

In Memoriam Paul Sanlaville

Éric Coqueugniot and Olivier Aurenche

Born in 1933, Paul Sanlaville passed away on 4th, March 2021. A geographer and geomorphologist, Paul was one of the best specialists on the environment and its evolution in the Near and Middle East and in the Arabian Gulf, which he studied for a long time and appreciated so much.

Paul was a man of the field with an exceptional ability to “read” a landscape, to understand it, and then to explain it, to make it clear for the others. His qualities as a teacher were coupled with a remarkable mind or syntheses, a combination that made him a great teacher and that is reflected in his publications. This is especially the case of his book “The Arab Middle East: the environment and man” (in French) published in 2000, which is still the main essential geographical reference for all those interested in this region and which has completed, extended and renewed Eugen Wirth’s great classic “Syrien, eine geographische Landeskunde” (1971).

After a stay in Algeria, Paul went to Lebanon (1960-1969) to teach at the Institute of Geography of the Near and Middle East and to prepare his doctoral thesis on the “Geomorphological Study of the Coastal Region of Lebanon” (in French, 1977). He also started to collaborate with prehistorians, Fathers Henri Fleisch sj and Francis Hours sj, Lorraine Copeland and Olivier Aurenche as well as with other geographers (Rémi Dalongeville).

A tireless and curious researcher, Paul worked not only in Lebanon and Syria, his favourite fields, but

also in several other countries of the Near and Middle East, in the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, Pakistan, Turkey, but also Sudan, Tunisia or Malta. Throughout his career, he was interested in the climatic changes that affected the Near East during the Upper Pleistocene and the Holocene, and he has left us in particular numerous syntheses, which still remain references today.

An open-minded person, at the interface of many disciplines, it is quite natural that Paul Sanlaville always accepted to take on collective responsibilities, whether in Beirut (where he co-directed the Institute of Geography of the Near and Middle East), in Lyon (*Maison de l’Orient* and University) or in the evaluation committees of the CNRS.

In Lyon, Paul was chosen by the Hellenist Jean Pouilloux to succeed him in 1979 at the head of the *Maison de l’Orient*, which he had created a few years earlier. This choice may have seemed surprising, as Paul was not an archaeologist but a geographer, but it was a wise one as it avoided any possible dissensions between potential archaeologist successors. Thanks to his qualities as a researcher and organiser, we owe him a great deal for the development of this research centre, which was unique at the time, characterised by its multidisciplinary within a clearly defined geographical field. While pursuing his field research, he also founded several research teams (RCP 438- Quaternary and Prehistory of the Near



Fig. 1 Paul Sanlaville and Bernard Geyer surveying the desert in the Larsa area, Iraq. (Photo: Joël Suire)



Fig. 2 Paul Sanlaville at a ceremony at Lyon City Hall in January 1986. (Photo: Anonymous)

East, then GREMO- [Research Group on the Middle East] “From the sea to the desert, management of space and organisation of societies”...). A tireless CNRS researcher, he taught for many years at the University Lyon 2, where he was Vice-President for Research.

At the CNRS, he chaired the section 31 of the National Committee for Scientific Research between 1991 and 1995, at a time when the repartition between the different disciplines had just been modified, with Prehistory, Protohistory and Biological Anthropology now

being associated with Physical Geography and no longer with Cultural Anthropology.

Personally (E.C.), a long time ago, I came to the MOM (at that time the “*Maison de l’Orient et de la Méditerranée Ancienne*”) to prepare my doctorate with “the Cauvins”. It was quite naturally that I got to know Paul, and his friend Francis Hours, the geographer and the prehistorian. Then, while I was a research fellow at the French Institute in Damascus from 1979, I came to know him in Jacques Cauvin’s excavation field in the el Kowm Basin. Invited to study the potential of the el Kowm Basin with a particular regard to Palaeolithic occupation, Paul Sanlaville, Francis Hours, Lorraine Copeland and Jacques Besançon formed a multidisciplinary team, they were inseparable and were affectionately called the “gang of four” because, like the Three Musketeers of Alexandre Dumas, they were always four and very close, often accompanied by Olivier Aurenche, Sultan Muhesen or Henri de Contenson. I really appreciated their openness and their truly multidisciplinary approach. At the end of the day, when the whole team of el Kowm gathered for the ritual of the aperitif, the debates (sometimes contradictory) to understand the choices of human settlement or the formation of the cones of artesian springs... were oh so enriching and stimulating.

A hard worker, Paul was always welcoming, not counting his time, especially for young researchers, and always knowing how to be deeply fair and human. Amongst all his qualities, we have to remember first of all his intelligence, his kindness, his listening skills, his rigour and his intellectual probity.



Fig. 3 Paul Sanlaville and Jacques Cauvin at the aperitif at el Kowm. (Photo: O. Aurenche)



Fig. 4 Paul Sanlaville, Lorraine Copeland and Olivier Aurenche at Marouatte (Dordogne) on the occasion of the publication of the *Atlas des Sites* (ASPRO), 1994. (Photo: P. Lombard)



Fig. 5. Portrait of Paul Sanlaville in the 2010s.
(Photo: Paul Sanlaville family photo)

Paul's ambition was to study, over the long term, societies and their relations with the environment in which they were developing and evolving. This may seem classical now, but with hindsight it is clear how far ahead of his time Paul was scientifically because he understood well before others the importance of a real multidisciplinary approach, associating geographers, anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, sociologists, *etc.* at all stages of research.

At once warm and firm, tolerant and rigorous, Paul was the last of this "gang of four" who contributed enormously to the study of "Man and Environment" in the Near East. The loss is great for all of us and beyond the present sadness let us remember all that he brought.

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Major Publications of Paul Sanlaville in Chronological Order

(NB: articles published in *Paléorient* and in *Maison de l'Orient* are available online on the Persée and/ or JSTOR portals).

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- Sanlaville P. (dir.), 1979. Quaternaire et préhistoire du Nahr el Kébir septentrional : les débuts de l'occupation humaine dans la Syrie du Nord et au Levant (travaux de la RCP 438). Lyon : Maison de l'Orient (Collection de la Maison de l'Orient méditerranéen, Série géographique et préhistorique 1).
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