

Paola Zancani Montuoro (1901 - 1987) by Licia Vlad Borrelli

Before the unification of Italy, Naples had been the great capital of a kingdom and, up to the end of the nineteenth-century, it was considered the second most important city in Europe after Paris. The signs of this ancient prestige were still visible in the first decades of this century. A pleasure-seeking aristocracy occupied its splendid palaces with Spanish-like splendour, while an enlightened bourgeoisie produced an independent culture and established relationships with the most advanced intellectual movements north of the Alps. Benedetto Croce united the tradition of a Neapolitan philosophical school that was open to the lesson of Hegel with his “philosophy of the spirit.” Generations of young scholars would nourish themselves from his teachings and his home would become a meeting place for free spirits during the Fascist era. At the same time, brilliant journalists endowed with strong and assertive personalities like Eduardo Scarfoglio and Matilde Serao, founded newspapers, fought political battles, and highlighted the vices and virtues of city life. The painters of the school of Posillipo, poets like Salvatore di Giacomo, and actors like Eduardo Scarpetta and later the De Filippo brothers, depicted the images of a Neapolitan reality that would soon be canceled by urban demolition programs and the ravages of war, or would be weakened by the transformation of Italy at the hands of the Piedmontese and by the subsequent homologation of customs.

This was the ambience, full of lively cultural ferment, into which Paola Zancani Montuoro was born in Naples on February 27, 1901. Her father, Raffaele Montuoro, was an inventive journalist, her mother, Clotilde Arlotta came from a wealthy family of politicians, industrialists and bankers. Her love of studying led her to the classical lyceum and then the Faculty of Arts of the University of Naples, a fortunate deviation from the customs of a city which generally excluded young women of her social standing from entering high school and prepared them to become gracious ornaments in its salons. This was also symptomatic of the learned, open and enlightened environment into which Paola Zancani had had the fortune to be born. Among the teachers that had a stimulating influence on her we must mention Antonio Sogliano and Giulio Emanuele Rizzo. The

former had dedicated himself to excavating and restoring the monuments of Pompeii, while the latter, in his complex and fertile scholarly activity, had tackled one of the great themes of the history of ancient art in his book on Praxiteles and then had gone on to publish his monumental volume on the coins of ancient Sicily. We will see how both these aspects of archaeological research would emerge in the work of Paola Zancani Montuoro. She obtained her *dottore di laurea magna cum laude* degree with Rizzo in 1923. The same year, she took part in the competition for the schools of specialization in archaeology of Rome and Athens. She won both competitions and left for Greece in 1927 after having married Domenico Zancani, who was also a student. Zancani later became an assistant professor to Rizzo and returned to Athens to continue his second year. The Italian *Scuola Archeologica di Atene* was and still is the most prestigious source for the best of Italian archaeology. Other fellow students taking part in the course with the Zancani couple were Luciano Laurenzi, Domenico Mustilli and Margherita Guarducci, who would all become illustrious teachers and renowned scholars. Zancani died in Athens soon afterwards from an epidemic of typhus and his young wife carried on his scientific heritage by dedicating a large part of her archaeological work to the study of the *pinakes* of Locri, a subject which Domenico Zancani had treated in his thesis. The Director of the *Scuola di Atene* was Alessandro Della Seta, an eminent archaeologist with vast and varied interests. At the time, he was particularly interested in the study and development of the anatomical and naturalistic knowledge of the Greek representation of the human figure which would result in the publication of *Il nudo nell'Arte* (I, *Arte Antica*, Milan, 1930). The lessons of Emanuele Loewy, who interpreted artistic development in evolutionary terms, were taken up by Della Seta and, in turn, transmitted to his own students. This influence even appeared in *L'origine della decorazione frontonale* (1925), the first work Dr. Zancani published that showed proof of her capacity for synthesis and acumen. In a self-assured manner, she tackled a subject rendered particularly current by recent discoveries and refuted commonly held opinions that pediment decoration in Greece had originated from painted scenes with figures on the tympanum area, which was gradually transformed into a relief. The examination of the clay *gorgoneion* belonging to the temple C of Selinunte discovered by Gabrici, and of other *gorgoneia* from Sicily, Calabria and Campania, as well as of numerous

comparisons with other figurative depictions led her to conclude that the most ancient pediments were decorated with clay apotropaic images of the *gorgoneion* which covered the head of the main roof beam. A later stage was represented by the pediment discovered at Garitza (Corfù) a little over a decade earlier. Here the Gorgon, located at the center with Chrysaor and Pegasus, was flanked by two panthers, while at the extreme margins were two mythical scenes, the killing of Priam and Zeus fighting the giants. The medical symbol of the Gorgon was later moved from the tympanum to the acroterion and the tympanum filled with scenes of figures. Based on brief and pertinent arguments later confirmed by other studies and discoveries, Dr. Zancani identified the place of origin of this fundamental component of the Greek temple as Corinth, dating it from the second half of the VII century after Christ.

The attention Paola Zancani dedicated to the artifacts of Magna Graecia already denoted her choice of a precise field of studies. Another fundamental aspect of Paola Zancani's personality to emerge and further confirm this direction was her civil commitment to the protection of artistic patrimony. The "*Persefone*" di Taranto (1933) reconstructed the history of a sculpture that had been clandestinely smuggled out of Italy and had found its way into museums in Berlin. With great rigor, numerous comparisons and analogies she was able to refute the assumption that the statue was false and attribute its origin to Taranto instead of Locri. Finally, she hypothetically identified the statue as a cultic representation from the sanctuary of Persephone that was located in Taranto. The publication of this study marked the beginning of a collaboration between Paola Zancani and the Società Magna Grecia, an independent entity founded in 1920 by Umberto Zanotti Bianco, an antifascist philanthropist, who had dedicated his life to the historical, social and economic development of the South. The archaeology of Magna Graecia, still at a pioneering stage then, was led by the work of the great southern scholar Paolo Orsi (Rovereto, 1859-1935) and his scientific heritage was inherited and carried on by Zanotti Bianco first and Paola Zancani later.

However, the discovery that placed Dr. Zancani among the great names of archaeology was that of the Heraion at the mouth of the Sele river. From her very early

studies, she had questioned the interpretation of the sources and, in particular, the interpretation of two passages from Strabo and Pliny which mentioned the presence of a sanctuary founded by Jason and dedicated to Hera Argiva, at the mouth of the Sele river. In 1934, thanks to a subsidy from the Società Magna Grecia, Paola Zancani and Zanotti Bianco began to explore the plain of the Sele river. At the time, the area was desolate and infested with malaria and the two scholars had to deal with the discomforts of an inhospitable site. Furthermore they also had to bear the constant presence of policemen who kept watch on the antifascist Zanotti. It was later revealed that the Ministry, which was hostile to both dissident archaeologists, had only authorized the excavation until the sum of eight thousand lire was spent, which was the contribution given by the Società Magna Grecia. Since the statement of expenses had to be sent to the Superintendency on a regular basis, Zancani and Zanotti invented a most unusual accounting system that allowed them to continue excavating. They spent one thousand lire and recorded only one hundred or ten lire...The results of the excavations, which the archaeologists carried out in the company of their most unusual chaperones into 1940 and resumed after the war in 1949 and in 1958, were extraordinary and were hailed, from the historical, religious and artistic points of view, as the most important discoveries to have taken place in Italy in fifty years.

Just as Strabo had indicated, the remains of a great archaic sanctuary dedicated to Hera were located right after the mouth of the Sele river, fifty stadia (approximately nine kilometers) from Poseidonia (Paestum), near the left bank of the river, at approximately one-hundred and fifty meters from its mouth. In fact, numerous votive statuettes representing the seated goddess holding a child on her left arm and a pomegranate in her right hand were further proof of this. The more ancient statuettes dated from the VII century B.C. The iconography was the same as that of the Madonna venerated in the nearby church at Capaccio and still maintained the appearance of that ancient cultic image after so many centuries. The sanctuary encountered its greatest prosperity in the archaic period. The more ancient building, a *stoà* perhaps, whose elevations were probably in rough brickwork, dated to the first half of the VI century B.C. The so-called *thesauròs*, which probably had a wooden roof with beams placed in a radial position,

followed soon afterwards (570-560 B.C.). Thirty-eight metopes obtained from local sandstone were attributed to this building or to another contemporary building. They were structurally solid with the triglyphs, which were recovered in different stages and reused in later buildings. The various adventures of Hercules, episodes from the Trojan cycle and other myths are illustrated with great narrative force, using an iconography that in many instances had never been seen before, inspired perhaps by Western literary sources (Stesicorus?). The sculptures were produced by local artisans working in the Trojan style. Some of them, like some of the architectural elements of the *thesauròs*, have been deemed unfinished, a clear sign that the construction was suddenly abandoned due to external causes. Dr. Zancani thought these could have been the destruction of Siris, the presumed dedicatory city of the *thesauròs*. The grandiose temple with its seventeen columns on the longer sides and eight on the shorter, dates from the end of the century (510 B.C.) and was built over the remains of a more ancient temple. A series of metopes depicting young girls (Nereids?) of diminishing size decorated this temple. Twelve of them have remained. These were also the work of local artists who reveal strong Ionic influences. Between the end of the V and the beginning of the IV centuries, these buildings were damaged by wars identified as either the invasions of the Lucans (end of the V century A.D.), or the battle in which Alessandro il Molosso defeated the Lucans (341-333 B.C.). Further invasions, new buildings and a new prosperity followed, as demonstrated by the great quantity of votive offerings. The decadence, which was slow and gradual, was caused by a sequence of events: depredation at the hands of pirates, an earthquake (63 A.D.), the eruption of Vesuvius that destroyed Pompeii and Ercolanum (79 A.D.) and, finally, the transformation of the area into marshes.

The impeccable rigor of excavation methodologies and the acuity with which the data was interpreted, combined with the exceptional quality of the finds to make this discovery a milestone of archaeological history. It not only confirmed the truthfulness of the ancient sources at a moment in which these were held very much in doubt, but it also corroborated the hypothesis of a precolonization, later proven in successive finds throughout the Mediterranean basin. This precolonization implied that since Mycenaean times, Greek navigators had ventured towards western shores in search of raw materials

and trade with the local populations. In fact, the Greek hero Jason and the Argonauts are connected with the mythical memory of the Achaeans and of the end of the Mycenaean era. The discovery of the series of archaic metopes and of those from late antiquity greatly enriched our knowledge of the culture of Magna Graecia and of its peculiarities vis-à-vis the models of the homeland. A new exploration of the sanctuary, recently resumed by the Superintendency of Archaeology of Salerno, will no doubt provide us with further evidence.

One of the many observations Dr. Zancani made on the frieze of the *thesauròs* and on the Heraion of Sele was the basis for her essay *Sulla struttura del fregio dorico* (1940), in which she examined the functional origin of the triglyphon (Doric frieze). Having ascertained that the metopes and triglyphs of the *thesauròs* presented a marked tapering, the author went on to acknowledge the existence of the phenomenon in other friezes of Greece, Asia Minor and Magna Graecia and to elaborate a theory on the genesis of this type of decoration. A brief mention of this article can illustrate the way in which Dr. Zancani reasoned by availing herself of a very accurate examination of the documentation and then arriving at extremely original conclusions through unexpected leaps of logic. She maintained that a parallelism appeared to exist between the triglyphs and the pilasters. The original function of the triglyph was, in fact, to support the horizontal wooden beam that held up the wooden roof structure in primitive temples. In fact, as the name metope indicates, (*metà opè* = intermediate opening) these were simply apertures that let light into the cell, at a time when the cell was the entire temple. When the peristyle was added, the *triglyphon* took on the appearance of a second, minute colonnade and the empty spaces of the metopes were filled in with scenes and figures.

Other studies, listed in the bibliography, were the result of interpretations of some of the myths depicted on the metopes of Sele. These studies revealed the scope of Dr. Zancani's field of inquiry and highlighted her interest in exploring all the cultural regions of the ancient world.

The other theme that would involve Paola Zancani constantly throughout her long career was the publication of the study of the *pinakes* of Locri. As was mentioned previously, it had been the subject of her husband's thesis. She had been entrusted with the task by Paolo Orsi who, while working on a series of digs at Locri, had unearthed a conspicuous number of *pinakes* which were added to the fragments that had been available on the antiques market since the 1850s. *Pinakes* are rectangular tablets of terra cotta no bigger than 30 cm. in size with decorative figures in relief painted in lively colours. They were given as votive offerings to a deity, maybe Persephone, who was honored at a sanctuary in Locri. The tablets were local products, as demonstrated by the style and the subjects referred to, that were no longer being made after fifty years, that is, between the end of the VI and the middle of the V century B.C. These objects were expressions of popular art which reflected the high quality of the figurative tradition of Locri and constitute a precious documentation of this tradition. Because of the fragility of the material employed, very few examples have survived almost intact are mostly fragments numbering in total almost six thousand pieces. With infinite patience, Paola Zancani undertook the job of finding and reconstructing this immense heap of fragments or gigantic puzzle most of which is preserved in the museum of Reggio Calabria. Yet the enterprise began on a conflicting note for Dr. Zancani was an avowed antifascist, was not well seen in the conservative environment of official archaeology which was allied with the regime. Using only her experienced visual memory, her acute spirit of observation and her own wisdom, and working her way through the overwhelming myriad of fragments, she was able to individuate over 176 types of different yet often very similar scenes that could be categorized into 10 major groups. One of the greatest difficulties she encountered was caused by the fact that the reliefs had been obtained from extremely perishable terra cotta molds. When frequent use wore the mold down and rendered it practically useless, a new mold was obtained from the molded object or *pinax*. This operation could and was repeated several times, especially for the more popular scenes. The objects cast with this process were smaller than the previous ones due to shrinkage resulting from successive firings. The tablets were also modified at times with the use of sticks or punches and varied by adding or removing figures or decorative elements. In this way, new types were created and the different demands of clients were met with very

little effort. Dr. Zancani worked untiringly for over thirty years at the study and the presentation of the *pinakes*. The subjects that were identified seemed to allude to the reproduction of liturgical ceremonies performed during the festivities dedicated to the goddess identified as Core-Persephone, even if subsequent exegetes have advanced new hypotheses on the interpretation of some of the scenes. The most frequent subject was the depiction of Core abducted by Hades or by one of his envoys (?), while gathering flowers in the company of other young women. Other groups illustrate sacrificial scenes, the fruit harvest, offerings and processions, the dressing and grooming of the bride, the preparation of her trousseau, the wedding procession and Hades and Persephone enthroned while receiving the homage of the gods. In a series of enlightening articles, Paola Zancani anticipated many observations that would later become part of the complete edition of the *pinakes*. Of these articles we must mention the fundamental text titled *Note sui soggetti e sulla tecnica delle tabelle di Locri* (1954). She examined the history of the cults and of the religious ideology of Locri in successive stages. With the acute and open-minded spirit of observation that was one of the peculiar characteristics of her talent, she recognized the persistence of usages and traditions in some of the local customs that linked the present-day inhabitants of the area to their distant ancestors. Such was the case of the cult of the Madonna of Capaccio, who was worshipped in the same guise as the Argive Hera.

Unfortunately this work remained unfinished and a group of worthy young scholars has only recently undertaken to complete it on the basis of Dr. Zancani's precious indications.

It was Paola Zancani's interest in southern Italian studies that guided her in many other directions through the territory of Magna Graecia. The search for the site of the ancient city of Sybaris, the richest and most famous Greek colony in the West, had been the object of one of Zanotti Bianco's expeditions in 1932. The expedition was soon stopped by the Fascist authorities but not before having already given fortunate results. The project was taken up by Paola Zancani, as part of the activities of the Società Magna Grecia, and was behind a series of campaigns which led from 1960 on to the discovery of

the ancient city, its port and its necropolis. Paola Zancani was the spirit and the tutelary guardian of this excavation, a campaign hindered not only by the swampy terrain which had to be drained with a system of suction pumps working continuously, but also by the uncontrolled development and industrialization of the area.

At approximately the same time (1960) and with the support of private funds raised by the Società Magna Grecia, she began excavating on the hill of the Motta and at Macchiabate near Francavilla Marittima, not far from Sybaris. The excavations unearthed a settlement from the middle Bronze Age and sanctuaries and necropolises that were filled with very important finds, promptly illustrated by Dr. Zancani in various articles. The settlement bore witness to the peaceful cohabitation of local inhabitants and Greeks which led Dr. Zancani to hypothesize that it could be Sybaris on the Teutranto, a primitive Sybaris of the heroic age, or Lagaria. The latter site, cited in the sources as being among the foundations of the mythical Epeus, the builder of the Trojan horse, suggested one of the most daring of the scholar's interpretations, namely that of associating a royal burial site, rich in metal goods and workshop tools, with references to the tools of Epeus. Among the objects uncovered in the rich necropolis were a Phoenician cup found in a tomb dating from the middle of the VII century B.C. and restored in ancient times with fragments of belts belonging to local women, a proof of the activity of Phoenician merchants who probably came from Cyprus, and a small terra cotta statue found near a sanctuary dedicated to Athena, obtained from the mold of another exemplar in the museum of Naples. The excavation near Francavilla Marittima, which continued until 1969, offered Paola Zancani numerous opportunities to formulate original and important considerations. The great abundance of bronze materials and, at the same time, the awareness that in the IX - VII centuries B.C. the source of metal supply could not have been located very far away, led the scholar to examine the ancient texts vis-à-vis the location of Temesa, mentioned by Homer in the *Odyssey* as the place where copper was produced and exported. Trusting in the veracity of Strabo, who had already led her to the fantastic discovery of the Heraion of Sele, as well as in medieval documents, she tried to circumscribe the location of this site to an area near Sibari, on the cliffs overlooking the Tyrrhenian and rejected the thesis that identified Temesa as the Cypriot Temesos.

There were many other questions of history and topography related to Magna Graecia that Paola Zancani confronted in her self-assured and original manner producing numerous articles on Sibari, Paestum, Locri, advancing her hypotheses on the location of Terina, Siri, Sirino and Pixunte, and her toponymical investigations, guiding fossils of the most ancient history. She also made frequent recourse to coinage for its historical, iconographic and epigraphic value and accessed the ancient sources constantly and knowledgeably. Her cultural appetite was insatiable and there was no discovery related to Magna Graecia that was not subjected to her judgment, from two new metopes discovered at Selinunte, to an obviously inauthentic stele, to the charioteer of Mozia, to which she assigned a much disputed date.

In her later years, her interests were especially focused on the Sorrentine peninsula where she lived. The search for the site of the sanctuary of the Sirens and the temple of Athena that the sources located at the tip of the Campanella, had always been present in her thoughts and she made various references in this regard in her essays. It was therefore with special enthusiasm that she welcomed the discovery made by Professor Mario Russo in 1985 of an Oscan inscription at the tip of the Campanella. The inscription celebrated a new access way to the sea promoted by the priests (*meddices*) of Minerva. The exceptional importance of this discovery, given both the language attesting to the presence of the Samnites in the area at the beginning of the III century B.C., the date of the inscription, and the explicit reference to the temple of Minerva, was immediately grasped by Dr. Zancani who sponsored a successful exploration of the surrounding area and a subsequent publication. Unfortunately, she did not live to see the publication of this volume to which she had dedicated her failing strength with the generosity and enthusiasm that never abandoned her.

In fact, even if she may have seemed authoritarian at times, she was actually a reserved and shy person, endowed with a rough kind of goodness and a great generosity which was mostly reserved for the young on whom she lavished advice and suggestions. She had a natural inclination for teaching which was only fulfilled in private dialogues

and in a brief and memorable course on excavation techniques which was held at the Department of Postgraduate Studies in Classical Philology of the University of Naples in 1945.

Her position as an intransigent anti-fascist had, in fact, kept her out of the spheres of official Italian archaeology during the years of the regime, in other words, for over twenty years (1922-1943). Except for a few cases, Italian archaeologists had been greatly gratified by Fascism because of Fascist Italy's desire to identify with the equivocal exaltation of the virtues of Romanity. Therefore, Grecian Studies were not considered very interesting at the time! A career with the Superintendencies was precluded to women and an academic career often called for humiliating compromises. Paola Zancani was, and could afford to be a free woman - her wealth freed her from the need to work - and kept her faithful to the tradition of enlightened liberalism in which she had been brought up. She had always been an outsider, with all the moral advantages and the material disadvantages that such a position implied.

As a young woman, her curiosity and vast interests had led her in various directions: she loved the theater and had seen the latest productions both in Italy and abroad; she loved the sea and in the Thirties the only speedboat in Sorrento was hers.

After having lived in Naples and occasionally even in Rome, she settled down once and for all at her villa del Pizzo, a vast and splendid estate belonging to her family at Sant'Agnello di Sorrento. On the estate were located the ruins of a Roman villa and Dr. Zancani considered the access ramp to the sea to be of Phoenician origin. This happy oasis had survived intact against the onslaught of urban development that had devastated most of the Sorrentine peninsula, thanks to the tenacious defense carried out by Dr. Zancani and her relatives against all attempts at exploitation and urbanization. All the advocates of militant archaeology of the last decades passed through this house, both the young at the beginning of their apprenticeship and illustrious scholars at the height of their careers. For each of them she had been equally available.

Though she did not seek any honors and acknowledgments, she had no lack of them. She had been the first woman elected to the Accademia Nazionale del Lincei in 1947; she became a member of the Accademia di Archeologia e Belle Lettere di Napoli, of the Deputazione di Storia Patria per la Basilicata e la Calabria, of the Pontificia Accademia di Archeologia, of the Istituto Archeologico Germanico, of the British Academy, of the Hellenic Society of London. She gave lessons and held conferences all over the world.

Finally, another aspect of her activity that cannot be left out was her work as an editor. Soon after the war, with Zanotti Bianco first and then alone when the latter died in 1963, she edited the Atti e Memorie della Società Magna Grecia, contributing articles of her own as well as obtaining articles from other renowned scholars, supervising the layout, and choosing and placing the graphic and photographic material with meticulous care; in other words, competently and professionally combining her work as an editor with that of the printer. She dedicated the same care to the archaeological publications of the Accademia dei Lincei, the Notizie degli Scavi, the Monumenti and the Memorie. Thanks to her stimulating activity and to her presence, all of these publications could come out of a lengthy hibernation.

Another organization in which her contribution seemed to be irreplaceable was the Convegni sulla Magna Grecia which have been held in Taranto every year since 1961. Her extraordinary knowledge of the world of the ancient Greek colonies of southern Italy greatly contributed towards rendering these encounters the most distinguished arena for the scholars of Magna Graecia.

It was mostly thanks to her unwavering commitment, to her impassioned and disinterested dedication and to the brilliant group of archaeologists who were stimulated by her example, that this terra incognita, which had only sparked the romantic interests of eighteenth or nineteenth -century erudites and travelers, but which up to the era of Paolo Orsi had been relegated to a marginal and peripheral role, has become a part of the history of ancient art with the same dignity as that of its Grecian homeland.

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Collaborated with numerous monographic entries in the “Enciclopedia Italiana”, in the “Enciclopedia dell’Arte Antica, Classica e Orientale”.

PHOTOGRAPHS

- 1) The excavation of the Heraion of the Sele with Zanotti Bianco
- 2) idem
- 3) A metope from the Heraion of the Sele
- 4) At Paestum with Einaudi, the President of the Republic of Italy (in a light-colored hat)
- 5) Her studio at her home in S. Agnello di Sorrento
- 6) At an excavation site in Metaponto
- 7) In Taranto at a Convention on Magna Grecia