

**ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN – ALONG THE NILE**

Studies in Egyptology, Nubiology and Late Antiquity Dedicated to  
László Török on the Occasion of His 75<sup>th</sup> Birthday

Volume 1



*László Török*  
*(photo: Csaba Villányi and Zalán Péter Salát)*

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László Török on the Occasion of His 75<sup>th</sup> Birthday

Volume 1

Edited by  
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Institute of Archaeology, Research Centre for the Humanities,  
Hungarian Academy of Sciences

and

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Tabula Gratulatoria .....	9
Editors' Preface .....	11
<b>I. PREHISTORIC EUROPE AND THE ANCIENT WORLD</b>	
Pál RACZKY	
<i>A Complex Monument in the Making     at the Late Neolithic Site of Polgár-Csőszhalom (Hungary)</i> .....	15
Gábor ZÓLYOMI	
<i>How to Let Someone Swear an Oath by a Battle Net in Sumerian</i> .....	61
Julie Renee ANDERSON	
<i>The Chryselephantine Lion Plaques from Nimrud</i> .....	71
Tamás DEZSŐ – Ádám VÉR	
<i>Ἀσσυρικὸς λόγος? Assyrian Military Allusions in Xenophon's Cyropaedia</i> .....	79
András PATAY-HORVÁTH	
<i>The Temple Builders of Apollo Epikourios at Bassai</i> .....	109
István M. BODNÁR	
<i>Hipparchus on the Ratio of Longest Day to Shortest Night in Eudoxus, Aratus and Attalus     (In Arati et Eudoxi Phaenomena I.3.10)</i> .....	123
Miklós SZABÓ	
<i>Un dessinateur pas comme les autres</i> .....	137
György NÉMETH	
<i>Bones in Dolls: Magic Figurines of the Anna Perenna Fountain</i> .....	147
László BORHY	
<i>Stirnschutzplatte eines bronzenen Pferdekopfpanzers aus Athen:     Berichtigung zu CMRDM D.1</i> .....	155
Ádám SZABÓ	
<i>New Evidence for the Domina-Dominus Religion and Cult from Illyricum:     A Lost Pre-Roman Mythologem from the Roman Age</i> .....	163
Friderika HORVÁTH	
<i>Militaria Finds from the Rural Settlement at Dunaszentgyörgy-Középső-Dűlő     Early Roman Settlements in the Hinterland of the Limes</i> .....	177
<b>II. ANCIENT EGYPT</b>	
Zoltán Imre FÁBIÁN	
<i>The Autobiographic Inscription of Seni-Iqer (Tt 185),     a Theban Dignitary of the Late Old Kingdom – 2016</i> .....	215

## VI Table of Contents

Carola VOGEL	
<i>20 Years of Silence? The Assumed Long-Lasting Coregency of Senusret III     with Amenemhat III – Additional Thoughts</i> .....	225
Balázs J. IRSAY-NAGY	
<i>Accession to the Throne in Ancient Egypt and Modern Japan: Parallels?</i> .....	233
Boyo G. OCKINGA	
<i>A Magical Plate in the Museum of Ancient Cultures, Macquarie University:     A Tool of Trade of an Ancient Egyptian Medico-Magical Practitioner</i> .....	243
Gábor SCHREIBER	
<i>Yet Another Kushite Tomb Group from the el-Khokha Cemetery</i> .....	259
Attila FERENCZI	
<i>Germanicus in Egypt</i> .....	269
Lajos BERKES	
<i>An Unusual Party Invitation from Graeco-Roman Egypt</i> .....	277
Alexandra VON LIEVEN	
<i>Porphyrios und die ägyptische Religion im Lichte ägyptischer Quellen II:     Der Magen als Sündenbock? (De abstinentia IV.10.3–5)</i> .....	283
<b>III. ANCIENT NUBIA</b>	
Tibor MARTON	
<i>Traces of the Dispersal of Modern Humans:     Middle Palaeolithic Sites in the Egyptian Eastern Desert</i> .....	307
Stuart Tyson SMITH	
<i>Gift of the Nile? Climate Change, the Origins of Egyptian Civilization and     Its Interactions within Northeast Africa</i> .....	325
William Vivian DAVIS	
<i>The Statue of Usersatet from Uronarti (Khartoum, SNM 32)</i> .....	347
Tamás A. BÁCS	
<i>Remarks on a “Nubian Tribute Scene”</i> .....	361
Julia BUDKA	
<i>Addressing the Gods Home Away from Home: Case Studies from New Kingdom Nubia</i> .....	379
Vincent RONDOT – Luc GABOLDE	
<i>Les dhnw.t de Kouch</i> .....	391
Dan’el KAHN	
<i>Some Thoughts on Egyptian Elements in Kushite Religion and Rituals</i> .....	411
Angelika LOHWASSER	
<i>Triaden und Dyaden in Kusch</i> .....	427
Irene VINCENELLI	
<i>Household and State Economy in Napatan Times</i> .....	437
Dominique VALBELLE	
<i>Egyptian Usage of Nubian Toponyms: Iam, Kush and Pnubs</i> .....	445

Bogdan ŻURAWSKI	
<i>Where Was the "Land of Shas"? Some Comments on Psamtik II's Expedition to the South Caused by the Recent Archaeological Discoveries in the Southern Dongola Reach</i> .....	455
Joachim Friedrich QUACK	
<i>Nubisch-meroitische Lexeme im Papyrus Brooklyn 47.218.47 vs.?</i> .....	477
Jochen HALLOF	
<i>Eine Dotation für Amesemi? Die Inschrift REM 1251 aus Meroe</i> .....	489
Jeremy POPE	
<i>The "Gum-Eaters" of Nubia Revisited</i> .....	503
Karol MYŚLIWIEC	
<i>Once More about Hellenistic Coroplasthy from Lower Egypt</i> .....	515
Krzysztof GRZYMSKI	
<i>A Decorated Meroitic Jar with a Guinea Fowl Scene</i> .....	533
<b>IV. LATE ANTIQUE NUBIA</b>	
David N. EDWARDS	
<i>Late Antique Nubia Revisited</i> .....	539
Adam ŁAJTAR – Grzegorz OCHAŁA	
<i>Kimeliarches, 'Treasurer': a So-Far Unidentified Office in the Kingdom of Makuria (With Notes on Several Other Offices and Titles)</i> .....	557
Pamela ROSE	
<i>Stamped Pottery of the Early Medieval Period from Lower Nubia</i> .....	575
Peter GROSSMANN	
<i>Examples of the Use of a Khurus in Nubian Church Architecture</i> .....	591
Artur OBLUSKI – Małgorzata KORZENIOWSKA	
<i>The Dormitory of the Ghazali Monastery, Sudan</i> .....	601
Magdalena ŁAPTAŚ	
<i>Transformations of Royal Images. Some Comments on the Regalia from Banganarti</i> .....	613
Helmut SATZINGER	
<i>On the "Absolute Genitive" of Old Nubian</i> .....	631
<b>V. THE LATE ANTIQUE AND EARLY BYZANTINE WORLD IN EGYPT AND BEYOND</b>	
Bente KIILERICH – Hjalmar TORP	
<i>From Alexandria to Kenchreai? The Puzzle of the Glass Sectile Panels</i> .....	643
Thelma K. THOMAS	
<i>Portraits of Apa Jeremias at His Monastery in Memphis (Saqqara): Holy Man, Philosopher, Prophet, and Monastic Father</i> .....	659
Dominique BÉNAZETH – Cédric MEURICE	
<i>Les niches de l'église nord de Baouît: emplacements et décors sculptés</i> .....	685
Beatrice HUBER	
<i>Qarara – Hundert Jahre danach</i> .....	707

## VIII Table of Contents

Claudia NAUERTH	
<i>Aus Alt mach Neu: Vom Flicken, Verändern und Wiederverwenden antiker Textilien</i> .....	725
Andrea HASZNOS	
<i>How Naked Is the Egyptian Woman?</i> .....	747
Ádám BOLLÓK	
<i>“Portable Sanctity” Brought to the Afterlife: Pilgrim Eulogiai as Grave Goods     in the Late Antique Eastern Mediterranean</i> .....	763
Marianne SÁGHY	
<i>Ad Aegypti Extrema Contendi:     Egyptian Monasticism in Sulpicius Severus’ Dialogues</i> .....	805
György GERÉBY	
<i>The Angels of the Nations: Is a National Christianity Possible?</i> .....	819
Volker MENZE	
<i>Christians Becoming Christians: Conversions, Conversion-Motifs and     Doctrinal Boundaries in the Sixth Century</i> .....	849
Gábor KALLA	
<i>Date Palms, Deer/Gazelles and Birds in Ancient Mesopotamia and Early Byzantine Syria.     A Christian Iconographic Scheme and Its Sources in the Ancient Orient</i> .....	863
Per Jonas NORDHAGEN	
<i>Byzantium, the Enigmatic Seventh Century</i> .....	901
Tivadar VIDA	
<i>Late Antique and Early Medieval Female Headwear Ornaments     from the Carpathian Basin (Veils, Hairnets and Headbands)</i> .....	915
<b>VI. THE ANCIENT WORLD IN MODERN EUROPE</b>	
Árpád Miklós NAGY	
<i>L’Anguipede d’Avenches</i> .....	939
Charles BONNET	
<i>Archaeology as a Means of Preserving Cultural Heritage</i> .....	953
Richard Holton PIERCE – Alexandros TSAKOS	
<i>The Past and the Future of Fontes Historiae Nubiorum</i> .....	961
Péter GYÖRGY	
<i>The Art of the Holocaust: Ethical Norms and Aesthetic Experiences –     The Unavoidable Tension</i> .....	967
List of Contributors .....	975



## EDITORS' PREFACE

The idea of the present volume was conceived as part of the preparations for celebrating Professor László Török's seventy-fifth birthday. The contributors and the editors – his colleagues, friends, students and admirers – wished to salute the influential scholar, professor, colleague, and friend with a volume published in his honour and to express their gratitude for the many decades' long and valuable academic collaboration and, even more importantly, his long friendship. Our original intention was to complete and publish the present volume in 2016, on the occasion of his birthday. *More patrio*, its publication was delayed by two years. Before the illustrious anniversary and during the two years that have elapsed since, we could personally experience both the respect he commands and the outpouring of affection towards him, which inspired over sixty of his colleagues to contribute a study to the *Festschrift* dedicated to him, and the challenge of editing a volume of almost one thousand pages. The continuous stream of manuscripts repeatedly spurred us to rethink our original concept and to modify our deadlines; the single thing we refused to compromise on was perfection in editorial work and high-quality printing, to which we had committed ourselves in view of the many excellent studies and their accompanying illustrations we had received. It is our hope that the book will be to the satisfaction of all our contributors and to readers, and, not least, will be a source of genuine pleasure to László.

László Török began his career as an archaeologist and art historian in the Archaeological Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, his first interest being a unique group of eleventh-century stone carvings in the Carpathian Basin. He soon found a research theme that was distantly related to these relics, but offered a broader perspective on universal art history and archaeology, which became one of his key research themes throughout his academic career. From the late 1960s, he embarked on the path that eventually led to the radical re-interpretation of the archaeological and art relics of late antique Egypt, generally lumped together under the label "Coptic". A rare piece of good luck, the UNESCO initiative to salvage the Nubian cultural heritage, in which his workplace, the Archaeological Institute partook, provided the opportunity to study the history of antique and late antique Nubia as well as its material and spiritual culture, which, similarly to the world of late antique Egypt, have remained key themes in his scholarly work.

By undertaking the assessment of the finds brought to light during the Nubian excavations, a rare window of opportunity opened to him: he received the chance to play a prominent role in the emergence of Nubian Studies, a previously barely existing discipline. This opportunity, coupled with his talent, his prodigious gift for languages, and his impressive faculty to synthesise large bodies of data, led to an outpouring of studies and over twenty-five monographs. Suffice it here to highlight four of the latter that illustrate his role in shaping Nubian Studies in the last third of the twentieth century and in the new millennium. He can be credited with the assessment and publication of the relics and finds brought to light in Meroe City, one of the royal centres of ancient Nubia (*Meroe City. An Ancient African Capital. John Garstang's Excavations in the Sudan*. London 1997). He made significant contributions to the volumes containing the critical edition, English translation, commentary and interpretation of the texts relating to ancient Nubia found in various sources of Antiquity (*Fontes Historiae Nubiorum*, 4 vols. Bergen 1994–2000). Based on these and his earlier research, he authored the handbook on the history of Napatan-Meroitic civilisation for the *Handbuch der Orientalistik* series (*The Kingdom of Kush. Handbook of the Napatan-Meroitic Civilization*. Leiden–Boston–Köln 1997), which, in a sense, was a direct continuation of his synthesis on late antique Nubia written a decade earlier (*Late Antique Nubia. History and Archaeology of the Southern Neighbour of Egypt in the 4th–6th century A.D.* Budapest 1988). These four books illuminate the essence of his work: the constant strive to see historical, archaeological, and art historical studies holistically and, not least, the ability to master and treat the research methods demanded by these disciplines and the source material as an integral unit. Throughout his academic career, he

remained true to the principles determining his scholarly activity in an academic milieu essentially characterised by an increasing over-specialisation in smaller fields and he continuously broadened his interest to include periods more distant in time (*Between Two Worlds: The Frontier Region between Ancient Nubia and Egypt 3700 BC–500 AD*. Leiden–Boston 2008). Yet, he never abandoned interest in late antique Egyptian art, which inspired him to set out on the journey of discovery to the Nile Valley. The culmination of a never-ending interest was a monograph covering the history of Egyptian art between the third and seventh centuries (*Transfigurations of Hellenism: Aspects of Late Antique Art in Egypt AD 250–700*. Leiden–Boston–Köln 2005), while the overall image of this period emerging from long decades of scholarship was presented to the Hungarian public in a major exhibition (*After the Pharaohs. Treasures of Coptic Art from Egyptian Collections*. Budapest 2005). The venue of the exhibition, the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, was the symbolic culmination of the many years' long cooperation between him and the museum, for he had assessed the overwhelming majority of the antique and late antique Egyptian objects in the museum's collection (*Coptic Antiquities*, 2 vols. Rome 1993; *Hellenistic and Roman Terracottas from Egypt*. Rome 1995). Similarly to the works in which he published the find material brought to light on Nubian excavations, these analytical catalogues reveal that while he explored many diverse historical, art historical, and archaeological issues as part of his scholarly output, he remained fully aware of the importance of publishing new source material that would enrich the period's scholarship.

The perhaps most distinctive aspect of his perception of what scholarship means and his scholarly self-image is that he periodically revisited themes he had earlier covered to take a fresh look at his own questions and answers in the light of newly uncovered evidence. Although his work in Egyptology and Nubian Studies linked him to the academic centres of the West, one of his priorities was to familiarise his Hungarian colleagues with the new findings and methods of research conducted in global academe. This was particularly important in the period before 1989 and in the ensuing decade, when few scholars had access to this world. He partook in the training and education of young researchers at the Department of Egyptology of the Eötvös Loránd University, first as a lecturer, later as a university professor. In the 2000s, as president of the Hungarian Society of Ancient Studies, he enthusiastically organised lectures and workshops that usually ended in amicable discussions. From this time onward, particularly after he became Foreign Member of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters (1995) and was elected first a corresponding member (2004) and later full member (2010) of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the scope of his activities in this field broadened considerably. He has always been and remains active in academic life, guided always by his moral sensitivity and perceptiveness. As chairman of the Seuso Work Committee established in 2014, he played a prominent role in that the study of this unique late antique silver hoard of immense historical and artistic value be conducted with the inclusion of various analytical techniques.

In his publications, his lectures held as part of the university curriculum, and the informal conversations he delights in, he generously shares his innovative, sparkling knowledge with his students and his colleagues. Whether in the former or the latter capacity, as a circumspect scholar and a wise master, he always took particular care to orient those seeking his guidance with thoughtful questions rather than with ready answers. To all those, who know him personally, this imposing academic career is the surface visible to all, which could hardly exist without the sensitivity of the human soul. It is exactly this personal sensitivity and wisdom that has been an inspiration to us all: in addition to drawing from his scholarly works, we would do well to learn from him and master his wise contemplation, not devoid of irony, amidst our all too noisy daily life.