

**Miroslav Verner and Hana Benesovská, *Unearthing Ancient Egypt: Fifty Years of Czech Archaeological Exploration in Egypt*, Czech Institute of Egyptology, Togga Ltd., Prague, 2008.  
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This account of Czech exploration and excavation in Egypt achieves two important goals. First, it describes in detail the activities of the Czech Institute of Egyptology in Egypt since its founding in 1958, including the significant events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that enabled its formation. Created to commemorate fifty years of Czech archaeological participation in Egypt, this book also serves to highlight the degree to which the widespread participation of international entities, including those of comparatively small countries such as the Czech Republic (former Czechoslovakia), have contributed to our understanding of Egyptian history.

The stated purpose of the book is "... not to give an exhaustive overview of the history of Czech Egyptology but to offer the general public basic information on the circumstances that contributed to the foundation of the Institute and above all to the development of the archaeological excavations in Egypt..." (p. 9). It begins by rightly demonstrating the significance of the Czech Institute's active participation in the UNESCO Nubian Campaign of 1960-1964. In 1958 the Egyptian and Sudanese governments requested aid to help preserve the monuments, temples and sites, some up to 3,000 years old, that were to be submerged after the construction of the dam at Aswan in southern Egypt. An unprecedented international response resulted in widespread co-operation to achieve these aims (over 50 countries participated in 40 separate missions to record numerous sites and to relocate a total of 22 monuments). The Czech Institute of Egyptology was a participant and this act of generosity fostered amicable relations between the Czech and Egyptian governments. Considering the significance of this project it is worthwhile to note that in 2009 UNESCO officially celebrates 50 years of the inception of the Nubian Campaign, an operation that inspired, in 1972, the development of UNESCO's World

Heritage Convention which recognised and sought to protect sites of natural and cultural significance.

*Unearthing Ancient Egypt* is divided into two sections. The first provides a detailed account of the activities of the Czech Institute of Egyptology, beginning with the UNESCO Nubian Campaign. The Institute worked at Qertassi, Tafa, Wadi Qitna, Kalabsha, excavating and performing several epigraphic surveys of the rock inscriptions. This work was viewed very favourably, leading to the attainment of the Abusir pyramid field concession. Work commenced at this location in 1976 and the excellent overview of these activities provides an engaging description of the excavations, information that well serves the student of the Old Kingdom, elite funerary practices of this time and, in particular, the site of Abusir itself. The account of the evolution of the excavations, from the Mastaba of the Vizier Ptahshepses in the Dynasty 5 necropolis to the work conducted in the large region south of the pyramid of Neferirkare and the causeway of the mortuary complex of Niuserre goes far to illustrate just how painstaking and gruelling excavations can be, particularly those conducted in such a large area. The exploration of the numerous familial tombs of Djedkare, the pyramid and temple complex of Khentkaus and the temple complex of Raneferef have provided a wealth of funerary information dating to Dynasties 5 and 6, as has the work conducted at the South Abusir Cemetery. The shaft tombs of Udjahorresnet and Iufaa, both dating to the Late Period, 664-332 BCE (specifically Dynasty 27, the first phase of Persian domination), were also discovered and excavated. Iufaa held the title 'priest and overseer of palaces' (p. 50) and Udjahorresnet was a senior official at the time of Cambyses' invasion. His biography on the naophorous Statue Inscription of Udjahorresnet (located in the Vatican museums, inv. no. 19), is an extremely important document that elucidates on the manner of early Persian rule over Egypt. Although there is speculation whether Udjahorresnet was ever interred here, both shaft tombs contribute to our understanding of elite burials of the Late Period. The section concludes with a useful list of monographs and proceedings associated with the Czech Institute of Egyptology.

The second section of the book comprises over two-thirds of its volume and is devoted solely to photographs. Each significant phase of the work of the Czech

Institute in Egypt is afforded a divided section: the beginnings of Czech Egyptology, the international campaign to rescue the monuments of Nubia, the exploration of the pyramid field at Abusir and the 'Black Desert' which is concerned with Bahariya Oasis. To conclude, a selection of 'significant artefacts' from Abusir are presented in the manner of a museum catalogue, providing information about their provenance, the construction material(s), dimensions and current location. This is a welcome inclusion which demonstrates the variety of the artefacts and serves as a record of the more significant examples. Although the photographs of the excavated burial complexes and artefacts found therein are informative, the more candid pictures are those which document events and situations not often published. The ramshackle catamaran Sadiq en-Nubia, the "friend of Nubia", that served as the mobile base of operations at Khor Rahma (p. 69), and the particularly difficult work environment of the epigraphic survey in the area of Gebel el-Girgawi (p. 81), are two examples, which are above all fascinating and entirely appropriate in this publication. Such inclusions would, I believe, interest scholars and students of Egyptology and the general public alike because they illustrate some procedures that are commonly practiced in Egypt and, in the process, help to de-mystify some romantic notions of the archaeological process. Likewise the photographs of the excavators themselves and their methods of excavation serve as an excellent reference point from which to examine the advances made in excavation techniques in the past 50 years (and, perhaps most significantly, to view how many elements remain the same). As a book that celebrates the collaboration of Czech and Egyptian interests it is appropriate that there are many pictures of the local workmen, guides and cooks without whom such expeditions would be near impossible. Of course, the photographs of the work conducted during the UNESCO Campaign have an added poignancy because they document sites that were submerged with the construction of the Aswan Dam.

This book was not written as a definitive record of Czech activities in Egypt, nevertheless it does provide a detailed chronological overview of the excavations. A large number of interesting and informative photographs are particularly impressive and provide the reader with a more relatable perspective of the worksite. In particular the panoramic views of the excavation areas and the satellite pictures and 3D computer models of the Abusir pyramid field in relation to the cultivation of the Nile Valley (pgs 150-151); however, it is problematic that the reader is left wanting more

information. For instance dates and a number names of the people depicted in the photographs are absent. Such information may not have survived, particularly regarding the earlier photographs, but with over half of the book dedicated to this pictorial history it is an exasperating omission. Indeed, a detailed map of the locations of the UNESCO rescue missions and the later excavations at Abusir and Bahariya Oasis would enhance the reader's understanding of the scope and location of these endeavours.

It is particularly refreshing to read about an institute with a small international profile that has nevertheless consistently participated in excavations in Egypt. Although only mentioned in passing in Michael Stehlík's brief introduction (p. 7) and on page 25, the spectre of an uncertain domestic situation serves to highlight how remarkable the continued existence of the Czech Institute of Egyptology actually is, as well as its consistently high level of scholarship.

It is fitting that a volume documenting past deeds concludes with a chapter dedicated to the recent excavations at Bahariya Oasis in Egypt's Western Desert, work that will undoubtedly feature heavily in future endeavours of the Czech Institute of Egyptology. As has been demonstrated by the Dakhleh Oasis Project the oases of the Western Desert have vast archaeological potential and the continued excavation of Bahariya will undoubtedly reveal much material of interest. As a book aimed at a general audience this glossy production goes far to highlight the munificence of organisations such as the Czech Institute of Egyptology in working tirelessly to promote the understanding of Egypt's rich and varied history. It is also useful in an academic context, particularly in the detail ascribed the sequence of excavations at Abusir.