

The book cover features a reproduction of an ancient Egyptian wall painting. The painting depicts two figures in a boat on a river. One figure is standing and holding a staff, while the other is seated. The background shows a landscape with trees and a building. The text is overlaid on the painting.

**JUAN JOSÉ CASTILLOS**

**MORE MEMOIRS  
OF AN  
EGYPTOLOGIST**

**Ediciones MAAT**

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**OF AN**

**EGYPTOLOGIST**

**JUAN JOSÉ CASTILLOS**

**Montevideo**

**2018**

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## **KING TUT IN CANADA 1979**

In that year some of the treasures of this king were traveling to many countries and were due to arrive in Toronto, Canada to be exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

I was there at the time and when some people learnt I was an Egyptologist, I was asked to make my small contribution to that event, as part of the preparation by the public.

My son was attending the Huron Street elementary school and the Principal recruited me to teach some classes to a group of students of the higher grades. I reluctantly agreed, showed them slides, explained who was this boy king and we even made a mummy in class using toilet paper, but the naughty mummified kid then jumped from the table and scared his pals.

And I write reluctantly because teaching kids has not been my cup of tea, I'm used to more mature university students, but I was in for a big surprise.

During one of the classes one of the children, I recall it was a Chinese-Canadian, asked me about the relationship between two obscure ancient Egyptian gods. I didn't have a clue.

I could have escaped on a tangent, like some people do to escape losing face, but that is not my style. I confessed I didn't know but that I would try to find out. Next class I could satisfy his curiosity and I gained more respect for the fresh, eager minds of very young children that sometimes go deep into some subjects.

Strange to say that during all my academic career in which I lectured in dozens of universities and museums all over the world, I've been lucky that not once I've been asked an embarrassing question that I was unable to answer... except at that elementary school in 1979 !

I was also invited in 1979 to lecture after a very elegant dinner for managers of pigment, paint and ink manufacturers in Toronto and their wives at a very posh Toronto hotel, so they could appreciate better the coming Tut exhibition.

I used one of the excellent slide shows that the Royal Ontario Museum had available and I presented some of my own research comparing the ancient and modern pigment technology.

People attending asked very good pertinent questions and I took advantage to debunk widespread myths about the wonders of ancient achievements, let's not forget it was the time of Von Däniken and the rise of pyramid power nonsense.

One of the questions was particularly interesting since it involved the ancient use of pigments. I showed them examples of the strength and quality of the colours used by the ancient Egyptians as paints compared to modern results. There was a huge difference. Then I said that the ancients were pleased with their results that in the case of inorganic pigments led to their survival for thousands of years in tombs and temples and other buildings. They did not have the expertise to go further and they did not need it for their purposes.

I also underlined that inventions arise when there is a need for them, not before, like in the case of steam power, known to the ancients but only rediscovered and used extensively during the industrial revolution.

When the Tut exhibition actually came, I must confess I did not attend, disgusted by the media and other circus around it.



At the corner of the Art Gallery of Ontario a couple of young people elaborately disguised as ancient Egyptians gave out pamphlets, in diners they sold 'Tut omelettes', in a newspaper Tut was shown holding a copy of the said paper, t-shirts asking people not to touch strategically placed 'Tuts', etc.

My disgust made me film it all in super-8 starting with a phrase of my own saying: 'In a consumer society culture is seen as just another marketable item' and I gave copies to the SSEA Canadian

egyptology society in the person of Mr. Geoffrey Freeman and I sent another to the Société Française d'Égyptologie of Paris, France.

The difference in how this was taken made me laugh and be grateful at the same time.

Mr. Freeman told me when I asked him if they had liked it, that they hadn't had a chance 'to listen to my tape yet' but that they would try some time in the future. It would have been a bit difficult to 'listen' to my silent super-8 short film, something they probably discovered later on, if they ever bothered to try.

But they probably did since Mr. Freeman asked me after a while, 'aren't all societies consumer societies, don't people always consume part of what they produce?'.  
.

I decided not to get involved in a lengthy discussion on that reasonable concept and the case of societies that stimulate consumerism not to satisfy any basic need but rather to generate profits for entrepreneurs that invent and promote the 'need' of things that people could perfectly do without.

Prof. Yoyotte of the Collège de France, on the other hand, replied saying that they had liked it very much and asked for permission to show it later on at a Mariette event in Boulogne-sur-Mer...

Oh, Canada, I sadly mumbled, thinking of our beautiful anthem.

## **EGYPTOLOGY AND THE MEDIA IN URUGUAY**

During much of the second half of last century there was a popular interest in ancient Egypt in this country.

Although professional egyptology had not taken root yet, well educated people published articles in a Sunday supplement of a local newspaper which conveyed what they had read in books on some aspects of that great ancient civilization.

Due to the shortcoming of lacking a proper training, some of those articles misinformed people.

I recall one written by someone who occupied for a while the chair of ancient history at the state university about the only Egyptian

mummy in the country, in which he wrote that the inscriptions in the coffin were in all three major ancient scripts, hieroglyphs, hieratic and demotic, and to make it worse, he wrote: 'I repeat, all three were represented on this coffin'. Later on, the first proper study of such texts found only hieroglyphs there.

A sensational and unique discovery it was not, rather the arrogance of celebrated and academically successful ineptitude.

But these occasional mishaps did not deter from the fact that there was a widespread popular interest in ancient history in the country that was satisfied with these publications.

After 1984, when our Institute of Egyptology came into being, the media jumped at the chance to have a more reliable source of information and we were interviewed many times in all newspapers, radio and TV.

The growing prestige of our Institute brought about interviews even from farther away, like Chile, Brazil, Argentina and also Colombia, Spain, the UK and the United States, whenever a new discovery or theory generated popular curiosity on the subject.

These encouraging requests lasted a couple of decades, unfortunately the cultural level of the country that had suffered quite considerably during the decade of military dictatorship in the seventies and early eighties of last century, compounded by the great financial crisis of 2002, suddenly put an end to all this media interest.

Although many local journalists think they work at a high professional level, the reality differs much from such an assumption.

I remember that a group from a TV channel went to Egypt and the show on their visit included embarrassing mistakes like that there were still annual floods in Egypt, the governor of Egypt Mohammed Ali in the XIX century was confused with the prophet Mohammed, that the Ptolemies had destroyed many of the ancient monuments, all the result of not bothering to consult us before broadcasting such nonsense.

One of the major local newspapers had a cultural supplement and after one of its leading intellectual personalities interviewed me, the

article they published had the prominent headline: 'Watch out for the mummies !'.

Regardless of these embarrassing situations, the published interviews attracted attention and helped recruit many students for our Institute.

But fortunately, there were a few exceptions. When I returned from international conferences I was interviewed about contemporary advances in our knowledge of ancient Egypt and the questions went occasionally beyond the pyramids and king Tut's curse, addressing more relevant subjects.

In one case they emphasized the topic of the beginning of class stratification in early Egypt and in another, gender studies and how many of the ancient women in Egypt expressed themselves in numerous ways.

Media superficiality and trivial interest seems to be a worldwide phenomenon, especially in these times in which they mostly seek to entertain rather than provide accurate and reliable information on the distant past.



## **MINYA, THE BRIDE OF UPPER EGYPT**

In one of my study trips to Egypt many years ago I struck up an acquaintance with the then Uruguayan ambassador in Cairo, who was really interested in what I was planning to do during my sojourn in the wilds of the rural part of the country, away from the amenities of the capital, where diplomats seldom go.

I told him I planned to visit some Tell el Amarna tombs and take slides of their decoration for my classes back home. The ambassador's wife said she would love to be guided by me and join in the visit since she had never been there. She offered to pick me up at Minya in the embassy's car and we could all (herself, two of their Egyptian employees and me) drive to Amarna.

I accepted although it would distract me a bit from my work and I made my way by train to Minya.

When I arrived I tried to locate a half-decent hotel to spend the night. After apparently succeeding in doing so, I woke up the next morning and wanted to take a shower. The hotel employees spoke almost no English and I couldn't make them understand that I needed towels, absent from the bathroom.

I used the bed sheets instead wondering what the owner thought a hotel was. Then it was time for breakfast. No such thing seemed to be available.

Fortunately another guest heard of my predicament and invited me to share his meal. He was a sort of mercenary French ex-air force pilot who was training Egyptian ones at a nearby base. He spoke only French and we had a long and jocular breakfast in which we shared different experiences of dealing with the people in these rather remote areas of Egypt.

Near lunch time I made my way to the rendezvous point with the embassy people and along the way, wearing just shorts and a thin shirt due to the heat, I couldn't help shuddering at seeing Egyptians wearing an overcoat and scarf as if they were in the midst of winter, which in fact, they were, but not like ours.

My partners in the trip were waiting for me so without further delay we headed to Amarna. As we approached the southern tombs, a guard armed with a rifle joined us and the subject of the right baksheesh came up.



He was quite amenable and in his crude English happily accepted ten pounds for the whole of his services. Before we started on our way to the tombs another Egyptian hurried towards us on a donkey and had an animated conversation with our guard.

The quite new latest model Mercedes car in which we arrived must have encouraged their covetous expectations.

My friends couldn't guess what was happening but I knew better, their argument was about how to extort from us the maximum possible contribution.

The ambassador's wife feeling quite at ease with them, took the rifle from the guard's hands and started waving it around without much concern to where it was pointing. He seemed amused at what was

being done with his weapon, but with the excuse that it was time to be on our way, I brought the dangerous exercise to an end.



We spent a few of hours appreciating details of the decoration of these unfinished tombs of which I made an abundant record in the form of slides and then it was time to leave.

We all made our way to where the embassy's car was parked, the guard and his partner smiling all the time, unable to communicate with us, but doing their best to show how pleased they were with our presence there.

As soon as my friends from the embassy were in the car, ready to go, I presented the guard with the agreed ten pounds.

The moment they saw the money, they started to gesture with an impressive display of anger that it wasn't enough. I learnt that what they expected was ten pounds per tomb, a very expensive proposition I couldn't possibly contemplate, especially after having agreed otherwise.

My friends got nervous and in view of the violent disagreement with the armed men, suggested I pay what they demanded. I was not going to spoil them and make difficult the situation for future visitors

so although smiling, I stood firm and offered them the agreed ten pounds, which they refused with ever angrier gestures.

To put an end to these theatrics, I grabbed a pebble, went to a nearby rock, placed the ten pounds on it with the pebble on top and got in the car.

As we drove away my embassy friends didn't have to dodge any bullets but were very surprised to see both guards with wide toothy smiles on their faces waving us goodbye.

When we reached Cairo, the ambassador's wife was quite pleased with her adventure and used her local contacts to get me an interview for the Latin American branch of the short wave government radio.





## **ADVANCED CHEMISTRY IN ANCIENT EGYPT**

Most of us are often half-amused and half-upset by the publications of people outside the field of academic egyptology in which they inform their readers that the ancient Egyptians were possessors of advanced technologies that are unknown to or ignored by egyptologists who fail to notice and correctly interpret evidence available to all.

Thus, what we say are plants or fantastic pictures in the funerary archaeology, to them it is electric lamps and even the great pyramid was a great source of ancient electricity.

They had powerful lasers to cut granite, that they would be unable, so they say, to cut with their soft metal or stone tools, in medicine,

physics, chemistry, mathematics, they were successful in hiding their knowledge that just now these enlightened writers start to rediscover.

Every one of them enjoys their moment of fame, makes substantial amounts of money selling such books, exploiting the natural tendency of people to accept at face value wonderful interpretations, and leave the stage for the next legion of 'researchers'.

But what is not so common, and is quite worrying, is to find academic egyptologists linked to well known universities, indulging in such flights of imagination.

I was attending a congress in Cairo years ago and one of the speakers told us that a certain pigment present in ancient Egyptian sites did not exist in nature and was clearly synthesized by them. In the question period and due to my background in chemistry, I objected his conclusions given the fact that this particular complex product could only be an artificial one only if the ancients had modern laboratories and knew things like pH control in order to manufacture them, something far beyond all we know of ancient Egyptian science.

He replied that the pigment was there and did not exist in nature, so it was up to me to disprove the obvious implications or otherwise credit the ancients with the knowledge they clearly seemed to have.

During the lunch break I approached him. He was sitting next to some of his German colleagues. His name was Egyptian but when I pointed this out to him, he emphatically denied it, I am German, he said. I accepted this and asked if he was aware of the implications of what he had told us, the little (supposed) fact that seemed to alter all we know of an aspect of an ancient people, for which much more is required.

He stood his ground and placed on me the burden of proof to counter his interpretation.

I decided to forsake lunch and went to the big library at the American University in Cairo to consult their geology books. After a while, I found several locations in Egypt where that precise mineral could be found, from which that famous pigment was extracted.

I returned to the congress venue where he was still sitting with his friends and confronted him with my findings. Obviously quite

embarrassed, he asked if I doubted his word on the matter. I replied that not at all, but being both scientists it is only natural to verify every statement made, especially in such delicate subjects.

For a moment he seemed confused, then he blurted out that what he was talking about was not this mineral, but actually an alpha variety of that pigment, but that he had said before that could not be found at all in nature.

Trying to avoid a personal confrontation, I got up and left, but more convinced than ever that we cannot take at face value everything we hear in academic meetings, especially if it sounds dodgy like in this case.





## ADVENTURES IN THE LUXOR AREA

Many years ago I was visiting temples and tombs in the Luxor area, gathering images of interesting features in them when, having a few hours to spare, I entered one of the well known bazaars in the difficult search of good reproductions of ancient objects, which in Cairo had proved to be fruitless, being all I saw deformed and not even decent approximations to the ancient art.

The owner greeted me very affably and showed me a piece of sculpture, an original according to him, that he could sell at a very steep price.



I let him talk and after a while, when he thought I was convinced and about to close the deal, I mentioned that it was a very well known object that was in a museum and had been published many years ago, I even quoted the source.

It was W. Hayes, The Scepter of Egypt, Part II, 1959, 301.

The crestfallen owner finally admitted it was just a reproduction, and not even a very good one, and asked me if I was an egyptologist. That put an end to his attempts and we parted on friendly terms.

At another time I visited the town of Gurna and the sheikh and one of his friends invited me to have some tea in his house. After a while of conversation in which he inquired about my life and occupation, his

friend started to bring supposedly ancient objects I might be interested in.

Every one of them had clear inconsistencies or wrong features and I took some pleasure in pointing them out to them. I was surprised that they took it all in their stride without giving any indication of being upset by my remarks.

Then I realized that I was being used to help them improve their forgeries, since they took careful note of everything I said. Not wanting to help them deceive unsuspecting tourists, I made an excuse and left.

While I was walking towards one of my destinations in the west bank, I was approached by a young man, about twenty years of age, who lived in one of the nearby villages. He identified himself as Hassan Ibrahim Ahmed al-Bez al-Dod and placed himself at my service for a small fee to guide me around.

Although I didn't need his help, I accepted to find out what he was really after. In the usual way, he led me to visit many of his friends

who were in business selling different crafts and fake antiquities, without any indication that we were going to visit any monuments.

At my obvious lack of interest in any of such goods, he became rather desperate. He asked me if I would be interested in the company of young girls he could procure for me at a small extra fee.

I became worried at the direction the conversation was taking and said nothing. He thought for a while and changed his offer. Maybe you are not interested in girls, he said. I also know very nice boys you might like to meet. No, that was not what I was after either. Then his face lit up, I see, he told me, perhaps you like to enjoy things on your own, would you be interested in hashish, cocaine or such, he could put me in touch with people that could provide them at very reasonable prices.

Wanting to get rid of him I replied that I wanted to do other things, that I was staying at the Etap hotel and if he could visit me there that evening we could reach some deal.

We parted and I reflected that the corruption common in the big cities had reached even small villages of rural Upper Egypt, which I didn't suspect was the case until then.

I guess this young man waited a long time at the wrong hotel before realizing that I wasn't interested in his wide range of infamous services.

Talking of the Etap hotel, this brings to my memory an experience I had there many years ago that shows how careful you have to be if you think that a normal transaction means the same in certain countries as back in your own.

I was checking out and I was short of Egyptian pounds, so I tried to get some at the hotel. I gave the man in charge my credit card and asked for 200 pounds. My friends outside were already blowing the horn of their car so I tried to speed up the transaction.

He took his time and started writing up three sets of receipts. As soon as I noticed, I told him I only wanted 200, not for 600 like he was doing. He said that all had to be in triplicate. I patiently informed him that each set was already in triplicate, the way he was doing it meant I would get 200 but they would charge me 600, a difference of 400 which most probably he would keep for himself.

After my insistence that he was doing it all wrong and my friends repeatedly requiring my presence outside, he said: You want 600 pounds, don't you? I signed, collected the money and left.

His plan had failed and I was in possession of currency I didn't really need, being worthless outside the country, so I became sort of the banker of the group, having avoided being ripped off at a place you wouldn't think this could happen.

The expression 'caveat emptor' is true everywhere and perhaps more so in Egypt, this not being my only similarly distasteful experience in the country over the years.



## **GETTING TO KNOW AN EGYPTIAN MUMMY**

While I was studying ancient history at the university in Montevideo I was familiar with the only ancient Egyptian mummy in Uruguay that was exhibited at a local museum.

It had arrived as a donation from an engineer that had visited Egypt at the end of the XIX century. It came with a wooden coffin and a gilded mask and for many years had been displayed without adequate protection, so the inscriptions on the coffin had become quite defaced by people passing their hands over the columns of texts.

At the time, it had become a major attraction although it hadn't been published, so very little was known about it. All that the museum had obtained was some comments by Erman in the early XX century to whom some photos were submitted, probably of poor quality, since he named persons that later on could not be found in the texts.

In the 30s of the XX century Capart had visited the museum and provided the first significant information, that is, the presence of fragments of the Pyramid Texts on the coffin.

Considering this situation embarrassing for the country, I decided to attack the problem and make a proper publication. A radiologist and a botanist were recruited for the purpose as a first multidisciplinary team.

The radiologist determined that it was the body of a young woman of between 20 and 25 years of age, that she suffered a certain degree of scoliosis or deviation of the spine but the cause of death could not be determined.

The botanist found that the wood used for the coffin was sycamore although there was also a type of hard wood used for the dowels that was supposed to keep the lid in place. Since the museum had put me in charge of this study and I was afraid of damaging the coffin, he was allowed to take only a very small sample of the dowel and thus could not identify the type of hard wood used to make it.

Then it was my turn to attack the decoration and the inscriptions as well as the cloth used for wrapping the body and for the mask and the chemical analysis of the pigments and the white base for the decoration in both the coffin and the mask.

As to the latter I could identify most of the pigments and the base as gypsum and the cloth was linen. The gilding on both the mask and the face on the lid of the coffin was very thin gold leaf.

Due to the deterioration of the inscriptions, and in order to avoid subjective interpretations, with the help of infrared and ultraviolet light I could obtain a facsimile which I translated as much as it could be done.

Our mummy resulted to be a young priestess who played the sistrum in the temple of the god Min at Akhmîm, in Upper Egypt, known as Ast Wrt or Isis the Great.

I could also identify some fragments of the Pyramid Texts, instead of the more common Book of the Dead, that Capart had noticed years before, and I provided a partial translation of what could be deciphered.

Due to the use of these texts on the coffin and certain peculiarities of the decoration, I tentatively dated the mummy to between the 26th and the 30th Dynasty.

After all this work, I submitted my results to Raymond Faulkner in the UK who very kindly gave a very favourable review of my work and supplied some of his own opinions as to the more heavily defaced parts.

Then, at last, this mummy could be properly published in a French journal in 1976.

Years later other local scholars supplied new information such as a new translation of the texts, the relative absence of biological agents that could endanger its conservation and a radiocarbon estimation of its age that came well within the range I had come up with, more towards the 28th or 29th Dynasty.

I took great pleasure in these later studies since they were made by people some of whom had had previously their feathers somewhat ruffled by the writer but much to their chagrin, had to conclude,

contrary to their hope, that all my work had been quite accurate and required no corrections of any kind.

On an entirely different level of developments, this poor mummy was subjected to a series of wanderings that conspired against its adequate conservation.

At first, and for over 80 years it had been exhibited at the National Natural History Museum of Montevideo, then in the 70s of last century an individual who worked at another museum located at a local palace, took advantage of the military dictatorship that ruled the country for over a decade and managed to wrest it from the above museum and place it under his supervision, manu militari. When democratic rule was restored in the 80s, the original museum claimed it as its property and got it back.

But unfortunately, this museum was evicted from its premises and the mummy became stranded in a temporary and completely inadequate location.

It was then that I suggested it should be transferred to yet another museum which had the largest ancient Egyptian collection in the

country, our Institute of Egyptology provided an official document to that effect, and a few years later, the Ministry of Education approved the transfer.

This mummy's journey was a spectacle to behold, in order to prevent any mishap, the mummy and its associated objects was transported by hand in a sort of very crowded procession through the main street of Montevideo to its, now hopefully, final resting place.



## **ESOTERIC FRATERNITIES AND ANCIENT EGYPT**

The most common meaning of the word fraternities has to do with the very well established practice in the United States of college students belonging to such groups for fun and other social purposes.

What I am talking about is the other meaning, of groups of people all over mainly the western world, in which self-appointed 'masters'

teach initiates who are deemed worthy, aspects of a sacred ancient wisdom that has been transmitted over the ages.

Ancient Egypt is not very prominent in all of them, although to some degree it provides much of what is taught to their recruits and is the subject of much discussion in those circles.

The best known of such fraternities are the masons, theosophists, rosicrucians, new acropolis, some of which claim to have originated in a very distant past, although their probable origin can be traced to only a few centuries ago, after the European Middle Ages.

Due to my early university training in the exact sciences that contributed to developing a scientific mind and attitude towards the acquisition of new knowledge, I have always contemplated their unsubstantiated speculations that feed on myths from before Champollion and the beginning of scientific egyptology, with a high degree of skepticism.

There is no place in these memoirs for a detailed analysis of the practices and beliefs of these fraternities as can be found in a profuse literature on the subject, but I will just share some of my

experiences with them in many ways, that reveal interesting codes of behaviour.

One of my early memories has to do with my early twenties, a time in which there was in Uruguay a debate show on TV, Know your rights, in which a wide variety of subjects were discussed. The panel included professionals of various disciplines, politicians, religious leaders, as well as prominent public figures. Those debates attracted a vast audience and had some of the highest ratings in the local TV.

I was invited to participate and I enjoyed it very much, being by nature very fond of debating and I was able to clarify some things that my fellow panelists were unable to address with the required level of expertise.

I remember that once a famous local psychic and parapsychologist that had become one of the stars of the show by his eloquence and supposed scientific background, who also had mentioned what he thought were the 'deep mysteries of ancient Egypt', said live that Einstein had made a certain assertion regarding his theory of relativity. I smelled a rat and having been for a while waiting for an opportunity to expose a charlatan, I asked him that he was

supposedly acquainted with that theory, since he was talking about it. Could he please outline for our enlightenment the main points of that theory? Silence was the only answer. Then I asked to speak and said that this panelist spoke through his hat and was talking to us about science fiction, not science.

The parapsychologist, so verbose and prominent, during the next whole month of shows sat in silence, without saying a word.

This brought about a very bad consequence for the writer. I was aware of what Andy Warhol had said about 15 minutes of fame and I lost all privacy, with people in the street, buses, everywhere making signs of recognition or just stopping me and asking me questions, a situation that lasted a few weeks but that gradually came to an end, for which I was very grateful.

Very late at night, after the show, many of the panelists got together at a nearby bar and continued discussing what had been mentioned that night.

Once a very well known theosophist, a leading member of the local fraternity, found out about my interest in ancient Egypt and got me

interested in the subject of his beliefs. He proceeded to let me know what they thought about many things starting with the logos that in every solar system controlled the flow of events, all this said as if talking from a high pulpit to a lowly initiate.

When I pressured him asking for further information and the foundation of those beliefs and speculation, he stopped me with a condescending smile saying that my brain might explode if he told me too much, that I had to proceed with caution.

Such arrogance and air of superiority from an obviously well educated older man, who should have known better, forced me to invent an excuse to leave, thanking him for his remarks.

At approximately the same time, a new fraternity became active in Uruguay, New Acropolis, ran by a gentleman and his wife who had founded it in Buenos Aires in 1957. Their purpose seemed to be to learn from the ancients to create a new man free of materialism and lack of spirituality. Ancient Egypt and the pyramids were also mentioned, so when somehow I was invited to attend their public meetings, I accepted.

They had rented a large and stately house in a fashionable part of town, decorated inside with frescoes depicting ancient Greeks in various situations, but I was puzzled to find very prominent at the entrance a big set of fasces, like the ancient Roman ones.

It was only much later that I learnt that their leader had nazi sympathies, something not uncommon in Argentina, that gave asylum to so many war criminal refugees. He was very keen on the classical past and his wife on Indian religion and spirituality.

During his lectures he dwelled on many of the myths so common about the pyramids and other ancient 'mysteries' and in the question period I tried to debunk every one of his statements.

I was surprised that in spite of my comments so clearly against his beliefs, he complimented me on my politeness and welcomed my remarks.

The next time I attended one of their meetings, they handed over a very elegant leaflet listing the members of their board and there I was, listed as First Vicepresident! It was so incredible that I still have it, as undeniable proof of their cheeky and unsolicited attitude.

As was to be expected, I demanded to be erased from such leaflets that compromised my budding academic reputation or I would have to take action on the subject. They did remove my name, but fearful of further undesirable compulsory involvement, I stopped going to their meetings.

When I returned to Uruguay and with my local colleague, Dr. Alberto Bianchi, founded the Uruguayan Institute of Egyptology in 1984, this got quite a bit of exposure in the media and brought us many students, but one day I received a different kind of visitor.

It was a well-dressed gentleman who claimed to be interested in the subject of ancient civilizations and was pleased to see that a new academic institution was now available in the country to pursue such studies.

Then he asked me what I thought of freemasonry and if I was acquainted with their goals, activities and membership requirements.



Ángel Martín Velayos, Serene Emperor  
of the Rosicrucian Order

As politely as I could but in my natural direct style, I told him that in my opinion, it was an anachronistic, obsolete, ridiculous and somewhat dangerous fraternity.

He didn't reply but appeared somewhat startled. Then I took my time to elaborate. Anachronistic because it incorporated speculations from before the time of scientific archaeology that had clarified so many aspects of the ancient past, their heavy emphasis on king Solomon's temple and its construction being, due to lack of any material evidence, no more than a foundational myth, only supported by a literary source. Obsolete because many people before the XX century probably found in such fraternities a place where they could freely discuss subjects without fear of government reprisal but that in our times, it became completely unnecessary. Ridiculous because their initiation and other rites and ceremonies require people to dress in ways that would embarrass them to display themselves elsewhere, bandaging their recruits' eyes so that later on they could 'come to the light' of their teachings. Somewhat dangerous because the duty of members to stand by their brothers in time of need could be a source of much corruption and deviations of fair procedure, as well as the very sad result of extreme rituals that in the United States ended in the accidental death of initiates.

When I finished, my visitor didn't comment, just got up, made an excuse that he had to be elsewhere and left. I suspected I had blown my chances to join and probably in time become a master or grand master grade 33, but such is life.

My other experiences with brothers turned up not to be more favourable. I never listen to the radio but my wife does. One day she came to where I was and told me that someone was being interviewed about ancient Egypt.

I hurried to listen and found out that he was an engineer, famous in the country for his articles in the media on science, and also the son of a very prominent local mason, as well as being a member of the National Academy of Letters, that had just returned from his first trip to Egypt and was sharing his experiences.

He was telling the public that the ancient Egyptians wrote in a sort of alphabet already from the earliest times. The moment I heard such nonsense, I ran to the nearest telephone and called the radio. During a short break I told the interviewer that the information being transmitted was inaccurate. He called the interviewee who asked me

who I was and why I disagreed, since he had seen examples of texts being alphabetic. Then he put me to the test by asking me if I knew what a nilometer was. I was becoming somewhat irritated but I answered his question and could finally convince him of his mistake.

The interviewer, who was also listening to our short conversation, quickly recruited me to go the next week to clarify the subject and correct any possible misconceptions.

The next day this engineer was at the door of our Institute and applied to join so that he could have access to our institutional library. He paid his dues, borrowed some books and stopped coming. It left me wondering if it was not all to moderate my future comments on the matter in the radio the following week.

But this was not the end of this curious situation. Years later this engineer published a series of big very ambitious volumes on the history of man through the ages. My wife bought me the volume that had the title *The dance of Shiva, The birth of class societies*. The back cover described the book as 'perhaps the most ambitious project by a Uruguayan intellectual: the reinterpretation of the history of mankind'.

I was very impressed by it all and hurried to the part in which he discussed ancient Egypt, to find that the same mistakes I hoped I had clarified before were repeated here, the ancient Egyptians writing in a form of alphabet, with the aggravated assertion that determinative signs were included in the middle of words, not at the end, even providing a picture with an example. Also that the hyksos who invaded Egypt were Jews (not Hebrews), something nobody could possibly say or write in academia, as well as telling us very convinced that the ancient king Akhenaten was a monotheist, ignoring all the evidence to the contrary and that it is a very contested opinion in egyptology. Not a word on our current knowledge about the birth of class society in Egypt, a subject on which I myself have carried out a lot of research and that is part of the title of his book. An 800 page supposedly erudite display of no more than nonsense that has been highly praised by some local reviewers.

The following example has to do with a very famous local writer who has published a series of historical novels. She is also a mason. Having conceived the idea of writing something about ancient Egypt, the result was a book bearing the title When the Hamsin is blowing.

One day she came to our Institute with her boyfriend at the time, then Director of the National Library, to ask our opinion on the subject of her book. She listened to our suggestions to stick to current knowledge readily available in books written by accredited scholars and we offered to review her manuscript at no cost to her, before publishing it.

As with so many overconfident authors, she decided she didn't need our opinion, probably any of her lodge masters was more than adequate for the purpose, and went to print without consulting us.

The result was that the novel, although well written due to the author's natural talent, tells her readers that in a late Old Kingdom library in Egypt books made with parchment are kept rather than the real papyrus used by the ancient Egyptians, she mentions an ancient character of her book who was a 'Maä-kbe-rou' (in fact, she probably meant a maat-kherou), not someone dead and found justified in the Osiris judgement but someone very wise and also very alive and kicking, a reference is included to the number of Egyptian hieroglyphs, that a human life would not allow learning them all (they are actually about 700, incorporating very late additions, only a few

thousand), a contemporary Egyptian trying to manufacture gold using other minerals, a sort of early alchemy, concept so dear to esoteric people, while gold was readily available for the taking from the mines, no need for any alchemy to procure it, the mention of queen Nitocris as the first queen of Egypt when already in the First Dynasty a queen reigned and was included in the contemporary official lists as such, an Old Kingdom pharaoh worshipping the god Amun as a prominent contemporary god, a long list of inaccuracies that could have been avoided.

When I confronted the author with all this, she replied that she had been advised by Zahi Hawass and also by other people. Regardless of who had reviewed her manuscript, he or she did her no favour.

Shortly after the author was celebrated at a ceremony that took place at the Uruguayan Houses of Parliament, a very beautiful building. I was invited to attend and among the numerous public I recognized the then Egyptian ambassador and the consul. When they saw me they approached me and begged me not to say anything about her book on that occasion, to which I readily agreed.

But being a mason, she couldn't help talking very well of the work of fraternities, using the word 'brotherhoods', which to the Egyptian government is like talking of terrorism in view of their problems with the Muslim Brotherhood. Talk of putting your foot (and perhaps the whole leg) in it by using the wrong word at the wrong time.

But there is no doubt that being a mason anywhere has its advantages.

I remember that at a local embassy they had an employee who had an impressive curriculum but wasn't much fond of work, so after quite a while, the diplomats decided that he had to go.

He had mentioned to the other employees that he was a mason and that he was very proud of that.

At embassies the work is not usually very demanding and an employee has to be very wanting in basic skills or application to be fired.

But in this case this was about to happen and the brother was aware of the impending dismissal.

One day he went to work and told the other employees that he was going to quit. He had found another, better, job.

They were very surprised and asked where. He told them that it was in the local government, at the office of planning and budget management.

This was the ideal solution for the diplomats who could avoid the unpleasant experience of firing a local employee, but perhaps not so good for the government.

Another painful example of disinformation took place at a lecture sponsored by the local Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I was invited to attend and I noticed that several people from the local Egyptian embassy were also present.

The speaker was the wife of a former Uruguayan ambassador in Egypt and was going to talk about the ancient past of that country. She started by praising the late founder of New Acropolis, whom I mentioned above, as a fountain of wisdom and from whom she had learnt so much. Her talk lasted two hours and included such nonsense as telling us that the ancient Egyptians called their fertile

valley, the Red Land, and the deserts at both sides of the river, the Black Land, together with other misconceptions and myths that she had probably learnt from her much admired master.

After what appeared to be an endless speech, I had to point out some her misunderstandings and asked if she was aware that almost all she had said was to the contrary of what is taught at every university in the world.

Her reply was that orthodox scholarship is very narrow-minded and that we have to explore other methods to acquire real knowledge.

I said no more and as soon as it was polite to leave, I made my way to the exit, but not before the people from the Egyptian embassy had caught up with me and asked: What did you think of this lecture, professor Castillos? They laughed at my gesture of impotence and despair and had a good time at my expense.

Walking along a street near downtown Montevideo I saw that in a house there was a notice board outside. It invited passersby to a lecture on the mysteries of Egyptian mummies. The organizing institution had a pompous name: Gnostic Association of

Anthropological and Cultural Studies. In other words, it was just a gnostic fraternity.

My curiosity was aroused and I decided to attend. Many other people were similarly attracted and the room was full. The speaker was a young man who had obviously been well trained because he had perfect diction and a powerful and eloquent delivery.

But what he was saying was something else. He informed us that under the Giza pyramids in Egypt a group of mummies of very special men were sleeping and would soon wake up to illuminate the world with their wisdom. He also spoke of the city of Cairo as existing already in the time of the pharaohs.

When the question period came there was no time for them, and the speaker invited the public to remain to ask questions from other trained members and have the chance to sign up for courses or further lectures.

I left surprised at the contrast between the professional presentation and the ignorance revealed by its contents, but somehow this



On another order of esoteric flights of imagination involving ancient Egypt, the mormon church provides a good example. Its founding prophet, Joseph Smith, was a mason and he lived and preached just after Champollion had deciphered the Egyptian hieroglyphs.

It is no accident that the Book of Mormon, that according to the prophet was found by him written on golden plates in a language that he called 'reformed Egyptian', although the few examples of such a script found in promotional posters published by the early church look nothing even close to any ancient Egyptian script.

Then the prophet came into possession of some ancient Egyptian objects, some of them inscribed and decorated, which he also translated into other holy books of the mormon church.

Not that such translations had anything to do with what a trained egyptologist would come up with, but instead pseudo-biblical events and teachings that have come down to us as part of the so-called Pearl of Great Price.

I felt compelled to publish years ago in the internet a critical opinion of such renderings, which led to some debates with mormons, who defended the to me, bogus translations.

One of those was a professor at Brigham Young university who I already knew as a fellow egyptologist. We never engaged in formal debate on the subject, perhaps thinking that it might be fruitless, since it is very difficult to invalidate matters of faith regardless of how much evidence and reasoning you may bring up.

We had actually never met, but at a dinner organized by an egyptological institution we found ourselves sitting next to each other at the table. I cannot say if this was done on purpose or not, but we were discreetly observed perhaps to see what could possibly happen in view of our widely opposing views on that very delicate subject.

However we got along fine, carefully avoiding certain topics. I was aware of his work as an egyptologist and had great respect for his ability and expertise in all but one aspect of our field.

I remember that once an Australian ex-mormon wrote to me asking my opinion as to whether this colleague was a competent

egyptologist or not, and I had to reply that as far as I knew, he was, but perhaps biased in certain subjects due to his faith.

That this can happen in spite of any scholar's best intentions was proved by some experiences I had during my work as an egyptologist.

On one occasion I took part in a symposium with other colleagues, among them another very competent egyptologist who was also a professor at Brigham Young university.

At the end there was a general question period from the public and I was asked about Bauval's theory that the Giza pyramids were meant to reproduce on the ground the disposition of stars in the Orion constellation.

I gave the major reasons why this theory didn't hold any water and I could tell that my mormon colleague disagreed with my remarks.

He then spoke and said that it was clear that the ancient Egyptians had a plan for the disposition of the monuments in that place, something with which I also agreed, but definitely not Bauval's theory.

To what an extent faith or any deep belief can interfere with an objective and scientific evaluation of any historical event is also present in some scholarly publications.

For instance, an evangelical egyptologist wrote not long ago in a book having to do with king Akhenaten's religious revolution that he had probably had an experience similar to that of St. Paul on his way to Damascus, hardly what we could call a scholarly argument.

As we have seen, there are a host of possible reasons for people with certain beliefs and traditions to distort known facts about ancient Egypt, replacing them with what suits their fancy, but when this is transmitted to the public it becomes in my mind examples of irresponsible behaviour.



## **ECCENTRICS**

During the last few decades a Spanish gentleman, who has a degree in history from a Spanish university, has become quite famous there with frequent interviews in the media of the country, has written some novels dealing with ancient Egypt and enjoys quite a following.

What many of his fans probably don't know is that this same person took part as organizer in UFO sightings in Spain and wrote in his webpages that most probably these phenomena were also observed in ancient Egypt.

He believes that what academic egyptology teaches is not always right, as I discovered when an amateur group in Montevideo, bearing the pompous pseudo-academic name of Society for the Study of

Ancient History, invited him to visit and speak at a local venue on the great sphinx of Giza.

The public found out through him that this sphinx was much older, maybe up to ten or twelve thousand years old and was built by some people we know little about who left absolutely no trace of its existence in Egypt (Atlanteans perhaps?). A firm believer in Bauval's Orion theory that nobody in academia even mentions nowadays as well as providing evidence for a second great sphinx in Giza according to the views of .... a local tour guide.

How can anybody conciliate a university education with all sorts of esoteric and fringe theories and speculations and UFO sightings, is a real mystery very hard to solve.

And this leads me to mention a famous local master who also uses ancient Egypt as a reference for his teachings.



He built a small pyramid in one of the fashionable seaside resorts of Uruguay in which he treated people for a number of ailments. His mystic system was called Dabraka and had as a guide an ancient Egyptian priestess with the name of Astenkeph, which sounds as Egyptian as Marilyn Monroe.

They performed a tree dance called Kabaetz, also taken from ancient Egypt, that allowed the souls of those who participated to attain eternal love.

One of her disciples took up and expanded these views conceiving something even more mystic called Kabash, according to her, an ancient Egyptian priestly tradition that led to a deep knowledge of magic and superior wisdom.

She works as a healer, part of the vast legion of such people who exploit the needs of so many lost souls or terminal patients who desperately seek any kind of assistance to escape their predicament.

Where we as egyptologists in Uruguay come into the picture is that this mystic had a sister who joined our Institute as a student in what was a short passage, since she obviously didn't find with us the special kind of 'wisdom' they strive for.

Another unpleasant situation involved this very local mystic. I was reading once a very nicely printed regular supplement published by a major Uruguayan newspaper devoted to the care of pets and under the professional orientation of a doctor in veterinarian science, graduated at the state university.

The mystic happened to be a collaborator in the supplement and practiced for a fee something called ancient Egyptian acupuncture, but with the variation that the needles, far from being inserted in the animal's body, were just placed on the skin in order to cure many ailments.

This was too much. That a professional accepted the help of a mystic to rip off people and convince them that their pets were well looked after and all that invoking a false ancient Egyptian medical practice, could not be tolerated.

I not only published a letter in the newspaper denouncing this but also got in touch with the state university to find out if this was what was been taught there.

The immediate result was that the supplement was no longer published, although neither the newspaper nor the university made public any apology or statement regretting the abuse.

One could say, what poor teaching we provide that we could not persuade her and others like her, that hers was the wrong approach to get to truly know the ancient Egyptian civilization.

But we derive some consolation from knowing that there are worse cases.

It all started with an exchange online that I had with a lady who expressed a devotion for the Egyptian goddess Isis. With the mindset that the ancient Egyptian religion died of unnatural causes long ago, after severe Christian persecution, I asked if she was jesting.

Far from it, she replied quite indignant that I was offending her since she owed her current well being to the love of her great mother Isis.

I made my apologies and was left puzzled at what she was talking about. Then after some research, I could find out.

A student years ago graduated at the University of Chicago with an MA in egyptology and then evolved (?) into founding a new sect called Kemetic of which she is the High Priestess, made up of people who worship the ancient Egyptian gods.

A partial explanation could be that she is known to have been previously involved in the Wicca movement that had to do with modern witches and their cult of nature.

A puzzling situation that leads one to think that after all the academic requirements to obtain a BA and then an MA at a very prestigious university, some people still retain unsubstantiated concepts and indulge in bizarre practices.



It is very difficult to persuade these people otherwise and equally difficult it must be for them to understand that far from learning about ancient Egypt through their system, they are distorting all we know about them and getting an imaginative version that can hardly help them in any way.

Worse still, when these Kemetics go to Egypt, get dressed up like they think the ancients did, and perform rites in the monuments, they are endangering their survival.

The islamic religion started its dates from the flight by the prophet threatened by the idolatry practiced by people at the time, so it is abhorred by any true muslim.

Already seeing the tourists taking photos and showing great reverence for the images of ancient gods can be and I suspect it is, misinterpreted by fundamentalists in the country as a return to the ancient idolatry, but seeing groups of western Kemetics actually worshiping in the temples seals the deal for them that it is something that must be stopped.

And the most drastic way to do so would be to destroy the object of all that worship, which with the example of what happened in Afghanistan and Syria, bodes ill for the monuments we try to preserve for posterity.





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References of the author:

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(seek there also the folder Trajectory)