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*Perspectives on 'Travel' in
Ancient Mediterranean.
The Multi-sensory
Approach to
Archaeological Sites,
Monuments and Artefacts
from Medieval to
Contemporary Ages*



a cura di Silvana Di Paolo
Prefazione di Fabio D'Angelo

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*The Sound of Ruins and the Presumption of Their
Silence*

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Sinossi: La visita delle rovine ha spesso evocato e continua a suscitare l'emozione del silenzio e, quindi, l'idea che gli spazi antichi implicino una possibilità di riflessione e astrazione dal rumore della realtà e della contemporaneità. Il presente contributo si concentra in particolare sulle descrizioni silenziose di antiche rovine e sulle relative emozioni vissute dai viaggiatori, indicando la differenza di descrizioni di luoghi e città antiche – prima che diventassero rovine – fatte dalle persone che vi abitano. I viaggiatori vivono gli stessi luoghi da una prospettiva diversa, aggiungendo sentimenti ed emozioni che non sempre – si potrebbe addirittura dire mai – corrispondono all'esperienza e alle emozioni delle persone passate che vissero quegli stessi luoghi che sicuramente non erano silenziosi, almeno non sempre e in qualsiasi momento e con un'atmosfera così romantica e meditativa.

Abstract: A visit to ruins often raised and still raises the emotion of silence and, therefore, the idea that ancient spaces implicate the possibility of reflection and abstraction from the noise of reality and contemporaneity. The present contribution specifically focuses on the silent descriptions of ancient ruins and the related emotions which travellers experience, pointing to the difference of descriptions of ancient places and cities – before they became ruins – made by the people living therein. Travellers experience the same places from a different perspective adding feelings and emotions that not always – one could even argue never – correspond to the experience and emotions of past people living those same places that surely were not silent, at least not always and at any time, and with such a romantic and meditative atmosphere.

Keywords: Egypt, Persia, sound

Tra i molli cantici di nere vergini
 sopra uno splendido tappeto tiro
 le candide bellezze
 di Cleopatra fulgono...

[...]

Naviga, naviga, regina splendida!
 Naviga il viride Nilo, tra' cantici
 de le vergini farie,
 de 'l sistro isiaco a 'l sonito!...
 (Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Su 'l Nilo*, 1879)

Introduction

Travels and therefore accounts of travellers interested the region of the Near East since, at least, the XVI century. The area had special attention from and attraction for European writers, historians, and adventurers who wanted to see places with their own eyes, and experience atmosphere and situations that they had previously read about in stories, accounts, and memoirs of other travellers. The attention towards the Near East (encompassing North Africa and Egypt) up to the regions of Central Asia has been a near-absolute prerogative of Europeans. Consequently, the Orient is seen and described with reference to Europe: sometimes the Orient is the indistinct wide region to the East of Europe, having special environmental, historical, and social features and customs which, because of the strong influence, even bias, of the romantic view and perception of the idea of exoticism, are usually described and narrated according to preconceived stereotypes that in the end precisely corroborate that romantic and exotic impression.

The attention of travellers actually preceded the XVI century, if one thinks for example of the account of the Venetian Marco Polo in his long travel to China (XIII century), crossing

the Near and Middle East along the Silk Road: it is always a point of view of a European moving to the East and collecting information, with the addition of his impressions of and considerations about the places and people he visits and meets. With a different perspective, the travels of the Berber Moroccan historian Ibn Battuta (XIV century) give a different representation, analysis, and description of the regions (from North Africa to India) he visits, although a certain degree of fiction and stereotypes can also be found. At least, however, the accounts of the travels of the Muslim scholar Ibn Battuta in the Islamic world (also crossing non-Muslim regions) start from a different intention, with a surely less romantic and exotic background, but with an emic rather than etic perspective on the countries, people, and customs he observes.

The present contribution, however, does not aim to present, generally and schematically, the different accounts of the travellers in the Near East, but rather it focuses on a specific matter: the description of ancient ruins and the perception of the ancient vestiges from an acoustic perspective, that is how sound or the absence of sound is considered in the moment of the visit, how sound or the absence of sound emotionally affected the discovery and the first meeting of archaeological and historical sites and, finally, how the sound or the absence of sound agree with the stereotypes of the exotic Orient. Starting from the recent trends of the analysis of senses in archaeological contexts,¹ the analysis of sound does not tackle the acoustic properties of

¹ See for example Y. HAMILAKIS, *Archaeology and the Senses. Human Experience, Memory and Affect*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013; *Distant Impressions. The Senses in the Ancient Near East*, edited by A. HAWTHORN and A.-C. RENDU LOISEL, Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 2019; *Sensing the Past. Detecting the Use of the Five Senses in Ancient Near Eastern Contexts. Proceedings of the Conference Held in Rome, Sapienza University, June 4th, 2018*, edited by D. NADALI and F. PINNOCK, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2020.

ancient buildings and spaces, but the acoustic impressions visitors had and perceived at the time of their visit: the descriptions and notes often refer to the hearing of sounds and noises; more often, the visit is indeed absorbed in a kind of unrealistic silence and references to sound or, more specifically, to music are indirectly evoked with reference to either ancient times (as for example D'Annunzio makes in his poem quoted above) or the contemporaneity (modern cities, harbours, suqs).

Sight and visual descriptions of landscape (with the ruins therein) and colours are predominant in the accounts of travellers and even in the very first “scientific” reports of visitors and scholars: the colour-atmosphere, pointing out not only the difference to the country of origin (generally in Europe), but also the distinction between the urban and urbanised contexts (for example when comparing the desertic landscape of the pyramids and the teeming built space of cities such as Cairo and the harbour of Alexandria), is a recurrent literary motif and, in fact, it seems that newcomers, who discover the Near East for the first time, feel the necessity to repeat and, to a certain extent, to confirm the same impressions the travellers before them had at the time of their first visit. Sounds are not among the very first observations made by visitors or, if they are, acoustic comments are however relegated to the background: sounds can sometimes be perceived indirectly, via the indication and description of places and the light; bright lights, the sun, and the desert are, via synaesthesia, a condition that suggests the perception of sounds or, more precisely, the awareness of the existence of silence.

To exemplify the attitude and attention of travellers towards the sound, the music or, more generically, the acoustics of places and spaces (with a special focus on the ancient ruins and sites), two contexts will be taken into account: Egypt and Iran (ancient Persia). The former has been the preferred destination of many (if not all) European travellers, before and,

even more so, after the campaign of Napoleon to Egypt, from 1798 to 1801, and the publication of the milestone book *Description de l'Égypte*. The majestic and imposing Egyptian antiquities were a major attraction and symbolised the exotic and magic atmosphere of the Orient, actually contributing to the creation of an invented Orient.² Starting from the *Voyage en Égypte* by Gustave Flaubert, the publication of the notes the travel the French writer made in 1849, attention will then be more specifically concentrated on the written reports and memoirs of Italian writers and scholars (among them Giuseppe Regaldi, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and Cesare Brandi), pointing out differences and similarities in their descriptions, perceptions, and natures of their literary compositions.

Iran has also been seen by many travellers and first discoverers being also on the trajectory to China and the Far East. At the same time, exactly like Egypt, the visibility of ancient ruins emerging from the ground was occasion for the fascination and reason for the travel: starting from the very first accurate impressions and, one would even dare, archaeological descriptions of Pietro Della Valle (it is interesting to compare the difference, for example, between the books on ancient Egypt by Regaldi and the one by German scholar Georg Erbers – translated into Italian in 1879 – that, notwithstanding that they are historical essays based upon a scientific foundation,³ they are at times influenced by the usual romantic and exotic clichés of

² On the use of Egyptian antiquities to generally represent the ancient Orient, see D. NADALI, *Invented Space: Discovering Near Eastern Architecture through Imaginary Representations and Constructions*, in *Time and History in the Ancient Near East Proceedings of the 56th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale at Barcelona 26-30 July 2010*, edited by L. Feliu et al., Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 2013, pp. 391-404.

³ For Regaldi, see D. MARCHESE, *Nella terra di Iside. L'Egitto nell'immaginario letterario italiano*, Roma, Carocci, 2019, pp. 62-63.

the more common writers),⁴ also in this case other Italian writers and different kinds of sources will be purposely taken into account (among them Italo Calvino and a documentary film by Bernardo Bertolucci).

Egypt: imagining music, evoking voices, hearing sounds

Having been visited by many writers, scholars, and travellers, the travel notes and personal feelings and memoirs on both ancient and modern Egypt are difficult (impossible?) to enumerate and the result would simply be a catalogue of recurrent events, impressions, and similar descriptions, even with the possibility of recognizing quotations, via an intertextuality research: at the same time, the long frequentation of Egypt offers the possibility of precisely identifying those recurrent *topoi* or clichés that are typical of the genre of travel literature. How has Egypt been described? Which were the first impressions of travellers, authors, scholars and how did they translate these into words? Special attention was of course given to the ancient Egyptian antiquities of the times of the pharaohs and, sometimes, this was the very reason for the travel: the discovery, study, and visit to ancient ruins as an intimate attraction for the past, for a very distant past, and for a past different to the more common European vestige.

Era la valle del Nilo, la feconda terra dei Faraoni, l'Egitto che mi si offerse al pensiero; e quella regione, meglio di ogni altra, volli eleggere a studio principale nell'Oriente antico. Perché a campo del mio insegnamento abbia scelto l'Egitto, e come in esso intenda svolgere la storia degli altri popoli che concorsero a creare la civiltà orientale, andrò mostrando nel presente

⁴ On Regaldi, see E. BUDETTA, *La genesi de «L'Egitto antico e moderno» di Giuseppe Regaldi*, in «Otto/Novecento», 1 (2015) pp. 5-30 (in particular at p. 7).

discorso, onde verrà ad un tratto a farsi palese l'ordine e l'indole delle mie lezioni. [...]

Il poter determinare quale delle umane stirpi abbia quivi in staurata la civiltà più vetusta che si conosca è ancora uno di que' problemi, ne' quali indarno si affaticarono forti intelletti. I monumenti però attestano, che in tempi anteriori agli altri imperi d'Oriente nella valle del Nilo si svolse una continuata serie di alti fatti e di meravigliosi eventi, che cospirarono a costituire questa sublime e singolare personalità dell'Egitto. [...]

Il Nilo e il deserto, i templi e i palazzi, le piramidi, i sepolcri e le sfingi, le bendate dinastie de' Faraoni e le caste privilegiate de' sacerdoti e de' guerrieri, e il servo popolo di viso nelle caste inferiori, tutto questo multiforme spettacolo procurerò di rappresentarvi, come io lo considerava visitando Tebe e Menfi, Ibsimbul e Dendera, e come nelle notti luminose vegliando ne faceva argomento di carmi e meditazioni.⁵

The very same attention for the ancient history of Egypt and its monuments (pyramids, the Sphinx, the several temples and tombs) can be found in the book of Gustave Flaubert (*Voyage en Égypte*) and in the work *Le Nil* by Maxime Du Camp, travel buddy of Flaubert and in charge, on behalf of the French Ministry of Public Education, of taking photos of the ancient Egyptian monuments and archaeological ruins.⁶ The different tasks of the two as well as the “archaeological” inclination of Du Camp actually make the sharp difference in the two accounts: the *Voyage* by Flaubert describes the antiquity from an external perspective as, probably, most of travellers had done in the past and still would do; at this point, it is interesting to point out the Flaubert admits that «les temples égyptiens m'embêtent profondément»,⁷ while Du Camp seems to show a great interest,

⁵ G. REGALDI, *L'Oriente antico, prolusione*, in «Rivista Contemporanea Nazionale Italiana», 161 (1867), pp. 1-16 (in particular at pp. 4, 6, 11-12).

⁶ G. BOTTA, *Viaggiare in Egitto nell'Ottocento*, in *L'esperienza del viaggiare. Geografi e viaggiatori del XIX e XX secolo*, a cura di F. Lucchesi, Torino, G. Giappichelli Editore, 1995, pp. 145-170 (in particular at pp. 149-150).

⁷ G. FLAUBERT, *Voyage en Égypte*, Paris, Bernard Grasset, 1991, p. 327.

passion, and admiration for the ancient Egyptian archaeological ruins and sites that he also has the duty to document photographically, with detailed description of contexts, analysis of the architecture, and reference to historical facts and quotations of sources next to his personal feelings and emotions in front of the ancient remains.

Their visit to the Sphinx is particularly significant and eloquent in the different approaches Flaubert and Du Camp had: in particular, Flaubert reports and describes the reaction of Du Camp that discloses a very special emotion that shows even through his body and face.

Vers 3 h. et demie nous touchons presque au désert où les trois pyramides se dressent – Je n’y tiens plus et lance mon cheval qui part au galop pataugeant dans le marais. Maxime, deux minutes après, m’imite – course furieuse – je pousse des cris malgré moi – nous gravissons dans le tourbillon jusqu’au Sphinx. Au commencement nos arabes nous suivaient en criant “σφις σφις Oh – Oh – Oh” – Il grandissait, grandissait et sortait de terre comme un chien qui se lève.

Abou-el-Houl <(le père de la terreur)> – le sable, les pyramides, le Sphinx, tout est gris et noyé dans un grand ton rose – le ciel est tout bleu – les aigles tournent en planant lentement autour du faite des pyramides – nous arrêtons devant le Sphinx – il nous regarde d’une façon terrifiante. Maxime est tout pâle. J’ai peur que la tête ne me tourne, je tache de dominer mon émotion.⁸

Du Camp also describes his own reaction with a different emphasis, with a series of questions which point out his curiosity, interest, and astonishment:

À mesure que l’on approche, les pyramides grandissent, on distingue les assises; le sphinx apparaît; un vent tiède souffle du côté du désert et m’enveloppe comme un large baiser. Tout à coup, la verdure cesse brusquement et le sable commence. Je lançai mon cheval au galop et je l’arrêtai devant le sphinx rose qui sortait des sables rosés par le reflet du soleil

⁸ FLAUBERT, *Voyage*, p. 208.

couchant. Enfoui jusqu'au poitrail, rongé, camard, dévoré par l'âge, tournant le dos au désert et regardant le fleuve, ressemblant par derrière à un incommensurable champignon et par devant à quelque divinité précipitée sur terre des hauteurs de l'empyrée, il garde encore, malgré ses blessures, je ne sais quelle sérénité puissante et terrible qui frappe et saisit jusqu'au profond du cœur. Je comprends bien les arabes qui l'appellent maintenant *abou-el-houl*, le père de l'épouvante! Avant-garde des pyramides, impassible sous le ciel, que fait-il là depuis cinquante siècles au milieu des solitudes? Les pharaons, les éthiopiens, les perses, les lagides, les romains, les chrétiens du Bas-Empire, les conquérants arabes, les fatimites, les mameluks, les turcs, les français, les anglais ont dormi à son ombre; les temps, les nations, les religions, les mœurs, les lois ont défilé devant lui; chaque mot de l'histoire a frappé sa large oreille entourée des bandelettes sacrées; on est tenté de lui dire: "oh! Si tu pouvais parler!" quel est-il et que fait-il là? Est-il la muette sentinelle du désert libyque? Est-il l'immobile gardien de ces montagnes bâties à mains et à existences d'hommes? Est-il le symbole toujours cherché et toujours introuvé de l'inconnu qui nous sollicite et nous attend? Ou n'est-il seulement qu'une fantaisie grandiose et olympienne d'un roi des temps passés qui voulut perpétuer son nom que nul ne sait plus aujourd'hui.⁹

Relying upon Flaubert, he was the first to reach the Sphinx and, being full of admiration and fear in front of the imposing monument, he tried to control his emotion, something that Maxime was not able to do or, as it seems from his own words, did not want to do. At the same time, it is important to consider that Du Camp completed his book two years after his travel and, therefore, two years after he took the photographs of the Egyptian monuments he visited (Fig. 1): one can suppose that those photos, in front of his eyes, helped Du Camp in remembering and re-experiencing the very first emotions he in person had at the time of his first visits and discoveries of the ancient Egyptian past.¹⁰

⁹ M. DU CAMP, *Le Nil: Égypte et Nubie*, passage from chapter 1 (digital version of the book marked, public domain).

¹⁰ BOTTA, *Viaggiare in Egitto*, p. 151; F.N. BOHRER, *Photography and Archaeology*, London, Reaktion Books, 2001, p. 44.

Despite the differences, both accounts register the same atmosphere of colours, light, and environment (the sand of the desert): Du Camp also adds an auditory consideration when he expresses the desire that the Sphinx might speak and, one can infer, answer his questions. The desertic environment significantly characterizes nearly all descriptions of ancient Egyptian monuments and ruins that are placed outside the civilised world, far from the cities and, because of this situation, retain their magic, elusive, and romantic atmosphere which is moreover emphasised by the absence of noises, sounds, and people. In this respect Du Camp, while on visit at Karnak, observed:

Au-dessus de ma tête, à travers les plafonds bouleversés, je voyais le ciel qui se constellait de lumières; les miaulements criards d'une bande de chacals, qui galopaient dans les blés, venaient jusqu'à moi; je regardais les pharaons, immobiles depuis des siècles, invoquant leurs dieux oubliés; je contemplais ces grandes batailles muettes qui se déroulent sur les murailles, et je souriais lorsque mon guide me tirait par la manche en disant: "kaouadja, il est temps de partir; voici l'heure où les fantômes blancs vont apparaître". Certes, si jamais ruines ont été visitées par les esprits, ce sont bien celles-là! Où trouveraient-elles donc, ces pauvres âmes errantes qui flottent dans les espaces, un ciel plus étoilé, de plus larges colonnades, des échos plus sonores, un silence plus profond, des images plus belles et un plus religieux recueillement.¹¹

The reference to ghosts in the open space of the desert or among the ruins is again a *topos* that also occurs in the historical book by the German Egyptologist Georg Erbers and, because it is explicitly mentioned, it probably depends on legends of the Arabs and Bedouins living in the region:

La solitudine del deserto non tardò a circondarmi da ogni parte e fa colà che io provai per la prima volta il suo meraviglioso prestigio, ma provai benanco

¹¹ DU CAMP, *Le Nil*, passage from Chapter 4.

quella strana eccitazione che tanto facilmente s'impadronisce della fantasia del viaggiatore, che spiega la sua potenza segnatamente nell'immaginazione degli Arabi e che popola di fantastiche immagini l'inanimato deserto. Qui vi ha la sua dimora tutto il mondo degli spiriti, qui vi si agitano enti malefici che fendono l'aere – sopra strane cavalcature, s'aggirano ricci, ragni e cavallette. Anche l'uomo più savio può credere all'esistenza di quegli enti, poiché erano tenuti in considerazione dallo stesso profeta e molti di essi accettarono l'islamismo, altri sono malvagi, opprimono gli uomini e sono guidati dal demonio. Essi osano avvicinarsi al cielo per ispiarne i segreti, ma vi sono gli angeli a guardia e le stelle cadenti che veggonsi di nottetempo nel deserto sono frecce infocate che stendono al suolo gli spiriti protervi. Nell'attraversare il silenzioso deserto ti giungerà all'orecchio al tempo della preghiera una voce sonora prolungata. Al tuo occhio non sarà dato di scorgere alcunché di vivente, ma la voce che tu avrai inteso si farà ognor più distinta. Un leggero terrore t'invade, ti lanci sul culmine della collina che ti nascondeva l'orizzonte ed allora ti si affaccia un romito pastore circondato dalle sue pecore, che innalza al cielo le sue preci con tutta la forza dei suoi polmoni. Gli spiriti devono ascoltare il solitario onde poterne fare testimonianza nel dì del giudizio. Havvi qualcosa che acquisti maggiormente la figura di spettri, quanto i viaggiatori arabi che attraversano il deserto nell'ora del crepuscolo sui loro cammelli, avvolti nei loro bianchi mantelli, silenziosi ed accompagnati dagli avvoltoi? Quando sorge la luna, ecco, quegli enti maligni si trasformano in lumi oscillanti od appaiono sotto forme umane sospese nell'aria vaganti silenziosi cavalcando nere strozze con neri volti e cogli artigli simili all'acciaio delle falci.¹²

The only admitted presence, because they are quiet and discreet, are the ghosts who, as Du Camp notes, can contemplate and enjoy the immobile pharaohs and the silent representations of battles on the walls: this reference to visual narratives on the walls of ancient Egyptian temples is particularly interesting and, even if indirectly, it gives another auditory remark. Du Camp sees the representations of battles as juxtaposed mute scenes without any sound and noise. On the other hand, Erbers, in his analytical descriptions of some bas-reliefs and paintings of

¹² G. ERBERS, *L'Egitto antico e moderno*, Milano, Tipografia Editrice Lombarda, 1879, p. 115.

temples and tombs, imagines the development of what is represented via a kind of enactment, adding considerations about sounds, music, and involvement of people:

Il silenzio della tomba di Osiride, in Abido, non è interrotto che da un leggero mormorio, mentre a Dendera si rendevano festosi servigi alla giuliva dea e quando essa nelle gran feste era uscita dal suo santuario e si mostrava al popolo, s'ornavano di ghirlande tutte le teste e tutti i calici s'empivano di vino. I locali interni del tempio rimanevano estranei a quelle feste, a motivo che potevano chiamarsi a buon dritto una gran sacristia che circonda il silenzioso locale del santuario e nella quale venivano custoditi gli utensili, le sostanze profumate occorrenti al servizio divino ed alle processioni.¹³

Indeed, Erbers has quite a fervid imagination in suggesting how the ancient life of the Egyptian monuments looked, thinking of the presence of people and enriching the hypothesis and reconstruction with chants, music, so actually giving ancient Egyptian monument life and voice:

A quest'ora risuonavano al tempo dei Faraoni, dinanzi alle porte dei templi, gli inni di lode che i sacerdoti volgevano al dio della luce.¹⁴

Chi bramava ottenere il permesso di entrare in queste sale, doveva sottomettersi a varie cerimonie. Solo i gran sacerdoti ed il re potevano porre il piede nei santuari, mentre le processioni dovevano fermarsi nel secondo atrio. I canti, i suoni di flauto o d'arpa dovevano risuonare in quel tempio che Seti I aveva forse fatto costruire come tomba d'onore di taluno altrove sepolto.¹⁵

I quadri che rappresentano il festoso consorzio della famiglia mostrano come le donne, al par degli uomini, prendessero parte al comune sollazzo, ai cibi,

¹³ *Ivi*, p. 266.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 152.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 245.

ed alle bevande. Canti, fiori e musica allettano l'orecchio degli ospiti come ne rallegrano l'occhio le seducenti movenze delle ballerine.¹⁶

Come in tutte le altre circostanze festose, s'alternavano anche qui incessantemente musica e canto, e persino il maestro di capella del tempio era talvolta costretto a suonare l'arpa in onore di Hathor.¹⁷

The presence of music is therefore inferred thanks to the representations of musical instruments, people singing and dancing, and the occurrence of special occasions (religious festivals, ceremonies, triumphs). This re-enactment, although imaginary and conjectural, can however be accepted in the end or, at least, it gives a vivid analysis of Egyptian life and buildings that, before becoming ruins covered by sand and inhabited by animals, were lively spaces attended by people.

It is in fact interesting to point out how the moment of the visit to ancient ruins is usually a single-handed experience and the desertic environment actually works in emphasizing this special condition and atmosphere of solitude: the visitor is alone in front of the ancient monuments and even his travel companions and local guides are a cause of distraction and disturbance. In this respect, photos of ruins, monuments, sites, and even details usually portray the ancient vestige as the only protagonist within the frame, sometimes surrounded by the empty landscape: sporadic human presence of either the visitor himself or locals passing there is also pictured and this is often due to the need to contextualize the monument and giving the proportions and dimensions of the ancient evidence.¹⁸ A kind of

¹⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 288-289.

¹⁷ *Ivi*, pp. 374, 375.

¹⁸ BOTTA, *Viaggiare in Egitto*, p. 150; BOHRER, *Photography*, p. 79; S. DI PAOLO, *Image of Ruins as Metaphorical Places of Transformations: The Case of Persepolis*, in *Receptions of the Ancient Near East in Popular Culture*

contemplation is thus suggested and fostered via verbal description and visual evidence: ancient monuments need to be reached by abandoning the noisy cities and crossing the desert immersed in a brilliant and dazzling light where yellow and fire (because of the heat) prevail, the same yellowish and brownish colour of the muddy river Nile because of the presence of silt. Indeed, the idea of abandonment of ruins is implicitly and even explicitly suggested not only by the description of the excursion to reach them, but also by the absence of any other modern building and mankind: on the contrary, ancient temples, palaces, and tombs are inhabited by animals and, concerning the hearing of sounds, the only voices a visitor can hear are the cooing of pigeons, the howling of jackals and hyenas, and the acute cry of bats that interrupt the silence adding an evil impression and allusion:

Il y dedans plus de chauve-souris que dans les autres; leur petit cri aigre interromp le silence de ces demeures cachées.¹⁹

mon guide me criait parfois de courber la tête en passant sous des voûtes que je n'avais pas aperçues; des chauves-souris muettes et rapides frôlaient mon visage: tout cela était sinistre.²⁰

ces ruines sont maintenant habitées par des chouettes qui partagent leur retraite avec les chacals fauves et les chauves-souris à larges oreilles.²¹

and Beyond, edited by L. Verderame and A. Garcia-Ventura, Atlanta, GA, Lookwood Press, 2020, pp. 49-61 (in particular at pp. 56-58).

¹⁹ FLAUBERT, *Voyage*, p. 213 (describing the interior of the Pyramid of Rhodopis, as the third pyramid of the monumental complex of Giza was known at that time).

²⁰ DU CAMP, *Le Nil*, passage from Chapter 1.

²¹ *Ivi*, passage from Chapter 5.

Una visita dell'interno delle piramidi non è certo cosa piacevole, giacché quanto più vi si addentra, tanto più molesti si fanno il calore e le esalazioni dei pipistrelli che abitano legioni intere i corridoi ora impraticabili.²²

Passando da tomba a tomba abbiamo scordato il tempo e le ore. La tranquilla notte si stende sui vasti campi dei morti; il silenzio della solitudine non è interrotto che dal sinistro ululato delle jene.²³

ma presentemente sono del tutto annerite le iscrizioni che si trovano sulle sue pareti, e miriadi di pipistrelli, che lungo il giorno pendono dal soffitto e che dopo il tramonto volano a stormi verso il Nilo, spengono i nostri lumi e s'impigliano nella nostra barba, il che è accaduto più volte allo scrittore di queste pagine.²⁴

We have no reason to doubt that all these animals inhabited the ancient ruins: it is at the same time very evocative that the presence of these very specific animal species actually recalls the invectives and curses of the prophets in the Old Testament when condemning Babylon and describing its fate:

(19) Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms,
the pride and glory of the Babylonians,
will be overthrown by God
like Sodom and Gomorrah.

(20) She will never be inhabited
or lived in through all generations;
there no nomads will pitch their tents,
there no shepherds will rest their flocks.

(21) But desert creatures will lie there,
jackals will fill her houses;
there the owls will dwell,
and there the wild goats will leap about.²⁵

²² ERBERS, *L'Egitto antico*, p. 170.

²³ *Ivi*, p. 204.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 340.

²⁵ Isaiah 13: 19-21.

And:

(39) Therefore the wild beasts of the desert with the wild beasts of the islands shall dwell there, and the owls shall dwell therein: and it shall be no more inhabited for ever; neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation.²⁶

The effort of imagination by Erbers in re-enacting the ancient music that was played in the temples and the echoes of chants and voices that once populated the ancient buildings is even more appreciated, due to the real conditions that affected the ruins: perhaps his ideal reconstruction wanted to dignify those ruins by returning their ancient magnificence and splendour. Although the predominant descriptive image of ancient Egypt is mainly based on colour perception and the emphatic reference to the desert,²⁷ the musicality of ancient Egypt is also recorded and suggestively evoked by other authors. Gabriele D'Annunzio, in his travel to Egypt in 1898, lingers on the dryness and heat of his experience:

²⁶ Jeremiah 50: 39.

²⁷ This is for example very clearly and explicitly declared by Giuseppe Ungaretti in his *Quaderno egiziano*: Ungaretti was born at Alexandria of Egypt and his travel in 1931 is a kind of backwards-itinerary to his origin. The environment, the light, and the desert of his native-born country deeply affected and influenced his poetry and the desert definitely becomes a real metaphor of the existence and poetics of Ungaretti: «sono nato al limite del deserto e il miraggio del deserto è il primo stimolo della mia poesia». See MARCHESI, *Nella terra di Iside*, p. 148; see also L. PAGLIA, *Il viaggio ungarettiano nel tempo e nello spazio. Le Prose daunie di Giuseppe Ungaretti*, Foggia, C. Grenzi, 2005, pp. 43-86; G. DE MARCO, *Un percorso ungarettiano di «fantasia esperita»: «le Puglie» attraverso le icone dell'«acqua», della «luce», del «deserto», della «pietra» e loro variazioni compositive sul/dal tema*, in «Chroniques italiennes web», 12 (4/2007), pp. 1-35<<http://chroniquesitaliennes.univparis3.fr/PDF/web12/DeMarco12.pdf>> (last accessed: 30-06-2020).

La fiamma cresce, la canicola infuria. La sabbia brilla nella mia visione come mica e quarzo. Mi abbarbaglia, mi dà la vertigine e il terrore, come il deserto libico quando quella mattina cavalcavo solo verso le tombe di Sakkarah. Non ho difesa di palpebre né altro schermo. Il tremendo ardore è sotto la mia fronte, inevitabile. Il giallo s'arrossa, il piano si travaglia. Tutto diventa irto e tagliente. Poi, come una mano creatrice foggia le figure nella creta cedevole, un soffio misterioso alza dalla distesa abbagliante rilievi di forme umane e bestiali. Ora il fuoco solido è trattato come la pietra a scarpello. Ho davanti a me una parete rigida di roccia rovente scolpita d'uomini e di mostri.²⁸

But music is also present: it is however interesting to point out the difference with Erbers' attempt which was based on the observation of the ancient representations of musicians and musical instruments. The musical references of D'Annunzio as well as of Giosué Carducci in his ode *Alessandria* or Marinetti's suggestions in his *Il fascino dell'Egitto* reflect more their reinterpretation or, indeed, one can even conclude that they tried to think of and propose a background music that was deeply influenced by the European way of conveying oriental music that tried to imitate and thus restore what was or it was supposed to be the ancient Egyptian melody:

Con languore sinuoso, il fiume mi svela, al di sopra del suo letto di terra nera e d'erba verde, il deserto. Dune. Solidificazione gialla di una musica di sabbia e vento con slanci, crescendo, cadenze arpeggiate, morendo in sordina e pizzicati soavissimi.²⁹

Or again, in another passage:

Quando finalmente Cavafy, pregato da tutti, si decide a regalarci la declamazione di una sua lirica inedita, Catraro interviene per spiegarne il titolo misterioso: Il Dio abbandona Antonio. Si legge infatti in Plutarco che

²⁸ G. D'ANNUNZIO, *Notturmo*, Milano, Fratelli Treves, 1921, p. 7.

²⁹ F.T. MARINETTI, *Il fascino dell'Egitto*, Verona, A. Mondadori, 1933, p. 83.

mentre Antonio cedeva alla voluttà di Cleopatra in Alessandria, si udì una sera allontanarsi sul mare un coro melodioso di voci mandole e flauti.³⁰

The time of the travels to Egypt by D'Annunzio (1898), the date of the ode by Carducci (1882) and finally the visit in 1930 of Marinetti to his homeland (who, like Ungaretti, was born in Alexandria of Egypt) have something in common:³¹ they all happen after 1871, the year when, at the Cairo Opera House, the first representation of *Aida* by Giuseppe Verdi was staged.³² Doubtless, the melody and exotic nuances of Verdi's music in describing and identifying situations, feelings, and landscapes (again the desert, the river Nile, and the vegetation) sealed, to a certain extent, the already original idea of music that had to sound oriental («Su l'ali tremule del vento arrivano / le note flebili del sistro isiaco / e i cantici d'amore / de le vergini farie» and «Tra i molli cantici di nere vergini» of D'Annunzio³³ or «cadenze arpeggiate, morendo in sordina e pizzicati soavissimi» of Marinetti):

Anche il colore orientale è felicemente trovato in questa musica coll'innesto di qualche cantilena caratteristica; ma dove sembrami felicissimo il Verdi, è nell'invenzione del canto ieratico egizio, che si assomiglia al canto fermo,

³⁰ MARINETTI, *Il fascino*, p. 135.

³¹ A. PELLEGRINO, *Verso Oriente. Viaggi e letteratura degli scrittori italiani nei Paesi orientali (1912-1982)*, Milano, La Vita Felice, 2018, pp. 103-112; MARCHESE, *Nella terra di Iside*, pp. 42-51, 149-153.

³² D. NADALI, "Su! Del Nilo al sacro lido": Note sulla realtà ed i fraintendimenti di *Aida*, in *A Oriente del Delta. Scritti sull'Egitto ed il Vicino Oriente antico in onore di Gabriella Scandone Matthiae*, a cura di A. Vacca, S. Pizzimenti and M.G. Micale, *Contributi e Materiali di Archeologia Orientale* 18, Roma, Scienze e Lettere, 2018, pp. 423-437.

³³ The verses are quoted from poem *Su 'l Nilo* (1879).

nello stesso modo che si assomigliano i preti di tutti i luoghi e di tutte le epoche.³⁴

I think the influence of Verdi's *Aida* is even more eloquent in Emilio Salgari's novel *Le figlie dei faraoni* (1906) when the author, speaking of the music played at the time of the pharaoh, explicitly refers to the opera by Verdi:

La musica era molto coltivata sotto i Faraoni, quantunque l'applicassero perlopiù alle feste religiose, cosicché possedevano gli egizi un gran numero d'istrumenti. Per lo più erano flauti, trombe di bronzo dorate, non così smisurate come quelle che figurano nell'*Aida*, anzi cortissime; ma dal suono potente, di una grande varietà di corni di bue, tagliati a becco presso l'imboccatura e che chiamavano comunemente *tan*.³⁵

To conclude the Egyptian "travel" in search of sound and acoustic references in the accounts of visitors, the case of the visit to the colossi of Memnon is quite significant and exceptional (Fig. 2): according to a legend that is registered and handed by ancient Greek and Roman visitors as well as by modern travellers, the northern statue, collapsed because of an earthquake, emitted a voice at sunrise. The restoration promoted by the Roman emperor Septimius Severus, however, caused the perennial suspension of the emission of the sound of the most renowned statue that, until that time, was in fact known as the speaking statue.³⁶ Therefore, the monument was not originally conceived to speak (although, according to the ancient Egyptian

³⁴ F. FILIPPI, *Musica e Musicisti*, Milano, Libreria Ed. Brigola, 1876, p. 363. In general, on the exoticism and oriental nature of the music of *Aida*, see C. COLOMBATI, *Esotismo ed archeologia nell'Aida di G. Verdi*, in «Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università di Macerata», XXV-XXVI (1992-1993), pp. 127-143.

³⁵ E. SALGARI, *Le figlie dei faraoni*, Torino, Viglengo, 1991, p. 56.

³⁶ The fact is also reported by Erbers in his historical book: ERBERS, *L'Egitto antico*, p. 312.

ritual practice of the opening of the mouth, statues were in fact provided with a voice and precisely had the duty to speak), but a historical dramatic event changed the nature of the statue; the following restoration re-established the shape and entirety of the colossus, but interrupted the wonder that had made that statue famous and a real tourist attraction since the antiquity. Maxime Du Camp refers to the event of «la fameuse statue vocale, celle qui, au lever de l'aurore, faisait entendre un son harmonieux»: ³⁷ he then refers to the legend by quoting some ancient authors, but he also explains that the “magic” marvel had a scientific reason. It is however more interesting his consideration and doubt: «je ne sais pas s'il [the colossus] chanta pour les autres, mais je sais qu'il ne chanta pas pour moi», ³⁸ maybe an admission of frustration rather than a question of veracity.

Even more recent is the experience of the Italian art historian and restoration theorist Cesare Brandi, in his book *Verde Nilo* (1963): like Du Camp, Brandi refers to the legend, but he also gives his own impression, actually revealing his interests and inclination of a scholar as well as a kind of indifferent astonishment:

L'ingresso trionfale a questa immensa necropoli è dato dai due famosi colossi di Memnone, che rappresentano invece Amenophis III, e furono già fra le cose più celebri dei tempi antichi: ma soprattutto perché, l'uno dei due, essendo caduto in pezzi, da quei pezzi, enormi macigni giacenti, sprigionava all'alba il lamento che d'obbligo udire per tutti i viaggiatori dell'antichità. [...] Anche Adriano venne ad ascoltare questa voce di pietra, e un'iscrizione in greco lo esprime come farebbe un annunciatore alla radio: la statua gli disse “buongiorno”. È curioso che il lamento non ci fosse sempre stato, ma avesse cominciato dopo il terremoto dell'anno 27, che fece crollare metà della statua di destra. Lo zelo di Settimio Severo rovinò tutto: ricollocati al loro posto, i macigni ammutolirono. Non solo muti, ma questi amorfi li vedevo io, tanto

³⁷ DU CAMP, *Le Nil*, passage from Chapter 4.

³⁸ *Ivi*, passage from Chapter 4.

le spaccature e la consunzione della pietra ne allontanano l'antica conformazione, via via che ci si avvicina.³⁹

Iran, ancient Persia: Persepolis, variation on the theme

Ancient Iran has been visited and crossed by many travellers: differently to Egypt that was visited as the main and final destination of the travel, that is visitors, travellers left their home to reach Egypt fascinated and attracted by the ancient history and monumentality of the ruins (as well as by legends, for example the speaking statue, as already mentioned, and mysteries, such as those related to mummies).⁴⁰ Ancient Persia was also a land of passage of people, merchants, and travellers generally going farther to the East (Central Asia and China). As will be pointed out later, the different nature of the ruins, in particular what those looked like and how they appeared in front of the eyes of visitors, determined the celebrity of Egypt: the pyramids, the Sphinx, temples, and even tombs were majestically emerging from the sand, while ancient sites in the area of Levant, ancient Mesopotamia and Persia, with due exceptions, had the typical morphology of shapeless hills that in fact covered the ancient remains of mud-bricks and, because of this, they were less fascinating or did not produce the same admiration and astonishment of the Egyptian monuments. It is at this point interesting to refer to the experience Leone Caetani had when visiting the ruins of the ancient Assyrian city of

³⁹ C. BRANDI, *Verde Nilo*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 2006, pp. 51-52.

⁴⁰ L. PEIS, *Viaggiatori italiani in Egitto fra Cinquecento e Settecento. L'antico Egitto prima della nascita dell'Egittologia*, in «Viaggiatori. Circolazioni scambi ed esilio», 3/1 (2019), pp. 471-526 (in particular at pp. 492-503). At the same time, travels to Egypt were also the occasion to visit neighbouring countries, for example pilgrims moved to the Levant with the religious reason of visiting the places of the Holy Land.

Nimrud: Caetani arrived at Mosul in 1894,⁴¹ the ancient Assyrian capital was discovered by Austen Henry Layard just few decades before (1845-1851) and because of the great sensation that this discovery caused,⁴² Caetani wanted to visit the ruins and was very disappointed when he did not find any evidence on the ground of the fancy architecture of the Assyrian palaces as presented by Layard in his very popular *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* (1853).

Pietro Della Valle had a different attitude when he visited Babylon, actually being the first traveller to identify the location of the ancient city:⁴³ like Caetani, Della Valle also expresses his disappointment in noting the absence of any monumental ruins and evidence that could confirm the magnificence and fame of the Tower of Babylon.⁴⁴ At the same time, however, Della Valle shows great care and interest for archaeological details and materials – as he already had done in Egypt,⁴⁵ when he for

⁴¹ P. GHIONE and V. SAGARIA ROSSI, *Leone Caetani: l'Oriente nella vita e nella storia*, in *Le mille e una cultura: scrittura e libri fra Oriente e Occidente*, a cura di Maria Cristina Misiti, Bari, Edipuglia, 2007, pp. 121-140; V. SAGARIA ROSSI, *Viaggiare in Oriente a fine Ottocento. La 'collezione' di Leone Caetani*, in «Horti Hesperidum», II (2012), pp. 341-382.

⁴² F.N. BOHRER, *Orientalism and Visual Culture. Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 132-167.

⁴³ P. DELLA VALLE, *Viaggi di Pietro Della Valle il pellegrino*, Bologna, Gioseffo Longhi, 1677, p. 484 (letter 17 from Baghdad, December 1616); A. INVERNIZZI, *Discovering Babylon with Pietro Della Valle*, in *Proceedings of the First International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, Rome, May 18th-23rd 1998, Vol. I, Roma, Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza", 2000, pp. 643-649 (in particular at p. 647).

⁴⁴ INVERNIZZI, *Discovering Babylon*, p. 647.

⁴⁵ PEIS, *Viaggiatori italiani*, pp. 492-503.

example describes the bricks he found and, more correctly, properly excavated, believing they belonged to the Tower:⁴⁶

La materia, di che è composta tutta la fabrica, è la più curiosa cosa, che vi sia, e da me fu con diligenza osservata, rompendola con picconi diversi luoghi. Son tutti mattoni molto grandi, e grossi di cruda, seccati, come io credo al sole a guisa delle Tappie di Spagna; e son murati, non con buona calce, ma pur con terraccia; e per più forza, tra mattoni, mescolati con quella terra, che serve di calce, vi sono come a solaio certe cannuccie palustri spezzate, ovvero paglie dure da fare stuoie. A luogo a luogo poi vi sono mescolati in diverse parti, massimamente dove più importa per sostegno, molti mattoni medesima grandezza, ma cotti e sodi, e murati con buona calce, o con bitume: però li crudi sono senza dubbio assai più. Di questi mattoni, cotti e crudi, co'l bitume attaccato, e di quelle cannuccie, che hanno in mezzo, io hebbi gusto di pigliarne, e ne porto meco per mostrarli in Italia a gli antiquari curiosi, che certo mi par che sia una bella antichità, facendosi mentione dell'uso in questo paese di fabbricar con bitume in vece di calce, non solo da Giustino abbreviator di Trogo nelle fabbriche di Semiramide, ma dalla Sacra Scrittura medesima nella fabrica a punto di questa stessa Torre e Città, l'edificio della quale la Scrittura Sacra a Nembrotto, e i profani a Belo attribuiscono.⁴⁷

Della Valle's same interest for archaeology can also be singled out in his description of the ancient ruins of Persepolis, actually with an attention devoted to the analysis of archaeological reality in front of his eyes and the historical interpretation (quoting ancient sources to support his considerations) instead of lingering on his impressions and emotions:

La pianura, ò piazza, in mezo della quale stà la fabrica de i Mostri, per esser molto ampia, termina co'l monte: onde, non vi essendo più luogo in faccia verso Levante, l'ordine del resto delle fabbriche si volge, e si stende a man destra verso Mezo giorno, in questa guisa. In mezo del gran piano, ò piazza,

⁴⁶ INVERNIZZI, *Discovering Babylon*, p. 648.

⁴⁷ DELLA VALLE, *Viaggi*, pp. 504-505 (letter 17 from Baghdad, December 1616).

a sinistra alquanto, caminando con la faccia a Mezo giorno, si trova prima, in terra, un gran vaso di marmo, quadro, fatto forse per tenervi acqua da lavarsi; un solo lato del quale, trovai esser lungo circa venti quattro piedi miei. Il marmo, di che è fatto, è grosso in ogni parte circa due palmi nostri; e di sette pezzi soli di marmo è composto tutto il vaso. Andandosi più innanzi, pur co'l viso a Mezo giorno, si trova un'altra scala di marmo, doppia essa ancora, che si sale da due parti; una, da Ponente verso Levante, e l'altra, da Levante verso Ponente: e tanto una parte, quanto l'altra, è di un solo branco, di circa trentuno scalini: ma non è così larga, come quella prima, benche non vi sia molta differenza. Questa scala stà in mezzo della facciata di una fabbrica più interiore, la lunghezza si stende da Levante a Ponente; et occupa assai più spatio, che la scala, da una banda, e dall'altra. Onde, nel muro della facciata, dove la scala si appoggia, di quà e di là dalla scala, avanza molto spatio; et in quello, che è diviso per traverso in due ordini, superiore, e inferiore, stanno scolpite molte figure; e tanto nell'ordine di sopra, quanto in quello di sotto, stan disposte le figure ad una ad una, come se andassero in processione: e dalla parte di Levante, parimente che da quella di Pontente, il viso della figure, e l'ordine della lor processione, è sempre rivolto verso il mezo; cioè verso dove la scala sale, come se dovessero andar di sopra, et entrar nella fabbrica interiore. Il numero ancora più esteriore della scala, che frà i due branchi di essa, con un gran vano, fa in mezo quasi un frontispitio, era similmente scolpito con figure più grandi, e tutto insieme, senza divisione: ma per esser caduto in terra, non si scorge, che fosse. Che cosa rappresentasse la processione delle figure scolpite, non saprei determinare: dirò ben, che ò è pompa di sacrificio, massimamente se la fabbrica era Tempio, il che più mi persuado: ò era trionfo: ò accompagnamento del Rè, che comparisse in maestà, in quel modo che lo descrive Senofonte, quando usciva Ciro: ovvero era pompa di presente, che si portasse al Rè: narrando Eliano nella sua varia historia, essere stato costume antico in Persia, anzi legge, che ovunque andavano i Re, ciascuno a gara gli honorava con presenti, secondo il suo potere; nel modo, che hoggidi ancora si fa, conforme hò scritto più volte. Che si fosse, l'ordine della scultura, tanto da una parte della scala, quanto dall'altra, è di questa sorte.⁴⁸

Because of it being stone and in view, Persepolis is surely an attraction for travellers and visitors and one can say that it kept this specificity until today. Persepolis, together with the

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 338-339 (letter 15 from Shiraz, October 1621).

nearby monumental complex of Naqsh-e Rostam, is doubtless one of most visited and preferred destinations and surely the presence of bas-reliefs and sculptures emphasizes the astonishment and involvement of any visitor.⁴⁹

Leaving aside the archaeological considerations and comments of Della Valle, other types of documents and authors are taken into account to analyse the way the ancient ruins of Persepolis have been described and perceived, with a very different approach from Della Valle and proposing again a style and wording that actually is very similar to and, to a certain extent, recalls the accounts of travellers of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

La via del petrolio by Bernardo Bertolucci is a black and white documentary movie filmed in 1967 comprising three parts (1. Le origini, 2. Il viaggio and 3. Attraverso l'Europa):⁵⁰ commissioned by the Italian oil company Eni (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi) for RAI Italian television, the movie tells the story and life of the oil in Iran, from the discovery, extraction, transport to Italy (arriving in the harbour of Genoa) and finally arrival at the refinery in Germany. In a voiceover, the narrator reads text written by Alberto Ronchey, providing the audience with different information not exclusively related to oil, but encompassing a historical outline on ancient and modern Iran with considerations on society, economy, and traditions. Music written by Egisto Macchi accompanies the scenes and alternates with sounds directly taken from the environment (and in those sequences the music stops).

⁴⁹ DI PAOLO, *Image of Ruins*, pp. 55-59.

⁵⁰ The movie can be seen on the Eni website of its Archivio Storico at the following link:
<<https://archiviostorico.eni.com/aseni/en/explore/audiovideo/>> (last access: 30-06-2020).

Centred on oil, the movie is not only a documentary but also a kind of hymn to this product that actually transforms society and economy: in the first part (*Le origini*), the meaning of oil is analysed and presented passing from a religious manifestation (the show of fire and the temples of fire of Zarathustra) to an economic resource that, however, had not totally affected Iran yet (referred to the time of the filming in 1967). While the discovery of oil in Texas contributed to the development and modernisation of the area, the same event had not had the same effect in Iran, in a society that is described as still living in an economic Middle Age. With the evident intention of pointing out the differences between West (Europe and US) and East (Iran), the former is characterized by traffic and modernization, while the East still has an archaic system of economy that is vividly represented by the scenes in the bazaar focusing on the way people work, move, and transport wares (carrying carpets on their back, pulling carts, or using donkeys, Fig. 3).

Within this discourse when and how the ruins of Persepolis are used? The ancient remains, with close-ups of the bas-reliefs representing the Persian soldiers (Fig. 4), occupy a very short time in the movie: in particular, the images of the Persian ruins appear after a quite long sequence of a landscape of mountains and beaches; the voice-over recalls the defeat of the Persians by the Greeks and how the new empire, the new power, is the oil:

Quando il fiore dell'Asia, come Eschilo ricorda, non tornò più dalle battaglie di Salamina e Platea, ebbe inizio l'era dei Greci e decadde la Persia, l'archetipo degli imperi di terra. Dopo due millenni e mezzo solo oggi affiora nelle valli iraniche una nuova potenza, ma questa volta è un'energia di natura che affiora dal sottosuolo, un impero sotterraneo. È l'età del petrolio, la forma endogena che spinge di nuovo la Persia ad essere teatro di storia. Ecco le

spiagge e le montagne condannate, ecco lo scheletro monumentale della Persia secco e marino, sepolto nei millenni con i Persiani di Eschilo.⁵¹

Oil is called an underground empire, exactly as archaeological ruins are covered and need to be excavated to emerge; if Iran had a role in history thanks to the Persians, who were however defeated by the Greeks, now a new emerging role can be achieved thanks to oil. The images of ancient Persepolis, for a quite limited frame (from min. 04:59 to min. 05:56), are instrumental to point out this difference and, at the same time, similarity to oil: they are not indeed part of a travel itinerary, but they are purposely used and shown within the discourse of the origin of the new black underground empire of oil.

The sculptures of the Persian soldiers at Persepolis are used to give the Persians of Aeschylus a face: in fact, while the camera moves portraying the figures, the voice-over declaims verses of Aeschylus' tragedy, accompanied by music. The visual and verbal description in the movie does not agree with the typical and traditional clichés of admiration and astonishment of visitors in front of ancient ruins nor does it correspond to the "pure" archaeological analysis of Della Valle. Protagonists of the first part of movie (*Le origini*) are the oil and the technology used for the extraction: empty spaces are filmed, with sporadic human presence in the immensity of the Iranian landscape. The voice-over emphatically insists on the indication that spaces, landscape, and environment have all tonalities of yellow and even the interviews with the Italian workers repeat that the climate is extremely hot and humid, everything is yellow and this is purposely opposed to the memories of the green Italian landscape of the Po Valley (the place of origin of many of the Italian personnel involved in Iran). These details actually match

⁵¹ Transcript of a passage of the voice-over from *La via del petrolio / 1. Le origini* (min. 04:14).

the vision and impressions of travellers in Egypt, as we have already seen: the heat, the yellow colour of stones, monuments, and desert. Another similar aspect: while music is inferred by the observation of bas-reliefs and paintings in Egypt, it is often stressed that ruins are inhabited by animals and only their voice eerily resounds. The movie is virtually all accompanied by music and only fragments are silent: in one short passage, for example, the camera films an eagle in flight and the echo of its call fills the emptiness of the landscape.

The ruins of Persepolis were also visited by Italo Calvino on the occasion of a travel to Iran in 1975 that was preliminary to the realization of radio programme called *Le città della Persia*. The genesis of Calvino's visit to Iran is therefore planned and targeted: therefore, his notes cannot exactly be compared with the accounts of the travellers we have already seen, although one can in fact recognize a similar style or an attitude towards the ruin; Calvino, in fact, uses his visit to the city of Isfahan, the temple of Ahura Mazda (with the observation of the cult of fire) and Persepolis to add his own considerations, impressions, and reflection on traditions, contemporaneity and, in general, life. The travel and the visit to those uncommon places give him the occasion to develop his intimate thoughts: the words of Calvino are not just a description of what he sees, but they lead to deeper analysis and a kind of contemplation and constant reference to the presence. As happens in Bertolucci's movie, the temporality of Iran, both ancient and modern, has a different rhythm and velocity: if the movie points out the contrast with the modernity (modernization, speed, industrialization) in what we could in fact define as a futuristic vision, Calvino seems to pause on the different nature of time. When speaking of the sculptures of Persepolis, Calvino actually seems to prefer to avoid the modernity, letting for example the crowd of tourists move away and giving him the possibility of

empathizing and identifying with the crowd of stone people (Fig. 5):

A Persepoli, mi trovo a salire la scala monumentale insieme a due file di persone incolonnate: quella dei turisti in comitiva e quella dei dignitari dalla barba e dai capelli a boccoli, con in capo cilindriche acconciature fatte di penne, al collo massicce collane a mezzaluna, sandali ai piedi sotto le toghe pieghettate, e talora un fiore in mano. La prima folla è fatta di carne e ossa e sudore, la seconda di pietra scolpita. Lasciando che la prima di s'allontani sotto il sole accecante, m'affianco all'altra, adeguo al loro calmo passo il mio, m'immedesimo a quell'andare ininterrotto di figure contegnose sulla grigia superficie delle lastre di pietra, a quell'incedere di processioni che si snodano dovunque si posa lo sguardo su per tutti gli scaloni della città, lungo la base di tutte le facciate, scorrendo verso le porte fiancheggiate da leoni alati e la sala dalle cento colonne. La popolazione di pietra ha la stessa statura di quella di carne e ossa, ma se ne distingue la compostezza e per una rigida uniformità di lineamenti e di vestiario, come se la stessa figura di profilo continuasse a passare e ripassare. Ogni tanto una faccia voltata indietro verso il vicino che segue nella fila, un posarsi a vicenda le mani sul petto o sulle spalle come in uno scambio di profferte d'amicizia introducono nella fissità cerimoniale una nota di animazione, tanto più calorosa quanto più stereotipata appare la ieraticità del resto del corteo. La reggia degli Achemenidi a Persepoli è un contenitore che riproduce sulle pareti il proprio contenuto di duemilacinquecento anni fa, un'architettura fatta per accogliere una fastosa cerimonia, la quale cerimonia non poteva che ripetere quella che era già lì sempre presente, in ogni aggruppamento e in ogni gesto, nel disporsi e succedersi d'ogni ambasceria e d'ogni drappello, nello sfoggio dei costumi, delle ricchezze e delle armi: la guardia dell'imperatore con lance, archi e turcassi, i portatori di doni delle nazioni con i vasi preziosi e i sacchetti di polvere d'oro.⁵²

Calvino's description of the garments, attire, and gestures of the dignitaries is so careful that it could easily be used in a book of Persian archaeology and art; Calvino's attention is specifically devoted to the details and careful observation but

⁵² I. CALVINO, *Collezione di sabbia*, Milano, Oscar Mondadori, 1994, pp. 229-230.

this is not just a mere description with an end in itself, rather it works to create a vivid representation the author shares and lives with: despite no acoustic references being reported, thanks to the annotation about the sweat of the crowd in the flesh (the tourists), of the heat, and the indication of a blinding sun, it seems however to hear, indirectly, the sound of small talk and whispers of the ascending crowd of stone taking part in the ceremony in the royal residence of the Achaemenids.⁵³ This happens because Calvino does not simply describe the scene, but he revitalizes it identifying himself with one of the guests admitted into the presence of the king: as he clearly states, sculptures are not a decoration of the staircase, but they actually represent a ceremony that really occurred in the same place. The analysis of Calvino is a re-enactment, it transforms the fixed stone sculptures into moving pictures, as if it was a movie, and this happens because he moves with them exactly as the ancient visitors did two thousand five hundred years ago, envisioning gestures, words, and sounds all around: this overlapping is strengthened by the fact that the people of stone have the same height as the people in the flesh climbing the staircase, thus with a nearly perfect mirroring effect.

Beyond the archaeological accuracy of Calvino's observations and terminology, his annotations are used to push forward reflections and considerations on life, the ancient ruins are the perfect situation (in space and time) to do this, indeed because of their nature they precisely create this condition.⁵⁴ In the same text, Calvino reports the meeting he had with a tribe of nomads, living people in the flesh that emit sounds, and this leads him to ponder on the nature and impact of time:

⁵³ It is interesting to note how Calvino uses Achaemenids instead of Persians: on the contrary the movie makes a clear reference to the Persians that fought against the Greeks, thus with a Western perspective.

⁵⁴ M. AUGÉ, *Le temps en ruines*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 2003.

In una stessa giornata non ho fatto che incontrare sulla mia strada folle umane in marcia: file di persone fissate per sempre nella roccia e altre file che si spostano in transito perpetuo. [...] Dovessi scegliere tra i due modi d'essere, avrei da valutare a lungo i pro e i contro: vivere in funzione del segno indelebile da marcare, trasformandosi nella propria figura incisa sulla pagina di pietra, oppure vivere identificandosi col ciclo delle stagioni, con la crescita delle erbe e dei cespugli, col ritmo degli anni che non può fermarsi perché segue il ruotare del sole delle stelle.⁵⁵

Conclusion

The visit to ruins is the occasion to reflect on the nature of time:⁵⁶ the decadence of the remains or even their majestic preservation immediately point to the idea of time that passes pushing any visitor in their presence in front of the past. Ruins are silent, and this silence precisely emphasizes both the astonishment and the condition of the reality that belong to another time and, in some way, lives outside time: indeed, that silence is speaking more than any words and the noises and voices around, for example sounds of the animals living among the stones and columns or inside closed spaces (pyramids, tombs), contribute to create a magic atmosphere that is balanced on romantic allusions, on one hand, and menacing suggestions, on the other. In fact it seems that visitors prefer silent ruins, they want ruins to be silent without any acoustic or noisy interference: if and when they speak and resound, it is only because of a supposed supernatural power (alimeted by a legend as in the case of the speaking statue of Amenophis III) or because the visitor, traveller, or scholar is able to re-enact and imagine ancient music and sounds. Today, the recent trend of archaeoacoustics aims to fill this gap of knowledge, basing the reconstruction of ancient sounds on contextualized analyses and

⁵⁵ CALVINO, *Collezione*, p. 232.

⁵⁶ AUGÉ, *Le temps*.

measurements rather than personal opinion and idealistic hypotheses.

Only the restored ancient music and the voices of animals are admitted, since they correspond to the idea and canon of ruins in the head of travellers, actually confirming their stereotypes and emotionally affecting their experience. Otherwise, the silence is preferred because it perfectly represents the romantic involvement of any visitor in front of ancient remains; indeed, it also represents, metaphorically, the Orient: the noise of the modernization of the West is totally absent in the East, actually it is feared and avoided. In the documentary film *Il canale* by Bernardo Bertolucci (1967) this contrast is visually and verbally represented in the scene of the passage of an oil tanker through Suez (Fig. 6):⁵⁷

Si pensa subito alla confusione di un porto orientale, al plurilinguismo dei marinai, alla sonorità di un grande bazar, le stirpi antiche dei contrabbandieri, invece a Suez i veri dominatori sono il sole e il silenzio. Perché Suez si è rassegnata al silenzio?⁵⁸

Sun and silence, Suez is exactly described as the ancient Egyptian monuments in the sunny yellow desert and in the stillness. Actually, the contrast and, one would say, the impossibility of the Orient to adapt to the present and therefore to strive for the future was already remarked upon by Marinetti when he speaks of Suez:

Il nazionalismo egiziano potrà presto realizzare il sogno di autonomia assoluta e entrare nella Società delle Nazioni come libero alleato amico di una Inghilterra sempre padrona dell'Alto Nilo e di una sponda del Canale di

⁵⁷<https://archiviostorico.eni.com/aseni/en/explore/audiovideo/IT-ENI-AV0001-000915?r=audiovideo> (last access: 30/06/2020).

⁵⁸ Transcript of a passage of the voice-over from *Il canale* (min. 00:53).

Suez? Contraddizioni! Ma gli ululati degli sciacalli desertici e dei gafir domestici non si armonizzano forse colla fluida eternità notturna del Nilo?⁵⁹

The differences, the emotions, and judgements that visitors attribute to ruins inevitably are the reflection of personal behaviours, predispositions, and cultural background: dealing with the Orient, the description of both the ancient remains and the society they meet enter into the sphere of what Edward Said called ‘Orientalism’, that is the attitude of Westerners in approaching the Oriental world that, for Said, always has a political return.⁶⁰

The situations taken into account here show however different approaches, that necessarily depend on the personality of the travellers, but also on the time and aims of the product (accounts, poems, opera, movies): Said would surely disagree, but I would distinguish between an innocent and unintentional Orientalism and an intentional and guilty Orientalism. The former is the result of the stratification of manners and styles in describing a world such as the Orient, which is unusual and refers to the idea of exoticism with lyrical descriptions of people, landscapes, situations, with everything sounding diverse. The intentional and guilty Orientalism, on the contrary, uses those ideas and clichés precisely to strengthen, even to exacerbate, differences and to subordinate and unbalance relationships. In this respect, the timeless and silent Orient enters into the calculation of time and the noisy modern world thanks to the West;⁶¹ from an archaeological perspective, the ancient Oriental

⁵⁹ MARINETTI, *Il fascino*, p. 153.

⁶⁰ E. SAID, *Orientalism*. Western Conceptions of the Orient, London, Penguin Books, 1979.

⁶¹ R. KABBANI, *Europe’s Myth of the Orient. Devise and Rule*, London, MacMillan, 1986, p. 73; K.M. MCGEOUGH, *The Ancient Near East in the Nineteenth Century. Appreciations and Appropriations. I. Claiming and Conquering*, Sheffield, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015, pp. 281-283.

and Egyptian civilizations entered into history thanks to Western explorers who gave them a voice.



Fig. 1: The Sphinx, photo by Maxime Du Camp, December 1849, <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/700111>>, CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0) Public Domain Dedication.



Fig. 2. Restored Colossus of Amenophis III, Thebes, the so-called “speaking statue”, photo by Maxime Du Camp, 1849-1850, <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/287140>>, CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0) Public Domain Dedication.



Fig. 3. Scene of a man carrying carpets on his back in the bazaar of Teheran, from *La via del petrolio / 1. Le origini*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1967, Archivio Storico Eni.



Fig. 4. Detail of the Persian warriors at Persepolis, from *La via del petrolio / 1. Le origini*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1967, Archivio Storico Eni.



Fig. 5. Apadana Hall Eastern Stairway, Persepolis, photo by Luigi Pesce (possibly), 1840s-1860s, <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/652166>>, CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0) Public Domain Dedication.



Fig. 6. Detail of the passage of an oil tanker at Suez, from *Il canale*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1967, Archivio Storico Eni.