Gherardo Gnoli was one of the most important Iranists and historians of religion of his generation. He combined extraordinary scientific production with untiring attention to cultural politics, explicated through his vigorous direction of two important Italian cultural institutions, the Istituto Orientale di Napoli (Oriental Institute of Naples [IUO]), now the Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale” [“The Oriental” Studies University of Naples]) and the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO) (Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East), which subsequently became the Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente (IsIAO) (Italian Institute for Africa and the East). His vigorous intellectual curiosity set him on his course to carry out research with a deep interest in Christianity at its origin, which in his first years at university directed him toward learning Semitic languages (Aramaic, Hebrew, and Arabic), in addition to his profound and practical knowledge of classical languages and the ancient world. This gave rise to a special sensitivity toward intercultural processes which would accompany him throughout his life, marking his intellectual development. During his years at university, his interests gradually moved toward the Iranian world, to which he would dedicate the vast majority of his future research. Attending the courses of the Faculty of Letters at the La Sapienza University of Rome, he had the good fortune to be supervised by undisputed experts, including some who left an
indelible mark on his development. Of the Semitists, Giorgio Legi della Vida, who, at the time, had already retired, certainly has to be remembered, as well as Sabatino Moscati. Though pursuing different aims, because of the role he played in Italian and international Oriental studies, Gherardo Gnoli was nevertheless in some way Moscati’s academic heir. As regards his Iranian studies, he worked with the experts Antonino Pagliaro, the well-known linguist and consummate scholar of ancient Iran and its languages, and the brilliant Alessandro Bausani, the great connoisseur of Iran and Islam. He also studied intensively with another eminent Orientalist of the period, Giuseppe Tucci. Previously the tutor of his brother, Raniero Gnoli, this Orientalist from the Italian Marches was the supervisor of the young Gherardo’s thesis “Aspetti della religiosità iranica e indiana riflesse nel pantheon monetario Kuṣāṇa” (“Aspects of Indo-Iranian religiousness reflected in the Kuṣāṇa monetary pantheon”), which was discussed on March 16, 1962. His collaboration with Tucci was to become fruitful in the coming years, when Gnoli worked with him on archaeological missions and scientific activities for the IsMEO, which was then presided over by Tucci, who later became its president (1979–95), directing its merger with the Istituto Italo-Africano (IIA) (Italo-African Institute) to create the Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, of which he was president from 1995 to 2011.

Gherardo Gnoli had a dazzling academic career that led him to overseeing the modernization processes of the two prestigious Italian academic institutions to which he dedicated his life. In 1965, when he was only twenty-seven years old, he joined the University Institute of Naples and was in charge of Iranian studies, becoming full professor in 1968. The first stages of his career took place at this university: he became director in 1970 and then chancellor, a role he continued to fulfill until 1978. During these years, he designed and achieved a radical reform of this venerable institution and under his leadership it was transformed from a single-faculty university that in some way was still in line with the tradition of the original Collegio de’ Cinesi, into a modern university, organized into faculties and departments, yet continuing its tradition of humanist and social studies with a principal focus on Asian studies. In 1993, he transferred to the Department of Oriental Studies and the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy at the La Sapienza University of Rome and lectured until his retirement, whereupon he was appointed emeritus professor.

After his years at the Oriental, Gnoli was called upon to take on the mantle of Giuseppe Tucci at the IsMEO, where he was elected president in 1979 after a short hiatus during which the management reins were held by Sabatino Moscati. While in perfect harmony with Tucci, he was nevertheless able to adjust the institute to changing times, supporting and broadening archaeological, linguistic, and anthropological research as well as, to a lesser extent, the institute’s sociological and political studies. This took place at a point in history in which Asia attained an ever more central role in geopolitics, while the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus were involved in epoch-making changes. As often happens to scientific and cultural institutions, the IsMEO underwent periods of considerable economic difficulty and on several occasions
it was feared the institute would be closed. During the most acute of these
crises, Gnoli, in agreement with Tullia Carrettoni Romagnoli, conceived the idea
of merging the IsMEO with the IIA, an operation that was certainly not devoid
of difficulties and contraindications in view of the substantial, profound
differences—one might even say alterity—in the activities of the two
bodies, but that circumstances rendered unavoidable. Nonetheless, in November
1995 the Parliament of the Italian Republic approved the merger of the two
bodies, thus creating the IsIAO, of which Gnoli remained resident until
2011, when he handed the reins over to Marco Mancini. The last months in the
life of this illustrious Iranist, regretfully, were saddened by the appointment of an
external commissioner and the risk of his beloved institute being closed down,
something it is still hoped can be avoided.

His activities, however, were not limited to these institutions and he was an
untiring promoter of many international projects. From 1981 to 1983 he chaired
the Steering Committee which created the Societas Iranologica Europaea, an
association whose registered offices are still at the IsIAO and that grouped
together more than four hundred of the most respected specialists in
Iranian studies, active in universities and scientific institutions all over the
world. Furthermore Gnoli was involved in and especially committed to the
Encyclopaedia Iranica founded by Ehsan Yarshater, of whose advisory committee
he was a founding member and to which his own contributions stood out because
of their brilliance and in-depth analysis.

Of his many contributions and reference works, can be cited the articles he wrote
for The Encyclopaedia of Religion, edited by M. Eliade, those for the Lessico
universale italiano, and those appearing in the Dizionario delle religioni.1 Gnoli’s
teaching helped a whole generation of scholars to understand fully the
international dimension required for research. In fact, he never considered
his work to be limited to Italy or Europe. On the contrary, building on the
example of Tucci, who was the founder of the aptly named East and West, an
English-language scientific journal, he immediately recognized the need for
a broader field, building up over the years relations of reciprocal respect
and esteem with the principal scholars of his area—active as much in Asia
and North America as in Europe—to whom he customarily sent his pupils
to open their minds to international debate. This relationship with Tucci also
explains his participation in the scientific committees of many collections and
journals (Res Orientales, Acta Iranica, Silk Road Studies, Iranica Antiqua,
Studia Iranica, Mediterraneo Antico, and Ancient Civilisations from Scythia to
Siberia). Furthermore, he was chairman of the editorial board of East and West
and director of some of the collections published by the IsMEO\IsIAO (Serie
Orientale Roma, Reports and Memoirs, Repertoria ac Bibliographica, and Il
Nuovo Ramusio). He was also a member of numerous academies and some
of the most prestigious international associations, including, in particular, the
Accademia dei Lincei, the Institut de France, the academies of the sciences
in Russia and Hungary, the Accademia of Turin, the International Association
of Manichaean Studies, the Société Asiatique, the Ancient India and Iran

Trust, and the Italian Società di Storia delle Religioni, of which he was president for many years.

A variety of themes are intertwined and are found in the research carried out by Gnoli, whose interests after his first period at university focused on the history, religions, languages, and history of thought of ancient and late antique Iran, with occasional nonsporadic digression into the dominion of Semitic languages, his first academic love. Having started to collaborate with the IsMEO, which at the end of the 1950s had expanded its interests to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, Gnoli dedicated his first monograph to the publication of the Judaeo-Persian plaques discovered in the Ġūr. This task, for which his preparation as a Semitist was a valuable advantage, was shared with Philippe Gignoux, a scholar from the other side of the Alps, with whom he had fruitful contacts over the years. Even though he always maintained his interest in Judaeo-Persian texts, the publication of the commemorative inscriptions of the Ġūr was destined to remain an isolated episode in his scientific career. Differently, though, the volume of studies on ancient Sīstān, published in 1967, contained in nuce many of the themes he would persevere in developing in his later research. These included his interest in historical geography, the centrality of the Zoroastrian texts, and, more generally, the primary sources of his research, his interest in the origins of Zoroastrianism and even the Sistanic hypothesis, which recognized the central role played by this region in Iranian religious history. The 1980s represented the period of greatest creativity by this Roman scholar with the publication of his monograph dedicated to the date and homeland of Zoroaster, of the four lessons to the Collège de France, and finally of the fundamental essay on the genesis of the idea of Iran. In Zoroaster’s Time and Homeland, Gnoli proposes dating Zoroaster to the turn of the first millennium BC, placing his homeland in the Sistanic region, a definition by which he meant an eastern Iranian area much larger than that known today as Sīstān.

Gnoli possessed a strongly critical spirit that was directed not only that of others but also to his own work. One of the great lessons he taught us was having the courage to change one’s mind. This happened in the case of the dating of Zoroaster. After long reflection and a rigorous intellectual discussion with Ilya Gershevitch, a pupil of Walter Bruno Henning, whom he often visited at Jesus College Cambridge, Gnoli became convinced of the likelihood of the traditional date of Zoroaster, accepting and defending the low dating, which had already been maintained by Henning and Gershevitch, among others. In fact, in his Zoroaster in History, the result of the Biennial Yarshater Lectures held at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1997, he returned to the problem of the dating of Zoroaster and after a convincing presentation of the historical evidence, concluded by indicating 618–541 BC as the probable dates of

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the life of Zoroaster. Despite this, in his deepest conception of Zoroastrianism, this Italian scholar was always consistent, considering Zoroaster to be the historic founder of the faith known by his name, a founder who had really lived and was an integral part of a deeply rooted religious tradition. In this, his position is very far from the one currently favored, maintained by scholars of the caliber of J. Kellens and P. O. Skjærvø (who denies the very existence of the prophet) but also that was maintained in the 1960s by scholars like M. Molé, influenced by the structuralism then in vogue, which sought to show that the legend of Zoroaster, known by Pahlavian and Persian sources, in reality had far more ancient roots already in the Gāthā, thus making the problem of the existence and dates of Zoroaster redundant, while not actually denying it completely. Gnoli’s *Quatre leçons au Collège de France* outlines the history of Zoroastrianism—and Iranian spirituality—from its origins to the Achaemenid period, to the first Sassanid period, when the faith of Zoroaster clashed with Manichean beliefs, ending as the winner because it was more in keeping with the spirit of the times.

Finally, in 1989, he published *The Idea of Iran*, perhaps the most exciting of his books, in which he traced the birth and genesis of the very idea of Iran, identifying its assumptions and roots and showing convincingly that this idea became a political concept only in the 3rd century, when the term *Ērānšahr* was used to define the political body dominated by the Sassanids. The book also shows how the birth of a national identity fits successfully into a more general movement of history, which, in the 3rd century, saw the birth of different national entities in the region. Zoroastrianism is tightly interwoven with Iranian identity, thanks also to the incorporation of Iranian national tradition into religious texts, and this was further investigated by this Roman scholar in a short essay published in 1993.7 An important part of Gnoli’s scholarly activities consisted of planning opportunities for meeting and debate. He organized a number of conferences, subsequently having the papers published, and he coordinated several volumes of miscellaneous materials,8 to which must be added the three volumes in memory of Giuseppe Tucci9 and the

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books on Manichaeism (work on which was suspended), which had aimed ambitiously to publish in a single instance all the written testimonies on the religion founded by Mānī, with the exception of the polemical confutations written by the Fathers of the Church, too voluminous to be included in the project and already thoroughly published elsewhere.

Of this series, three volumes were published by the Fondazione Lorenzo Valla. The fourth volume, created also under his guidance, is still in preparation. The majority of the articles by Gnoli dealt with problems concerning the religious history of pre-Islamic Iran, with special attention to Zoroastrianism. In this context, his contributions on the dating of Zoroaster, on the definition of the x'arənah, the Sistanic hypothesis, particular aspects of the doctrine, and the religious policy of the Achaemenids and the Sassanids are notable. He made important contributions on Manichaeism, dualism, and Zurvanism. Also of note were his studies on historical geography, an interest cultivated from early on, which combined successfully with his studies on the date and homeland of Zoroaster. Another context, in which Gnoli made very original contributions, was his research on the genesis of the very conception of Iran, in connection with which, he wrote stimulating articles on the Sassanid period and its cultural climate.


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In the second half of the 1980s and then also in the 1990s, this Roman scholar again took up his interest in Semitics, stimulated by the huge success of the excavations in Yemen (IsMEO|IsIAO), for which he, in fact, was the epigrapher. Detailed bibliographies of his work can be found in the volume of studies published in his honor on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday and in the booklet, unfortunately with limited circulation, containing a profile of Gnoli and his updated bibliography, which a group of pupils, friends, and colleagues decided to present to him when he reached his seventieth birthday.

It is hard for me to speak of Gherardo Gnoli as a person. As a supervisor, he was both demanding and tolerant. As a teacher, he was always very generous, pointing out new paths of research, bringing to his pupils’ attention publications he found it necessary or just useful to read, dedicating his valuable time to discussion of the most diverse topics. He knew how to do it with such lightness of touch and such generosity, so as to remove immediately any sense of distance between teacher and pupil, or tutor and student. And he knew how to direct without ever criticizing harshly, highlighting the student’s strong points (even if they were few), rather than pointing out their shortcomings. He was able to detach himself from his students (a rare quality indeed), advising them to go abroad, to find new and different tutors with whom to compare notes, to become accustomed to working in an international context. He considered this to be useful and necessary because he was very familiar with the national boundaries that were too narrow for our discipline, as indeed for all sciences.

So Gnoli was a great and rigorous supervisor of our studies, as demanding of his students as he was of himself, but he was always ready to help with difficulties, identifying himself with the problems of others in order to seek possible solutions. Gnoli also knew how to take on the heavy burden of institutional responsibilities, first the Oriental Institute of Naples, then the IsIAO|IsMEO. And he knew how to do it with a great sense of responsibility, surrounding himself with competent and loyal people. In fact, he had an excellent understanding of people, a characteristic that had become refined during his younger years, thanks to a burning passion for psychoanalysis. He was able to draw out the best from his colleagues, enhancing their qualities

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