

Alessandra Nibbi (June 30, 1923 – January 15, 2007)

Alessandra Nibbi left us on January 15th, leaving a great gap among Egyptologists and in the hearts of her friends. Her life is divided into two almost-equal parts. One is essentially Australian, the period of her formation as a schoolgirl and student; the other English, the epoch of scientific output, the epoch of Egyptology.

Alessandra Nibbi was born at Porto-San-Giorgio, on the Adriatic coast of Italy, on June 30th, 1923, to Elvira Petrelli and Gino Nibbi. Her father, a man of multiple talents, a writer and art historian, left Italy in 1928 because of the political conditions of the time and settled in Australia at Melbourne with his wife, daughter and young son. Alessandra's education and upbringing were thoroughly English. As well as Melbourne University, which she left at the age of twenty-three, she attended the conservatoire in the same city, as a soprano. As her first occupation, she taught English language and literature.

In 1947 the Nibbi family returned to Italy; Alessandra got married there; her son Daniel was born in 1953. After a second period of a few years in Australia, the Nibbi family decided, in 1963, to leave Australia for good. The long return by ship had an unforeseen consequence: as they were passing through the Suez Canal, an excursion organised for the passengers revealed Egypt, its pyramids, civilisation and universe to Sandra. As soon as she arrived in Italy, she undertook studies in archaeology at the University of Perugia where she followed the teaching of the Etruscologist Massimo Pallotino, and at the University of Florence, where she obtained the degree of Doctor of Letters in 1965. She was then forty-two. Obscure circumstances, connected with the fact that she still had Australian nationality, obliged her to leave Italy. She decided to settle, with her son, in England, where the language was, in fact, her first language, which she continued to teach for a time. After some hesitation, she moved to Oxford and settled in 13, Lovelace Rd., where she would spend the rest of her life.

In 1972, Alessandra Nibbi published a small book (64 pages), *The Sea-Peoples: A Re-examination of the Egyptian Sources*. In this she explained that the term 'Great Green' in the Egyptian texts did not mean 'the sea', as was generally believed, but essentially the Egyptian Delta, because of its immense greenery. The book was published at the author's expense, as was everything she published subsequently. Alessandra Nibbi presented herself simply under her own name, without a title: she did not belong to the 'academic body', neither to a university nor to a museum; she was completely independent; no one could imagine that she was forty-nine years at that time, one could only sense a maturity in the sobriety and rigour of her exposition and reasoning. She was aware of the extreme boldness of her ideas and, at the end of her preface, she refrained from quoting the names of the numerous Egyptologists who had helped her, 'to spare them the embarrassment of being linked with these ideas.' What had happened between 1965 and 1972? She had actually prepared a first work, resulting from her Etruscan studies, *The Tyrrhenians*, in 1969, in which she had already spoken widely of 'The Sea Peoples' and 'The Great Green', which, etymologically, could refer only to greenness and not to the sea. This small book was a synthesis of opinions on these questions before Sandra Nibbi intervened. In the preface to her work of 1972, in a formula which she would use frequently, she acknowledged her about-turn between 1969 and 1972: 'The time has come when all our ideas about the so-called Sea Peoples should be set aside and the texts re-examined in a fundamental way, as a whole'.

This book of 1972 provoked a shock: the view that the Egyptians did not even have a word for 'sea' was so different from the common view that no-one wanted to believe it. The reaction of the Egyptological world was in general deplorable. Even worse than the taunts that certain persons – even respectable scholars – were bold enough to make, there was from then on a total black-out of the writing of Alessandra Nibbi and of her personally: for an Egyptologist to mention her name was to 'disgrace oneself', and this anti-scientific attitude has still not died out thirty-five years later, in spite of some changes.

When the 29th Congress of Orientalists was held in Paris in 1973, Alessandra Nibbi wanted to meet me; she had read my doctoral thesis where I had touched on a number of the geographical problems that preoccupied her, but with all the errors current before Alessandra Nibbi got involved. Lacking a knowledge of hieroglyphs (she subsequently made great progress here), she asked me to interest myself in her ideas, verifying them philologically. I agreed, but it took me more than ten years to unburden myself of the prejudices traditional in Egyptology at that time. From 1985, I have understood the quality of her research and set myself to follow after her, which has sometimes exposed me to public ignominy alongside her.

After 1972, Alessandra Nibbi did not cease to produce books and articles to expand and defend her concepts of ancient geography, always with that originality, that independence of spirit, which overthrew the 'traditionalists'. As well as her extraordinary intelligence, she also had a courage and perseverance thanks to which she overcame all obstacles and all baseness. Faced with the refusal of journals to accept her studies, in 1985 she funded her own review, *Discussions in Egyptology*, which at last ensured her perfect freedom of expression. This journal, through the quality of publication and the numerous collaborators which she attracted, is today recognised – splendid revenge – as a leading Egyptological publication, universally appreciated.

The scientific method of Alessandra was not to trust in 'what had already been written', the 'textbooks' as she used to call them, often scornfully. She consulted ancient texts, archaeological facts; she went on sites to find out for herself, using public transport, catching in a glimpse, through the window of a bus, a topographical detail which would illuminate an ancient text which she held in her memory; discovering the direction 'Alashia' on the 'local buses' of Ismailia (so not the direction of Cyprus as is commonly thought), insisting on the ancient importance of Bilbeis where there was nevertheless 'nothing more to see'; she travelled through the villages of the Delta, where, sometimes, the presence of 'officials' prevented her from having personal, friendly contact with the native people who revealed to her small facts derived from their millennial knowledge of the territory; she undertook excavations, at Marsa Matruh, to elucidate problems connected with the anchors of Egyptian boats. Her friend and collaborator Terence DuQuesne recalled: 'She was always determined to find things out for herself, and not to rely on the judgement of others. Her critical sense and absolute fearlessness were inspiring. I remember' — said Terence — 'once discussing with her a question about symbolism in Egyptian religion, and she replied : « This is too vague for me: I like to keep my feet in the mud of the Delta »'

From choice, she chose to grapple with questions called insoluble, where her mind, freed from all obstructions, her unblinking eyes, followed ways that were unfrequented but always fruitful.

Knowledge of the geography of Egypt and its neighbours received, thanks to Alessandra Nibbi, a formidable advance whose consequences have not yet been measured. The foolish brakes which certain 'authorities' in our field have exerted over the research of Alessandra Nibbi have held back the development of this aspect of the subject at the end of the twentieth century. But the bitterness which she might have felt never destroyed her generous, joyful and lively personality; this unusual Egyptologist never let herself be beaten: she commanded the respect of our community. In addition – something which will not necessarily be apparent in her writings – she had a great heart and was a faithful friend; she supported all beginners for whom she foresaw a more open future than the one she had experienced in her life.

Alessandra Nibbi was a great and noble lady who deserves all our admiration and our thanks.

Claude Vandersleyen