

Bareš, Ladislav

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CZECH EGYPTOLOGY – PAST AND PRESENT

Since mediaeval times, Czech people visited Egypt here and there. The first Czech man who can be connected with Egyptology was Jan (Giovanni) Kminek-Szedlo (1828-1896). Though Czech-born, he spent most of his life in Italy where he started his career in Egyptology as one of the founders of the Egyptological studies in Bologna.

However, the actual founder of the Czech Egyptology is Professor František Lexa (1876-1960). Originally a high school teacher of Mathematics and Physics, he started studying ancient Egyptian language at first at his own. Later on, he spent one year and a half at the universities in Strasbourg and Berlin. In 1919 he was promoted to the rank of a voluntary reader (“Privatdozent”) of Egyptology at Charles University in Prague, and then became a full-time Professor of Egyptology in 1922.

As a pupil of Wilhelm Spiegelberg, Lexa concentrated his efforts mainly on the Demotic studies. His *Grammaire démotique*, the largest grammar of this phase of the language spoken in Egypt from the 7th century BC to 3rd-4th century AD, still remains valid. Beside Egyptian philology Lexa devoted himself to the study of Egyptian religion and magic. His main work in this field, *La magie dans l'Égypte antique*, aroused quite a lot of reactions (sometimes rather controversial, in fact) among Egyptologists and historians of the religion. At the same time, Lexa offered almost complete set of ancient Egyptian literary works then known to a broad public in reliable Czech translations.

In connection with Lexa, two of his pupils should be mentioned. At the first place, Jaroslav Černý (1898–1970), for whom Lexa mediated the possibility to work with the French mission at Deir el-Medina since 1925. In that way, Černý became the first Czech Egyptologist actually working in Egypt. His cooperation with the French mission at Deir el-Medina lasted till the beginning of the World War II. Besides, from 1930 Černý taught Egyptology at the Charles University and worked for the famous British Egyptologist Alan H. Gardiner. Most of the war times Černý spent in Egypt and later on also in England, where he worked for the Czechoslovak exile government in the anti-Nazi resistance. When the war ended, Černý returned to Czecho-slovakia for a short while. From 1946, he lived in England working as Professor of Egyptology at the universities in London and later on in Oxford. In spite of

the fact that he was deprived of the Czechoslovak citizenship by the Communist government after 1948, Černý supported the Czech Egyptology until his very last days and even bequeathed his unique specialized library to the Czech Institute of Egyptology.

With Černý abroad, the task to continue the work of Lexa at the Charles University fell on Zbyněk Žába (1917–1971). In mid 1950ies Žába spent several years in Egypt and at that time he realized the necessity to start the Czech archaeological excavation there. At his instigation, and due to his immense effort, in 1958 the Institute of Egyptology was founded at Charles University. In 1960, when Lexa died, Žába started the Czech archaeological excavation in Egypt. Following the advice of Černý, he chose the Mastaba of Ptahshepses at Abusir (partly known from the French excavations in 1893) as a place of the fieldwork of newly founded Institute.

Shortly afterwards Czechoslovakia reacted to the appeal of UNESCO and took part in the international action to rescue the monuments of ancient Nubia, to be submerged by the newly built High Dam at Aswan. Thus, between 1961 and 1965, Žába headed altogether five expeditions to Nubia. During that time, the Czech team recorded almost 300 rock inscriptions (written in ancient Egyptian, Meroitic, Greek, Latin and other scripts) and about 5000 rock drawings of animals, boats, symbols, etc. on two concessions spreading along the Nile for about 50 kilometres each. They also completed the preliminary archaeological survey on those concessions. In addition to that, Czech Egyptologists have succeeded in locating the so-called Southern Temple at Taphneh, seen by the early travellers in mid-19th century and covered later by the 4 metres thick layer of Nile mud settled on the bottom of the first Aswan dam lake. They also examined the ruins of the Roman fortress at Qertassi and excavated the early Byzantine cemetery at Wadi Qitna.

Because of the Nubia rescue action, the work at Abusir could have been resumed only in 1966. Until 1974, the Mastaba of Ptahshepses was examined – the largest private mastaba of the Old Kingdom times known from Egypt so far. Ptahshepses started his career as a royal barber at the beginning of Dynasty 5, and finally became the King's son-in-law, vizier (first minister) and director of all royal building works under Pharaoh Niusera. Because of his position, Ptahshepses used some features typical for the royal architecture of his times, e.g. the gabled roofing of the burial chamber. Almost 3000 finds

were officially registered from his Mastaba, mostly fragments of finely carved reliefs that had originally embellished its interior before it was turned into a quarry of limestone during the New Kingdom and Roman times. Among other finds, fragments of some 20 statues of different sizes should be mentioned, including a beautiful face of Ptahshepses made of quartzite, now exhibited in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

The excavation of the Mastaba of Ptahshepses was finished by cleaning the area to the south of the Mastaba proper, situated between its southern wall and the southern wing of the massive enclosure wall built of mudbrick. At this place, the northern end of the Greek cemetery (the greater part of it excavated by the German mission led by Ludwig Borchardt some 90 years ago) was located. This area represents the largest Greek cemetery unearthed in Egypt so far from the times preceding Alexander the Great.

The excavations in the Mastaba were immediately followed by restoration and reconstruction works. Among other things, two uniquely shaped limestone columns (the oldest samples of columns imitating eight stems of papyrus bound together) had been raised again and covered with a roof in the monumental entrance of the Mastaba. In many places, also the original masonry of the Mastaba was completed and reinforced. At present, the Mastaba is prepared to become one of the most important monuments to be seen at Abusir in connection with the opening of this site for the tourists. The restoration and reconstruction works are done in close cooperation between the Czech Inst. of Egyptology and the Supreme Council for Antiquities of Egypt.

Following the end of archaeological activities in the Mastaba of Ptahshepses, a new place for archaeological research has been looked for. Miroslav Verner, the newly appointed director of the Czech Inst. of Egyptology, turned his attention to the region south of the pyramid of Neferirkare. Those broad areas were left practically unattended by former archaeologists, though many remains of ancient monuments were clearly visible under the sandy desert surface. Also our Egyptian friends were positive that this is a very promising place where many important discoveries can be expected.

The new archaeological concession was granted to Czech mission by Egyptian authorities in 1975. Thus, in autumn 1976, the excavations were started at two places. One is situated just to the south from the pyramid of Neferirkare and the other on a sloping plain some 200 metres of it in southeastern direction.

At the first place, remains of the previously unknown small pyramid complex of an Egyptian queen were unearthed. The complex has been built for Queen Khentkaus, wife of King Neferirkare (second ruler of Dynasty 5, about 2450 BC). Very probably, for a period of time this queen acted as regent for one of her sons. Her

funeral monument, though badly destroyed by later stonemasons who quarried stone from there, yielded a number of interesting and important finds. Among them, one of the oldest so called satellite pyramids discovered so far in a burial complex of a queen, or fragments of reliefs originally decorating the walls of the temple. From the historical point of view, several scraps of papyri are perhaps most important, representing remains of the original temple archives almost 4500 years old.

On the second spot, a number of Old Kingdom mastabas were unearthed. The tombs, built for less important members of the royal family and dignitaries of middle to low rank, concentrated around the tomb of Princess Khekeretnebti, a previously unknown daughter of King Djedkara Isesi. According to the anthropological research conducted by Prof. Eugen Strouhal, several females from the family of Djedkare Isesi were buried here, surprisingly far from the pyramid of the King that is situated at North Saqqara.

In 1980, Czech Egyptologists started to excavate the unfinished pyramid complex of King Raneferef (mid-Dynasty), certainly the most important monument unearthed by them at Abusir so far. Raneferef died very soon and thus his tomb had to be hastily finished by his successors. Because of the pressure of time, mudbrick was used for Raneferef's mortuary temple instead of limestone. That was a lucky chance as the monument had been unattended by later stone cutters and is preserved to the height of about two metres including remains of its original equipment: Artifacts of immense historical value have been discovered here, among them a set of Raneferef's statues carved in various stones. The partly preserved statue of the young king protected by the royal Horus falcon, made of pink limestone, represent nowadays one of the masterpieces of the Old Kingdom gallery at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Of the same historical value are hundreds of fragments of papyrus rolls – remains of the original temple archives dating back to Dynasties 5 and 6. At present, only two royal temple archives of similar kind are known from the Old Kingdom Egypt, the other coming by chance from Abusir as well. The temple of Raneferef yielded lots of other finds as well, among them hundreds of inscribed seal offprints of Nile mud (parallels to modern stamps), stone and pottery vessels, flint blades and other tools, etc.

The architecture of the mortuary temple, though finished hastily in a cheap way, was equally surprising. It contained, among other features, remains of a columned hall (hypostyle), perhaps one of the oldest, if not the oldest, found in Egypt until now. In the eastern part of the temple, the unique structure called "Temple of the knife" was unearthed – originally a slaughterhouse for cattle used especially during the religious feasts.

In the central portion of the Czech archaeological concession, near to the pyramid complex of Raneferef, other royal funerary monuments are situated. Two small

pyramid complexes of queens, presumably prepared for the wives of Niuserra, represent perhaps the last royal monuments ever built at Abusir. Only one of them has been examined so far. Unfortunately enough, the complex was badly destroyed by the stone quarrying during the New Kingdom and later. For that reason, even the name of its owner could not be ascertained yet. Anyway, the small pyramid, though badly destroyed, is extremely interesting and important as it clearly shows the ways in which Egyptian pyramids of Dynasty 5 were built. Inside the pyramid, there were remains of a badly damaged mummy of a young woman, which might perhaps represent the original burial.

Just in front of the mortuary temple of Raneferef, a small mastaba of King's son Nakhtkara was unearthed. The formerly unknown Prince might be a son of the prematurely dead Raneferef. Though again badly damaged by tomb robbers and stone cutters, this mastaba yielded some interesting remains of the original burial equipment, among them very rare models of offerings (ducks, eggs, loaves of bread, etc.) made of alabaster.

A number of other tombs of higher and lesser dignitaries have been so far unearthed also in other portions of the Abusir necropolis situated to the east and southeast from Dynasty 5 pyramids. Among those tombs, that of the previously unknown vizier Qar should be mentioned. In the tomb, dating perhaps to the very end of the Old Kingdom, there were discovered several rooms with walls covered with coloured reliefs carved in blocks of fine limestone, preserved almost to the original height of about 4 metres.

Unexpectedly, a group of huge shaft tombs dating back to about mid-first millennium BC was discovered in the southwestern portion of the Czech archaeological concession, some 200 metres far from the unfinished pyramid of Raneferef. Only two of this group of tombs, that comprises some 5 bigger and perhaps more than 30 smaller structures of this kind, have been at least partly excavated so far. To the surprise of all people involved, it turned out that the first of them, being at the same time perhaps the oldest in the whole group, belonged to Udjahorresnet. This man, certainly one of the most important and influential Egyptian dignitaries at the time when Persians conquered this land in 525 BC, is sometimes called a traitor because of his apparent cooperation with the new rulers. True or not, he belonged to the nearest entourage of the Persian kings Cambyses and Darius I. for whom he even invented their traditionally shaped Pharaonic titularies, trying in this way to make them acceptable for the Egyptians. His tomb, however, had been visited by robbers several times and thus yielded only very limited information about this somewhat enigmatic personality.

The other tomb unearthed in this group so far belonged to a priest Iufaa, otherwise unattested. Fortunately enough, the tomb robbers failed to enter this tomb that thus remained intact for about 2500 years. Though Iufaa held only titles low in rank, his burial chamber, including the huge outer sarcophagus of white limestone, was almost completely covered by long columns of hieroglyphic texts, interspersed here and there with images of deities, scenes of offering, libation and other ritual pictures. The tomb aroused much attention of scholars, general public and media in 1996, when the burial chamber was uncovered, and again at the beginning of 1998, during the opening of the double sarcophagus. Around the sarcophagus, the original burial equipment was found, consisting of four alabaster canopic jars (vessels where viscera were preserved after the mummification), a complete set of 408 shabti figures (intended to replace the dead during the work in the Other world), pottery and faience receptacles for sacred oils and ointments, bronze models of offering tables, the so called magical bricks, etc. Inside the mummy wrappings of Iufaa, another set of 18 amulets of various types was discovered. Unfortunately, all objects made of organic materials, especially two sets of papyrus rolls (perhaps containing the Book of the Dead and other religious texts), have been badly damaged by the natural humidity, as the deeply situated burial chamber is very near to the underground water table. The most precious pieces from the tomb of Iufaa are now deposited in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and prepared to be exhibited in due time.

In addition to their research and pedagogical tasks, Czech Egyptologists never forget to make the public acquainted with the results of their work or, in a more broad sense, with the recent results of the Egyptological research in the world. During the least decade, the Czech TV has prepared four TV serials in close cooperation with us. Perhaps the most important work orientated on the broad public, which has been prepared by the Czech Egyptologists, is an illustrated encyclopaedia of ancient Egypt (with about 700 entries and 600 colour and b/w photographs and line drawings). At present, the encyclopaedia is available in Czech only but translations into other languages (including perhaps Polish as well) are considered or even negotiated.

The number of scholars and students of Egyptology in Czech republic is rather limited and most probably will be limited also in the future. Anyway, due to its results, Czech Egyptology has certainly found its place in the world and has definitely contributed to the knowledge of ancient Egypt.