



Fig. 1 Zbyněk Žába in discussion with his mentor Jaroslav Černý in the mastaba of Ptahshepses at Abusir (photo M. Zemina)

## Professor Zbyněk Žába (1917–1971)

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This year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Professor Zbyněk Žába (1917–1971), one of the founders of the Czech Institute of Egyptology at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague. Professor Žába was not only crucial in acquiring the concession of the site at Abusir and the commencement of the long-lasting exploration of its Old Kingdom cemetery of officials, but also contributed to the popularization of Egyptology among the general audiences of former Czechoslovakia.

Zbyněk Žába, Professor of Egyptology at Charles University and Director of the Czechoslovak Institute of Egyptology in Prague and Cairo, was born on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June, 1917, at Doubravice near Dvůr Králové nad Labem (in Eastern Bohemia). On completion of his studies at secondary grammar school in Hradec Králové, during which he showed great talent for both modern (especially French) and classical languages (Greek and Latin), he decided to study classical philology at Charles University in Prague. His studies were interrupted in 1939, when all the Czechoslovak institutions of higher learning were closed down for the whole period of World War II, and Zbyněk Žába was able to resume his studies at Charles University only after the liberation in 1945.

Upon returning to his education, however, he began to study Egyptology under Dr. Jaroslav Černý and Professor

František Lexa, founder of Egyptology in Czechoslovakia. Zbyněk Žába graduated from Charles University in 1949, and in the same year, he earned the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Žába's doctoral dissertation *Les Maximes de Ptahhotep*, published as late as 1956, earned him world renown in Egyptian philology. In 1954, he completed a habilitation thesis dealing with some problems of ancient Egyptian astronomy. The thesis, under the title *L'orientation astronomique dans l'ancienne Égypte, et la précession de l'axe du monde*, is regarded as an essential work in Egyptology and is often referred to even today.

In 1956, as Associate Professor of Egyptology at Charles University and the closest collaborator of František Lexa, he took part in a trip of the first Czechoslovak cultural delegation to Egypt, which was to prepare background material for a future Czechoslovak-Egyptian cultural

agreement. He came to realize how useful it would be for Czechoslovak Egyptology if a special Czechoslovak Institute of Egyptology were established right in Cairo. Only this could create suitable conditions for the systematic collecting of original archaeological and written sources in Egypt. In the following period, official negotiations were conducted and a proposal was drafted to found an independent Czechoslovak Institute of Egyptology. In the meantime, Žába returned to Egypt to teach the Czech language at the High School of Languages in Cairo (Heliopolis) in 1957–1959.

Thanks to Žába's immense initiative combined with Lexa's recognized authority, the Czechoslovak Institute of Egyptology of Charles University was founded in October, 1958, in Prague, and in May, 1959, in Cairo. In 1959, Žába was appointed Professor of Egyptology, and after Lexa's death in 1960, he became Director of the Institute. The opening of the Institute marked the beginning of a new stage in the history of Egyptology in Czechoslovakia. Our Egyptology gained a unique opportunity to carry out its own field work in Egypt and to obtain original sources, joining thus the stream of world Egyptology.

In 1960, when the UNESCO Director-General called, at the Egyptian government's request, on all states of the world to help save the cultural heritage of ancient Nubia, threatened by the rising water of the Nile in connection with the construction of the Aswan High Dam, Czechoslovakia was one of the first countries to offer assistance. This was, namely, the participation of the newly founded Czechoslovak Institute of Egyptology in the surveying and documenting of the threatened monuments. In the course of this salvage campaign, the Institute organized five expeditions under Žába's leadership in 1961–1965, during which Czechoslovak Egyptologists carried out archaeological and epigraphical surveys on two large concessions in Lower Nubia, the northern one being located between Kalabsha and Gerf Hussein, the southern one between Wadi es-Sebua and Girgawi. The results were the rediscovery of the Southern Temple of Tafa, the archaeological survey of the Roman fortress at Qertassi, and the uncovering of large tumuli cemeteries from late Roman and early Byzantine periods at Wadi Qitna and Kalabsha-South. Moreover, our expeditions documented hundreds of rock drawings, paintings and inscriptions which shed light on the development of Lower Nubia from prehistory into the Islamic Middle Ages. The rock inscriptions provided the base for Žába's consequential monograph *The Rock Inscriptions of Lower Nubia (Czechoslovak Concession)*, which was published posthumously in 1974.

Other expeditions led by Professor Žába headed for Abusir with the famous pyramid necropolis of the Fifth Dynasty. His expeditions there excavated a very important monument of ancient Egyptian architecture, the largest non-royal tomb of the mastaba type belonging to vizier, chief judge and director of all royal construction works, Ptahshepses, who became son-in-law of King



Fig. 2 Professor Zbyněk Žába at Abusir (photo M. Zemina)

Nyuserre. This unique architecture and archaeological, iconographic and epigraphic finds have provided valuable information on the Egyptian Old Kingdom. Regrettably, Professor Žába failed to compile and publish these numerous finds because of his premature death on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, 1971, at the age of 54.

With immense persistence and admirable energy and patience, Professor Žába devoted himself to the difficult organization of the Institute's work, to pedagogical work, and to publishing and translating activities. Besides foreign-language treatises, he wrote in Czech dozens of popular-science articles and books on history, literature and law of ancient Egypt. He deserves great credit for the founding of the Czech (former Czechoslovak) Institute of Egyptology. Czech Egyptology won world fame and renown thanks to Zbyněk Žába, who was a member of numerous scientific institutions abroad. It is now the task of his followers to maintain its repute in the world, and it should be said that they do so very well.

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Fig. 3 Zbyněk Žába resting during the documentation of finds inside the chapel of Ptahshepses at Abusir (photo M. Zemina)

