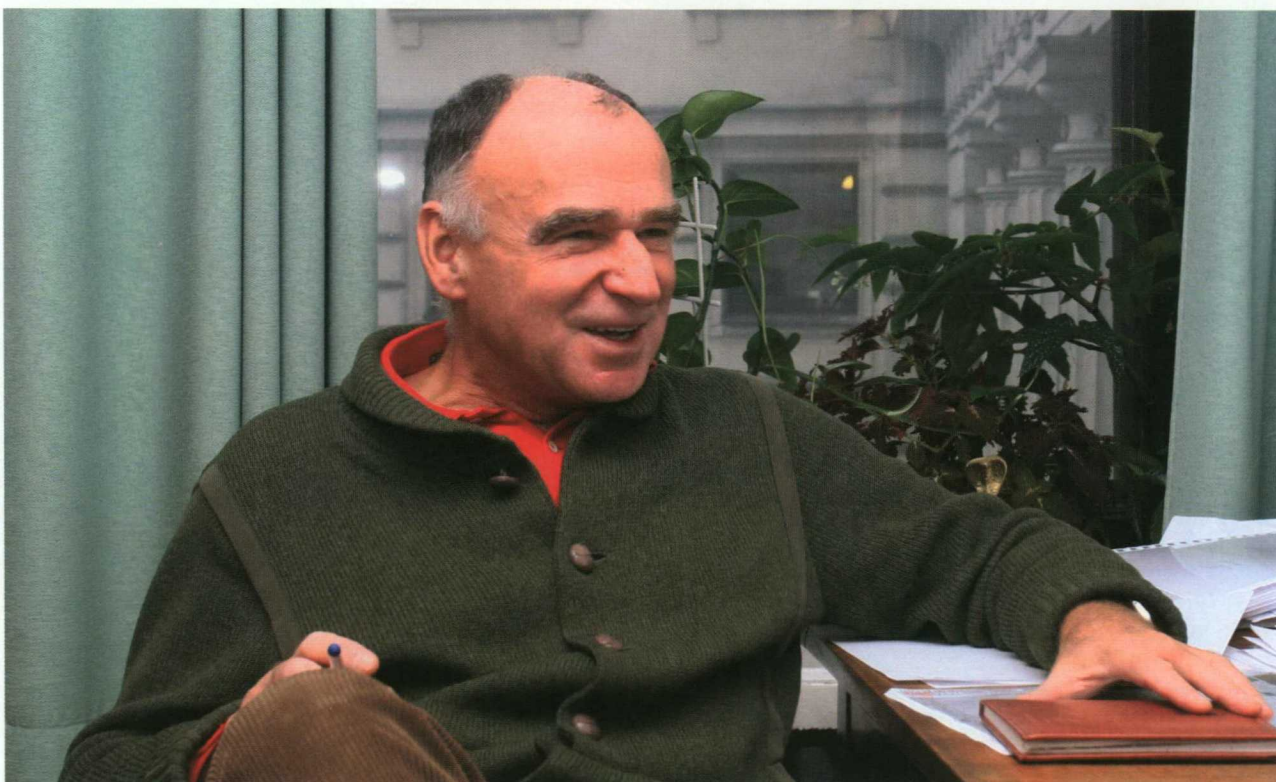


Interview with Professor Karol Myśliwiec

Raider of the Lost World

Krzysztof Kalinski



Professor Karol Myśliwiec is Director of the Research Center for Mediterranean Archeology of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Polish-Egyptian archeological mission at Saqqara, where he discovered the tomb of Vizier Merefnebef, the administrator of Egypt at the beginning of the VIth Dynasty

Academia: How did you find your way into archeology as a profession?

Professor Karol Myśliwiec: I was passionate about all the things an archeologist needs, and above all had a desire to move about and to work hard. I was interested in ancient cultures, history, geography, art, and languages. I thought that my field would be archeology, Mediterranean archeology, then a university major that was awfully hard to get admitted to. And even though I attended the excellent King Stanisław Leszczyński High School in Jasto in the Podkarpacie region, I did not really believe that I would manage to get admitted. I have to say that once I was at university, I really did not for a moment believe

that I would become an archeologist professionally. I had such brilliant fellow students that it never occurred to me, a simple provincial newcomer, that there would be some sort of place for me here. And so, I also majored in Romance philology at the same time. I of course wrote a master's thesis in archeology, but I was still thinking that it would mark the end of my career. Nevertheless, that was really the beginning: it was completely unexpected when Professor Michałowski offered me a post as his assistant at the University.

I held the assistantship for several months, and then I got another internship with the Polish Academy of Sciences, until the next proposal came: to go to Egypt for 9 months under a

stipend exchange between the Egyptian and Polish governments. That marked a turning point. Those nine months turned into nine years, because the stipend was constantly renewed. And then there was a political event that essentially sealed my career as an archaeologist. Namely, Poland established diplomatic relations with West Germany, and back at university I had been known as the "guy who knew German." Professor Michałowski decided that this could mean excellent cooperation in the field of archeology. And so when Professor Rainer Stadelmann, who was later director of the German Institute in Cairo but was then directing the German excavations at the temple of Pharaoh Seti I, sent a proposal that someone should join his excava-

tions, Professor Michałowski chose me. There was no discussion, I had to go.

But didn't the strong reputation of German archeology make this more attractive?

Well, you know, in fact it didn't. Please bear in mind that I was then still not expecting to work in the field of archeology, because there were no prospects waiting for me after I got back to Poland. After all, I got my first job in Poland when I was 39 years old. Prior to that, I traveled around the world, exclusively under various stipends. Immediately after the first campaign, I was offered a stipend in West Germany and I went to Munich. In fact, I had long been dreaming about some sort of extended stay at the university in Munich, because Professor Hans Wolfgang Müller, the only Egyptologist in Germany who researched Egyptian art, was head of archeology there. And art was the field I found most interesting of all. I lived in Munich for two years and I wrote my D.Sc. dissertation, which I also published in Germany, in German. Finally, Prof. Michałowski managed to secure me the proper position with the Polish Academy of Sciences. He passed away several months later, on 1 January 1980. Since I already had a foothold in the Academy, soon after his death I was elected by my colleagues to succeed him as director of the Academy's Research Centre for Mediterranean Archeology.

How much does what you are doing now, and the direction the Center is now heading in, differ from what things were like under Prof. Michałowski?

I would say that we can underscore two directions in the Centre's work. One is the continuation of the basic research that was pursued by Prof. Michałowski with such excavations as at Alexandria, Queen Hatshepsut's temple in Bahri, or Dongola in Sudan, where we are researching early African Christianity. But on the other hand we, Prof. Michałowski's students, have initiated completely new research and new excavations. Our work in

Saqqara, which began in 1987, marked the start of the now very intense Polish research on the first half of the Pharaonic epoch in Egypt.

While the strongest point in Polish research on the Pharaonic times was previously the New Kingdom – meaning the middle and second half of the second millennium BC, above all the period of the 18th or 19th dynasties and the time of pharaohs bearing the names of Thutmose, Amenhotep and Ramesses – the entire preceding epoch, the 1,500

years stretching from the beginning of the third to mid-second millennium B.C., was completely absent from our research. Now, our excavations have made a strong mark on Old Kingdom research; we have given history magnificent new sources to fill in previously unknown pages in the history of ancient Egypt during its earliest period.

And what do you consider to be your greatest success as an archeologist and as a discoverer?



Stefan Sadowski

Reliefs and paintings in the doorway to the tomb of Vizier Merefnebef, circa 2200 BC

Interview with Professor Karol Myśliwiec

You are probably expecting me to say that the discovery of the tomb of Merefnebef has been the peak research achievement. This was undoubtedly a sensational discovery and a very important one from the research perspective – yet I think I would rank first our discoveries in ancient Athribis, the capital of the tenth lower Egyptian province, where I directed Polish-Egyptian rescue excavations in the Delta terrain in 1985-1995. For many years, archeologists took little or no interest in the delta, because it is much easier to work on sand-covered sites. You can relatively neatly move the sand around in precise fashion, rather than digging about in the damp soil and walking around in the mud. In the dry sands of Upper Egypt it is much easier to find papyri, mummies, or excellently preserved graves. Poland has been a pioneer in researching the Nile Delta. From the scientific standpoint these excavations are more significant, because in this part of Egypt the

archeological strata are particularly disturbed, not only by the fellahs who have turned everything upside down while seeking soil for their crops. Especially the archeological strata from later periods – from the Greco-Roman, Byzantine, or later epochs. Suddenly, in this terrain we discovered strata from the Ptolemaic period, the 300 years between Alexander the Great and the famed Cleopatra VII. Moreover, their stratification enabled us to distinguish three stages and to date them very exactly on the basis of extensive, well preserved numismatic material. Because it is such numismatic material, inscriptions and seals that provide the basis for exact dating. And so, these excavations have enabled certain types of materials, such as terracotta figures, faiences, and ceramics, to be dated for the first time, on the basis of the single, 100-percent certain criterion provided by stratification. They can sometimes be dated with an accuracy

of 30-40 years, while similar finds held in museums worldwide have previously been dated on the basis of style, with an accuracy of up to 500-600 years. I only realized the significance of this discovery when I was invited to lecture at various European museums, the Louvre and the British Museum, where the captions under certain finds on display there were changed immediately after my lecture.

Are archeological researchers helped by new technologies?

Of course, the methods of archeology have developed greatly over the past 20 years, and the technical sciences, above all geophysics, are being employed to a greater and greater extent. No excavations in the Nile Delta, or essentially anywhere in Egypt, now start without what is called “geophysical prospection,” investigating the electromagnetic resistance of what lies hidden inside



Maciej Jawornicki

Discovering the huge “dry moat” hewn in the rock beside the world’s oldest pyramid in Saqqara



Maciej Jawornicki

Wooden coffins from the deep Ptolemaic period lying in the sands of Saqqara

the earth. In fact, the first excavations where this sort of prospection was used was our work at Tell Atrib.

Nevertheless, I have to paradoxically admit that the most interesting results came from a sondage pit we dug in a location where the machinery hadn't registered anything at all. This was because the location was where Bedouins had once kept their camels, leaving such a thick layer of dung that its salinity completely blocked the waves from penetrating the soil further. But because the plant cover on the surface evidenced a suspiciously rectangular shape, I decided to cut a sondage pit there. And imagine that 60 cm under the surface we discovered a magnificent marble statue of Aphrodite! In and of itself, the statue would not be anything important from the scientific point of view, yet it lay in a stratum where the coins, seals, and all the ceramics were extremely homogenous, and clearly indicated the early Ptolemaic period. No one wanted to believe this. It took me a few years of persuasion that this context allowed for no other monument in this location than this one. But this is the exception that proves the rule.

You have many excellent discoveries to your credit. But is there something that you would hope to come across in your research work?

Of course I have dreams, but on this issue I am awfully superstitious. I believe that vocally articulating what I have in mind essentially almost negates the chances of making such a discovery. And so, perhaps I will talk not so much about what I imagine, but about what others imagine we might find there. For example, our Egyptian colleagues try to persuade us that at our current location we might find the grave of Imhotep, the legendary architect who was later worshiped as a saint for almost four millennia. He was the only saint in world history that arose in the epoch we call the Pharaonic period, and gained an incredible cult in the Greek religion of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. Subsequently, he entered the Christian Pantheon during Byzantine times. Moreover, the remains of Alexander the Great's first grave might be discovered several hundred meters to the north of our current excavations – not necessarily by our mission, but by whoever digs there.

If you had to name five or so world powers in the field of archeology, what countries would be on the list?

Undoubtedly France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, Poland, and Italy. This stems from an awareness that these countries' own

cultures derive from Mediterranean cultures. Poland, too, is in terms of its culture entirely the progeny of Mediterranean cultures. When we seek the sources of our identity, we should first look to the south, and then later to the west. That's why I believe that a civilized European country which acknowledges its Mediterranean roots is simply obliged to help glean new sources for studying this culture.

Interviewed by
Anna Zawadzka
Piotr Kossobudzki
Warsaw, December 2005

Professor Karol Myśliwiec (b. 1943), archeologist and continuator of the Polish tradition in ancient Egyptian archeological research. He studied Mediterranean archeology at Warsaw University under the direction of Prof. Kazimierz Michałowski. Since 1969 he has taken part in archeological excavations in Egypt (Alexandria, Minshat Abu Amar, Deir el-Bahari), Syria (Palmyra), and Sudan (Kadero). Starting in 1985 he directed the Polish-Egyptian rescue excavations at Tell Atrib (in the Nile Delta), where he discovered a quarter inhabited by artists and craftsmen, erected in the third to first centuries BC. Since 1987 he has directed the Polish-Egyptian archeological mission at Saqqara, where his team discovered the tomb of Vizier Merefnebef, carved out of the rock. He is an outstanding promoter of popular science, the author of many books and articles in the field of archeology, and a 2005 laureate of the "Polish Nobel Prize," a prestigious Polish award for outstanding research achievements. He is a member of the German Archeological Institute, the International Association of Archeologists, and the Explorers Club.