

The Monument of Paikuli: The Activities of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Iraqi Kurdistan, Past and Present.

Carlo G. Cereti, Luca Colliva, Gianfilippo Terribili, Massimiliano Vassalli

MAIKI - Sapienza University of Rome¹

DOI: 10.31972/ISCAHKRD19.007

Abstract

Since 2006 a team of Italian archaeologists and epigraphists, led by Prof. Carlo G. Cereti (Sapienza University of Rome) surveyed and studied the commemorative monument erected by the Sasanian king Narseh (293-302 CE) next to a strategic pass of the Qaradagh Range (Sulaimaniyah Province). Through the data collected from the site and the Paikuli Collection held at the Slemani Museum, many innovative results have been achieved in the last decade. More specifically, the study of the bilingual inscription (Middle Persian and Parthian) and the massive sculptures of the king, once adorning the monument, provided significant improvement of the scholarly debate on the early Sasanian kingship. The ongoing activities include the documentation of all the blocks originally constituting the outer coating of the monument and now scattered on the slopes of the hill. The new set of archaeological data will soon shed light on different matters related to the still problematic feature of the monument structure².

Keywords: Sasanian period; Middle Persian; Parthian; Early-Sasanian royal ideology

Narseh Inscription at Paikuli §. 32:

« And when We arrived in Asōrestān at this place where this monument has been made...the Princes and Grandees and Nobles and Householders and Satraps and Accountants and the remaining Persian and Parthian who were in Asōrestān, Nōdšīragān, Garamea and Syārazūr, all together they came to Xāyān ī Nikatrā to meet Us. And here they came into Our presence where this monument

1 The present work is based on a paper in Italian, which is going to be published in the Journal *Scienze dell'Antichità* 24, 2019.

2 All the activities are carried out in collaboration with Kamal Rashid Rahim, Director of Antiquities of Sulaimaniya and Shkwr Mohammad Haidar, Director of Antiquities of Garmian and with the participation of the representatives of the mentioned institutions: Zana A. Qadir (Directorate of Antiquity of Sulaimaniyah) and Mohammad Ali Karim (Directorate of Antiquities of Garmian). For the study and conservation of materials held at the Slemani Museum, MAIKI actively and fruitfully collaborates with the Museum Director Hahim Hama Abdullah.

has been made ». (HUMBACH - SKJÆRVØ 1978-1983, vol. 3.1: 41-42; CERETI - TERRIBILI 2014: 363-364)

It is with concise and effective words that Narseh (293-302 CE) himself explains in his bilingual inscription the reasons that led him to build in this mountain valley a monument that glorified his ascent to the throne and his role as protector of the dynastic legitimacy. It was in fact near the Paikuli pass (Fig. 1)³ that Narseh, the last of Šābuhr I' son to wear the Sasanian crown, there he met the great dignitaries of the kingdom who had come to that valley to recognize his royal rights and dignity. This event marked a decisive turning point in the dispute that saw Narseh involved against his nephew Wahrām III, initially supported by an influential court faction (WEBER 2010; WEBER 2012).

Although today it appears a remote and isolated place, indeed Paikuli represented a key element of those historical vicissitudes and the consequent display of the ideological message promoted by this sovereign (COLLIVA - TERRIBILI 2017: 174-184 with references, and SHENKAR 2018). Nevertheless, the mountain pass was located in a strategic area of the kingdom controlling one of the main accesses to the region of Asōrestān (CERETI et al. 2015) where the great urban centre of Ctesiphon was located and where the military confrontation between the troops supporting Narseh and those of Wahrām III took place (Narseh's inscription §§. 38-46, HUMBACH - SKJÆRVØ 1978-1983, vol. 3.1: 46-50). More generally, in the Late Antiquity, Paikuli and the surrounding area represented an important junction within a complex road system, which connected the heart of the Mesopotamian plain to the border with the Roman world, toward west, and the Iranian Plateau to the east.

3 The Paikuli pass and the site are located in the south easternmost part of the Qaradagh mountain range, about 7 km west of the modern town of Darbandikhan. The entire area represents a natural transition point between the Mesopotamian plain and the Iranian Plateau (BOGDANI et al. 2016).

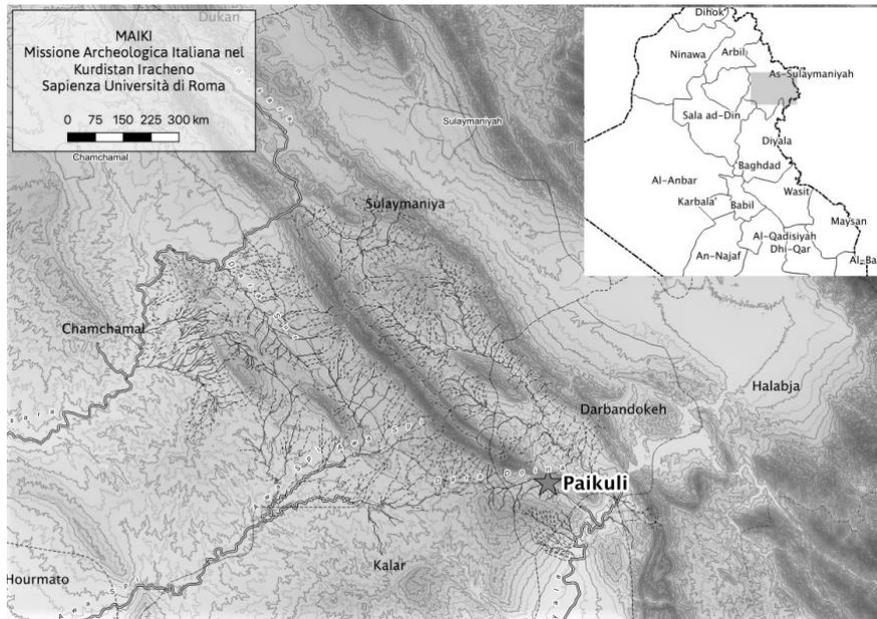


Fig. 1 – The MAIKI survey area and the valley of Paikuli (image DiSA-MAIKI).

There were at least three ancient and long-distance routes of communication, which intersected this morphological and socio-cultural transition area.⁴ These roads continued to have a primary importance for the life and cohesion of the kingdom throughout the Sasanian period and far beyond. In a place that at the time probably marked the entrance into the royal domains of Asōrestān, the Sasanian sovereign gave life to a rather sophisticated monumental and figurative project through which a well-defined ideological and dynastic message was expressed in a tangible and solemn manner (COLLIVA - TERRIBILI 2017). Along with the bilingual inscription, whose language and content is of extraordinary importance despite its fragmentary state,⁵ the structure also included five monumental busts of Narseh that exalted his figure and framed the meaning of the complex within a purely regal language, both iconographic and architectural.⁶ The 3D renderings implemented through a digital photogrammetric system and an

4 The first of these highways connected the Adiabene/Nōdšīragān region to Garamea and Media, while a second one run from Ctesiphon and Asōrestān towards Ecbatana/Hamadān, Ray and far more to the east towards the Khorāsān. Joined to this, a third itinerary continued toward the city of Ganzak and the fire temple of Ādur Gušnasp in Ādurbādagān (CERETI et al. 2015).

5 The text of the inscription presents a multifaceted composition in which a narrative motif based on patterns belonging to the epic oral tradition (SHAYEGAN 2012) alternates with sections that follow other compositional models. This is an element that highlights the high degree of techniques mastered by the scribes of the early-Sasanian court. The stylistic register is equally varied, including an overlap between technical-religious terminology and formulas attuned with the official and epistolary protocol. Such a complexity of language was probably paralleled by the polysemy related to this royal message, which conflates key features of the Iranian kingship conceptions.

6 To adorn the complex the sovereign had four high relief busts and a well-rounded sculpture carved. the 3D renderings implemented through a digital photogrammetric system In the 2009 campaign all these evidence were documented through

innovative documentation of these pieces collected during the 2009 campaign at the Slemani Museum, fostered a reconsideration of this material and new approaches to its study (CERETI - TERRIBILI 2014: 383-384; TERRIBILI - TILIA 2016; COLLIVA - TERRIBILI 2017).

The first information on the Paikuli monument came to the West as early as the second half of the nineteenth century thanks to the tireless work of Colonel Sir H. Rawlinson (RAWLINSON 1868). Informed by the then British diplomat in Baghdad, J.B. Fraser, he was the first Orientalist to visit the site and to graphically document some of the inscribed blocks.⁷ A more consistent investigation of the site came only with the missions of the famous German archaeologist E. Herzfeld (1911, 1913, 1923) who, due to historical contingencies, didn't had the opportunity to stay long on the site and accomplish a comprehensive documentation of all the monument evidence. Herzfeld himself published the first edition of the inscription in 1924, while for the reconstruction of the shape of the monument he hypothesized a tower-like⁸ structure based on contemporary Roman models and inspired at the features of the famous Ka'ba of Zoroaster at Naqš-e Rostam (Fārs - Iran)⁹. Since the last German mission in 1923, and except for a brief photographic survey conducted by V. Popp in the early 1970s (POPP - HUMBACH 1973) and a safeguard intervention carried out by the local Department of Antiquities in 1990, no archaeological activity has involved the site of Paikuli until the resumption in 2006 of new investigations as part of a series of scientific projects led by C.G. Cereti.¹⁰

Despite several setbacks due to the unstable political situation in the country,¹¹ during this last decade the research activities of the Italo-Kurdish team achieved significant results, especially

photogrammetry On the characteristics and ideological meaning related to the figurative program of Paikuli see extensively COLLIVA - TERRIBILI 2017.

- 7 See HUMBACH 1974. For a summary of the history of studies on Paikuli see HUMBACH - SKJÆRVØ 1978-1983, vol. 1: 13-16 and vol. 3.2: 7-9; KOZAD 2011; CERETI - TERRIBILI 2012.
- 8 The MAIKI surveys at Paikuli show that the internal conglomerate, composed of rough stone and mortar, measures approx. 8.50 × 8.50 m, suggesting that the original perimeter was approx. 9.50 × 9.50 meters. The Data that seems to be confirmed also by the philological reconstruction of the epigraph extension.
- 9 See HERZFELD 1924: 1-11 with particular reference to Figs. 6-7. On the Ka'aba-e Zardošt at Naqš-e Rostam Šābuhr I had had engraved a long trilingual inscription, while the structures around this monument were dated by Schmitt 1970: 53-58 and fig. 23 to the Achaemenid, Hellenistic and Sasanian periods; See also CANEPA 2018: 160. Currently the monument of Paikuli has completely lost its outer covering consisting of large rectangular blocks.
- 10 The activities have been carried out in collaboration with the General Directorate of Antiquity of the Kurdish Regional Government, the Antiquity Directorate and Museum of Sulaimaniyah and the Antiquity Directorate of Garmian.
- 11 A first excavation campaign - autumn 2006 - under the technical direction of Dr. Barbara Faticoni focused on the study of the stratigraphy of the monument external area for searching evidence of possible foundations. On that occasion were dug two trenches: the first 15 x 2.5 m, oriented E-W and located at the SE corner of the monument; the second of 10 x 2.5 m, oriented N-S, also located at the SE corner of the monument. The excavations have shown that the archaeological stratigraphy, at least in the

as regards the study of the bilingual inscription and the architectural features of the monument (CERETI - TERRIBILI 2014; TERRIBILI 2016; TERRIBILI - TILIA 2016; COLLIVA - TERRIBILI 2017). Starting from 2011 the Italian Archaeological Mission in Iraqi Kurdistan (MAIKI) is also carrying out an archaeological map that includes the Paikuli site and an area of approx. 850 km² between the cities of Chamchamal and Darbandikhan, west of the Qaradagh mountain range (BOGDANI et al. 2016). In addition to the identification of all the archaeological traces still visible today in this area, the survey aims to contextualize the Sassanid monument in a broader diachronic perspective. The most innovative aspect concerned a photogrammetric documentation of the epigraphic material, now preserved at the Slemani Museum, which allowed to identify a remarkable number of inscribed blocks till then unpublished (CERETI - TERRIBILI 2014) and not included in the pioneering work by Herzfeld (1924) and in the excellent philological reconstruction of the text by H. Humbach and P.O. Skjærvø (1978-1983).¹² The significant contribution of this material, both linguistic and content-related, has enhanced our understanding of Narseh's ideological message, highlighting on the other hand the need to carry out new and systematic documentation campaigns on the site with the aim of acquiring a series of still-missing archaeological data. This demand has become even more pressing in the wake of the rehabilitation of a fifth in the round royal bust, not taken into consideration by Herzfeld (Fig. 2). This sculpture, in fact, puts into question the architectural shape previously hypothesized for this monument and at the same time stresses the value of the ideological meaning associated to the figurative program ordered by Narseh.¹³

south-eastern area, has a thickness of a few centimetres. The monument stands directly on the natural rock and no traces of foundation have been found. In 2007, a second campaign for verifying the stratigraphy in the remaining areas was prematurely interrupted for security reasons. Since then, the main research activities on Paikuli have focused on the collection of the inscribed and decorated blocks kept at the Slemani Museum.

- 12 The two authors of this work had no possibility of visiting Paikuli and worked only on the photographic material and the squeezes of the inscribed blocks collected by Herzfeld and later Popp.
- 13 COLLIVA - TERRIBILI 2017: 174-182. The conceptual meaning of Paikuli is part of a significant pre-Islamic Iran tradition related to dynastic spaces and the so-called "technology of memory"; see CANEPA 2010. All these places exploited a series of recurrent constituents, such as the morphology of the territory, characteristic architectural elements, effigies of the sovereign, gifts, ceremonies and ritual apparatus, which fabricated multi-layered messages etc. see CANEPA 2013; 2015.



Fig. 2 - 3D rendering of the in the round bust of Narseh from Paikuli, from the two fragments now held at the Slemani Museum (COLLIVA - TERRIBILI 2017: 195).

It is therefore in this framework that the new excavation project supported by Sapienza University (2018) aims at the result of collecting a complete documentation of the moulded blocks that originally constituted the outer casing of the structure and that now lie scattered along the slopes of the hill. At the same time, the topographic survey of the territory in which the monument is located remains a central focus of our research. In the medium term, this latter activity has the aim to investigate the relations between other evidence and adjoining contexts possibly connected to the main structure. This aspect of the research could provide new data for reconstructing the much-articulated features of a royal complex whose symbolic strength was based on the dialogue and convergence of different and integrated elements.

In 2018, the new field activities included an extensive campaign of photographic aerial documentation of the site, positioning and documentation of the moulded blocks whose data will flow into the MAIKI GIS and the relational database. More specifically, the activities covered the sectors of the northern slope and part of the dry watercourse running at the bottom of that slope; likewise investigated were the ridge of the hill south of the monument and the area in correspondence of a probable secondary structure built with reused material (Fig. 3). In this Framework, a total of 331 blocks or fragments were identified, positioned and documented photographically and graphically. Of particular interest is the finding of 13 inscribed, integral or fragmentary blocks, of which 8 in the Middle Persian language, 3 in Parthian language along with other 3 evidence presumably attributable to this latter version. To this epigraphic material collected at the site must be now added two other evidence found by the current guardian of the

site, Nauzad Barkal, in the period following our activities. The first of these findings is a remarkable piece that improves our understanding regarding the display of the inscription on the monument walls. Found in the bed of the dry stream north of the monument, this semi-column indeed looks unique containing two contiguous inscribed surfaces, one in Middle Persian the other in Parthian. The second finding is a well-preserved Middle Persian block, discovered inside a wall of a ruined house in the adjacent village of Barkal.¹⁴



Fig. 3 – The site of Paikuli and the positioning of the blocks documented in 2018 – from the combining of UAVs aerial pictures (image DiSA-MAIKI).

The material is currently under study, but some preliminary considerations already highlight its relevance both in relation to the philological reconstruction of the text and as regards the arrangement of the epigraphs on the two distinct walls that housed them. As in the documentation campaign at the Slemani Museum collection in 2009 (CERETI - TERRIBILI 2014), also in this case a surprising number of unpublished blocks was found, along with some elements already documented by Herzfeld and included in the previous philological editions.¹⁵

14 These are the blocks PB352 and PB462. All the epigraphic material and some particularly interesting architectural elements (stepped merlons and half-column) have been transferred to the Slemani Museum for security reasons.

15 PB350 and 351, both cases present serious deteriorations compared to the state documented by HERZFELD 1924.

According to a preliminary analysis of the material, the new and unpublished pieces should not be less than 7 units. It is precisely in this corpus of finding that the innovative potential of the activities that can be still carried out on the site of Paikuli is patently revealed. Some of these inscribed blocks are in fact in a good state of preservation and present a linguistic material that will provide integration to the bilingual glossary of Narseh's inscription. A first confirmation of that is in the Middle Persian block PB330, which seems to confirm the reading proposed by G. Cereti and G. Terribili (CERETI - TERRIBILI 2014: 355, 357) concerning the celebratory name of the monument itself and found in a previously unpublished block written in Parthian language (a12) (see also COLLIVA - TERRIBILI 2017: 182-184; SHENKAR 2018: 125). The hypothesis of reconstructing the compound name Pērōz-Anāhīd-Narseh [Pa. **prgwz-`nhyE-nryshw**] is now supported by the first line of PB330 where, in spite of the fact that only few characters can be clearly distinguished (Fig. 4), the first two elements of this compound, Pērōz-Anāhīd (Mp. **py[lwc] `nhy[t]**), can be reconstructed as well.



Fig. 4 – Detail of the first inscribed line of the Middle Persian block PB330 where occur elements of the monument dedicatory name (image DiSA-MAIKI).

Equally interesting are the preliminary data regarding the disposition of the text on the walls, two semi-columns inscribed in Middle Persian language (PB273, PB352) show in fact that the incipit of the textual lines extended, also in the case of this version, on these architectural elements, which constituted the right corner of the corresponding wall. This datum not only questions what was recently hypothesized by G. Terribili on the basis of the available data at that time (TERRIBILI 2016: 154-158), but in the case of the above-mentioned semi-column PB352 - having two inscribed surfaces (Middle-Persian and Parthian) and thus witnessing the contiguity of the two walls containing the epigraphs - it radically changes a consolidated *communis opinio* that, starting from Herzfeld's work, considered the texts placed on two opposite sides of the monument (namely, east-west) (HUMBACH - SKJÆRVØ 1978-1983, vol. 3.2: 7-9; KOZAD 2011; CERETI - TERRIBILI 2012).

Like the epigraphic and philological analysis, the full understanding of the main features of the structure, as well as the nature of the site and the area in which it was located continue to represent a challenge that is as much stimulating as it is complicated. In the wake of the

promising line of research drawn by the previous activities, it is planned to continue the systematic documentation of all the blocks placed in those sectors not yet systematically investigated. Along with that, MAIKI aims to investigate through a stratigraphic excavation a terrace facing the southern side of the monument and to extend the aerial photographic documentation to the surrounding areas. The latter activity will prove useful for reconstructing the broader historical-landscape context of the Paikuli pass and its valley. In order to prepare the future archaeological investigations, during the last campaign (December 2018) the area in front of the south side of the monument was cleaned by rearranging blocks and architectural elements in a free area to the west of the monument¹⁶.

16 In the same occasion the monument and the surrounding area have been documented with aerial photos using UAVs (Phantom 4 ADV.), while during the survey of the area 10 new archaeological sites were identified and documented (from MSP-S0048 to MSP-S0057) and 3 contemporary abandoned villages (from MSP-V103 to MSP-V105).

Bibliography

BOGDANI et al. 2016

Bogdani, J., Colliva, L. & Insom, C. (2016) Activities of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Iraqi Kurdistan of Sapienza - University of Rome: The Archaeological Map of the Paikuli Area, **In:** Burgers, G.L.M., Kluiving, S.J. & Hermans, R.A.E. (eds.) *Proceedings of the Third International Landscape Archaeology Conference, Rome, 17th-20th of September 2014*, Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (online edition 2016: <http://lac2014proceedings.nl/article/view/91>).

CANEPA 2010

Canepa, M.P. (2010) Technology of Memory in Early Sasanian Iran: Achaemenid Sites and Sasanian Identity, *American Journal of Archaeology*, 114(4), 563-596.

CANEPA 2013

Canepa, M.P. (2013) The Transformation of Sacred Space, Topography and Royal Ritual in Persia and the Ancient Iranian World, in: Ragavan, D. (ed.) *Heaven on Earth: Temples, Ritual, and Cosmic Symbolism in the Ancient World*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 319-372.

CANEPA 2015

Canepa, M.P. (2015) Dynastic Sanctuaries and the Transformation of Iranian Kingship between Alexander and Islam, in: Babaie, S. & Grigor, T. (eds.) *Persian Kingship and Architecture: Strategies of Power in Iran from the Achaemenids to the Pahlavis*, London: I.B. Tauris, 65-120.

CANEPA 2018

Canepa, M.P. (2018) *The Iranian Expanse. Transforming Royal Identity through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment 550 BCE – 642 CE*. Oakland: University of California Press.

CERETI - TERRIBILI 2012

Cereti, C.G. & Terribili, G. (2012) The Paikuli Monument, in: Alam, M. & Gyselen, R. (eds.) *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum (Band II)*, Wien: OAW Verlag, 74-87.

CERETI - TERRIBILI 2014

Cereti, C.G. & Terribili, G. (2014) The Middle Persian and Parthian Inscriptions on the Paikuli Tower. New Blocks and Preliminary Studies, *Iranica Antiqua*, 49, 347-412.

CERETI et al. 2015

Cereti, C.G., Terribili, G. & Tilia, A. (2015) Paikuli in its Geographical Context, in: Krasnowolska, A. & Rusek-Kowalska, R. (eds.) *Studies on the Iranian World I: Before Islam*, Cracow: Jagellonian University Press, 267-278.

COLLIVA - TERRIBILI 2017

Colliva, L. & Terribili, G. (2017) A forgotten Sasanian sculpture. The Fifth Bust of Narseh from the Monument of Paikuli, *Vicino Oriente*, 21, 167-195.

HERZFELD 1924

Herzfeld, E. (1924) *Paikuli. Monument and Inscription of the Early History of the Sassanian Empire*. 2 vols. Berlin: D. Reimer Verlag.

HUMBACH 1974

Humbach, H. (1974) Sir Henry Rawlinsons Copies of the Paikuli Inscription, in: Gignoux, Ph. & Tafazzoli, A. (eds.) *Mémorial Jean de Menasce*, Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste, 199-204.

HUMBACH – SKJÆRVØ 1978-1983

Humbach, H. & Skjærvø, P.O. (1978-1983) *The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli*. 3 vols. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

KOZAD 2011

Kozad, A. (2011) Paikuli (Study and text), *Zhîn*, 3, 11-36. [in Kurdish].

Popp, V. & Humbach, H. (1973) Die Paikuli-Inschrift im Jahr 1971, *Bagdader Mitteilungen*, 6, 99-109, tab. 37-45.

RAWLINSON 1968

Rawlinson, H.C. (1968) Note on Paikuli, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3, 296-300.

Schmitt, E.F. (1970) *Persepolis III: The Royal Tombs and Other Monuments*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

SHAYEGAN 2012

Shayegan, R.M. (2012) *Aspects of History and Epic in Ancient Iran. From Gaumāta to Wahnām*. Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies.

SHENKAR 2018

Shenkar, M. (2018) The Coronation of the Early Sasanians, Ctesiphon, and the Great Diadem of Paikuli, *Journal of Persianate Studies*, 11, 113–139.

TERRIBILI 2016

Terribili, G. (2016) Notes on the Parthian Block f1 from the Sasanian Inscription of Paikuli, *Annali dell'Università di Napoli "L'Orientale"*, 76, 146-165.

TERRIBILI – TILIA 2016

Terribili, G. & Tilia, A. (2016) Activities of Sapienza-University of Rome in the Pāikūlī Area: Narseh's inscription and the archaeological map of the area, in: Kopanias, K. & MacGinnis, J. (eds.) *The Archaeology of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Adjacent Regions*. Oxford: BAR, 417-425.

WEBER 2010

Weber, U. (2010) Wahrām III, König der Könige von Ērān und Anērān, *Iranica Antiqua*, 45, 353-94.

WEBER 2012

Weber, U. (2012) Narseh, König der Könige von Ērān und Anērān, *Iranica Antiqua*, 47, 153-302.

Carlo G. Cereti

Sapienza Università di Roma

Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità

carlo giovanni.cereti@uniroma1.it

Luca Colliva

Alma Mater Studiorum, Università di Bologna

luca.colliva2@unibo.it

Gianfilippo Terribili

Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità
Sapienza Università di Roma
gianfilippo.terribili@uniroma1.it

Massimiliano Vassalli
Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità
Sapienza Università di Roma
massimiliano.vassalli@uniroma1.it