progenitors of today population, but they lived in the same places. So, in the end, “all these groups are very proud of this past. An awareness that is the best bulwark against terrorism.” And also against the ‘grave robbers.’ “On our site, unlike others, which have been seriously vandalized, not a potsherd has been touched,” says Giorgio Buccellati.

Last but not least, the activities with young people. Syrian middle and elementary school children, who are put in contact with peers from other countries. It started with Italy, then the United States, Greece, in the future Spain and from next year also Gaza, “a situation that is in a certain sense even more difficult, because we must speak of pride of the territory in a place where this is called into question.” The project is ambitious and demanding. The young people are followed by archaeologists in Syria and in various countries. And the exchange must be conducted in English, through the technology. For the Buccellati spouses, digital is not just a practical aid, it helps in the conceptualization of the immense amount of data. “Millions if you consider small potsherds and bones. Each of them has its own dignity. Starting from them, thanks to the website, a ‘digital discourse’ can be carried out in parallel, on many levels of analysis. Thus, putting the data in a dynamic and critical relationship.” Digitality is therefore used to critically analyze the reality. To “stimulate the brain instead of clouding it,” as it happens with the use that today many adolescents make of technology.

The gaze is therefore always projected to the future. “When we will be back, the excavations will start again and it will be as if we left yesterday,” say the two enthusiastically.