



# **European Archaeology Abroad**

*Global Settings, Comparative Perspectives*

edited by:

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***This is a digital offprint from:***

Van der Linde, S.J., M.H. van de Dries, N. Schlanger & C.G. Slappendel (eds) 2012: *European Archaeology Abroad: Global Settings, Comparative Perspectives*. Leiden: Sidestone Press



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Universiteit Leiden



Education and Culture DG

Culture Programme

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Published by Sidestone Press, Leiden

[www.sidestone.com](http://www.sidestone.com)

Sidestone registration number: SSP132010001

ISBN 978-90-8890-106-5

Photographs cover: Archaeological work at Ancient Merv,  
Turkmenistan (Photograph: Justin Barton (flickr: Amen-Ra)).

Cover design: K. Wentink, Sidestone Press

Lay-out: P.C. van Woerdekom, Sidestone Press

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein. The contributors to this publication have done so in their personal capacity. The views and analyses they express here remain their sole responsibility, and do not necessarily reflect or represent those of the publishers, the sponsoring organisations, their institutions or the European Commission.

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## 2.6 THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF POLISH ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES IN FARAS, SUDAN

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### **Abstract**

The archaeological mission at Faras (Northern Sudan), headed by Professor Kazimierz Michałowski, is one of the most recognized and best-known efforts of Polish archaeology abroad. Despite the fact that the site was explored in the 1960s, the outcome is still considered a great success. Most probably, this is the result of large-scale publicity of the activities developed in Poland as well as in the international arena. Considering the fabulous discoveries, it is impossible to disregard their principal scientific inference, bringing to attention the great cultural and archaeological heritage of Sudan.

This paper presents the circumstances related to the excavation work at Faras by researchers from a communist state in Central-Eastern Europe. In particular, the authors shall look into the political and economic situation in the second half of the twentieth century, when the confrontation between two ideological blocks (communism and capitalism) – also known as ‘the Cold War’ – played a particular and infamous role. The unique ways of presenting the research achievements will be discussed, which simultaneously resulted in building up the importance of Polish archaeology abroad in the eyes of the citizens of the People’s Republic of Poland.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the paper highlights the effort that was made to popularize the excavation at Faras and its importance to Polish society at the time of communism. Short references to the contemporaneous situation in Sudan and the importance of the discoveries in the local communities will form complementary issues of this paper.

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1 Eastern European countries governed by communist parties (widely known as ‘the Communist States’) used the term ‘Countries of the People’s Democracy’. Accordingly, Poland was called the *People’s Republic of Poland* or the *Polish People’s Republic*.

## Résumé

### Le contexte socio-politique des découvertes archéologiques polonaises à Faras, Soudan

La mission archéologique à Faras (au Soudan du Nord), présidée par le professeur Kazimierz Michałowski, est un des efforts les plus connus et les plus renommés de l'archéologie polonaise à l'étranger. Malgré le fait que le site avait été exploré dans les années 1960, le résultat est jusqu'à présent considéré comme une grande réussite. Ceci est sans doute grâce à une grande publicité faite en Pologne ainsi que sur la scène internationale, sur ces activités. Vu les fabuleuses découvertes, il est impossible de faire abstraction de leur inférence scientifique principale, attirant l'attention du grand patrimoine culturel et archéologique du Soudan.

Cet article présente les circonstances dans lesquelles les fouilles ont été effectuées à Faras, par des chercheurs d'un État communiste de l'Europe centrale et orientale. Les auteurs vont se pencher notamment sur la situation économique et politique durant la seconde partie du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, quand l'affrontement entre deux blocs idéologiques (le communisme et le capitalisme) – également connu sous le nom de 'guerre froide' - jouait un rôle particulier et bien connu. Les méthodes uniques pour présenter les réalisations en terme de recherche seront discutées, ces méthodes ayant également renforcé l'importance de l'archéologie polonaise à l'étranger dans le regard des citoyens de la République populaire de Pologne.<sup>2</sup> L'article souligne donc l'effort que l'on a fait pour populariser les fouilles à Faras et leur importance pour la société polonaise à l'époque où le communisme régnait. De brèves références à la situation contemporaine au Soudan et à l'importance des découvertes pour les communautés locales, constitueront des questions complémentaires dans cet article.

## Extracto

### El marco sociopolítico de los descubrimientos arqueológicos polacos en Faras, Sudán

La misión arqueológica en Faras (Sudán del Norte), que es dirigida por el catedrático Kazimierz Michalowski, es uno de los esfuerzos más reconocidos y conocidos de la arqueología polaca en el extranjero. Pese al hecho de que el sitio fuera explorado en los años 60, se lo considera todavía un gran éxito. Esto, muy probablemente es el resultado de la publicidad a gran escala de las actividades que se desarrollan en Polonia tanto como en el campo internacional. Si se tienen en cuenta los maravillosos descubrimientos, es imposible ignorar su interferencia científica. Lleva a la atención el gran patrimonio cultural y arqueológico del Sudán.

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2 Des pays d'Europe de l'Est, gouvernés pas des partis communistes (connu généralement sous le nom de 'États communistes') utilisaient le terme 'Pays de la démocratie du peuple'. Par conséquent, la Pologne était appelée la République du peuple de Pologne ou la République du Peuple Polonais (connu en français comme 'la République populaire de Pologne').

Este artículo muestra las circunstancias relacionadas al trabajo de excavación en Faras realizado por investigadores de un estado comunista en Europa Central y Oriental. Los autores analizarán en particular la situación política y económica en la segunda mitad del siglo veinte, cuando la confrontación entre los dos bloques ideológicos (el comunismo y el capitalismo) – también conocida como ‘La Guerra Fría’ – tuvo un papel peculiar e infame. Se discutirán las maneras únicas de presentar los logros de la investigación, que a la vez resultó en la construcción de importancia de la arqueología polaca en el extranjero para los habitantes de la República Popular de Polonia<sup>3</sup>. Por consiguiente el artículo destaca el esfuerzo que se hizo para popularizar la excavación en Faras y su importancia para la sociedad polaca durante la época del comunismo. Referencias breves a la situación contemporánea en Sudán y la importancia de los descubrimientos en las comunidades locales formarán cuestiones complementarias de este artículo.

## ص خ لم

نادوسلا، سرف يف في دنلوبلا في رثال تافاش تكالل في عامتجالا في سايسلا راطللا

ش تي ووميلك ايسيرتابو ش تي ووميلك شوي داكرا

ادنلوب، نازوب، ش تي ووميلك مءا عم اج، خيراتلا لبق ام روصلا ده عم

## ص خ لم

ذاتسأل امسأري يتلا، (نادوسلا لامش) سرف يف في رثال اءعبل ربت عت يف هب فرت عم دوه جم رثا أو يدنلوب يرثا دوه جم رهشأ، فيكس فول الكيم ريمي زيالك ال، نيرش عل نرقلا تاينيتس يف هفاشكتسا مت عقوملا نأ نم مغرل ابو. ج راخلا عم ساو فيا عد ءجي تن ناك اءه نأ حج رال نمو. اري بك احاجن دعت تل از ام جئاننل نأ قبس نلابو. فيلودلا ءحاسلا يلعو ادنلوب يف اهر يوطت مت يتلا عطشنأل قاطنل يذل فيس فيئرلا فيمل عل اهل ادتسا لامه! ليحتسمل نم هن اف، ءعئارلا تافاش تكالل نادوسلا يف عئارلا يرثال او فياقنل اثار تل هابتنل ا تفلي

نم نوءحاب اهب ما سرف يف في تايرفح لم عب ءقل عتمل فورظلا قورولا هءه مدقتو عرضولا نارضا حمل لوان تي س، صاخ لكشبو. ابروأ قرش-طسو يف في عويش ءلود تبعل تي ح، نيرش عل نرقل ينائل فصنل يف في اءصتقال او في سايسلا يتلاو- (في لامسأرل او في عويشلا) ني تي جول و في ديأل ني تل تكلل ني ب ءه ج اومل ناشقان فيس امك. عم سلا في سو اصاخ ارود- ءدرابل برحل اب اضيأ ءفور عم في مل ع فيم هءا نبع تر فسأ يتلا، ءحبلل تازاجن! مي دقتل ءدي رفلل بيل اسأل يف ءي ب عشلل ادنلوب في روه جم في نطاوم رظن يف ج راخلا يف يدنلوبل رائل ل جأ نم لوءبملا دوه حملل عل ع و ضل قورولا في قلت، في اءل ابو. بتقولل سفن ده ع يف يدنلوبل عم ج حملل قبس نلاب اهتيم هءا سرف يف في تايرفحلا ج يورت

3 Los países europeos orientales que fueron gobernados por partidos comunistas (ampliamente conocidos como ‘los Estados Comunistas’), solían usar la expresión ‘los Países de la Democracia Popular’. En consecuencia, Polonia se llamaba la *República Popular de Polonia* o la *República Popular polaca*.

4 عم ساو قاطن عل ع ءفور عم في يتلاو) في عويش بازح امكحت تنك يتلا ابروأ قرش لود تمدختسا ادنلوب تي مس دقف، اءل افسو. ”في ب عشلل في طارق مي دل لود“ حل طصم (”في عويشلا لودل“ لك ”في دنلوبلا في ب عشلل في روه جم لا“، و ”في ب عشلل ادنلوب في روه جم“ ب.

نادوسلا يف نه ارلا عضولا لىل ةري صقلا تاراشال اضعب لكش تسو . ةي عوي شلا  
ةقرولا هذه يف ةيفاضل اياضق ةيل حمل تا عمت حمل ا يف تافاش تاكلال ةيمأو .

## Keywords

*Faras, Polish archaeology abroad, Nubian Salvage Campaign, Kazimierz Michałowski*

## A historical background

The Polish archaeological mission at Faras was carried out as part of the Nubian Salvage Action. This international campaign under the auspices of the UNESCO was a reaction to the appeal of the government of the United Arab Republic of Egypt and of the government of Sudan, to help save the antiquities of ancient Nubia endangered by the construction of the Aswan great reservoir and the High Dam (El-Sadd Al-Ali) on the Middle Nile Valley at Aswan.<sup>5</sup>

At first sight the involvement of Poland in the project of saving the Nubian monuments fitted perfectly into the foreign policy of the Soviet Union, as well as other states of the Warsaw Pact.<sup>6</sup> Circumstances of the post-war world had been mainly shaped by the USSR and the USA, and concerned also spreading their influence on the African continent (Yahya 1989; Kreutz 1999; Borodziej 2005). The quest for a concession to construct the Aswan High Dam in the early 1960s was of considerable importance. Its outcome was to define the direction of development of post-colonial North Africa and determine the scope of domination of one of the two superpowers in the Middle East. The USA as well as the USSR focused their activities on diplomacy and generously granted assurance of long-term economic, engineering and financial aid, which was to tempt the United Arab Republic. As soon as the American government, displeased with the politics promoted by president Gamal Abdel-Nasser, withdrew their declarations of assistance in the financing of the construction of the gigantic dam, the Soviet Union immediately offered its help.<sup>7</sup>

The situation in the international arena seemingly favoured the prospects of developing Polish excavations on the Nile at that juncture. However, the coincidence of the interests of politicians and archaeologists was not the main factor deciding on the participation of Polish researchers in the Nubian project. One must make

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5 The vast reservoir (c. 500 km long) created by taming the Nile at Aswan is variously named. The Sudanese call the southern part 'the Nubian Lake', while the greatest part of the water belongs to the territory of Egypt and is widely known as 'the Nasser Lake'.

6 The Warsaw Treaty was a mutual defence treaty, signed in 1955 by the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, East Germany and Albania. The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, was also commonly known as the Warsaw Pact and from a military point of view it was the socialist counterpart of NATO.

7 The extending Soviet influence on the Middle East was demonstrated by the presence of Russian specialists who built the Aswan Dam and a modern air defence system in Egypt (Daigle 2004). In return for this *support*, thousands of Arab students had the opportunity to complete their cost-free university education in the Eastern European countries (Kreutz 1999).

clear at the start that by the middle of the 1950s, the concept of carrying out archaeological activities outside Poland had been treated as a bourgeois reverie, absolutely not worth spending public money on. Indeed the approach to conduct research in the Middle East was evidently against the 'real patriotic attitude' of the working class, whose labour serves the purpose of constructing the socialist republic between the Bug and Oder rivers. Nevertheless, the sixth decade of the twentieth century brought changes in the issue. At that time Professor Kazimierz Michałowski, the unquestioned precursor of the Polish School of Mediterranean Archaeology, decided to take an advantage of conducive conditions in the international arena and to develop scientific research abroad. From his point of view, the change in the wider political context made it possible to continue his activities, which were interrupted in 1939 and then brutally withheld by the communist regime for over ten years (see also Klimowicz and Klimowicz, this volume).

These unpleasant experiences (*i.e.* the World War II and the Stalinist period) almost certainly affected his further approach that is distinguished by a 'neutral' attitude and avoiding any deep political and ideological engagements. Consequently, one of the golden rules transferred by Michałowski, and strictly maintained in the School, was that involvement with policy had a deleterious influence on the discipline. Taking this into consideration, the major aim was to limit relationships with the communist government to a minimum and to exploit the affairs in a unilateral manner. The most noticeable example of the resilient posture towards the authorities had been demonstrated by clever use of the circumstances that occurred in the 1960s, in order to simplify the complex administrative procedures. Consequently, the argument that the excavation work in the Middle East was a matter of international assistance, supported by the UNESCO and officially approved by the Soviet Union, unquestionably made it easier for the members of the expedition to obtain passports, visas and some funding from the budget of the People's Republic of Poland.

Besides officially representing a country belonging to the Soviet Bloc, the researchers did not get involved in international politics. In this sense the activities of the Polish archaeologists abroad have been considered as 'neutral' from the point of view of the East-West confrontation (Szafranski 2007: 55-56). From the very beginning of the missions on the Nile, the work was nothing but academic research, resulting in great scientific achievements. Additionally, their success was strengthened by the fact that the United Arab Republic, Sudan and several newly constituted states in decolonized Africa were searching for their own identity and preferred to host researchers from countries with which they had never had a colonial past (Michałowski 1974a: 30, 47-48; Hassan 1998: 207-209).

## **The Poles at Faras**

The archaeologists led by Professor Kazimierz Michałowski were amongst the first to actively participate in the International Nubian Programme (Michałowski 1959; Hassan 2007: 81; see also Klimowicz and Klimowicz, this volume). Initially, they were only involved in salvage excavations in Egypt. It was at the end of

1960 that the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology (PCMA) in Cairo was officially invited by the Sudan Antiquities Service to conduct rescue work beyond the second cataract in the Sudanese part of Nubia (Klimowicz and Klimowicz, this volume). Professor Michałowski agreed to expand his archaeological activities to the south in the same campaign, as the Sudanese government offered the very attractive condition that half of the recovered finds would be given to the National Museum in Warsaw. The possibility of obtaining such exquisite exhibits was a decisive argument according to Michałowski, who believed that Polish archaeology could otherwise not afford such excavations for research purposes only. He used to argue that the people of Poland should be able to have direct contact with the real outcome of archaeological work (Michałowski 1974a).

In this context one must realize that Poland has always been at a geographical distance from the great centres of antiquity (Natunewicz 1967: 279-280). Compared with West-European institutions, the financial distance was also noticeable. The difficult economic circumstance of Polish archaeology was caused by a total dependence on public money, gathered and distributed by the 'Polish United Workers' Party'. In this regard, the discipline was still treated as a bourgeois science and it suffered from ongoing under-financing. Therefore, Michałowski realized that the only way to change the general attitude of the officials towards his research abroad was to provide a discovery that would make him an acknowledged authority again.

Having a choice of several sites that were suggested by Jean Vercoutter, the Director of the Sudan Antiquities Service, professor Michałowski chose the concession at Faras, which was a small village destined to become submerged by the rising waters of the Nile. The site was located just on the border with Egypt, north of the second cataract near Wadi Halfa (figure 1). The decision was based on an archaeological inquiry, which had indicated a large soil heap (Great *Kom*), surmounted by ruins of an Arab citadel, and thus a promising site.<sup>8</sup>

A rapid academic and diplomatic effort resulted in the start of the work as early as February 1961 (Michałowski 1974a: 77-78, 1974b: 248). The concession of the Sudanese authorities included an area of 7.5 hectares to be explored by the Polish team (Michałowski 1980; Żurawski 2002: 27). Unfortunately the first season only lasted four weeks, as the PCMA was involved in several projects in Egypt simultaneously and did not have enough funds to continue the research in Sudan. Not only was the financial status of the expedition poor, the team had no car and no local workers were available either. Whoever needed a job had already found employment in American and Scandinavian projects (Michałowski 1974b: 248-250). This was not caused by better social or financial conditions, since the wages for workers was the same in every expedition of the salvage campaign (Jakobielski,

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8 An archive prospection was supported by an in-depth investigation of available files comprising data about previous excavations at Faras. The latter was based mainly on the results of an Oxford expedition between 1910–1912 and conducted by F.L. Griffith (1921). The result of those excavations brought to light 40 sandstone blocks inscribed with the name of Thotmes III (Żurawski 2002: 27-28). However, due to the presence of the modern village of Faras on the slopes of the Great *Kom*, Griffith's team was unable to excavate the mound.

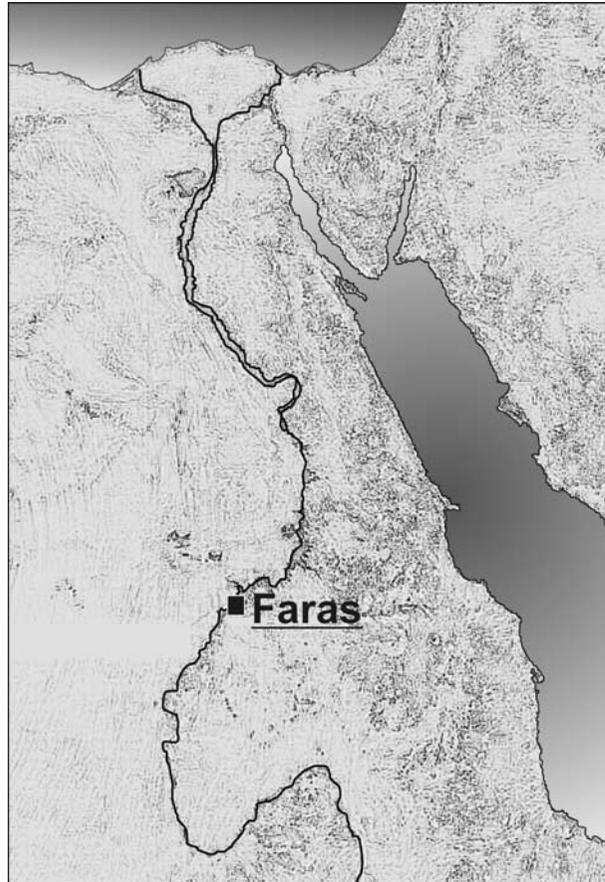


Figure 1. The location of the archaeological site at Faras  
(Illustration: A. Klimowicz).

pers. comm.). Most probably it was caused by a delayed start of the work and a general scepticism that there would be interesting archaeological finds under the mound of sand.

Despite these adversities at the beginning of the expedition, the strategy of conducting a ‘big dig’ soon brought visible results (Żurawski 2002: 28-29). A single large trench, that was meant to reveal the stratigraphy of the site, yielded fragments of a magnificent cathedral that was decorated with frescoes dating back to the Early Christian period (figure 2). Especially two of the discovered mural paintings, Madonna with Child and Archangel Michael in the chapel of Bishop Johannes evoked huge interest, not only among archaeologists but also with the local and international public.

It is important to note that the site of Faras was located in the al-Marīs region, which has been inhabited essentially by Nubians. Most of the workers (*fellabeen*) that were employed during the excavation campaign were *Mahas* (or with a more Arabic sound: *Mahasī*). These inhabitants seem to have occupied the same area,

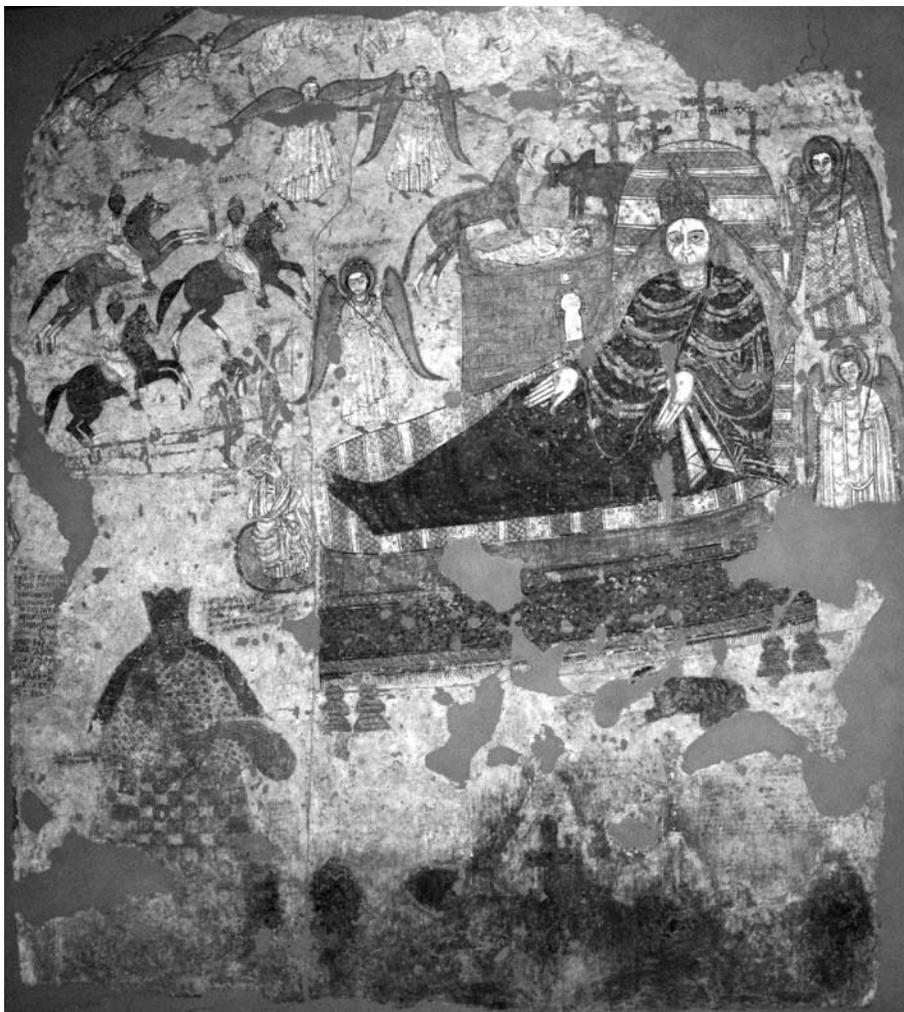


Figure 2. Model of the Faras Cathedral and a complex of associated buildings (Current collection of the National Museum in Warsaw. Photo: P. Klimowicz).

between the second and third cataract, longer than any other Arab tribe (Hasan 2010a: 143-145). They continued to speak a Nubian dialect, maintaining a large body of genealogical traditions. The present form of the (genealogical) traditions indicates a long term of compilation and a high degree of Arabization (Hasan 2010a: 135-136, 2010b: 47-53). However, the *Mahas* were able to trace their ancestors back to a remote period of time. This illustrates the Nubians extraordinary approach to history. It is characterized by a sensitivity to any evidence of the past. Consequently, the contemporary inhabitants (as well as the *fellaheen* in the 1960s) consider the Christian heritage as part of the long-term Nubian identity.

Most probably this sort of perception results from the general pattern of the Islamization that seems to have been a peaceful process (Hasan 2010b: 209). Hence, Christianity is recognized as a relatively lengthy chapter of Sudanese history, which was gradually superseded by the Islamic faith. Taking this into account, it is no wonder that the *Mahas* expressed awareness and devoted much attention to exposing the cathedral at Faras. It thus seems reasonable to say that there was a deeper motive for their involvement other than the frequent astonishing discoveries.

This led eventually to an increased number of workers at the end of the first excavation season, as local people suddenly wanted to work for the Polish mission (Michałowski 1974b: 249). They were probably encouraged by the newspapers that kept readers posted on the results of the excavation and by the Sudan Post, which issued occasional series of stamps with reproductions of discovered murals while the exploration was still in progress (Jakobielski, pers. comm.). The most remarkable fact was that Christian motives appeared on the stamps, such as the



*Figure 3. Mural painting featuring the Nativity of Jesus uncovered in the North Aisle of the Cathedral at Faras. This reproduction was used by the Sudanese National Postal services on its stamps (Current collection of the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum. Photo: A. Chlebowski).*

Nativity of Jesus (figure 3). It was interpreted as the ultimate demonstration of approval of the archaeological achievements, given that Islam was the national religion.

Michałowski demonstrated again his unusual organizational skills when he managed to restart the work at the Great *Kom* in the autumn of the same year (Michałowski 1965: 5). This circumstance is particular worth emphasizing, taking into consideration the troublesome restrictions of the Polish financial system. Unfortunately, he was exceptionally modest in his publications and did not reveal the exact arguments he had used in the negotiations with the regime officials. It is even more difficult to determine the conditions that the authorities proposed

in return for further co-financing the excavations. He did show that he was self-confident. This is best expressed in his article with the telling title 'Chasing the Lost Time' (1974b), in which he described his undisturbed optimism after the end of the first season: "Unfortunately, we ran out of money and all we had to do was break camp and return to Cairo. But at that point I had no doubts that we hit the jackpot and that there would be no problem finding funds for further exploration" (249-250).

During the following four months of work the sand deposits inside and outside the structure were removed, preparing the church for thorough exploration (Michałowski 1974a: 164-165). It was only during the following two expeditions that the monumental foundations of the basilica were uncovered. The find turned out to be one of the finest specimens of Early Christian architecture and art, dating back to the period between the eighth and twelfth century AD (Michałowski 1964: 325).

In the course of four excavation periods at Faras, over 120 brilliantly coloured religious (Coptic-Byzantine) frescoes were discovered in the church and in associated buildings. They were more magnificent in their design and preservation than any other that had been discovered so far in the Middle Nile Valley and they were published in the most renowned newspapers and magazines in the world. The international press headlined the discoveries as 'The Faras Miracle' (Michałowski 1974b: 250; Żurawski 2002: 27). Of all breathtaking frescoes, presenting bishops as well as scenes from the Bible, the portrait of St. Anna quickly became the most



Figure 4. Fragment of fresco featuring Saint Anna (mid eighth century AD), uncovered in the North Aisle of the Cathedral at Faras. The mural painting is known also as 'Mona Lisa from Faras' (Current collection of the National Museum in Warsaw. Photo: P. Klimowicz).

recognizable symbol of the Polish expedition at Faras (figure 4). People from all over the world were enchanted by the charm of this portrait, that was painted on the wall of the basilica in the middle of the eighth century AD. The mural was so admirable that it soon was called the ‘Mona Lisa from Faras’ (Michałowski 1966: 198).

The results of the work became widely recognized, also by the international scientific community, as the most prominent discovery of Polish Mediterranean Archaeology. The international research authorities that were participating in the Nubian salvage campaign also expressed their admiration for the sensational discoveries near Wadi Halfa. They used to say that “the Poles hit the jackpot in the Nubian lottery” (Michałowski 1983: 63). In addition, the inscriptions in Greek, Old-Nubian and Coptic that were discovered inside the cathedral constituted a tremendous contribution to the history of Nubia (Jakobielski 1986: 90). Especially the so-called ‘Bishops’ List’ was of great importance for determining the historical chronology. It contains the names of the 28 bishops of the old *Pachoras* from the beginning of the capital city until the end of the twelfth century (Jakobielski 1986). The tombs of bishops, a monastery, an Eparchs’ palace and a sixth century church that were found beneath the ruins of the cathedral, also helped to extend the chronology of the religious tradition.



Figure 5. Mural painting featuring the Archangel Michael with Three Youths, uncovered in Bishop Johannes’s chapel at Faras (Current collection of the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum. Photo: A. Chlebowski).

When people referred to the world famous excavations, no word of praise was too much to honour the interdisciplinary team, which was working under tremendous time pressure, as all the relics had to be properly recorded and removed before the water of the vast artificial Nile reservoir would sweep them away (Emery 1965: 98). The hectic situation is illustrated by the fact that the fourth and last excavation season (1964) was completed only four months before the site was flooded. In this context, the term ‘rescue archaeology’ seems all too meaningful.

As a result of this institutionalized sharing of monuments by the Sudan Antiquities Service, they retained 37 frescoes, including the two largest (the Nativity and the Archangel Michael with Three Youths, see figure 5). The remaining 62 paintings and various other unique objects (*i.e.* ceramics, bronze artefacts, stone sculptures, decorative architectural elements, and fragments of textiles) became part of the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw (Michałowski 1964: 328, 1966: 198, 1974a: 172; Jeżewska 1966: 110; Żurawski 2002: 30-31).

### **Public and scientific reverberations of Faras in communist Poland**

Although the monuments arrived in Poland in 1964, they were not presented to the public until two years later, as time-consuming conservation work had to be done to save the priceless frescoes. In 1966 a temporary exhibition of the world-famous mural paintings was opened in the National Museum in Warsaw (Michałowski 1966: 198-208). A few years later the Sudanese part of the collection was also displayed in Khartoum.

With regard to post-excavation work, due to a lack of specialists from Sudan, mainly Polish experts were responsible for the conservation, analysis and interpretation of both assemblages. For instance, the restorers worked simultaneously in the two countries. In Khartoum they were supervised by H. Jędrzejewska, whereas J. Gazy managed the renovation in Warsaw. Apart from the restorers, multiple other Polish professionals and students contributed substantially to the multidimensional elaboration of the data (Jakobielski 1972; Kubińska 1974; Godlewski 1979; Karkowski 1981; Martens-Czarnecka 1982; Dzierżykray-Rogalski 1985).

When discussing the question of popularization by the media, one must not overlook the fact that there was no private television in communist Poland, nor was there any private radio station or independent press. Any programme published by the state-owned stations and agencies was carefully planned or rather watchfully censored (Lech 1998).<sup>9</sup> This pertained especially to news from the world at the other side of the ‘the Iron Curtain’.

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9 ‘The Central Office for Control the Press, Publications and Public Performances’ operated in Poland until 1989 as an official censorship institution restricting the freedom of speech within the state-owned broadcast stations and press agencies.

The huge interest of the public in the 'miracle of Faras' did not escape the notice of the authorities. They could have treated the apparent sacral nature of the discoveries as inappropriate in terms of communistic ideology. Religion used to be treated in contemporaneous Poland as 'opium for the people', and to the communist regime, the major religious institution in the country (the Roman Catholic Church) was nothing but the enemy, 'influenced and subsidized by imperialist states' (Natunewicz 1967: 280-281).

Nevertheless, it appeared that the international publicity, initiated by Michałowski, could not be easily denied or restricted in Poland, mainly due to the world-wide recognition of Faras and the authority Michałowski had gained. His wisdom, eloquence and persuasive power made the government regard the excavation of an Early Christian Cathedral as the greatest achievement of the Polish researchers and worth subsidizing. In this situation there was nothing left for the cultural policy officials but to formally assume a supporting attitude towards archaeological activities abroad. It was in fact the last chance to turn Michałowski's triumph to their advantage and to demonstrate the political correctness of the communist state, tolerating inimical ideologies (Jakobielski, pers.comm.).

Judging by the number of realized audio-video productions and articles published in the press, the regime authorities most probably believed that the publicity regarding the spectacular results of the Polish archaeologists did not pose any threat to the *socio-cultural order* of the Party. Looking back, one may say that the contemporaneous society witnessed a hitherto unparalleled large-scale and well-organized information action which was to promote the activity of the Polish research in Nubia.

The monographs (Michałowski 1962, 1965), as well as the numerous academic papers on Faras, were probably read only by a small circle of those archaeologists interested in the subject. The most important role in popularizing the Polish achievements during the UNESCO operation of safeguarding the Nubian monuments was played by journalists. One of them was Kazimierz Dziewanowski (1965), who actively participated in the excavations at Faras in 1963 and vividly described the efforts of archaeologists saving the endangered monuments in his book *'Archangels and Jackals. A Report From Before the Flood'*. Another popular-scientific work worth noticing is *'At the Limits of Time'*, by Zofia Jeżewska (1966). She was a reporter of the Polish Radio, accredited to archaeological missions during the Nubian Campaign. Based on her voyage to the Middle East she wrote a diary-style book with personal reflections and memories of the time she spent at Faras. Also remarkable was the documentary film made in 1965 by Aleksandra Jaskólska, *'The Frescoes of Faras'*.<sup>10</sup> It presented the history of saving the unique collection of murals from the lost Christian Kingdom of Nubia.

Faras reached its peak of popularity in Poland at the beginning of the 1970s. At that time many actions were taken to present the Nubian treasures to society. For instance, the Polish Post issued in April 1971 a limited series of stamps and postcards featuring the frescoes from Faras (figure 6).

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10 The original Polish title is *'Freski z Faras'*.



Should be "Figure 6. Limited series of stamps featuring the frescoes discovered at Faras. The collection was issued by the Polish Post in April 1971, to promote Polish archaeological achievements (Photo: Polish Post).

But the most important event for the popularization of Polish archaeology abroad took place in 1972. At that time, the Nubian Art Gallery was officially opened in the National Museum in Warsaw, as an accompanying event of the Second Nubiological Conference. Apart from the opening ceremony, the primarily goal of the meeting was to strengthen mutual scientific relationships, in order to expand the knowledge and discuss issues associated with the results of the archaeological work that was carried out during the salvage campaign of 1960-1967. This led to the establishment of the International Society for Nubian Studies (ISNS), which gathered prominent scholars from all over the world. They soon realized that the scope of interests required a new field within the framework of oriental studies (Jakobielski 1986: 90; Żurawski 2002: 31). In this regard, the advent of Nubiology as a separate discipline can be seen as a result of the need to undertake elaborate research in the art and archaeology of the Meroitic and Christian civilizations that flourished from the third until the fourteenth/fifteenth century AD in the current territory of Northern Sudan and Southern Egypt. Due to a substantial contribution of Polish archaeologists to the subject and to the world's largest permanent exhibition of Nubian art, Warsaw was *the* centre of Nubian studies at that time (Michałowski 1983: 64).

The next stage in publishing the achievements of the Polish archaeologists was Michałowski's book *'From Edfu to Faras'* (1974a), a collection of plainly written memoirs referring to the sites in Egypt and Sudan presenting the subsequent stages

of development of the Polish School of Mediterranean Archaeology. Faras occupies a special place in the author's reflections. For him the excavations at Great *Kom* were a great challenge and its sensational results would become the PCMA's showpiece (Michałowski 1974a, 1980). A year later, another noteworthy documentary was made, by Tomasz Pobóg-Malinowski ('*The Frescoes of Faras*'). It was the final chord of the unsurpassed popularization action of the excavation results.

During that period the press, radio and television devoted relatively much time to promote the contribution of the Polish researchers to the rescue of the heritage of Nubia. The contemporaneous Polish society, which was experiencing the ups and down of the centrally planned economy, desperately wanted news from a world that was free of rigorously rationed products and goods. Unfortunately, the prospect of complex passport procedures limited, if not completely eliminated, the possibilities of travelling for the average Polish citizen. This might have been one of the reasons why the general public was so interested in the information from the Middle Valley of the Nile, which transported the reader or viewer to a world full of mysteries, exotics and the Middle Eastern sun. The discoveries not only brought interested recipients closer to an unknown attractive region, they also expanded their cultural and educational horizons. The archaeological activities abroad stimulated a cosmopolitan attitude.

### **Political circumstances accompanying the excavations at Faras**

The relationships between the 'Countries of the People's Democracy' were a complex matter (Milisauskas 1998: 223). For instance the People's Republic of Poland (PRP), as the second state of 'the Eastern Bloc' in regard to size, was totally dependent on the USSR concerning diplomacy and relationships with the outside world. This subordination was demonstrated in the foreign policy of the PRP, which totally corresponded with the Soviet Union's standpoint (Borodziej 2005: 15-17). This reliance counted on taking the same position as Moscow and on conducting negotiations with other nations along with the Soviet approach of extending the sphere of influence. The contacts of the Polish with the Middle Eastern and Near Eastern states were considered as strategic and of utmost importance.<sup>11</sup>

In the light of the political situation of the early 1960s, Michałowski deserves recognition and respect as the organizer of great archaeological missions abroad. He had the unusual skill of coping with adverse situations and to maintain a balance between scientific concerns and political involvement. He took the opportunity to improve the relationship between Middle Eastern and Soviet

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11 The amicable relationship of Egypt, under the presidency of Nasser, with the Soviet Union came to an end with the presidency of Anwar al-Sadat (1970-1981). Consequently, in 1972 all Soviet experts and military advisors as well as some diplomats from Eastern Bloc Countries were expelled from Egypt in an insulting way (Saliba 1975; Daigle 2004). In addition, Eastern archaeological institutions and research centres that reported to Ministries of Foreign Affairs (e.g. from Czechoslovakia and Hungary) were temporarily closed (Jakobielski 2001). The expulsion of the Soviet personnel emphasized the new Egyptian direction and an inclination towards the United States.

Bloc states in order to continue the research and to develop the Polish School of Mediterranean Archaeology, which was of utmost importance to him. Thanks to his charismatic personality, he could convince the communist authorities to increase the funds for the research at Faras. One must not forget that after World War II, the Polish communist government accomplished a Soviet-like economic regime of nationalization and expropriation of private property (Lech 1998) and of a centralized industry and business in the hands of the ruling party ('the Polish United Workers' Party'). This made the government the one and only depositor of funds and the exclusive funder of archaeological research. A private sector was missing.

Moreover, if researchers were planning to carry out archaeological digs abroad, they had to find a way to organize the so-called 'hard currency'. However, legal access to a reliable and stable currency (*i.e.* US Dollars) required a lot of effort and industriousness in the People's Republic of Poland. The main reason was that the exchange rate regime was entirely controlled by the centrally planned economy in an attempt to limit the internal circulation of foreign currencies. In practice it meant that scientific institutions, like universities, were only allowed to deposit foreign currency in the state-owned bank and the money could only be used during authorized (by the government) travel abroad.

The strict control of the internal circulation of foreign currencies within Poland implied that the budget of all archaeological activities that were carried out abroad, had to be deposited in a special bank account with the Ministry of Finance. This simplified the process of authorized exchange and of receiving money (Jakobielski 2001).

The forceful insertion of the Marxist-Leninist dogma into scientific writings was another academic reality of the communist time in Poland (Lech 1998; Milisauskas 1998). A reinterpretation of history in the spirit of Marxism and *materialism* was more than welcomed. It was also widely known among the authors that references to *class distinction* and *frictions* were sometimes necessary if government subsidies for academic projects were to be received. However, the total amount of ideologically motivated interpretations in archaeology is relatively small. There were very few dedicated Marxists among the Polish scholars in the Humanities, and only a minority (15%) had an official Polish United Workers' Party affiliation (Natunewicz 1967: 280; Milisauskas 1998: 226).

It is noticeable that none of the different types of publications that dealt with the discoveries at Faras promoted communist theory. The fact that the activity of the Polish mission was scientific in nature is owed to professor Michałowski. Thanks to him the entire Nubian salvage programme as well as further activities were not involved with politics, not during the excavations nor in any writings that followed (see also Klimowicz and Klimowicz, this volume).

## Conclusion

The aim of this brief historical background is to present the external conditions under which Polish archaeological projects were conducted in the Middle East. The domestic restrictions of the strict communist administration greatly influenced researches outside the country. The general diplomatic policy of the People's Republic of Poland fulfilled a task given by the Soviet Union. In spite of persistent attempts by the communist authorities to convert the Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology into a cultural institution subordinated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the PCMA successfully sustained its academic position (Jakobielski 2001). It could develop its studies without serious turbulences. The seemingly unpleasant conditions constituted incomparable vivid scientific activity in Northern Sudan. Faras became the focal point of the presence of Polish archaeology abroad, both in the eyes of the home country and in the international arena. The autonomous attitude of the PCMA and Polish School of Mediterranean Archaeology also has had remarkable meaning in the context of the permanently altering socio-political configurations during the twentieth century. In particular the East-West confrontation shows how policy could have a deleterious influence on science, especially on research abroad.

In a social sense, the beginning of the Nubian salvage campaign marked an increased popularity of the discipline among the general public. It cannot be measured in figures of course, but the integrated activities using a wide range of opinion-making media clearly affected the fascination with archaeology.

Also remarkable is the exchange of students and experts between Sudan and Poland, that could take place for over 40 years (see also note 4). The main objective was to alter the lack of Sudanese professionals, which had been noticed already during the Nubian salvage campaign. As a consequence, many of the inspectors employed in the Sudan Antiquities Service today still identify themselves with the Polish scholarship (Szafranski 2007: 53). Their presence and full credit studies in Poland surely strengthened the relationship between the countries. In recognition of professor Michałowski's merits in saving the Nubian monuments, the government of Sudan even decided to create favourable conditions for Polish archaeologists, allowing them to continue their work at Old Dongola, the former capital of the ancient united Christian Nubian Kingdoms (Michałowski 1983).

Presently, the scientific community still considers Faras as one of the most significant *milestones* in the development of Polish archaeology abroad (Szafranski 2007). The unique collection of murals remains a widely recognized symbol of professor Michałowski's legacy (Żurawski 2002: 32). A miniature of the 'Mona Lisa of Faras' became a graphic sign, promoting the National Museum in Warsaw. Her portrait is featured on the tickets allowing entrance to the Nubian Art Gallery where the magnificent original is on permanent display.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to express our honest gratitude to dr Stefan Jakobielski for his generous scientific merit as well as for sharing his memories with us. We would also like to thank Arkadiusz Marciniak for his support and Sarunas Milisauskas for the series of conversations about his experiences during communist Poland. We are extremely grateful for the assistance and help in preparing the text for print to Sjoerd van der Linde, Corijanne Slappendel, Monique van den Dries and Nina Schücker, as well as to all scholars who participated in the Archaeology Abroad Project.

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