



Trier, 18 November 2019

Review of the Habilitation dissertation of Dr. Filip Coppens:

“Continuity, discontinuity and change.

Reflections on Egyptian temples in the Ptolemaic and Roman Era”.

Dr. Coppens has submitted a substantial Habilitation dissertation of 374 pages, which contains fifteen articles or chapters previously published in academic books and journals.¹ These fifteen articles are arranged in four sections, which are preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion and a bibliography.

The candidate is well-known in the academic community through various means, first and foremost through the published version of his PhD dissertation “The wabet. Tradition and innovation in temples of the Ptolemaic and Roman period” (2007), but also through his articles and his regular presentations at conferences, especially those dedicated to the ancient Egyptian royal ideology, of which he has organised a meeting himself in Prague in 2013 (proceedings published in 2015), together with Jiří Janák and Hana Vymazalová, with whom he has also co-authored several articles submitted in his dissertation. He is established in the Egyptological community and known for presenting well-researched contributions, always keen on discussing the aspects and on sharing information. It is therefore not surprising that he now wants to take the next step and prepare for a senior grade.

The work of Filip Coppens focusses around the world of the Egyptian temples of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods and is in most aspects, either directly or indirectly, connected with his research on the *wabet*, a specific architectural unit so significant in the temples from the Thirtieth Dynasty onwards. Each *wabet* is decorated in an intricate way, which he deciphered in its visual and textual expressions and which he has been following up – after the publication of his dissertation – in a variety of articles or book chapters, most of which are presented as the cumulative Habilitation dissertation.

Introduction:

His commentaries in the Introduction (pp. 7–42) set the context and his aims, clearly recognising and explaining the multicultural environment of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, which had its influence on the more traditional world of the temples and native priests. The candidate uses several times the phrase “foreign power”, “foreigners”, etc. when relating to the Ptolemaic dynasty (e.g., p. 11), which is generally used in Egyptology and, at least in regard to the origin, correct, but deserves more attention. Alexander the Great conquered Egypt and the known (at least at his time) world. Upon his death his Macedonian generals divided his empire and created subsequently the Hellenistic kingdoms, such as

¹ It would have been useful to have an overview of when and where the chapters have been published. The candidate provides this information only at the beginning of each chapter.

Ptolemaic Egypt. So the Ptolemies were a foreign power, ruling for close to 300 years, thus being the longest ruling dynasty of ancient Egypt. But for how long does one regard a power as foreign? What are the criteria? The ancient Egyptian culture forms the past which the Ptolemies, these Mediterranean rulers of Egypt with Macedonian ancestry, referred to in different ways, thus being challenged to self-reflection, which is, in some aspects, addressed in the dissertation. For the Ptolemies, Egypt was now part of their own origin in which they also recognised the foreign elements. In contrast, when Octavian, the later emperor Augustus, conquered Egypt, the land by the Nile developed into an icon of subjugated power. The Romans were depicted in the guise of pharaohs, as were the Ptolemies, but the latter lived in Egypt and ruled from Alexandria. The needs and perception of the Ptolemies varied fundamentally from that of Rome. These conceptual ideas could be explored and verified for the construction of a cultural concept in Ptolemaic Egypt.

Another aspect is, rather strikingly, completely excluded, which is the role played by the Ptolemaic queens, a long line of politically savvy and powerful women. It was for Arsinoe II, wife and sister of Ptolemy II, that the ruler cult was introduced in the Egyptian temples, with very far-reaching effects on the entire dynasty. Indirectly, the royal women had decisive influence on the development of the temple decoration and the goddesses such as Isis and Hathor, which is only starting to get noticed on a larger scale, although Jan Quaegebeur, Filip Coppens's professor at the KU Leuven, published already some break-through and fundamental ideas from the late 1970s to the 1990s, followed by others. Filip Coppens correctly describes on p. 278 the goddess Isis as the queen of Upper and Lower Egypt, which is a royal title. And indeed, Arsinoe II and her epithets had a large influence on Isis (see Minas-Nerpel, in: *Ancient Society* 49: 141–83). The dynasty shaped not only the ruler cult, but also the understanding of the divine world. It was not a one-way process, as the candidate alludes to in his last chapter (no. 15), but limited to the king. Especially in Philae, the temple of Isis was used to elevate Arsinoe II, and this might have been one of the reasons which could have caused the huge developments in Philae under this king (including the *wabet*).

I do not mention these points in order to argue against the candidate's promotion and successful completion of the Habilitation process – far from it! – but rather to raise some awareness which points might be useful to address in order to receive an even fuller picture of the temples and their decoration, perhaps with an additional theoretical approach. These areas could be vital for his overarching topic of “continuity, discontinuity and change”.

Chapters:

The chapters are all organized around the temples, in particular the *wabet* as a starting point or point of reference, radiating into different areas: Section I “Setting the stage” focusses in four chapters (nos. 1–4) on a geographical viewpoint, the Theban area, and on temple architecture. The candidate demonstrates his deep knowledge of Thebes in the late periods and various architectural points, including the tombs and their “Lichthof”, which seems to be influenced by the open court of the *wabet* and *vice versa*. His argumentation is logic, and it becomes obvious that he is an expert in this area.

Section II “Purifying and provisioning the temple” with its four chapters (nos. 5–8) builds upon Section I, of which the first (chapter 5) has been published together with Hana Vymazalová, discussing medicine and magic, which is a very interesting addition to the topics on which the author otherwise concentrates. As in the following two chapters (nos. 6 and 7), the Nile water plays an important role besides the medical instruments. On p. 140, I would have expected a more detailed discussion of the date of the scene in question in Kom Ombo (Marc Aurel?). Although the author is very knowledgeable in the ways how temples are decorated, he almost stops short in this instance when looking at the neighbouring scenes. The following two chapters (nos. 6 and 7), on the other hand, are very detailed and show how deeply the candidate is acquainted with the inscriptions and reliefs that decorate the late temples. He recognised the intricate word plays (pp. 155–6, 175), which would warrant, in the future, a larger research project together with other such word plays. As for the analysis of the *keku* or the Nile inundation of “darkness”, it occurs only seven times (see pp. 167, 176), but other waters more often. So why is there such a limited number, and why was it not used in other enumerations?

His second case, the *hehu* (infinity)-water, appears much more often. The last chapter (no. 8), which deals with the offering of linen and oil, once again alludes also to word plays (p. 188), allowing further glimpses into a topic which has been neglected so far.

Section III “Daily cult, feast, and festivals” comprises three chapters (nos. 9–11), of which the last one (no. 11), again published with Hana Vymazalová, also discusses linen as does chapter 8. This is a fruitful cooperation since she brings the detailed knowledge of the Old Kingdom, and indeed, the two authors make very interesting first observations about a possible shared relation of the Abusir-papyri and the rituals dating roughly two millennia later. Chapters 9 and 10 deal with temple festivals. While no. 9 is rather general and useful as an introduction, no. 10 is very specific and highlights one particular feast in a clear manner.

Section IV “Kingship of God and Man” comprises four chapters (nos. 12–15), which deal with a time period from the Old Kingdom to the Roman period. Chapter 12, co-authored with Jiří Janák, focusses on two periods, the “near king” of the Amarna period (by Jiří Janák) and foreign kings as “distant king” (by Filip Coppens). This works very well in its contrasting manner, but the conclusion is rather short. Chapter 13 is, once again, co-authored with Jiří Janák, but this time, they have worked together on the entire article, sharing their knowledge, which results in a useful overview of “The Ogdoad and Divine Kingship in Dendara”.

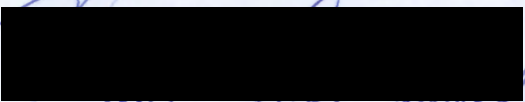
Chapter 14 “Long live the king” is presented by the candidate in co-operation with Hana Vymazalová, once again touching upon the Old Kingdom administrative papyri from Abusir. One would have liked to see this article grouped with chapter 11 of Section III, because it deals with the same larger topic of possible precursors of rites, which are present in the late temples. The authors mention that these are only the first steps of a larger research topic, which is indeed be very promising.

Chapter 15 with its discussion of the *proskynesis* is very detailed and full of important observations for the dynastic developments over almost 300 years (and the older periods before as precursors). The author has once again established a topic which warrants for much more research.

Conclusion:

The conclusion (pp. 335–8) is rather short. It does round the picture and addresses important points, but the reader would have wished for a bit more in regard to reviewing the ideas which have been followed over many years. However, the candidate makes it clear with the selection of articles and book chapters which he has presented that he is an experienced and well-established Egyptologist, who not only convinces with his analytical abilities, but also recognises important developments and major areas of future research, while at the same time being dedicated to precise details, all of which is a *conditio sine qua non* for a Habilitation. He concentrates very clearly on the later periods of Egyptian history, without neglecting the earlier ones when researching for the roots of certain developments. He cooperates in areas which are outside his own direct expertise to reach a maximum of input and to put his results in a larger context.

Filip Coppens’s written work and his academic approaches clearly qualify him, in my eyes, for being awarded the Habilitation degree, so that I fully support his application.


.....
(Prof. Dr. Martina Minas-Nerpel)