

JAROSLAV ČERNÝ

1898-1970



Among the many scholars who have served the Museum and the University through the years, Jaroslav Černý was one of the most distinguished. His sudden death in England on May 29th has brought sadness to all of us.

Dr. Černý was Visiting Curator of the Egyptian Section of the Museum and Visiting Professor at the University for the fall semesters of 1965 to 1968, coming here after his retirement from Oxford. Jaroslav Černý was born in Czechoslovakia in 1898, received his doctorate from Charles University in Prague and was appointed lecturer there in 1929. In 1946 he was elected to the Chair of Egyptology at University College, London (a post formerly held by Sir Flinders Petrie). In 1951 he became Professor of Egyptology at Oxford University, following Battiscombe Gunn who formerly was curator here. In 1954 he was Visiting Professor at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

Dr. Černý's work was by no means confined to teaching and "armchair" research, but included frequent trips to Egypt and to European museums to collect new data. While his academic career owed much to the esteem of his English colleagues his field work was an expression of his close relationship with French Egyptologists. From 1925 to 1940 he was engaged in interpreting and publishing much of the inscribed material discovered by the excavations of the French Institute of Archaeology in Cairo at Deir el Medineh, near Thebes. Subsequently he spent several years recording, with his colleagues, the inscriptions of the famous temple of Ramesses II at Abu Simbel in response to the UNESCO appeal to record the monuments shortly to be permanently inundated by

the new Aswan dam. This work was under the auspices of the Centre for Documentation in Cairo, and later he undertook on its behalf a project in which he had long been interested.

This was the further recording of the numerous "graffiti" or inscriptions scratched on the cliff faces of western Thebes by artisans and officials during the late second and early third millennia B.C. Although now in his late sixties and early seventies and suffering from impaired eyesight and some ill-health, Černý enjoyed this arduous work. Assisted by his wife, Manya, and by Egyptian, French, and Swiss colleagues, he spent two months every year scrambling through boulder-strewn, sun-drenched desert valleys, pursuing the "chasses aux graffiti" as he called it some years ago. His later field work, like the earlier, owed much to the encouragement and assistance of French scholars as well as the great interest shown in his work by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture and the Antiquities Department.

The characteristic features of Černý's scholarship were unremitting industry in the collection of data, scrupulous accuracy in their study and presentation, and great understanding of the cultural and historical significance of that data. He was primarily a philologist and an historian; and those two interests complemented each other in a most fruitful and consistent way; his philological researches were devoted not only to the elucidation of the ancient Egyptian language itself but also to the study of those "unofficial sources" which illuminate, however imperfectly, the social and economic background of Egyptian history. He pointed out that without knowledge of this background "real history can neither be understood nor written."

As a philologist he was familiar with all aspects of ancient Egyptian and wrote, for example, an important summary of the mechanics of Egyptian writing, *Paper and Books in Ancient Egypt* (1952), and contributed a chapter on "Writing and Language" to the revised authoritative survey of Egyptian culture, *The Legacy of Egypt*. His special interest however was Late Egyptian, the vernacular of the period 1570-710 B.C.; this was characteristic of the business documents and letters which were the principal objects of his research. Because of its many differences in grammar, syntax, and vocabulary from Middle Egyptian, the "classical" form of the language spoken during the early second millennium B.C. and characteristic of literary, religious, and monumental texts to a much later date, Late Egyptian presents many problems to the scholar. Černý was a leading authority on this difficult phase of the language and although he unfortunately never wrote a formal grammar (the last Late Egyptian grammar appeared many years ago and is badly out of date) his students and colleagues benefited greatly from his lectures, discussions, and specialized articles.

One most important result of his philological researches was a *Coptic Etymological Dictionary*, which was largely in proof at the time of his death. Coptic was the language of Christian Egypt from the third century A.D. onwards and was the direct descendant of ancient Egyptian, although written in the Greek alphabet with only a few signs derived from the hieroglyphic script. Once hieroglyphic and its cursive derivatives, hieratic and demotic, had been deciphered (ca. 1820), Coptic proved a rich source of information on its ancient predecessor, although inevitably it had also developed many differences from Late Egyptian. Černý's *Dictionary* is an invaluable summary of this information and perhaps no single work better illustrates the breadth and quality of his scholarship. A typical entry gives the Coptic word and its English translation, its equivalent or ancestor in Late Egyptian and/or demotic (the very last phase of ancient Egyptian, named after its characteristic cursive script), references to examples and important discussions of the word; in some cases he also cites related words in Arabic and other Semitic languages. The *Dictionary* then is not merely a work of reference, but a veritable history of the Egyptian language over four millennia.

Černý's extraordinary knowledge of Late Egyptian was derived from the papyri and the literally thousands of ostraca (limestone flakes or pottery sherds bearing ink inscriptions) which he copied, transcribed, and translated through-

out his life. The difficulties presented by these documents, which were mostly of New Kingdom date, were formidable. Their study had been neglected, many lay mouldering and uncatalogued in museum collections, and they were often damaged because of their comparatively fragile nature. They were in the hieratic script, a cursive form of hieroglyphic, and had often been written in such haste that they were barely legible. Moreover, consisting as they did of the minutiae of daily life (agreements, wills, letters, instructions, ration lists, etc.) these documents contained many obscure technical terms and alluded to facts and beliefs recorded elsewhere in records which had not survived or were still buried in the ground or in museum collections. However, as Černý pointed out in 1931 in his article "Les ostraca hiératiques, leur intérêt et la nécessité de leur étude" (*Chronique d'Égypte*, 12), it is these difficult papyri and ostraca, and not the better known and better studied monumental inscriptions of tombs and temples, which contain the wealth of detail needed to reconstruct the social, economic, and religious activities that made up the fabric of life for most Egyptians.



From the village of Deir el Medineh came many vivid sketches on limestone flakes, made by the artisans whose lives Černý studied. Above is the portrait of a king, shown most unusually with an unshaven stubble on his chin.

Sketches on limestone flakes from Deir el Medineh: a portrait of one of the artisans, with his brush and palette; a caricature of a Nubian soldier; an imaginative sketch of a monkey playing the flute.



It was to the exploration of these activities of "les petits gens" that Černý primarily devoted his work as an historian. His interest is shown clearly by a number of his publications: his editing and completion of the work of English colleagues in *The Inscriptions of Sinai*, Volumes I and II (1952, 1958), a collection of the numerous graffiti and inscriptions left by working parties near the turquoise mines of the Sinai peninsula; his *Late Ramesside Letters* (1939) and *Hieratic Ostraca I* (1957; with Sir Alan Gardiner); and above all, the many volumes and articles which he wrote on the activities of the officials and artisans in the royal necropolis of the New Kingdom at Western Thebes.

The vast and elaborately decorated tombs of most kings and queens of Dynasties XVIII to XX (ca. 1570-1087 B.C.) are located in deep valleys within the limestone plateau at Western Thebes. These royal tombs were cut and decorated by a community of artisans who lived, with their families, at a place now called Deir el Medineh. The well-preserved remains of the artisans' village, and of their tombs surrounding it, were excavated primarily by the French Institute of Archaeology in Cairo and yielded large amounts of inscribed material and many artifacts, all richly illustrative of the life of this community over four hundred years. Černý had already shown a deep interest in the artisans' community by writing his doctoral thesis upon it and subsequently had greatly increased his knowledge of the area's history by publishing a catalogue (1930-1935) of the hieratic ostraca

in the Cairo Museum. Most of these ostraca came from the valley in which the kings' tombs lay and many were related to the activities of the artisans of Deir el Medineh.

Deir el Medineh itself also yielded thousands of ostraca, some of which were "literary" (i.e. were parts of famous literary texts copied by student scribes) but the bulk of which were "non-literary" and concerned with the daily life of the community. Černý, invited to study the non-literary ostraca, published many of them in seven volumes (1935-1951); he also published (1949) a repertory of names, titles, and relatives of the individuals buried nearby, thus supplying much of the information necessary to reconstruct the genealogies and interrelationships of the families occupying the village. In 1956 he published a collection of the graffiti left by the artisans in several parts of the royal necropolis.

From this published, and from much unpublished material, Černý patiently reconstructed the social relationships existing within the community, the religious practices of its members, the prices and wages of the period, and a variety of other matters which made up the life of this small village. In 1965 he summarized the main aspects of this life in his contribution to the revised *Cambridge Ancient History* (Vol. II, Ch. XXXV; currently appearing as fascicle 27). At the time of his death he was working on a detailed study of the community; one volume is in proof, a second requires minor editing, and the final volume remains to be written. It is greatly to be hoped that his colleagues will com-



plete this study, which is a major contribution to our understanding of ancient Egypt.

Černý was also very conscious of the broader historical and cultural environment of the artisans' village, the activities of which revolved around the burial of the god-kings and were closely supervised by the state. As Černý demonstrated in an important essay (1963), "The contribution of the study of unofficial and private documents to the history of Pharaonic Egypt" (in Donadoni's *Le fonti indirette della storia egiziana*), ostraca and similar material contain information on dynastic chronology and historical events. His specialized articles, as well as his chapter in the *Cambridge Ancient History*, show Černý's outstanding ability to reconstruct history from a variety of "non-official" as well as more conventional sources.

The study of Egyptian religion benefited greatly from Černý's work. He was, of course, an authority on the cult practises of the Deir el Medineh community, practises which were dedicated to a series of local "forms" of the great gods and deified dead rulers and which illustrated the poorly-known religion of the Egyptian lower classes. Amongst these practises was the custom of placing written questions concerning personal decisions or community disputes before an image of a local god while it was being carried in a religious procession; the image indicated "yes" or "no" by making its carriers move towards, or recede from, the petitioner. It is typical of Černý's sensitivity to the spiritual environment of an ancient people that



he pointed out that such "oracles" involved no "clever or deliberate deception" but rather "suggestion and auto-suggestion."

Oracles were also used for deciding important questions of state during the New Kingdom and Černý explored the entire subject in a major study, "Egyptian Oracles" (in R.A. Parker's *A Saite oracle papyrus from Thebes in the Brooklyn Museum*, 1962). Černý also wrote several articles on Egyptian religion for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and in 1952 published a concise and authoritative survey, *Egyptian Religion*, in which a mass of significant and complex data was treated with great clarity.

Throughout his life Černý also contributed to the development of Egyptology by generously providing information and thoughtful criticism of their work to other scholars. In later years he was also instrumental in securing financial support for the publications of his peers and of younger scholars. Consequently, the many contributors to the 1968 Festschrift volume of the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, celebrating his seventieth birthday, wrote in a spirit expressed by I. E. S. Edwards as being "as much in personal affection for very many years of [Černý's] friendship as in admiration for his scholarship."

Černý's colleagues and students at this Museum and University soon felt a similar affection for him and his wife Manyá, and it is with a sense of personal, as well as scholarly, loss that we mourn his death.

—DAVID O'CONNOR