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GNOLI, GHERARDO

GNOLI, GHERARDO (b. Rome, 6 December 1937; d. Cagli, 7 March 2012; [Figure 1](#)), one of the most distinguished Iranists and historians of religion of his generation, combining an extraordinary scientific output with a constant focus on cultural policy, which expressed itself in his vigorous direction of two important Italian cultural institutions: the Istituto Universitario Orientale in Naples (IUO, now University of Naples “L'Orientale”) and the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente ([IsMEO](#)), which later became the Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente (IsIAO).

Gherardo Gnoli was born in Rome into a learned family, the second son of Aldo Gnoli and Maria Lenzi. Among his relatives are the poet and historian Domenico Gnoli (1838-1915) and the painter Domenico Gnoli (1933-1970). He was married to Erminia Michellini Tocci, who gave him two sons, Tommaso and Andrea.

Endowed with a vivid intellectual curiosity and a strong interest in the origins of [Christianity](#), Gnoli enrolled at the Sapienza University of Rome in the academic year 1956-57 and began studying Semitic languages and philology ([Aramaic](#), Hebrew, and also [Arabic](#)) at the Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia. He turned to Iranian studies only later. The study of these languages and cultural traditions, combined with a profound, passionate, and comprehensive knowledge of classical languages and of the ancient world, gave rise to that particular understanding of intercultural processes that accompanied him throughout his life, marking his varied intellectual journeys.

During university years, his interest shifted gradually toward the Iranian world, to which he would devote by far the greater part of his future studies. Attending courses at the Sapienza University of Rome, he was guided by a number of undisputed masters each outstanding in his own field of studies, some of whom indelibly marked his formation as a scholar. Among academics in the field of Semitic studies one should mention at least Giorgio Levi Della Vida (1886-1967), then already retired, and Sabatino Moscati (1922-1997). While pursuing a different path of study, Gherardo Gnoli was the spiritual heir of the latter, specifically for what regards the central role that both played, one after the other, in the development of Oriental studies in Italy.

In the field of Iranian studies his masters were Antonino Pagliaro (1898-1973), renowned linguist and fine expert on ancient Iran and its languages, and the brilliant [Alessandro Bausani](#) (1921-1988), perhaps Italy’s greatest expert on Iran and Islam. Moreover, he had a deep and intense intellectual relationship with another eminent orientalist of the era, Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1984), a relationship which would largely determine his future. Professor Tucci, who was already the master of his brother Raniero Gnoli (b. 1930), was rapporteur of the thesis of the young Gherardo, entitled “Aspetti della religiosità iranica e indiana riflessi nel pantheon monetario Kuṣāṇa” (On some aspects of Iranian and Indian spirituality as found in the pantheon attested on [Kushan](#) coins), presented for defense on 16 March 1962. The link that was created between master and disciple when preparing the dissertation would prove fruitful in the following years of Gnoli’s collaboration with IsMEO, later IsIAO, then headed by Tucci.

In 1965, aged just 27, Gnoli arrived at the Istituto Universitario Orientale [IUO], Naples, to teach Iranian Studies, and in 1968, he became full professor holding the chair of “Iranistica,” a title that few years later was to change to “Filologia iranica.” He became the director of the IUO in 1970 and then its rector, a post he held until 1978. In those years, he conceived and brought to a positive conclusion a radical reform of this ancient institution, which under his leadership transformed from being a specialized university, with only one faculty and somehow still in line with the tradition of the Collegio dei Cinesi—a religious institution officially recognized by Pope Clement XII on 7 April 1732, which had been created by Matteo Ripa (1682-1746) to prepare young priests for their mission in the East—into a modern university, organized into faculties and departments. This he was able to do while at the same time maintaining the Institute’s tradition in humanities and in social studies, both fields having their main focus on the study of the Asian continent and the Mediterranean. In 1993 he moved to the Sapienza University of Rome, where he became a member of the Dipartimento di Studi Orientali (Department of Oriental Studies) and of the Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia (Faculty of Humanities), where he taught until his retirement, when he was appointed Professor Emeritus.

Once he had stepped down from his office as rector of the Istituto Universitario Orientale, Gherardo Gnoli was called to take charge of Giuseppe Tucci's legacy at IsMEO, where he was elected president in 1979, after a brief period during which the reins of management were in the capable hands of Sabatino Moscati. In perfect continuity with Tucci, he was able to adapt the Institute to changing times by supporting and expanding the archeological, linguistic, anthropological, and to a lesser extent sociological and political studies conducted by IsMEO. This was at a historical moment when Asia increasingly played a central role in geopolitics, while the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia were hit by sudden and to a great extent unforeseen changes, such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. As it often sadly happens to scientific and cultural institutions, IsMEO faced moments characterized by serious economic difficulties, and more than once the scientific community fought against the closure of the Institute. During the most acute of these crises, Gnoli conceived the plan, in agreement with the parliamentarian Tullia Caretoni Romagnoli, for IsMEO's fusion with the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa. The process encountered difficulties and drawbacks, given the substantial, profound difference between the activities of the two bodies, but was driven forward by the need to rationalize expenditures. In November 1995 the Parliament of the Italian Republic approved the merger of the two entities and formation of IsIAO; Gherardo Gnoli was its president until 2011, when, due to his failing health, he voluntarily resigned, to be replaced by Marco Mancini. The last months of Gnoli's life were embittered by the hardships and troubles faced by his cherished Institute, which risked being shut down due to lack of funding, as, unfortunately, finally happened.

While heading first the Istituto Universitario Orientale and then IsMEO/IsIAO, Gherardo Gnoli also tirelessly promoted many international projects related to his scientific interests. During 1981-83, he coordinated the Steering Committee that led to the formation of the Societas Iranologica Europaea (SIE), an association whose seat was at IsIAO until its last days, then was transferred to the new ISMEO, which itself is now hosted by Sapienza University of Rome. The SIE brings together more than four hundred specialists in Iranian studies, who are active in universities and scientific institutions around the world. Over the years Gherardo Gnoli also had a very special dedication to the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* founded by Ehsan Yarshater. There he was a member of the Advisory Committee from the very beginning, and he also contributed many remarkable entries. Among his many contributions to other reference works, one can cite the articles written for *The Encyclopedia of Religion* edited by Mircea Eliade, those contributed to the *Lessico universale italiano*, and those published in Giovanni Filoramo's *Dizionario delle religioni* (Filoramo 1993).

Gherardo Gnoli's example helped an entire generation of scholars to fully understand the international dimension needed for research. Indeed, he never viewed his action as being limited to Italy alone or even to Europe. Quite on the contrary, he learned from Tucci, the founder of *East and West*, a scientific journal that has been entirely published in English ever since its first issue back in 1950, the need to play in a broader field; and over the years he built up strong mutual respect and esteem with leading scholars in Europe, Asia, and America. Moreover, he always encouraged his graduate students to spend part of their study abroad in order to gain confidence with other methodologies of research while becoming familiar with international debate. This is one of the reasons that led him to take part in the scientific committees of many series and journals (*Res Orientales*, *Acta Iranica*, *Silk Road Studies*, *Iranica Antiqua*, *Studia Iranica*, *Mediterraneo Antico*, and *Ancient Civilisations from Scythia to Siberia*). At home he was chairman of the Editorial Board of *East and West* and director of some of the series published by IsMEO/IsIAO (Serie Orientale Roma, Reports and Memoirs, Repertoria ac Bibliographica, Il Nuovo Ramusio).

Gherardo Gnoli was also a member of numerous academies and some of the most prestigious international associations, such as the Accademia dei Lincei, the Institut de France, the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Accademia delle Scienze di Torino, the International Association of Manichaeic Studies, the Société Asiatique, the Societas Iranologica Europaea, the Ancient India and Iran Trust, and the Società di Storia delle Religioni, a learned society of which he served as President until his death.

Several interwoven themes are recurrently found in Gherardo Gnoli's researches, whose interests, after early university years, converged more and more on the history of religions, languages, and history of thought in pre-Islamic Iran, with some sporadic digressions in the domain of Semitic languages, his first academic training. In the late 1950s, IsMEO progressively widened the scope of its activity to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, and the Italian scholar collaborated with various programs of the Institute in this context. More

specifically, it is to these years that one should date his interest in [Judeo-Persian](#) and his first formulation of the “Sistanic Hypothesis” (see below).

Gnoli devoted his first monograph to the publication of the Judeo-Persian funerary inscriptions discovered in [Ġur](#), a task for which his studies of Semitic languages proved useful (Gnoli, 1964). He shared a proficiency in Semitic and Iranian with Philippe Gignoux, a French scholar with whom he maintained a fruitful and friendly relationship over the years.

Although Gnoli always maintained an interest in the Judeo-Persian texts, the publication of the funerary inscriptions found in the Ġur area was bound to remain an isolated episode in his career. Quite differently, the volume of studies on ancient Sistan published in 1967 contained the seeds of many of the themes that persistently developed in his later research (Gnoli, 1967). These include historical geography, the centrality of Zoroastrian texts (the primary sources for his research), the question of the origins of [Zoroastrianism](#), and the Sistanic hypothesis, which correctly recognized the central role played by this Iranian region in Zoroastrian religious history.

The 1980s were the decade of greatest creativity for Gnoli: he saw the publication of his monograph on the date and birthplace of [Zoroaster](#), the four lessons at the Collège de France, and finally the masterly critical essay on the genesis of the idea of Iran. In *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland* (1980) he suggested dating Zoroaster to the turn of the first millennium BCE, placing his country of origin in an ample Sistanic region—a term by which he defined an area larger than the eastern Iranian area now known as Sistan (see also the interesting debate in MacKenzie, 1988 and Gnoli, 1991a). The strong, critical spirit of Gherardo Gnoli was directed to critiquing his own work and not only that of other scholars. One of the great lessons that he taught to his students was to have the courage to change one's mind. This is what happened to him on the date of Zoroaster. After much thought and long evenings spent in conversation with Ilya Gershevitch, a pupil of [Walter Bruno Henning](#), whom he often visited at Jesus College in Cambridge, Gnoli became convinced of the plausibility of the traditional date of Zoroaster, accepting and defending a late date for the prophet's existence, such as had already been proposed, among others, by Henning (1951) and Gershevitch (1995). In fact, in his *Zoroaster in History* (2000), a book based on the 1997 Biennial Yarshater Lecture Series held at the University of California, Los Angeles, he returned to the question of the date of Zoroaster and after a convincing presentation of the historical evidence, he concluded his work by saying that the most likely dates for the life of Zoroaster are 618 -541 BCE.

Although he was bitterly criticized for changing his mind on such a debated subject, one should note that nevertheless Gnoli was always consistent in his most profound conception of Zoroastrianism, considering Zoroaster to be the historical founder of the faith, an initiator of change who was at the same time part of a religious tradition endowed with deep roots. On this issue his position is quite distant from the one supported by some scholars, such as J. Kellens (1991, 2000, 2006) and P. O. Skjærvø (2003), who deny the very existence of the prophet. It is also distant from the position advocated in the 1960s by scholars such as M. Molé (1963), who, influenced by the structuralism that was then in vogue, sought to demonstrate that Zoroaster's legend, mainly known through Middle Persian and Persian sources, had in reality much older roots stemming from the ritual which was already apparent in the [Gathas](#). This view rendered the problem of the existence and the date of Zoroaster absolutely redundant, without denying the possibility of an historical Zoroaster. More specifically on Zoroaster's dating, Gnoli's position now greatly diverged from those of scholars and Iranists such as [M. Boyce](#) and Sh. Shahbazi (Boyce, 1992; Shahbazi, 1977, 2002).

Gnoli's *De Zoroastre à Mani: Quatre leçons au Collège de France* (1985) drew an outline of the history of Zoroastrianism—and with it of Iranian pre-Islamic spirituality—from its origins, which are discussed in the first two lessons, to the [Achaemenid](#) period (third lesson) and further on into the first [Sasanian](#) period, when the faith of Zoroaster collided with the [Manichean](#) belief, winning the day in consonance with the spirit of the time (fourth lesson).

Finally, in 1989 Gnoli published *The Idea of Iran*, perhaps the most exciting of his books, which traced the birth and genesis of the idea of Iran, identifying its roots and demonstrating convincingly that Iran's national identity became a full-fledged political conception only in the third century, when the term [Ērānšahr](#) was employed to define the political entity ruled by the Sassanids. The book also shows how the birth of a national identity fits in well with the more general movement of history that in the third century saw the emergence of various national entities in the region. Moreover, careful attention has been given to the

interplay between Zoroastrianism and [Iranian identity](#), a very close interaction indeed, almost intimate especially in early Sasanian times, and particularly so thanks to the incorporation of the Iranian national tradition in religious texts. This theme was further investigated by Gnoli in a short essay published in 1993 (Gnoli, 1993).

Although heavily burdened by both scientific and administrative responsibilities, Gherardo Gnoli took particular care in organizing seminars and other opportunities for scholars to meet and debate. He managed several conferences and took care of the publication of their acts (Gnoli and Rossi, 1979; Gnoli and Vernant, 1982; Gnoli, 1983, 1985, 1989; Gnoli and Panaino, 1990, Gnoli and Fragner et al., 1995; Gnoli and Belardi et al., 1996; Gnoli and Carile et al., 2004; Gnoli and Sfamini Gasparro, 2009) as well as editing some collective volumes, such as the three volumes in memory of Giuseppe Tucci, edited together with the Sinologist Lionello Lanciotti (Gnoli and Lanciotti, 1985-88) and the multi-volume work on Manicheism, which he unfortunately left uncompleted. When envisaging the latter project, Gnoli had set himself the ambitious aim to publish all written documents regarding the religion founded by Mani with the exception of the anti-Manichean polemical texts written by the Church Fathers, which would have been too bulky to be included in the project. The first three volumes of this series have been published by the Lorenzo Valla Foundation; the fourth and final volume, also planned under his supervision, is still under preparation (Gnoli, 2003, 2006, 2008 and in the press).

Most of the articles by Gherardo Gnoli discuss issues related to Iran's pre-Islamic religious history, with a particular focus on Zoroastrianism. Notable in this context are his contributions on the date of Zoroaster (Gnoli 1995a, 1997, 1998, 1998b, 2004, 2006a), on the definition of **huarnah-* (Gnoli, 1963a, 1984, 1989b, 1990, 1996, 1996b, 1996c, 2002; see [FARR\[AH\]](#)), those expounding the Sistanic hypothesis (Gnoli, 1975, 1977), the ones on particular aspects of the Mazdean doctrine (Gnoli, 1962, 1963, 1964a, 1979, 1983, 1994, 1995, 1996a, 2009), and his contributions on the religious policy of the Achaemenids and Sasanians (Gnoli 1971, 1974, 1998a, 2005a, 2007). His articles on Manicheism (Gnoli, 1990b, 1991, 1994b), on [dualism](#), and on [Zurvanism](#) (Gnoli, 1984a, 1988, 1995b) were very important. His studies on historical geography also were quite relevant—an interest that he held since the beginning of his studies, and which combined well with his researches on the date and birthplace of Zoroaster (Gnoli, 1983a, 1985a, 1991a, 2005).

Another field of research in which Gherardo Gnoli contributed extensively was the study of the genesis of the idea of Iran, on which he wrote a book and a number of very stimulating articles (Gnoli, 1966, 1966a, 1986, 1987, 1987a, 1989, 1990a, 1994a, 2002a); related to these were his papers on the Sasanian period and its cultural climate (1985c, 1991b, 1993a, 1996a, 2004a). In the second half of the 20th and then in the 21st century, Gnoli resumed his interest in Semitic studies, encouraged by the brilliant successes of the Italian archeological missions in Yemen (IsMEO/IsIAO), of which he was, in fact, the epigraphist (Gnoli, 1986a, 1987b, 1990c, 1991c, 1993b, 1993c, 1994c, 1996e, 1996f, 2005b). Detailed bibliographies of his work can be found in the volume of studies published in his honor on the occasion of his 65th birthday (Cereti, Maggi, and Provasi, eds., 2003) and in the booklet containing a profile of Gherardo Gnoli and his updated bibliography that a group of students, friends, and colleagues offered him on the occasion of his 70th birthday (see Bibliography).

As a teacher, Gherardo Gnoli was both demanding and tolerant. He has always been very generous in pointing out new paths of research, in telling his students which new publications he considered necessary or useful to read, and in dedicating large amounts of his valuable time to the discussion of most diverse topics. He knew how to do it with such courtesy and grace as to remove any distance between teacher and student, between master and pupil. He was never prone to harsh criticism, preferring to highlight the strengths of the student, however few, rather than the defects. He always encouraged students to seek out other scholars' perspectives, advising them to go abroad in order to grow accustomed to an international context. In carrying out the institutional responsibilities at IUO, then at IsIAO/IsMEO, he chose collaborators who were both competent in their own field of studies and loyal to the institution itself. He was able to draw the best from his staff and collaborators, enhancing each one's qualities and hiding the defects. He had the uncommon quality of making anyone feel at ease in conversation with him, regardless of his status, but without renouncing his great authority, which he rightly liked to call "a moral authority."

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