

The Wizard of Faras



STEFAN JAKOBIELSKI

Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures
Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw
stefjak@wp.pl

Dr. Stefan Jakobielski, a Nubiologist, relates the story of eminent Polish archeologist Prof. Kazimierz Michałowski and the successful mission to Faras in Sudan

Academia: You worked with Prof. Kazimierz Michałowski on the Faras excavations in 1961–64. How did you come to join his team?

Stefan Jakobielski: I had just earned a degree in philology, and the professor needed someone to read inscriptions, as the first campaign had made it clear that they would be found in Faras. The professor applied an excellent approach, one which greatly contributed to the success of the Polish archeological school, in that he took specialists in specific fields out on excavations. The architecture was documented by an architect, rather than an archeologist – something that may seem obvious today. I am an Egyptologist by education, and I specialized in the Coptic language. One well-known figure on the mission was the anthropologist Prof. Tadeusz Dzierzykrz-Rogalski. During the first campaign there was an architect, Dr. Wiesław Koziński, who had previously worked at the Warsaw University of Technology.

When did you first set foot at the excavation site?

On 11 November 1961 I flew to Cairo, then travelled to Faras.

And what did you see?

The commemorative chapels that adjoined the cathedral had been uncovered, in the center were the bishops' stelae and two paintings with inscriptions, in this case with a legend: the monumental figure of the Archangel Michael and an image of the Virgin Mary, which I witnessed being taken down from the wall during the second campaign by Stanisław Jasiewicz, the first restorer who came to Faras. But I have to go back in time to the first campaign, even though I did not take part in it. It was then that the first trench was dug across the hill from the eastern side, where there was no architecture to get in the way. That was important, because the first campaign had been short, and Prof. Michałowski wanted to have something to show. He of course had the pharaonic blocks, which had been found in the beginning of the campaign. The blocks had inscriptions of Thutmose III, Rameses II. There was the option of a bigger project to check what was inside the hill. And what could be there? A pharaonic temple, of course. If there are blocks from a specific period lying around, there must be some kind of temple in the middle. The big hill of Faras had to be concealing something; it was artificial. Several top-notch archeologists were known to have had this site offered to them, but they turned it down, seeing the excavations as too risky. Michałowski's genius was that he knew that there was a big building in the middle, because it had to be there, so he was essentially not risking anything. When digging, he came across the wall of the cathedral.



Above: comparison of a photo taken at Faras (showing "The Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace" on the cathedral wall) with a stereoscopic image of the Cathedral created in the FARAS 3D project. **Below:** Bishop Petros with St. Peter. Sudan, Faras, 974-997. Tempera on mud plaster, 244.5 cm high by 113 cm wide.



Right where there were commemorative chapels for the grave of five bishops from the 11th and 12th centuries, decorated with two paintings.

During your first stay in Faras, did you read the inscriptions on those episcopal stelae?

No, they were read by Marek Marciak, who had been on the first campaign. I had other inscriptions to read, but I did correct the dating.

How does one work with such texts?

A facsimile has to be made of the inscriptions. If it is carved (or incised), a cast can be taken, provided that the stone is hard enough and water will not harm it. Nowadays latex casts, or "squeezes," are made, but I think that the school of tracing over the text is good, and that is what we usually did. There were so many inscriptions at Faras that they were just photographed and read on-site, meaning that if something could be read it was immediately recorded.

Things began with those two paintings, but ultimately there were more than 100 of them. 169 to be precise, including all items with traces of paint on walls. Of the inscriptions, for me the most important is the list of bishops. It included their death dates - the day and month, without the year, which were needed back in those days for saying commemorative masses on the anniversaries. The list of bishops formed the main axis of my research. Using it to establish a precise chronology of the successive diocese bishops enabled us to date the paintings. In the cathedral there were portraits of 14 bishops, three of them specified by name. The list, in turn, had 28 names, which provides an ordering. They were largely deteriorated, and so data was not available for all of them, and there were also several bishops' stelae. All of this needed to be pieced together.

The successful Polish mission to Faras

Why is that important? Because some paintings were seen to form stylistic groups, either done by the same painter or by artists from the same atelier, that included a certain bishop's portrait. Each bishop had a duty to have his likeness put up on the wall of the cathedral. And this is a very important chronological point, because it makes it possible to date other paintings from the group. We have three layers of plaster in the cathedral, each of them painted, and (to simplify things somewhat) each corresponding to a certain historical period. The list needed to be matched up with the plaster layers and vice versa, and also the painters needed to be matched up. For me that was the most important text from Faras, because the epitaphs (except the data concerning the deceased) mainly contained formulaic language - one of them being a prayer for the dead used to this very day in the Orthodox Church.

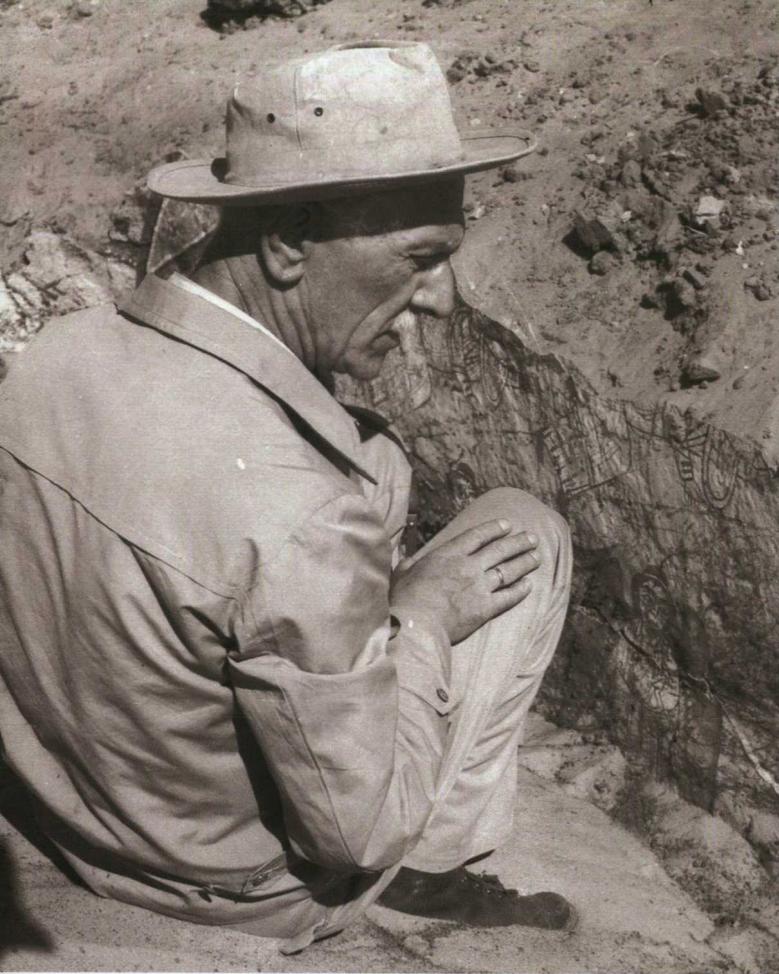
You did more at Faras than just interpret inscriptions. What was the most difficult work?

The removal of around 120 paintings. This was done by Józef Gazy, a restorer from the National Museum in Warsaw. He had the assistance of the Egyptologist Elżbieta Dąbrowska-Smektala and the Arabist Marta Kubiak, who worked as restorers under his command. At that point the whole mission team was handed rasps to use for filing off the plaster from the reverse sides. The point was for each painting to be made as light as possible. This work was so intensive during the final campaign that Prof. Michałowski nearly ceased all other archeological work.

Why?

He realized that the main thing that needed to be done before the site was flooded by the Nile was to rescue the paintings, because they were the greatest treasure. Incidentally, it was due to him that, apart from the 50:50 divide of the finds under Sudanese law, the Polish side proposed that the two largest paintings, the "Nativity Scene" and the "Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace," should be kept by the Sudanese, as their national treasures. And that was the right decision.

And so, during the fourth campaign Prof. Michałowski made all other work subordinate to the paintings, with everything else fading into the background. We were still digging, but that was not so important; occasionally, due to the lack of time it was not even possible to draw up full documentation. That was a dramatic decision. The cathedral needed to be dismantled to recover the reused architectural



Prof. Kazimierz Michałowski during the excavation work at Faras

elements that Bishop Paulos had built the cathedral out of in the year 707. The problem of stratigraphy, fundamental to all of archeology, seemingly did not apply at Faras. Finds were mainly lying under pure windblown sand, and so we could allow ourselves to uncover them quickly, without painstakingly going down 5 centimeters at a time across the whole area. And I suppose that was the most exciting time - you could see something emerging over here, the top of a wall with some color becoming visible over there, etc. Then something happened by chance, which thrust Faras into the world limelight. Georg Gerster, a journalist and photographer who was writing a book on Nubia, rode up the Nile in motorboat to the Egyptian-Sudanese border, where he was halted by the Egyptians. He protested greatly, and so they told him to go to the other side, where there was an archeological mission. Faras was just 300 meters from the border, on the

The UNESCO Nubian campaign was a large-scale, international archeological rescue operation carried out in the 1960s in southern Egypt and Sudan (including the Polish mission described here), aiming to save the ancient cultural monuments in the area soon to be flooded by the Nile after the construction of the High Dam at Aswan. The sites protected by the international project included the pharaonic temple at Abu Simbel, the temple of Isis on the island of Philae. Poland contributed to it with a task of preserving the paintings from the cathedral at Faras.

Tadeusz Brziewski / Archives of the PAS Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures

Sudanese side. Gerster walked across the border and happened to reach us the moment when we were uncovering the large archangel from the painting "Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace." It portrays an episode from the Book of Daniel: the Archangel Michael is protecting the three youths from the flames. Gerster's image of this archangel emerging from the sands became famous after he published it, first in a popular Swiss magazine. Prof. Michałowski greatly appreciated the importance of popularizing archeology. What scholar, back in those days, would give an interview to a sensational evening newspaper like Express Wieczorny? But he did so, because he knew that everyone in Poland would read it. Including the ministerial officials that a lot depended on.

But the credit for Faras's fame goes to Prof. Michałowski?

Definitely so. In 1958, UNESCO made an appeal to rescue the monuments of Nubia. This mainly meant the Egyptian temples in Egyptian Nubia. Sudan was focused on somewhat less, because the flagship project was the moving of the pharaonic temple at Abu Simbel. But Prof. Michałowski had long been interested in Nubia. Already back in 1938 he had tested the possibilities for launching excavations there. He organized an expedition to Nubia in 1958. He rented a boat and traveled with his staff around all the archeological sites in Egypt, all the way to the border with Sudan, taking notes and observing the terrain. In 1959, the Polish Archeological Center of Warsaw University was set up in Cairo - an institution that could apply for such research. When UNESCO announced its appeal, Michałowski came forward, because he already had laid the groundwork, he had a logistical base in Cairo and had a budget.

Where was the money from?

From the Polish Finance Ministry. The special budget for the Center was not under the jurisdiction of the University, the Ministry of Culture and Art, or the Ministry of Higher Education, and so no one could get their hands on that money under any pretext. We were all on stipends from the Egyptian government, but its scholarships were kept in a drawer at the ministry, because they were in Egyptian pounds and no one at the ministry took any interest in them. We received some 28 pounds monthly, which was then around \$50.

What impact did the Faras excavations have on archeology?

The successful Polish mission to Faras

Above all, Faras led to the emergence of a new field in Poland and the world, called Nubiology. Everyone knows who an Egyptologist is, but people do not really know what a Nubiologist studies. The International Society for Nubian Studies was established, with someone from Poland always among its leading officials. Another legacy is the interest in the Christian period in Nubia, which has also been a very strong stimulus for studies of Christian iconography. Another issue, perhaps even the most important, is the public opening of archeology, its development thanks to a publicly hailed success.

But Faras was not Prof. Michałowski's only success?

Each of his missions ended in great success. Deir el-Bahari in 1962/63 - where the temple of Thutmose III was discovered in a location that had seen digging for 100 years. Western Thebes, of all places, had been dug up again and again over those years, yet suddenly the temple of Thutmose III was found, with his granite statue, right next to the largest temple of Hatshepsut. But also the excavations in Alexandria, finding an amphitheater (recently identified as a lecture hall) in the heart of a city. Palmyra, where beautiful sculptures were discovered. I had the honor of working there. In Cyprus in 1965, a Polish mission discovered a treasure of silver coins, recognized as an extraordinary event. Later came a flurry of highly prized mosaics.

How strong is Polish archeology today, against that standard?

I think that Polish Middle-Eastern archeology continues to rank among the best. As concerns Sudan, which is dearest to me personally, in the times when the next dam was being built on the 6th cataract, there were eight Polish missions working in Sudan simultaneously. That was in 2005-2006. Now the number is two less, but we are still a major player in the area's archeology. The same thing goes for Egypt. The Cairo Center, or more precisely the "Kazimerz Michałowski Polish Center of Mediterranean Archeology of the University of Warsaw," is essentially a very serious research institute. It has developed wonderfully, it has its own journals and more than 20 staff members, not in Egypt but only in Poland. More people are needed in Poland to draw up documentation. Discoveries continue to be made, missions are out there working hard. For instance, Prof. Karol Myśliwiec's work at Saqqara. In Egypt alone,

there are nearly 10 other Polish missions currently working. We are also present in Cyprus, Kuwait, Lebanon, and until recently we were in Syria and Iraq. The funding is just obtained differently; nowadays that's the most important job of the mission leader. More or less three-quarters of the year gets devoted to that, then the remainder on excavations. As for Sudan - the dig at Dongola is led by Prof. Włodzimierz Godlewski. There is enough work there to last 50-100 years. There are also excavations at Banganarti, and further to the south, at Selib, both led by Prof. Bogdan Żurawski. Conservation of the site at Ghazali is managed by Dr. Artur Obłuski. And there are many others.

As a final question: has work related to the excavations at Faras ended?

In a certain sense it remains underway. Right now we are preparing to print a catalog of the Faras paintings, for which there was never money. It will be published by the above-mentioned Center. Work began a long time ago, the text has been translated, and I am constantly adding to it. It will encompass all the paintings, including those kept in Khartoum and Warsaw, and also the fragments that were not taken down. This publication is sorely needed, but the fact that it is only appearing after 50 years is a terrible sin. ■

Interview by Anna Zawadzka

Dr. Stefan Jakobielski,
who worked with Prof.
Michałowski on the
mission to Faras and
led the Old Dongola
excavations after him,
explaining inscriptions
at the Faras Gallery in
the National Museum in
Warsaw

