

| Tomasz Górecki

(17 November 1951 – 29 September 2017)

| Tomek and the Copts

Tomek was born on 17 November 1951. Very early on, at the age of four, he lost his father. In 1958, he began attending the 47th Primary School, and in 1965, the 67th Secondary School in Warsaw named after Stanisław Wyspiański. Right after his school-leaving exam, in 1970, he enrolled at the University of Warsaw to study history. The following year, he switched to Christian Archaeology at the Theological Faculty of Warsaw's Academy of Catholic Theology (today's Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University). He graduated in 1976 and straight away found a job at the Ancient Art Conservation Studio of the National Museum in Warsaw, where he worked as assistant conservator (and later senior assistant conservator). Two years later, he presented his Master's thesis on the representations of saints in armour in Faras painting, written under the supervision of Dr Stefan Jakobielski. Soon afterwards, Tomek began working at the NMW's Gallery of Ancient Art. Throughout his professional life, he remained associated with the Museum. In 1988, he was made in charge of the Storeroom of Egyptian Art, in December of that year he became assistant curator, and in April 1996, curator of the Collection of East Christian Art. In November 2011, he was appointed curator of the reorganized Collection of Ancient and East Christian Art.

Tomek's research interests found an outlet already in his first article, "Z problematyki ikonografii świętych wojowników w malarstwie ściennym katedry w Faras" [On the iconography of warrior saints in wall paintings of the Faras Cathedral], published in the *Journal of the National Museum in Warsaw* in 1980.¹ Referring to numerous source texts, he presented an intriguing aspect of iconography against the background of the cult of martyr saints in the Eastern tradition, illustrating the precise descriptions of paintings with his own copies and reconstructions thereof. No element of weaponry escaped his attention, nor did he fail to analyse in detail the symbolic importance of the poses of individual figures. The text proves Tomek's in-depth knowledge of literature and erudition. He often returned to this subject matter, both in public speeches and in conversations we shared throughout the years of our work together.

Tomek took part in a number of archaeological missions, both Polish and non-Polish, mostly to Egypt: to Alexandria with Dr Hab. Mieczysław Rodziewicz, to Naqlun with Prof. Włodzimierz Godlewski, to Deir el-Bahari with Prof. Jadwiga Lipińska and Dr Zbigniew Szafranski, to Marea with Dr Dagmara Wielgosz-Rondolino, to Minshat Abu Omar with Prof. Dietrich Wildung, to the Seti I temple at Gurna with Dr Rainer Stadelmann and Prof. Karol Myśliwiec, to Deir Abu Fana with Prof. Helmut Buschhausen, to Wadi El-Natroun with Dr Karel Innemée, to Buto with Dr Dina Faltings, and to Shenhur with Dr Harco Willems. For many years, he was the pillar of excavation works conducted at Tell Atrib in Egypt and headed by Dr Barbara Rusczyk. He also worked in Sudan (Dongola, with Prof. Stefan Jakobielski)

¹ Published since 2012 as *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie. Nowa Seria / Journal of the National Museum in Warsaw. New Series*.

and Palestine (Gaza, with Prof. Jean-Baptiste Humbert). He presented his research results at a number of conferences and published articles in prestigious Polish and international journals, such as *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean*, *Études et Travaux* and *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology*.²

Ever since his first stay at Gurna in 1979, Tomek's greatest passion was tracing and studying the remnants of Coptic culture. He was not only interested in easily accessible graves, but also the sometimes dangerous caves filled with funerary shafts. There he was looking for traces of their later inhabitants – Coptic monks and hermits, who used the old tombs and temples of the pharaohs as their monasteries and hermitages. He would show us the evidence of their presence: drawings on walls (often covering beautiful ancient paintings that were 1,000 or 1,500 years older) and brick walls that transformed old graves into cosy abodes. He planned to establish his own mission that would pursue comprehensive research of one of such relic.

This he managed in the spring of 2003. He became interested in a tomb from the Middle Kingdom period, which was located on a cliff slope above the Ramesseum and marked with no. 1152 by Americans who had studied the area in the 1920s. The remains of a mud-brick structure in front of the tomb, the abundance of ceramics found on the slope of the mountain and traces of paintings in the tomb's corridor testified to the activity of Coptic monks. Tomek pursued excavations in the tomb until the spring of 2015, at the same time researching and conserving the rich excavated material. He sought the cooperation of researchers from many disciplines in order to arrive at a multi-faceted interpretation of all types of finds. For Tomek, even the most minute details were meaningful, as they allowed him to reconstruct, step by step, the life of ancient monks: what they occupied themselves with and how they acquired various knick-knacks that could later prove useful (he was something of a collector too, and he hated profligacy and wastefulness). He studied the methods of making tools and providing the monks with food and water, the circulation of amphorae and other vessels that were useful in the monastic household, the ways of painting the characteristic patterns on ceramics and all other manifestations of everyday life in the hermitage. He tried to understand and interpret even the most minute of the finds, never disregarding anything as insignificant. He also made some breakthrough discoveries, one of the most important being the recovery of three Coptic manuscripts – two on papyrus and one on parchment – containing the meticulously, beautifully written *Canons of Pseudo-Basil* from the 6th century, *A Laudation of Saint Pisenthios* (bishop of Koptos) from the 7th–8th c. and a fragment of the Book of Isaiah from the 9th–10th c., all bound in decorative covers. This discovery made waves among researchers of Early Christian culture all over the world, and the manuscripts underwent painstaking conservation.

The broadly understood subject of the iconography of warrior saints is a recurring topic in Tomek's works. He also published texts on Coptic ceramics from Tell Atrib, Naqlun and Deir Abu Fana, and – though perhaps not as eagerly – on Nubian ceramics from Faras. Yet his main research interests were in the field of Egyptian monasticism as well as the religious and cultural transformations in Egypt between the 4th and 7th centuries. He studied the cult of saints (e.g., Saint Apa Bane) and magic symbols (i.e., magical marks discovered in hermitage no. 1151 in Gurna). Unfortunately, only a part of this research was published. Recent years, however, brought fantastic texts on light and its significance in Early Christian liturgy. Tomek's article "Hand (Portable) *Candelabrum* from a Byzantine Church in Athribis in Egypt," published in 2014 in the NMW's *Journal*, served as the basis for "Lighting of the Church Interior," published

² See Literature by Tomasz Górecki at the end of this article.

as annex to Prof. Ewa Wipszycka's book *The Alexandrian Church. People and Institutions* (Warsaw, 2015). Both papers focused on light in East Christian culture – a subject as important as it was intangible, which kept fascinating Tomek and to which he kept returning in our conversations. The first of the aforementioned articles is possibly the best illustration of his favourite work method: an in-depth case study and multifaceted analysis of a selected object.

Tomek had lately taken an interest in the functioning of specific liturgical objects. This is exemplified in his article “The Vessel Fragment from Faras Cathedral: A Reliquary or a Vessel for Eucharistic Bread?” published in the *NMW Journal* in 2016. He was also preparing to publish his paper presented at the 24th Nubiological Conference in Gdańsk in June 2017 on trays or containers from the Faras Cathedral. At that time, he presented his original concept concerning the manner of using such containers in the context of Nubian liturgical practices. In both cases, the point of departure were small, fragmentarily preserved objects, and only Tomek's vast knowledge and experience allowed him to recognize their function and place them within the broader context of Early Christian liturgical tradition in Nubia. He also planned to present papers on the image of prophet Melchizedek from the chapel in the *prothesis* of the Faras Cathedral, but only managed to gather the relevant materials on the subject and give a speech at the 23rd Research and Educational Nubiological Conference in Gdańsk in June 2016 (“Melchizedek? The Archpriest Painted in the *Prothesis* of the Faras Cathedral”). Unfortunately, he did not have time to complete the text.

Tomek liked being involved in educational activities, he took part in many seminars, academic conferences and semi-formal meetings among specialists. He had a gift for communicating little known aspects of the lives and culture of Early Christian monks in a very interesting and accessible manner.

Interrupted research, portfolios of materials for future articles, shelves in the Metropolitan House storeroom – the house of Polish missions at Gurna – packed with excavation equipment, an empty place at the table and the commemorative photograph in the fireplace room... It is difficult to come to terms with Tomek's passing. His common sense, ironic sense of humour and cheerful nature, which made being around him and working with him so pleasant and inspirational, are and will be sorely missed.

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