

Climbing King Nabonidus in the Mountains of Edom:

An Interview with Rocío Da Riva

She loves studying cuneiform inscriptions from Mesopotamia, especially administrative, historical, and temple ritual texts from the Neo-Babylonian period now stored in European museums and libraries. But she also loves to climb high mountains in the rugged terrain of southern Jordan to document little known royal inscriptions. This is Rocío Da Riva, a distinguished Assyriologist now teaching at the University of Barcelona, who studied in Madrid, Ghent, Erlangen and finally Würzburg, where she obtained her PhD. Prof Da Riva visited the CEHAO in October 2019, where she gave a conference on Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and a joint seminar on the fortresses of Edom, with Prof Juan Manuel Tebes. This is an interview with Prof Da Riva, where she tells us more about her scholarly life and her incredible experience in the mountains of Edom.

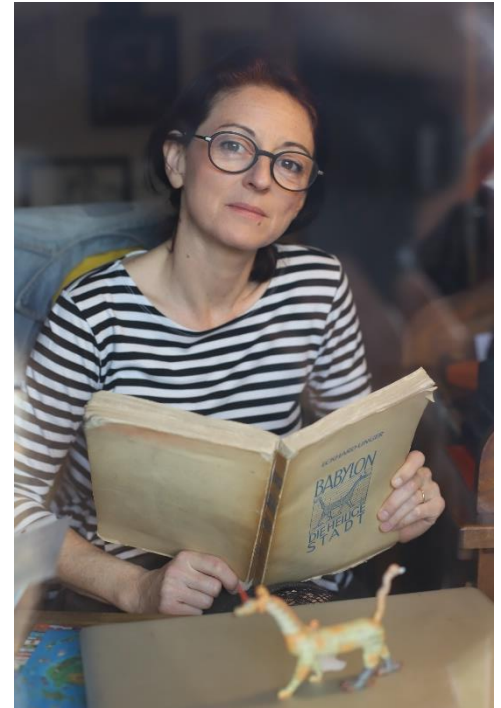


Fig. 1. Rocío Da Riva.

Photo: Agustí Ensesa

How did you get interested in the history of the ancient Near East?

At home, my parents had a very good library, full of interesting books. One of them was Wilhelm Ziehr's *La Magia de Pasados Imperios* (in Spanish), it had chapters on Egyptians, Mayas, Incas... with very nice colour photos. I loved it when I was a child. Unfortunately, I do not possess the book anymore, it got lost when I moved out, I guess... I cannot remember any particular chapter on Mesopotamian history or archaeology, but I think my interest in ancient cultures was born at that time. And there was Ceram's *Gods, Graves and Scholars* (in English and in Spanish) ... and the *Encyclopedia Americana*, in a nice edition from the 1960's that my father had brought back from the US. In its dark blue volumes, you could look up at virtually everything! Those

were the olden internet-free days when people used to check information in books. The *Encyclopedia Americana* had articles penned by the best specialists in the world: the entry "Babylonia" was written by W. F. Albright and "Sumerian Language" by S. N. Kramer! Can you imagine? So, I guess all began there. I have been very fortunate with my understanding, caring and supportive parents, I could not have had a better family. I studied ancient history in Madrid for some years, and I was also a student of Gonzalo Rubio, he was my first teacher of Akkadian and Sumerian! Then I went to Ghent first and afterwards to Erlangen and Würzburg. Germany is a great place to study Assyriology and Ancient Near Eastern studies.

You did your doctoral studies in Würzburg, Germany, under the direction of Gernot Wilhelm. How do you remember your studies there?

I have very fond memories of my time in Würzburg and of G. Wilhelm. I am still in contact with him of course, and with my Kommilitonen (fellow students). G. Wilhelm was extremely generous and helpful with his students: we admired and respected him enormously. It was a small department, but very lively. The courses were varied, and we had the best teachers one could have. The library was (and still is) very well provided, and the working atmosphere was great. We even went out together to watch soccer matches at the many bars in Würzburg! My links with Würzburg are still very active: at present I am Alumni Ambassador for Spain of the Alumni-Network of the University: I am so proud of it!



Fig. 2. Remains of a house of Sela.
Photo: Sela Archaeological Project

How did you end up teaching in Barcelona?

Through the late Miquel Civil, who suggested that I apply for a post-doc to go to the University of Barcelona (UB), so I got a Ramón y Cajal fellowship at the UB. Miquel was very nice to me: he introduced me to all his friends and colleagues and was my respected guide in the old city. I learnt a lot about

Catalonia with him. Gregorio del Olmo and Joaquín Sanmartín warmly welcomed me at the Institute of Near Eastern Studies (IPOA). Afterwards I was associate professor and since 2019 I am a full professor at the Department of History and Archaeology.



Fig. 3. Sela, documenting a cistern.
Photo: Sela Archaeological Project

You have worked a lot on the Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions. Why is this an important period in the history of the Near East and what can we learn from it?

The Neo- and Late-Babylonian periods are probably the best documented in Ancient Near Eastern history, so the sources, textual but also archaeological, are plentiful. I mean, there is still a lot to do... These late periods belong to one of the greatest eras of ancient Babylonia, probably the most representative, if we consider the impact it had on later cultures and traditions, both eastern and western. What can we learn? We can learn that powerful empires come to an end, great civilizations disappear, important languages are forgotten... and that we are all just passing through! Fortunately, Mesopotamians wrote on clay... at least some of their texts. In addition, I had the fortune to have Michael Jursa as co-supervisor of my thesis, and I learnt a lot from him: he is definitely one of the

leading specialists in Neo-Babylonian.

You started your own archaeological project at al-Sila in Jordan, the ancient Sela in Edom. Please tell us more about this experience, which from the photos seems amazing!

Sela is an incredible place, a very important Iron Age and Nabatean site in Jordan, and because of the Nabonidus cuneiform inscription carved on the rock, it is also an extraordinary witness of Babylonian military expansion to the West. The study of the inscription was a very challenging task: it is very difficult to reach, carved as it is on a vertical wall 120 m above the wadi. As the work involved climbing, a team of four mountain climbers was recruited to assist in the project (see front cover). But Sela is much more than the cuneiform inscription. At first, the site looks like a skeleton, a dead body in which only the bones, the non-perishable parts, have remained: the rock-cut structures, the water cisterns and ancient canals, the stone ashlars, the carved cuneiform signs on the cliff of the promontory. All the other parts of the body, the sinews, the muscles, the flesh are gone. But if you try to imagine Sela's dwellings with their perishable materials too: wood, animal skin, textiles... and fill the desolate place with water and gardens, with goats and sheep, with people moving around, talking, singing, quarrelling, working, with children running and parents scolding them, with noise and smells... that is what Sela becomes after some days working there. It is a magic place! Sela is unique, but at the same time it belongs to a group of settlements called hilltop settlements or mountain strongholds, characteristic of Iron Age Edom. Most of these places conform to the Biblical descriptions of the rocks of Edom. Jeremiah (49,16) speaks of those who live "in the clefts of the rocks" and occupy

"the heights of the hill". And Obadiah (1, 3) says "you who live in the clefts of the rocks and make your home on the heights (...)." Katharina Schmidt, Benedikt Hensel, Piotr Bienkowski and I would like to begin a project to study these sites. We are all very excited about it!



**Fig. 4. Sela southern side of the site.
Photo: Sela Archaeological Project.**

You visited the CEHAO in Buenos Aires in 2019 to give seminars and lectures. How was your experience and what do you think about the local scholarship?

My experience was very positive, I knew some of the colleagues there, of course, and was very happy to meet the others. CEHAO is an incredible place, its members are dynamic and magnificent scholars (you can find them everywhere in the world) and its publications are really very good. It was a great experience. I also enjoyed giving the seminars, talking to the students, and getting to know them, their experiences... Buenos Aires may be very far physically, but for Ancient Near Eastern cultures, it is very close to us. Additionally, for someone from Madrid, Buenos Aires feels very much like home.