

Some Remarks on Changes in the Water Level of Lake Van, Turkey: an Evaluation of the Cartographical and Archaeological Evidence

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Il lago salato di Van è il più grande della odierna Turchia e uno dei laghi endoreici più grandi del mondo. La recente scoperta di contesti archeologici sommersi o semi sommersi, insieme a fenomeni importanti di erosione delle coste, ha rimesso al centro dell'attenzione della comunità scientifica la questione della oscillazione dei livelli delle acque del lago. Il presente contributo è finalizzato ad uno studio sistematico della documentazione cartografia e archeologica relativa a questo problema. Il quadro che è emerso dimostra che la morfologia attuale del lago è il risultato di un innalzamento piuttosto recente in termini geologici dei livelli delle sue acque. Questa circostanza ha portato ad una riconsiderazione di alcune evidenze archeologiche discusse nel testo e alla constatazione che, all'epoca del regno di Urartu (prima metà del I millennio a.C.), il livello delle acque del lago fosse considerevolmente inferiore rispetto a quello attuale.

In the accounts of explorers and travellers from the 16th century CE onwards there is evidence that the extension of Lake Van was considerably different from what it is now until at least the 18th century, although progressively rising water levels were already recorded, with evident consequences such as the partial submergence of agricultural areas and inhabited centres. Among the geographical maps preserved in the National Library of France there is, catalogued as Ge C-10188, a map of Lake Van made by Colonel William Monteith “dessinée d’après les indications du Dr. F.E. Schulz,” as the subtitle on it says (Fig. 1). Seeing this map in the early 1990s of the last century provoked reactions of disappointment and amazement. Disappointment because the toponyms are written in such a way as to be almost all illegible even with a good magnifying glass,² and amazement because the shape of the lake does not resemble that with which we are familiar today from maps and satellite pictures, with its “horn” facing Eastwards (Fig. 2). It seemed impossible that an officer of the British army had made such a gross error, which was then repeated on the map attached to his memoir, presented to the London Royal Geographical Society on February 13th 1832 (Monteith 1833). In these years, we have always believed that there must be a

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² Today, with modern information technology, it was possible to clearly read all the names on the excellent premium HD copy the Bibliothèque Nationale de France has provided.