

Medea Norsa was born in Trieste, then under Austrian rule, on Aug. 26, 1877, daughter of Michele and Silvia Krosna. Papyrologist, she was one of the most important scholars among the founders of papyrology. After studying at a girl school in Trieste, she went first to Wien university, where she probably learnt ancient Greek, then to Florence, mainly to study Italian Literature, but here she met her Mentor, Girolamo Vitelli, professor of Greek, and took a degree in 1906. Since the same year Vitelli allowed her to study the unpublished papyri in the so called 'Gabinetto dei Papiri': and, from that moment on, she became his right-hand and it started a perfect collaboration which lasted until Vitelli's death, in 1935, and which produced the edition of 11 volumes of 'Papiri Greci e Latini della Società Italiana per la ricerca dei papiri greci e latini in Egitto' (PSI). In 1923 she became professor of Greek and Latin in the secondary school, but soon the Ministry charged her with a special post at the 'Gabinetto dei Papiri', so she was able to dedicate all her activity to the study of the papyri bought by the "Società Italiana per la ricerca dei papiri" or found by the archaeological missions supported by the Società. From 1926 to 1940 she went almost every year to Egypt in order to buy papyri and to take part in the archaeological missions as papyrologist. From the same 1926 until her retirement, she taught Papyrology in the University of Florence, but only as "corso libero", first and then as "incarico", and from 1933 she regularly taught Papyrology, but in the form of "esercitazioni", in the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa as well.

On Vitelli's death, Norsa became director of the Istituto Papirologico, later named "Vitelli", but yet she did not have the academic acknowledgement of a professorship, even if in 1940 Giovanni Gentile, the famous philosopher, former minister of Education and Director of the Scuola Normale Superiore, guaranteed for her, who was jew. In 1944 her home was destroyed and almost all her books and a few papyri burnt in a bombardment, so she had to find an accomodation in a monastery, where she lived until her death. After the war, she tried, without success, to find

economical support for a new "Società per la ricerca dei papiri" and to open again the archaeological missions in Egypt. Delusion and loneliness accompanied her during the last years. In 1947 she had to retire. Though in 1949 she was appointed Honorary President of the 'Association Internationale de Papyrologues', during the VI International Congress in Paris, she was not able to attend because of the serious illness which would lead her to death three years later. She still worked, but with great difficulties: her last article is the edition of the Pap. Vaticano gr. n.2037A in «Aegyptus» of 1952. After a long and painful illness, she died on Jul. 28, 1952 in Florence.

Norsa was not an archaeologist: she herself proclaimed so in a letter to E. Breccia (n.361) : "I am not an archaeologist, I have never excavated nor directed excavations". But she believed strenuously in the importance of systematic excavations in order to find papyri (letter to Breccia n. 210, 329) and she always took the greatest care of the Florentine missions (Oxyrhynchos, Tebtynis, Antinoe), until she could; she always respected and appreciated also the smallest fragments (the so-called 'salad'). Her faithful friendship to Evaristo Breccia, historian, archaeologist and director of the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, attests such confidence. Besides, she had an exceptional ability in finding out and purchasing important papyri from the Egyptian antiquarian market, which, in the Twenties and Thirties, was a kind of flourishing, gorgeous mine: for example, Callimachus ' "Lock of Berenice" (PSI IX,1092), Favorinus ' "De exilio" (P.Vat.Gr.11), Philistus' "De Sicilia" (PSI XII,1283), the so-called "Boulé papyrus" (PSI X,1160), were bought by her, among many, many other famous or less famous, but often not less important, documents and literary fragments.

Norsa was exceptionally talented, both as a philologist and as a palaeographer, and her contribution to define, through her work, what a good papyrologist must be, was decisive. Nevertheless, she did not succeed in getting a permanent position as professor in the university: probably this was only in part due to her being a woman, or because

of her prudent political attitude or because of her race (letter to Breccia no.404); the main reason seems to be that papyrology was not accepted as an autonomous discipline by the academic world until a much later period. But if the study of ancient Greek and Latin documents from Egypt is now considered as a fundamental part of Classics, this is Norsa's merit too.

Bibliography: there are very few informations on N. private life, apparently absorbed by her devotion to Vitelli and to papyrology. Apart from her scientific production (the edition of hundreds papyri in XIII volumes of "Papiri Greci e Latini della Società Italiana", 1912-1951, the volumes "*La scrittura letteraria greca dal secolo IV a.C. all'VIII d.C.*", Firenze 1939, "*Papiri greci delle collezioni italiane. Scritture documentarie dal secolo III a.C. al secolo VIII d.C.*", Roma 1928-1946, and a lot of important articles especially in "Bulletin de la Société archéologique alexandrine", "Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa", "Aegyptus"), a great deal of her epistolary is now published in D. Morelli-R. Pintaudi, *Cinquant'anni di papirologia in Italia. Carteggi Breccia-Comparetti-Norsa-Vitelli*, Napoli 1983, and by F. Longo-Auricchio, *Lettere di Medea Norsa ad Achille Vogliano (1921-1933)*, in "*Miscellanea Papyrologica in occasione del bicentenario dell'edizione della Charta Borgiana*", Firenze 1990, pp.351-360.

Very useful is also the introduction, by M. Capasso, to the volume "*Omaggio a Medea Norsa*", Napoli 1993.

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