

Anna Maria Bisi

By Rita Dolce

The idea of devoting a book to the scientific field work of women archaeologists and their study of pre-Classical and Classical cultures is not only highly praiseworthy but it is also a demonstration of considerable courage. For it draws attention to something that is much wider in scope, happening worldwide: whole leading areas of our contemporary societies—culture, economics, politics, social commitment and humanitarian work—are being silently but constantly sustained by women, often out of the limelight, but determined to achieve their goals.

Women have played a particularly influential role in archaeology since the last century, as the result of an extremely difficult choice on their part which, at the time, received little support in international opinion. In the event, this choice has contributed greatly to the far-reaching change that has taken place in the role of women in modern society. The first women archaeologists were therefore fully entitled to be called, “The Pioneers,” and it is right that we should pay tribute to them both in the book and on this Web Page. We trust that it will be followed by other works that will also pay tribute to the second and subsequent generations of women archaeologists of equal prestige for the soundness of their intentions and working methods.

It is therefore with pleasure, tinged with sadness at her early death, that I wish to recall the memory of Professor Anna Maria Bisi, who made her silent exit from the stage on which she had never wished to hug the limelight.

A. M. Bisi’s human and scientific personality were inseparable, because her intellectual curiosity and her enthusiasm for her work, which I have witnessed on more than one occasion, merged in her research projects which were based mainly in the Phoenician-Punic world.

She began her scientific career in Rome, in 1961, under the direction of S. Moscati, and drew on her doctoral thesis to publish her first monograph entitled “Il grifone: dalle origini orientali al VI secolo a.C.”, in *Studi Semitici* 13, Roma, 1965. She then published a second paper dealing specifically with Punic archaeology entitled, “Le Stele puniche,” *Studi Semitici*, 27 Roma, 1967. Both these works demonstrate the future cultural and spatial horizons her research was subsequently to follow.

But, as often happens, despite her ceaseless and intense scientific activity, she was never fully satisfied with the results, and her unexpected death prevented her from completing a whole range of studies, and, even more importantly, from carrying out a comprehensive examination of the identity and the developments of Phoenician and Punic culture. It also prevented her—and this is by no means a secondary consideration—from savoring the gratification from the Academy. But she devoted herself to university teaching and research from the very beginning of her career as a lecturer at Rome’s “La Sapienza” University and, before her 30th birthday she had already been assigned the role

of “Inspector of Oriental Antiquities at the Superintendency of Antiquities of the City of Palermo” (Ispettore Orientalistico presso la Soprintendenza all’ Antichità della Città de Palermo); and while continually engaged on active research, she was awarded the Professorship of Punic Antiquities in 1969.

It should not be forgotten that A. M. Bisi’s professional work at the Superintendency immediately produced one important result, sometimes neglected even today, relating to the primary study of those who take on and exercise authority to control and provide information in the fields of culture and the dissemination of knowledge in general: the duty to promptly report even partial information on excavation and research activities. It was in this period that she published papers in “Notizie degli Scavi” between 1966 and 1970, in Bollettino d’Arte in 1968, in Sicilia Archeologica, Annali dell’Istituto Orientale di Napoli (AION) in 1969, and Libya antiqua, in the years 1969-1970.

These were to be years of grueling hard work on two fronts. Firstly, she was given responsibility for the Excavation Office at Herculaneum, which she took on in 1970. It was probably only thanks to her considerable human and personal energies that she managed to reconcile these responsibilities with her uninterrupted study and research, leading in 1971 to her appointment as Assistant Professor of the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East at Urbino University, and as Associate Professor of the same subject at Urbino following a competitive examination that she won in 1982.

The vast amount of papers she published from 1965 until only a few days before her death in January 1990 bear witness to her inexhaustible energy which animated her professional and private life in equal measure. They contain studies of virtually every area of Phoenician and Punic culture, from fictile pottery and vessels to the analyses of Punic stelae—she comprehensively analyzed the most significant aspects of their religious and funerary significance. She also researched individual classes of highly artistic craftwork such as the ivories and bronzes which led her inevitably to examine the whole issue of the problematic relations between the Mediterranean East and the Aegean world.

It is only possible here to mention a select few of her many writings: La Ceramica Punica. Aspetti e Problemi, Naples 1970; “Le terrecotte figurate di Ibiza I-III,” in Rivista di Studi Fenici 1, 1973, 69-89; 2, 1974, 201-244; 6, 1978, 161-226, which was to culminate fifteen years later in her works on the trade in Punic vases and amphorae in “Un aspetto dell’economia punica: manifattura e commercio delle anfore ‘a siluro’ e ‘greco-italiche’ fra Nordafrica e Sicilia,” in the Proceedings of the Seminar on Ancient Oriental Studies held at the Istituto Gramsci in Florence, entitled, “Stato, Economia, Lavoro nel Vicino Oriente Antico,” 363-402, published in Milan in 1988. Our meeting in Florence was the last time I was ever to see A. M. Bisi and to appreciate her immediate approachability.

She also devoted the essay in the catalogue for the “I Fenici” exhibition at the Palazzo Grassi, Venice, Milan, 1988, 328-353, on the subject of terracottas together with

analytical studies on specific classes of ceramics such as “Le matrici fittili puniche della Sardegna e della Sicilia,” in Sefarad 28, 1968 289-308.

Her interest in highly artistic handicrafts, such as bronzes and ivories, were to lead her to explore the central issue of the spread of the Phoenician culture, in that vast area of the Mediterranean ranging from Spain to Cyprus, both in synthetic and in analytical studies, which were certainly ‘preliminary’ to that conclusive and fully mature elaboration of the subject on which she was then working. Of her works on these problems suffice to recall here, Kypriaka, Contributi allo studio della componente cipriota della civiltà punica, Roma, 1966, and “I pettini d’avorio di Cartagine,” in Africa 2, 1967-1968), 10-52; and for toreutics, “L’apport phénicien aux bronzes nouragiques de Sardaigne,” in Latomus, 36, 1977, 909-932.

Her investigation of the iconography of divine personalities enabled A. M. Bisi, between the end of the 70s and the 80s to suggest a number of interpretations of the cultural relations that existed between the specifically Phoenician environment and other cultures in the Mediterranean basin, one of which was entitled “Da Bes ad Erakles. A proposito di tre scarabei del Metropolitan Museum,” in Revista de Studi Fenici 8, 1980, 19-42; “Le ‘smiting god’ dans les milieux phéniciens d’Occident; un réexamen de la question,” in Studia Phoenicia IV, Religio Phoenicia, Namur 1986, 169-187, and “Ateliers phéniciens dans le monde égéen,” in Studia Phoenicia V. Phoenicia and the East Mediterranean in the First Millennium B. C., Leuven 1987, 225-237.

Her research in the stelae was to develop from the very first work mentioned above into the religious values and funerary functions in “La religione punica nelle rappresentazioni figurative della stele votive,” in Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni, 36, 1965, 99-157, and in “Influenze italiote e siceliote nell’arte tardo-punica: le stele funerarie di Lilibeo,” in Archeologia Classica 22, 1970 93-130, and in the very detailed analysis in her long study, “A proposito di alcune stele del tipo della Ghorfa al British Museum,” in Antiquités Africaines 12, 1978, 21-88.

Of the latter, the image that remains behind is that of a woman who was always relaxed, with immediate communicative skills which, as I remember them, exuded the pleasure she derived from life and learning, and a lighthearted joie de vivre—qualities that are extremely rare today, perhaps on the verge of (temporary?) extinction in the academic world of women archaeologists.

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