Introduction

"How long will archaeologists continue to dig in Egypt?," Egyptophiles tend to ask impatiently.

"Till the end of the world," I answer. And this is no joke. Not because – according to some estimations – the land of the pharaohs is believed to have one third of all the monuments in the world, but rather because the human approach to history is subject to constant change, shifting the very questions that archaeologists ask and are asked.

Many artefacts, which not so long ago seemed to have little historical significance, today are not only an object of intense research but also – as it turns out – have enormous cognitive value. It is no longer merely the lives of rulers that interest us today. For we are willing to better understand our own role in the history of the world, which is why we seek to gain knowledge about how societies and human individuals – as the basic element of this evolution – developed. The first 150 years of the development of Egyptology, from the moment when hieroglyphs were first deciphered and systematic excavations began to be conducted, led archaeological research towards the search for texts, especially those written down on papyrus, and for artworks to enrich museum collections.

The minimal or complete lack of interest in other source materials led to huge, sometimes irreversible losses for the entirety of our knowledge about the ancient world. Modern-day archaeology needs to bridge, at least to some extent, the gaps created by centuries of negligence. One such example could be the huge ancient cemeteries, where the human skeletons were never subjected to anthropological studies, or the very rich ceramic material, from which only vessels preserved fully intact or lavishly decorated were selected for publication. The changes introduced at the turn of the twentieth-first century included such that no archaeological mission conducting excavations in a necropolis can today do research without an anthropologist and a paleozoologist present. A ceramologist has become an essential participant of any excavation, or – increasingly more frequently – a group of ceramologists with various specialisations to correspond to both the richness and diversity of the material.

The conservation of artefacts has become a whole new chapter in this saga. This refers not only to those artefacts that make their way to various museums around the world but also those that remain at the site. For many decades, archaeological missions were least interested in the latter type of artefacts. Rather, they focused on copying texts and documenting the architecture for publication purposes. Some consequences of this were not

only the disintegration of many, sometimes monumental specimens of stone architecture, but also – and above all – the decay of the polychromy on relief and statue surfaces. Sacral architecture today forms a monochromatic landscape consisting of a grey conglomerate of stone blocks but, in reality, it was the richness of colours that cast the most fascinating allure.

Nowadays, a precondition for conducting an excavation are immediate professional conservation activities aimed at preserving the artefacts in the same state in which they were discovered. This is a difficult task since, before conservation is initiated, the material used by the ancient peoples must be subjected to laboratory tests, which determine the selection of a research methods. Thus, experiments that develop conservation as a science are constantly being conducted on the basis of new archaeological discoveries.

Research methods are also dictated by the particular natural conditions. In these terms, sandy Upper Egypt differs radically from the damp earth of the Nile Delta. Most of all, it is much easier to remove sand than to lead a persistent struggle against underground water. Furthermore, artefacts made from organic materials, e.g. papyrus or wood with a polychrome surface, are not preserved at all in wet soil, or at least not in a very good shape. That is why, for many years, archaeological excavations were focused mainly in Upper Egypt, where the layer of dry sand has long functioned as a natural preservative for the artefacts lying beneath. There were only few excavation missions in the Nile Delta. The pioneers included the 1950s archaeological mission directed by Professor Kazimierz Michałowski in Tell Atrib (the ancient Athribis). The scientific significance of the Delta increased once geophysics was introduced, as it turned out to be the best method of distinguishing the walls built from (dried) mud brick from the damp soil surrounding it. For example, thanks to applying this method, the Austrian excavations in Tell el-Daba brought fantastic results.

However, even at those archaeological sites which were the subject of many archaeological expeditions over the course of more than one hundred years, there are huge 'blank spots' that appeared, among other things, as a result of the false conviction about the 'barrenness' of certain areas. These would include a large part of the necropolis of the ancient city of Memphis, located at the head of the Delta, on the western side of the Nile. This land of royal pyramids and mastabas (or the tombs of the noblemen) is today one of the two largest concentrations of excavations in Egypt. The second is the Theban district with its centre on both sides of the Nile in Luxor, a few hundred kilometres south of Memphis. In the middle of the Memphite necropolis, one can find Saqqara, symbolised by the 'step pyramid,' i.e. the oldest Egyptian pyramid, erected by the legendary architect Imhotep, divinised for centuries. Even though excavations took place near this pyramid in the middle of the nineteenth century, considered to be the very beginnings

of science-based archaeology, no one continued the research on the western side of the pyramid, in the spot located south of the famous Serapeum, the underground galleries containing the burials of the holy Apis bulls.

It is precisely in this area where the author of this book directed the Polish and then Polish-Egyptian excavation missions. I was a student of Professor Kazimierz Michałowski, who initiated the "Polish school of Mediterranean archaeology" focused on Egypt in 1937–1939, when he directed the French-Polish excavations in Edfu (Upper Egypt). The experiences gathered by this school, in which the conservation of artefacts played an especially important role, include work done not only in such ancient metropoles as Alexandria, Thebes (Egypt), Faras and Dongola (Sudan), Palmyra (Syria) or Nea Paphos (Cyprus) but also cooperation with international excavation missions in the Nile Valley, such as the English mission in Qasr Ibrim, the German-Swiss mission in Elephantine or the German mission in the Theban necropolis (the Seti I Temple).

This book presents the results of the first twenty years of work done by Polish archaeologists in Saqqara.