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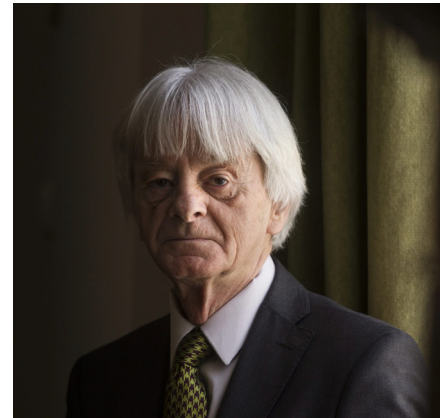
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OBITUARY



László Török (1941–2020)

In spring 2005, I received an invitation to attend a guided tour organised for the staff of the Institute of Archaeology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in the Museum of Fine Arts' temporary exhibition "After the Pharaohs: Treasures of Coptic Art from Egyptian Collections". My inviter duly stressed the uniqueness of the event, for the guide, as he emphasised, would be none other than the exhibition's curator, László Török, a major expert on "Coptic" art and archaeology, a field of research he had then been actively engaged in for the past 35 years. "You will meet an outstanding scholar", he added. Needless to



say, it took me long years to acquire the knowledge needed for the genuine appreciation of the brilliance of Török's mind. Yet, despite my obvious intellectual unpreparedness at the time to perceive the depth of his erudition and the quality of his scholarly achievement, his softly spoken words, his charm, his dignity and his elegance made a deep and lasting impression on me. The passing of time and my own intellectual maturing opened my eyes to discover, appreciate, and understand how scholarly quality and high moral principles were intertwined in his figure.

Although he was born during the Second World War and the greater part of his childhood fell into the immediate post-war years, László Török was to a large extent a child of pre-war Hungarian society due to his family background and upbringing. While he strongly condemned the political oppression, social injustice, and moral flaws of pre-war Hungary, his attitudes and lofty moral standing was strongly rooted in late nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century genteel, *bürgerlich* mentality, and he was openly nostalgic for the high culture of those times as well as the lifestyle and ideals of the erudite upper middle class.

His affection and enthusiasm for arts and culture was rooted in his upbringing, which from early on directed his interest towards art history. However, born into a family stigmatised as representing the "class enemy" in the Hungary of the late 1950s and early 1960s, his chances of enrolling in the Department of Art History were low to non-existent. As he later recalled, studying architecture was the means that provided him with the opportunity of attending a university and graduating, because family background mattered less in that field, while the courses on the history of architecture, as he realised during his first university year, satisfied his personal interest in art history. His growing expertise in these twin disciplines finally led him to a third one, namely archaeology, which later opened the way to other fields of scholarship engaged in the exploration of the past. As he repeatedly emphasised, his long career was shaped by fateful coincidences, but, as he also often professed, "we all have our own personal coincidences".¹ One of these unexpected events occurred at the time of his graduation from the Faculty of Architecture. Despite the intention of his professor of architectural history to employ Török as his assistant lecturer, he was not allowed to keep him at his department, and he therefore called the attention of László Gerevich (1911–1997), then director of the Archaeological Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, to his talented young student.

In the earlier 1960s, Gerevich was engaged in the publication of the results of the large-scale excavations conducted in the broader area of the medieval royal palace of Buda and in preparing the archaeological exploration of the Cistercian monastery at Pilis (conducted between 1967 and 1982). Unsurprisingly, the involvement of a young architect in these projects appealed to Gerevich. Therefore, in 1964, he offered a job to the freshly graduated Török in the Archaeological Research Group, later reorganised under the aegis of the

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¹ „Mindent mindig újra kell gondolni”. Gréczi Enikő beszélgetése Török Lászlóval [“One should always rethink everything”. An interview with László Török by Enikő Gréczi]. *MúzeumCafé* 40/2 (2014) 108–113.

Hungarian Academy of Sciences as an independent Institute of Archaeology, which remained Török's home institution for the rest of his more than half-a-century-long scholarly career, up to his death. However, despite the promising beginnings, the collaboration between Gerevich and him turned out to be neither long-standing, nor prosperous. The young scholar did not find intellectual pleasure in the tasks assigned to him, while his director did not support his research into early Árpáadian-age sculpted stone ornaments with palmette decoration, the self-chosen topic for Török's doctoral dissertation,² because Gerevich himself entertained plans for writing up that sculpture group, too. Given the sour relations between them, Török even handed in his resignation. This was the moment when László Castiglione (1927–1984), classical archaeologist and then deputy director of the institute, stepped in and offered a way out of the unpleasant situation by inviting Török to join him in forming a team specialising in classical archaeology.

This, again, turned out to be another of his "own personal coincidences". Castiglione, a specialist of the history of Roman-period religious life in Egypt, organiser and head of the Archaeological Research Group's salvage excavation within the framework of the UNESCO's initiative prior to the construction of the Aswan Dam in 1964, suggested that Török make a research trip to Egypt. With Castiglione's support, he was granted the chance of spending a longer period of time in Cairo and Alexandria in 1967.

As he frequently recalled, Egypt's late antique art, generally, although erroneously, labelled as Coptic, had actually piqued his interest by what was not known about it in the later 1960s. As he later said, "It annoyed me that I did not properly understand the late antique sculpture I was looking at while strolling in the Coptic Museum in Cairo". In fact, he regarded this feeling of irritation and annoyance, which regularly preyed on his mind when encountering misunderstood masterpieces, artworks, and artistic and historical periods as one of the recurring key elements of his scholarly method and habitus. This gave him the decisive impetus to immerse himself in the literature available in the 1960s on "Coptic art", and, after realising the many pitfalls and deficiencies of the then current interpretations, to revisit some major points of the chronology and Mediterranean background of late antique Egyptian stone sculpture.³ After returning from Egypt, he was also invited to participate in the publication of the late antique and early medieval Nubian village excavated at Abdallah Nirqi by the Hungarian team in 1964.⁴ From

these decisive moments onward, research into late antique Egyptian art and the history, archaeology, and culture of Nubia became inseparable from his person throughout his entire life.

At the very beginning of the 1970s, again thanks to his knowledge of architecture, he had the chance to participate in a project launched and led by Professor Fritz Hintze (1915–1993), an outstanding pioneer of Nubian studies, and thereby to be trained in an important centre of the then nascent Nubian studies in the *Bereich Ägyptologie und Sudanarchäologie* at the *Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*. He not only cherished extremely fond memories of this period, which had a decisive impact on his future career,⁵ but the long months spent in Berlin also resulted in the chronological expansion of his research interest as he immersed himself ever deeper in the history and archaeology of Nubia. His commitment to late antique times never ceased, that age remained one of the focal points of his Nubian research, too, but armed with the knowledge acquired in Berlin, he began to engage himself in investigations into earlier periods of ancient Nubia. Back from Berlin, he studied Coptology with László Kákósy (1932–2003) at the Department of Egyptology of the Eötvös Loránd University, where later he started to share his knowledge with university student through courses given by him.

His early commitment to Nubian studies opened up a way, which was the privilege of very few in the last third of the twentieth century: he could play a pioneering role in laying the foundations of a dynamically emerging new discipline. From the early 1970s onward, he dedicated a long series of papers and monographs to the exploration of several key topics of ancient Nubian history, society, and material and spiritual culture. One central element of his chosen scholarly methodology was the synoptic analysis of the historical and archaeological record. His lifelong passionate fascination with art and art history enabled him to look at and evaluate archaeological finds through the eye of an art historian, the results of which were then presented to his readers embedded in the widest possible historical and cultural framework. Besides his talent to transform the material record of past societies into vivid sources speaking of historical and cultural phenomena, his admirable skill for synthesising the findings of various disciplines into a single coherent image always served as a source of inspiration for starting new investigations of comprehensive topics.

The fruits of the one-and-a-half- to two-decades-long intense work following his first visit to Egypt and the countless research papers devoted to different subjects in its wake eventually materialised in a truly impressive series of monographs and monography-long studies on the major historical periods of first-millennium BC and AD Nubia from the later 1980s, with a new English and German book appearing every one or two years. Within a decade,

²L. TÖRÖK: XI. századi palmettás faragványaink és a szekszárdi vállkő (The XIth century carved stones with palmette decoration and the chamfer from Szekszárd). *BÁMÉ* 1 (1970) 96–154.

³L. TÖRÖK: On the chronology of the Ahnas sculpture. *ActaArchHung* 22 (1970) 163–182.

⁴For the site's publication, including Török's contributions, see the collected papers re-published in L. CASTIGLIONE–L. BARKÓCZI–Á. SALAMON–GY. HAJNÓCZI–L. KÁKÓSY–L. TÖRÖK: *Abdallah Nirqi 1964: The Hungarian Excavation in Egyptian Nubia*. Budapest 1979.

⁵L. TÖRÖK: Kinship and decorum: (Re-)constructing the Meroitic élite. *Der Antike Sudan* 13 (2002) 60–84, here 60.



independent volumes were dedicated to the centuries traditionally labelled as Napatan and Meroitic periods in Nubian studies,⁶ as well as to the history and archaeology of Nubian Late Antiquity.⁷ Further separate monographs covered the questions of the Nubian myth of the state and royal ideology.⁸ Neither did he abandon the problems of late antique Egyptian art, which played a crucial role in riveting his attention to the rich cultural heritage of the Nile Valley. His affection for late antique sculpture persisted,⁹ but his coverage was significantly extended when publishing in two volumes the “Coptic antiquities” kept in Hungarian museum collections, principally in the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. He also undertook the task of making the museum’s Hellenistic and Roman terracottas from Egypt available to the scholarly community, and he was more than happy to dedicate a separate book to a late antique Egyptian sculpted stone ornament then recently acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts.¹⁰

He was genuinely committed to supplying his discipline, still relatively young in the last decades of the second millennium as compared to many other branches of ancient studies, with the fundamental handbooks necessary for making significant advances in the field. This led him to join to the research group established in Bergen with the aim of collecting, editing, and publishing the original texts on Nubian history written in different ancient languages alongside their English translation. To this monumental enterprise, making available for the first time all the then known ancient texts on almost one and a half millennia of Nubian history, Török contributed by gathering and writing commentaries on select

documents and passages.¹¹ Another major task he gladly undertook was the publication of the results of the archaeological excavation conducted in the early twentieth century in Meroe City, one of the capitals of the Meroitic Kingdom, whereby he opened an important window on the material culture of a Nubian royal centre, long invisible in the lack of a proper final report of the site.¹² As an outcome of his intense work exploring the history and culture of ancient Nubia, in the 1990s he was invited to author a handbook on the region’s politics for the renowned series *Handbuch der Orientalistik*.¹³

Crowning his dedicated research into late antique Egyptian art was the opportunity, favoured also by a fortunate cultural climate, to present his research findings for the art-loving public of his native Hungary at an exhibition. While making the necessary preparations for this major show, held in 2005 under the title “After the Pharaohs”, he wrote an analytical exhibition catalogue as well as a separate volume in which he summarised the results of his decades-long inquiries into third- to seventh-century Egyptian art in a monographic format, written and published as a quasi “by-product” of his research for the exhibition. As another “by-product”, a small book was devoted to the publication of late antique textiles kept in Hungarian private collections.¹⁴

Returning to his Nubiologist self, his attention in the years of the 2000s was again more intensely focused on gaining a better understanding of the true nature of the cultural contacts between ancient Nubia and Egypt. In order to explore the dynamics of these cultural phenomena in the *longue durée*, he set out to trace the process of cultural interactions through more than four millennia, between 3700 BC and 500 AD.¹⁵ Then, reverting to an analysis of the finer details, he devoted a further monograph to the examination of Hellenistic art in Nubia by scrutinising in detail both its Alexandrian roots and the process of adaptation in the Nubian realm.¹⁶

⁶L. TÖRÖK: Der meroitische Staat. 1.: Untersuchungen und Urkunden zur Geschichte des Sudan im Altertum. Meroitica 9. Berlin 1986; L. TÖRÖK: Geschichte Meroes. Ein Beitrag über die Quellenlage und den Forschungsstand. In: Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt. II.: Principat. 10.: Politische Geschichte (Provinzen und Randvölker: Afrika mit Ägypten). Hrsg.: W. Haase, H. Temporini. Berlin 1988, 107–341; L. TÖRÖK: Meroe: Six Studies on the Cultural Identity of an Ancient African State. *Studia Aegyptiaca* 16. Budapest 1995.

⁷L. TÖRÖK: Late Antique Nubia: History and Archaeology of the Southern Neighbour of Egypt in the 4th–6th c. A.D. *Antaeus* 16. Budapest 1988.

⁸L. TÖRÖK: The Royal Crowns of Kush: A Study in Middle Nile Valley Regalia and Iconography in the 1st Millennium B.C. and A.D. *Cambridge monographs in African archaeology* 18. BAR IntSer 338. Oxford 1987; L. TÖRÖK: The Birth of an Ancient African Kingdom: Kush and Her Myth of the State in the First Millennium BC. *Cahier de recherches de l’Institut de papyrologie et d’égyptologie de Lille (CRIPELS). Supplément* 4. Lille 1995.

⁹L. TÖRÖK: Notes on the chronology of late antique stone sculpture in Egypt. In: *Coptic Studies: Acts of the Third International Congress of Coptic Studies*, Warsaw, 20–25 August, 1984. Ed.: W. Godlewski. Warsaw 1990, 437–484.

¹⁰L. TÖRÖK: *Coptic Antiquities. I–II. Bibliotheca archaeologica (Roma) 12. Monumenta antiquitatis extra fines Hungariae reperta* 2–3. Roma 1993; L. TÖRÖK: *Hellenistic and Roman Terracottas from Egypt. Bibliotheca archaeologica (Roma) 15. Monumenta antiquitatis extra fines Hungariae reperta* 4. Roma 1995; L. TÖRÖK: *The Hunting Centaur – A Monument of Egyptian Hellenism from the Fourth Century AD in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest = A vadászó kentaur – Az egyiptomi hellénizmus 4. századi emléke a budapesti Szépművészeti Múzeumban. Kentaur = Centaur* [1]. Budapest 1998.

¹¹T. EIDE–T. HÄGG–R. H. PIERCE–L. TÖRÖK: *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum. Textual Sources for the History of the Middle Nile Region between the Eighth Century BC and the Sixth Century AD. I–IV. Bergen 1994–2000.*

¹²L. TÖRÖK: *Meroe City, An Ancient African Capital. John Garstang’s Excavations in the Sudan. Occasional publications (Egypt Exploration Society) 12. London 1997.*

¹³L. TÖRÖK: *The Kingdom of Kush: Handbook of the Napatan-Meroitic Civilization. Handbuch der Orientalistik. 1. Abt.: Nahe und der Mittlere Osten* 31. Leiden–Boston 1997.

¹⁴L. TÖRÖK: *After the Pharaohs: Treasures of Coptic Art from Egyptian Collections. (Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 18 March–18 May 2005.) Budapest 2005; L. TÖRÖK: *Transfigurations of Hellenism: Aspects of Late Antique Art in Egypt AD 250–700. Probleme der Ägyptologie* 23. Leiden–Boston 2005; L. TÖRÖK: *Kopt textilek: Válogatás magyarországi magángyűjteményekből = Coptic Textiles from Hungarian Private Collections. Budapest 2005.**

¹⁵L. TÖRÖK: *Between Two Worlds. The Frontier Region between Ancient Nubia and Egypt 3700 BC–500 AD. Probleme der Ägyptologie* 29. Leiden–Boston 2009.

¹⁶L. TÖRÖK: *Hellenizing Art in Ancient Nubia 300 BC–AD 250 and its Egyptian Models: A Study in “Acculturation”. Culture and history of the ancient Near East* 53. Leiden–Boston 2011.



The series of monographic studies presenting inquiries into the phenomena of cultural adaptation and adoption¹⁷ illuminate two key features of Török's scholarly oeuvre, organically built over half a century, and his brilliant erudite mind in its background. Firstly, as he himself repeatedly emphasised, he never considered to have provided *the* final and conclusive solution to a scholarly problem with the publication of his studies on the subject. Just to the contrary: with the emergence of new pieces of evidence or suggestions, he willingly returned to the topic time and again to propose new, more accurate explanations and to revise, if need be, his own views, thereby offering more detailed and compelling interpretations. To maintain his freshness of mind, he never ceased to keep abreast of the latest results and novel approaches in the many-faceted field of ancient studies, whereby he would be able to refine his own research methodology and analyses. One particularly eloquent illustration of this habitus is his re-analysis of Herodotus's description of Nubia, to which he returned some two decades after penning his commentaries on the same account for *Fontes Nubiorum*, in order to explore the Greek historiographer's data, now armed with a new and more sophisticated research methodology.¹⁸ The same perpetually renewed scholarly attitude is mirrored in one of his latest books, written with the aim of refining the chronological periodisation of ancient Nubian history, traditionally divided into a Napatan and a Meroitic phase, thereby once again revisiting a topic which he had scrutinised from different angles in several papers and monographs from the 1970s onward.¹⁹

Secondly, he was fully convinced that if we as modern scholars are unable to discover the originality and creativity as well as an inherent aspiration for self-expression in the deeds and material products of past societies, this does not bespeak the lack of those qualities in past peoples, but is rather a clear indication of the limits of our modern understandings and approaches, which are thus in a serious need of renewal. This attitude urged him to address time and again the same problems from different angles, which led to the exploration of several key aspects of the history and culture of ancient Nubia with the ultimate aim of reaching a fuller understanding of the Nubian mind. The same conviction was in the background of his half-a-century-long struggle for re-integrating "Coptic art" into its original Mediterranean setting. And last, but by no means least, this inspired him to author a monograph, regrettably uncompleted, on the Hellenistic art of Alexandria, of which merely the Hungarian summary of a single chapter with the masterful and innovative analysis of the Petosiris Tomb in

the Tuna el-Gebel necropolis was published in his lifetime.²⁰

In recognition of his pioneering scholarly achievements, he was honoured and distinguished with several prizes (e.g. Marót Károly Prize [1986], Ipolyi Arnold Prize [2007], Széchenyi Prize [2015]), research grants, memberships in various committees, and guest lecturer positions. He was elected, among others, foreign member of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters (1995), honorary doctor of the University of Bergen (2000), and first corresponding (2004), then full member (2010) of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. From 2014 onward, he served as the head of both the Seuso Work Committee and the Seuso Research Project, established to coordinate and direct the scientific examination of the Seuso Treasure, claimed back by Hungary in two stages in 2014 and 2017. But more than all these offices, the true reflection of the high esteem in which he was held and the admiration towards him could be felt after the talks he gave as well as from the letters I was personally privileged to receive as one of the editors of the honorary volume dedicated to him on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday.

Throughout his long career, the Institute of Archaeology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was his academic home, providing the solid institutional background to his rich scholarly activity in the fields of Nubiology and Coptology, two "exotic" disciplines in intrinsically introverted Hungarian archaeology. As he recalled his years spent in the Institute on the occasion of the last public event he attended within its walls, he noted, not without some resignation, that although his chosen field and discipline were not always met with understanding and support, it was nevertheless a haven of calm for a very long time, even for an unconventional scholar like him. Even if the true meaning and extraordinary value of his research were not always properly understood and appreciated, and thus his research enterprises were not expressly supported, he said, he was never deprived of a pleasant environment conducive to creative freedom and, at the end of the day, he was always free to pursue his self-chosen research interests. Yet, most of the time, he found the genuinely inspiring intellectual milieu, especially after the death of L. Castiglione, his mentor in the Institute of Archaeology, among his colleagues working in the Hungarian and international centres of Egyptology and ancient studies as well as in the friendships maintained with members of the Hungarian cultural elite. The deep bitterness he felt over the indifference among many of his colleagues in his native country towards the new advances in international scholarship, a stance that can be clearly sensed in his obituary on Castiglione,²¹ softened slightly during his last two decades. Similarly to the early days of his career, he was again willing to present papers and publish his research results in his native tongue, often the main conclusions of certain chapters of his English monographs. He also gladly

¹⁷Besides the above, see L. TÖRÖK: *Adoption and Adaptation. The Sense of Culture Transfer between Ancient Nubia and Egypt*. Budapest 2011.

¹⁸L. TÖRÖK: *Herodotus in Nubia. Mnemosyne supplements: History and archaeology of Classical Antiquity 368*. Leiden–Boston 2014.

¹⁹L. TÖRÖK: *The Periods of Kushite History. From the Tenth Century BC to the AD Fourth Century. Studia Aegyptiaca. Supplements 1*. Budapest 2015.

²⁰L. Török: Egy félreismert remekmű: A Petosiris-sír és az egyiptomi–görög kiegyezés [A misunderstood masterpiece: The Petosiris Tomb and the Egyptian-Greek compromise]. *Ókor* 16/2 (2017) 3–19.

²¹L. TÖRÖK: Castiglione László, 1927–1984. *ArchÉrt* 111 (1984) 250–252.



assisted his younger colleagues who turned to him for advice by sharing his wide knowledge, experience, methodological considerations, and, not least, his own rich library. His sophisticated approach to guiding his students was a true mirror of his mind: instead of providing ready answers to the questions with which his colleagues turned to him for advice, he masterfully oriented them by introducing them to his own approach to research and addressing questions that would guide them towards possible solutions.

The genuine person of the gentleman and the scholar in every sense of the word – whom I had the good luck to meet at the Budapest Coptic exhibition and was then privileged to be acquainted with more deeply through the many conversations we had and by reading his works – was perhaps most intimately revealed to those who were among the fortunate invited to his home. His impeccable taste was reflected by the carefully chosen, elegant, antique furniture, his immense erudition symbolised by the library enriched over the decades, making it very clear how much the *bürgerlich* life of the scholar engaged in the study of the material legacy of past societies with a sophisticated sense of style was intertwined with his professional researcher self.

Just like our first meeting at the Budapest Coptic exhibition, one of our last telephone conversations was, for me, a similarly touching moment, which clearly bespoke the depth of his life-long passionate affection for the rich cultural heritage of the Nile Valley. Upon answering a call I made

before a visit to Egypt to ask him about the must-see monuments that would have to be squeezed into a brief trip, his voice, tired and wearied by his ailment, suddenly grew strong and lively. He went over the major monuments and museums with must-see finds, recalled the tricks of catching a safe cab, and gave useful advice on choosing the best places to eat. He nostalgically evoked his memories of first visiting Cairo and Alexandria, which had such a decisive impact on his subsequent life, and pondered for a moment on the tremendous changes the region had gone through since that time. The fruits of those short, but tremendously important months in 1967 can be studied by all in László Török's many papers and books dedicated to the history and archaeology of ancient and late antique Nubia as well as to the Hellenistic to late antique art of Egypt – a rich treasury of informed scholarship accumulated throughout half a century, which has profoundly reshaped the way we look at and understand the history and culture of the Nile Valley in Antiquity and without which we can hardly draw well-founded insights in the discipline he had helped to create.

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