

The PCMA UW Research Centre in Cairo: 60 years in the field



“To be a player in world archaeology, we must be in Egypt!”

Prof. Kazimierz Michałowski

The indisputed position of Polish Mediterranean archaeology and Polish archaeologists in Egypt is the effect of dozens of years of excavations at different archaeological sites as well as outstanding research, countless publications and many impressive and inspiring projects. The beginnings, however, were quite modest.

More than 80 years ago Professor Kazimierz Michałowski, representing the University of Warsaw, joined forces with the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology (IFAO) in Cairo to excavate at Edfu. Pooling resources and organizational skills, the two institutions carried out three seasons of fieldwork, opening the field of international studies of ancient cultures to Polish archaeologists. These three seasons—before the outbreak of World War II put a stop to further investigations—were of immeasurable significance for Polish culture and science. Since that memorable year, 1937, Polish archaeological presence in the ancient Mediterranean is an unquestioned fact.

An archaeological return to the world of ancient civilizations was Michałowski's main objective after the war. First were sites on the Black Sea (Myrmekion, Olbia, Kalos Limen) in the mid-1950s, then Novae, a Roman fortress on the Danube. Polish archaeologists soon launched research in Egypt, appearing from this

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point on as an important independent partner of the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities.

The 1960s brought several spectacular discoveries of great informative and scientific value. Mediterranean archaeology in Poland gained a sound foundation for its development as an independent field of science and a new generation of young researchers emerged, comprising egyptologists, but also classical archaeologist, ready to undertake new projects. The international position of Polish scholars was reinforced by their participation in the Nubian Campaign,

a major international project launched by UNESCO and headed by Michałowski. Among the priceless monuments of ancient Nubia that were saved during this campaign were the iconic temples of Abu Simbel, Taffa, and Dabod; the project also involved Polish archaeological and conservation work at the Christian cathedral of Faras—the discovery that was acclaimed worldwide as the “miracle of Faras” [Figs 1, 2]. The few Polish projects in Egypt: Tell Atrib, Kom el-Dikka (Alexandria) [Fig. 3], Meidum, Deir el-Bahari, and in Sudan: Old Dongola and Kadero, were supplemented with new



Fig. 1. Professor Kazimierz Michałowski at Faras, 1963 (PCMA UW | photo T. Biniewski)

excavations in Syria (Palmyra), Cyprus (Nea Paphos), and Sudan (Qasr Ibrim and Kadero), and subsequently Iraq (Nimrud, Bijan, al-Saadiya, Haditha, Raffaan, Tell Rijim, and Nemrik). This greatly expanded the scope of research conducted by Polish scholars.

The new scientific and logistic challenges posed by a growing portfolio of archaeological projects in Egypt and the Near East demanded a continuous presence of archaeologists and experts from other disciplines. Michałowski saw the opportunity and with great determination

and with support from his university and approval from both the Polish and Egyptian authorities, he founded the Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw, the first Polish scientific institution in Egypt. He regarded the foundation of this institute, which he headed until his death in 1980, as his greatest life achievement. It was indeed the highest form of recognition of Michałowski's esteemed position in scientific circles. The official inauguration of the institute's office in the district of Heliopolis in April 1960 was attended by



Fig. 2. Cathedral in Faras: restorers taking down wall paintings for transport and preservation in the National Museums of Khartoum and Warsaw; left, surface of saintly figure protected before removal from the wall (PCMA UW Documentation Center | photos T. Biniewski)

representatives of the Egyptian Department of Antiquities, foreign archaeological institutes, guests invited specially for the occasion from Poland as well as the Professor and his students. The Cairo institute represented Polish researchers in contacts with Egyptian authorities and served as “headquarters” and administrative and logistic support for archaeological and restoration teams working in and outside Egypt (Sudan, Cyprus, Syria, and Iraq).

The following years brought a series of archaeological discoveries at sites in Egypt: Marea, Naqlun, Saqqara, Pelusium, Tell el-Retaba, Sheikh Abd el-Gurna,

Gebelein, Asasif, and recently Berenike on the Red Sea. Research expanded in the Near East: Tell Arbid, Tell Qaramel, Hawarte, all in Syria, Chhîm/Jiyeh in Lebanon, Beit Ras and Khirbat al-Sar in Jordan. New sites were opened in Sudan: Banganarti, Selib, Ghazali and the region of the Fourth Cataract, el-Zuma and el-Detti. New directions of research led to excavations in Kuwait (Bahra), and recently on the Arabian Peninsula (Aynuna), in the UAE (Saruq al-Hadid) and in Oman (Qumayrah), as well as Armenia (Metsamor) and Georgia (Gonio). The latest projects in Ethiopia (Debre Gergis)



Fig. 3. Clearing the cavea of the Roman theater in Alexandria, 1965 (PCMA Documentation Center | photo W.B. Kubiak)

and Erythrea open a new chapter in the research activity of Polish archaeologists.

From the beginning also the Polish institute has been involved in concurrent reconstruction and conservation work, starting from the earliest projects in Alexandria (a theatre and public bath from late antiquity), Deir el-Bahari (temples of Hatshepsut and Tutmosis III, tomb of Ramesses III), Faras (frescoes) and Dongola (Nubian churches), Palmyra (Tetracylon), Nea Paphos (Roman villa with mosaics), mortuary complex of Emir Qurqumas in Cairo, Meidum (Nefermaat's mastaba), and recently Merefnebef's tomb at Saqqara [Fig. 4], Marina el-Alamein (Roman houses) and Hawarte (Mithreum).

In response to the changing realities of the late 1980s and early 1990s, in Poland as well as in the region, the University of Warsaw established in 1990 a main office operating out of Warsaw, the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology (PCMA UW). The Cairo institute remained as the chief overseas branch, moving into new premises in Heliopolis purchased in 1994 from a grant awarded by the Foundation for Polish Science in recognition of the PCMA's role in advancing and popularizing knowledge of Mediterranean antiquity and its public service as a very special ambassador of Polish culture. In 2007, the institute celebrated 70 years of successful projects in Egypt, presenting an impressive exhibition of finds from Polish excavations at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. On this occasion, a cast bronze bust of Michałowski was unveiled in a pantheon located in the museum gardens, commemorating the most eminent archaeologists and egyptologists

who have ever worked in Egypt, next to portraits of Jean-François Champollion, Auguste Mariette, Gaston Maspero and Karl Richard Lepsius [Fig. 5].

Recent years have witnessed fundamental changes: the Centre has developed new objectives and research clusters reflecting the changes in its staff structure, opening the way to an ever broader participation of Polish specialists in archaeological, documentation and conservation projects. Multidisciplinary approaches to archaeological research have



Fig. 4. Conservation challenge: painted wall reliefs from the Tomb of Meref-nebef in west Saqqara (PCMA UW Documentation Center | photo J. Dąbrowski)

always characterized Polish Mediterranean archaeology, bringing tangible results in the form of publications as well as various site presentation projects, where the combined efforts of specialists from different fields can be observed. Many aspects of ancient cultures have been discovered in consequence, contributing importantly to the world archaeological heritage. The Cairo Research Center is also involved in educating new generations of archaeologists, acting as a partner to the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education's scholarship program for student, post-graduate and doctoral research as well as to the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities in the training program for Egyptian archaeologists, egyptologists and conservators.

The Research Centre is also a place for networking and presentations of the latest results of research by Polish and foreign archaeologists working in Egypt. As part of the community archaeology approach, the Centre organizes exhibitions, among others in Egypt, to present past and current work, educating the general public in the most important and impressive discoveries. And just like in Nubia years ago, the Centre responds to international calls to save world cultural heritage endangered whether by natural factors, economic development or warfare.



Fig. 5. Bust of Michałowski (cast bronze, by Ewa Parandowska) in the pantheon of scholars of ancient Egypt, Cairo 2008 (Photo R. Kucharczyk)