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## Maria Giovanna Biga

*A life dedicated to Ebla, Syria and the East*



Maria Giovanna Biga, Roma, 2021.

Maria Giovanna Biga graduated in History of the Ancient Near East at the University of Turin and then continued her studies in Rome at the Sapienza University of Rome and the Pontifical Biblical Institute. In 1974, while still a student, she began to study the first tablets found in Ebla by the *Missione Archeologica Italiana in Siria* (MAIS) of Sapienza University of Rome. She worked together with Professor G. Pettinato as an epigrapher and in the autumn of 1976, she took part in his first mission to Ebla. Since then, she has worked continuously on the Ebla texts, and participated as a field epigrapher in many archaeological seasons at Ebla between 1976 and 2010, the last season before the terrible war in Syria that is still going on. In 1981, she became confirmed researcher in History of the Ancient Near East at the chair of Professor Mario Liverani, and continued to work with him until his retirement in 2010. In 2011, she became Professor of History of the Ancient Near East in the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of Sapienza University, and finally Full Professor in 2021, the year of her retirement. She was President of the master's degree in Society, Culture and History of the Ancient World between 2005-2008, coordinator of the doctorate programme in Philology and History of the Ancient World from 2001 to 2021, and coordinator of the

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doctorate in Philology and History of the Ancient Near East between 2010 and 2013. She was also responsible for students with disabilities in the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy between 2001 and 2011.

Since 1979, she has held seminars and taught courses on the History of the Ancient Near East at Sapienza University of Rome, and between 2001 and 2005, also at the University of Tuscia, in Viterbo. She gave courses in the History of the Ancient Near East (especially on the history of Syria and Ebla in the Third millennium BC) in Paris (École Pratique des Hautes Études, sections IV and V) in 1997, 2000 and 2013. Also in Paris, in February and March 2008, Vanna Biga was asked to give “the four lectures on the history of Syria and Ebla” at the *Collège de France* and was subsequently awarded the institution’s medal. She has been invited to innumerable international meetings in Europe as a specialist on Syria in the Third millennium BC. She was part of the Roman unit of many PRINs (*Research Projects of National Importance*: 1998, 2000, 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2015) as a researcher, of a European project (*Ebla chora*) from 2010 to 2013 and has directed many other University researches including a project on historical geography and landscape archaeology in Mesopotamia. In 2007, she was invited by the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore (USA) to give a seminar at a conference about the Ebla civilization. In the autumn of 2008, she was invited to give a series of lectures in the United States, at Harvard, Yale, Columbia and Johns Hopkins universities. She has been the director of numerous doctoral theses, and co-director of many others with French, Spanish and German colleagues, and participated in multiple doctoral thesis committees in Italy, France, Germany and Spain. From 2004 to 2014, she was a member of two commissions for the *Habilitation à diriger des recherches* in Paris. She has been a member of the scientific committees of several exhibitions in Rome and Florence, and organized many lectures of colleagues in Rome and a variety of conferences.

In her research, M. G. Biga has always focused on reconstructing the History of the ancient Near East, and especially of Syria and Mesopotamia of the Third millennium BC without neglecting the Second and the First millennia. After publishing two books on the Ebla texts, in 1982 (with A. Archi) and in 1984 (with L. Milano), she decided to dedicate herself to the reconstruction of the relative chronology of the Ebla texts, key to understanding the history of the period. The administrative texts of Ebla, which are a treasure of information for the reconstruction of the economic, political, social and religious history of Syria and Mesopotamia, had not yet been dated, and therefore it was necessary to order them in a relative chronological sequence. This was a difficult task for which the study of the prosopography of the texts was essential. M. G. Biga developed a prosopographical study mainly of female individuals at the court of Ebla, who were followed by the scribes from the time they were princesses until their marriages, often with kings of allied states, or the birth of their children. She published articles on several leading figures: the queen mother, the queen, the princesses and their marriages, the nurses and other female courtiers. This prosopographical study permitted M. G. Biga, together with F. Pomponio, to identify the name of the last king of Ebla, Ishar-damu, and reconstruct his long reign (36 years). This analysis (which she has maintained for thirty years and which continues even today) has allowed many texts to be dated in their relative chronology, year by year and sometimes month by month. This is a fundamental task before writing the history of Ebla’s relations with other contemporary states.

She has also identified the many festivals attested in the texts and studied the trade on which the wealth of the Eblaite state depended. Analyzing the traded goods, she has suggested the identification of the place name *Dugurasu* in Eblaite texts as Egypt during the reign of Pepy I. In the last ten years, she has studied the trade of lapis lazuli, tin, linen,

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etc., and, together with P. Steinkeller, has written a long article, “In Search of Dugurasu”, for the prestigious *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*. She has also studied war, identifying with certainty the term for military campaign used by the Eblaite scribes (*nig-kas<sub>4</sub>*) in 1997, after many discussions with French colleagues dealing with the Mari texts<sup>1</sup>. She has also studied the ancient Near East in general, the problems of relative chronology, the calculation of time, botany and measurement systems. She has dedicated many studies to historical-religious aspects of the culture of Ebla (various rituals) and of the different populations of the Near East (the cult of the *baetyli* of Mari, iconography and iconoclasm, festivals and celebrations). On May 17, 2022, she was appointed as member of the Turin Academy of Sciences, in the section of Moral, Historical and Philological Sciences.

As the introduction underlines, Vanna Biga’s links with the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid transcend the academic field, and the editors also want to highlight this. One of the first co-supervision agreements signed between the two universities resulted in the doctoral thesis of one of the editors of this volume thanks to European programs then emerging. Her teaching has always been a point of reference, and her friendship and support a guarantee in academic and scientific matters, since our work is also based on these qualities. Her excellence has always been recognized by the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, by Sapienza University of Rome, and by the ancient Near East scientific world.

Although *Isimu* is an academic journal, as editors of the present volume we want to emphasize, in addition to the outstanding **Colleague**’s curriculum, also our deep gratitude to Maria Giovanna as **Maestra** and above all our sincere affection for Vanna as a **Friend** who always accompanied us and followed us with human sensitivity in our lives.

*Marco Ramazzotti and Fernando Escribano Martín*



Tablet print found in front of the Royal Palace G, Ebla (Ramazzotti, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> Biga, M.G., 2003, “Las guerras de Ebla”, in M. Alonso Baquer, J. M<sup>a</sup> Córdoba Zoilo, C. Sevilla, R. Jiménez Zamudio (eds.), *The war in the Middle East and Egypt. Evidence, history and trends in research. Suplementa ad Isimu, Acta et Symposia*. Volumen II. pp. 79-87.

