



Fig. 1 Ahmad El-Sawi (Archive of CIE)

In memoriam Ahmad El-Sawi

Zahi Hawass

Ahmad El-Sawi was one of the greatest Egyptian archaeologists. His recent passing away was a great loss for his colleagues, friends, and students. I myself had a special relationship with him, as he was one of my best friends in this field. I first met this man in 1969, when I had just started working in the Egyptian Antiquities Service (now the Ministry of Antiquities). El-Sawi was one of a few Egyptian Egyptologists who was a specialist in archaeological techniques. He worked and excavated at many sites, such as Tell el-Basta and in Nubia, and we continued our work together at the site of Kom Abou Bellou. We shared one room during the excavations and we became like brothers.

Ahmad El-Sawi was born in El-Waraq, a district of Embaba in Giza. His father was a greatly respected man, and he decided to send his son to study archaeology at Ain Shams University in 1957. He was influenced by his relative Abdel Hamid Zayed, who was the first in the family to study archaeology. At that time, the Director of Ain Shams University was a famous Egyptologist Ahmad Badawy.

His cousin, the late Abdel Hamid Zayed, was an archaeologist working at the sites of Minia and Sohag before he started teaching at the university. Doctor Zayed married the sister of one of our most renowned Egyptologists, Gamal Mokhtar, who served as the Head of the Egyptian Antiquities Service for a long time and accomplished impressive projects for Egypt. He also participated in the salvage

campaign of the temples of Abu Simbel, whose discovery we celebrate the two hundredth anniversary this year. But Mokhtar's most important achievement was the elevation of the Antiquities Service from the local level to the international level.

El-Sawi began his career as an inspector of antiquities, then a chief inspector, after which he became the Director of the Technical Office, Director of the Scientific Documentation, Director of Excavations and Inspectorates, and at last, Vice Director of the section of Egyptian archaeology. Finally, he became the Director of the Pharaonic Section.

He carried out a lot of significant research: he excavated and recorded the antiquities, supervised both foreign and

Egyptian expeditions, as well as the salvage archaeological campaign of Nubia. He participated in the rescue and transfer of the two temples of Ramses II and Nefertari at Abu Simbel.

When I first met Ahmad El-Sawi, I found a young man who was very decent, handsome, and well dressed. He was extremely nice to me and gave me good advice. He was working at that time as a member of the Excavation Department and was exploring Tell el-Basta, assisting the accomplished excavator Shafik Farid. He showed me that the field of excavation is very exciting and explained the importance of Tell el-Basta as the religious center of the goddess Bastet, the cat-headed goddess. The team was able to discover a large cemetery of the cat goddess dated to the Old Kingdom and other cemeteries of other periods. They also found temples for the worship of Bastet.

During my early career, I left Cairo to work at the site of Tuna el-Gebel and others, and then returned to Alexandria because I was chosen to work at the site of Kom Abu Bello. I worked for a few years there under the supervision of Shafik Farid and Abdel Hafi Abdel-Aal. When these archaeologists retired, El-Sawi was appointed the director of the excavation, and I was appointed to be his assistant. Many people thought that we would not be able to work together and that we would fight. But, from the first day, we became close friends.

There were ten members of the expedition, and we all lived in a house rented in a village called Nasser Moustafa, part of El-Tarna village in the Delta. The project was

initiated by the Ministry of Irrigation in order to dig out a canal called "El-Riah El-Nassery" (the Nasser Canal). This excavation was an extensive salvage operation aiming to explore the route of the canal that would run through the archaeological site. We made major discoveries in the six-kilometer-long stretch that we excavated. We used to get up at 6 AM and return back to the house in the late afternoon. I learned a lot from Ahmad El-Sawi. He was decent, quiet, and a good leader. He was fair to all his colleagues and to the workmen, about fifty of them who came from the village of Quft, located north of Luxor. All the Quft workmen, such as *reis* Doctor, Mohamed Yassein, *reis* Abdel Wahab Hamed and others, were trained in the archaeological techniques by many prominent foreign archaeologists. All of them had a great love and respect for Ahmad El-Sawi.

The pharaonic town of that site, which was called "Mafket", grew into an important trading centre called Terenuthis during the Graeco-Roman Period. In the course of El-Sawi's excavation, we were able to record many tombs dated to this period, as well as traces of a temple that belonged to the Greek god Apollo. We uncovered and recorded more than six thousand tombs dated from approximately 300 BC to the fourth century AD. Most of the tombs had rectangular or square superstructures with barrel-vaulted roofs, and rested on platforms. In my book, *Secrets from the Sand*, I acknowledged how much I learned from El-Sawi. I do not think that the Egyptian Antiquities Service ever had such a well-organized expedition like that particular one.



Fig. 2 Ahmad El-Sawi in front of the relief with war prisoners in the temple of Ramesses II in Abydos (Archive of CIE)

One of El-Sawi's and my most important achievements was when the storage magazines of Giza were robbed. Police general Aouda Ahmad Aouda asked Ahmad El-Sawi to cooperate with the officers of the Giza Police Station. El-Sawi was talented in a way that he could make people tell him secrets, thus he went to the village of Nazlet El-Semman and questioned the people there. He was able to discover that the magazines' robbers had placed all the boxes that contained the artefacts inside the canal. As a result, we went with the police and recovered all the stolen objects. It was a great victory for El-Sawi.

During our exploration, El-Sawi met Miroslav Verner, who was excavating in Abusir at that time. Verner had a great respect for El-Sawi and his archaeological work and discoveries at Tell el-Basta. His finds there could shed more light on the history of the site and the cult of the cat goddess Bastet. Consequently, the two archaeologists agreed that El-Sawi should go to Prague and finish his doctoral studies there. He was granted a scholarship from the Charles University in Prague and during his two study stays at the university, he completed his monograph on Tell el-Basta and defended his PhD. dissertation.

In my article in *El-Masry El-Youm* (in Arabic) about this great man, Ahmad El-Sawi, I wrote that he was one of the great persons who have contributed much to the fields of archaeology and history. The achievements of such people are seen through their scientific articles and books on the history of the pharaohs and through their archaeological discoveries.

I briefly mentioned a story at the beginning of the article showing how I met Ahmad El-Sawi in 1969. At that time, the headquarters of the Egyptian Antiquities Service were located behind the Cairo Museum and we were at an office called the Department of Excavations and Inspectorates. The Department of Drawings was on the same floor as our department, and a famous musician Ahmed Sidky also worked here. I was twenty years old when I first started working for the Antiquities Service. I saw employees signing the attendance sheets for others who were not there, and other employees who came at 9 AM and left after two hours, while others stayed all day reading the newspapers. This is why I decided to leave the Antiquities Service. However, I failed to go to any place else. Meeting Ahmad El-Sawi after attempting to leave and returning to the same building, heartbroken, was a good thing that happened to me.

Ahmad El-Sawi continued to work hard and with honour in those difficult times in the Egyptian Antiquities Service and left a great mark on the field of excavation. He trained many young archaeologists, and I was one of them. He was a symbol to all of us, and moreover, he was a young and fine-looking man.

Unluckily, when Ahmad El-Sawi came back from Prague, his enemies started to plot against him. I call these people friends of the god Seth, the god of evil. Some of his colleagues, who were dishonest and disliked by many people, were afraid of the rise of El-Sawi. He was the only one capable to be appointed the Head of the Egyptian Antiquities Service because he had worked his way up to this position since his years as an inspector in the field. He was a great personality and, moreover, held a doctorate

degree. But the friends of Seth were able to interfere and stop Farouk Hosni, the then Minister of Culture, from appointing El-Sawi as the director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service.

El-Sawi decided that he could not live all his life fighting those people and he made the decision to leave the organization and become a lecturer of archeology at Sohag University at his age of fifty. He was promoted to assistant professor and later to a professor in 1988. He also became the President of the Egyptian Archaeology Department that he had created at the university; furthermore, in 1990, he became the Dean of the Faculty of Arts. Finally, he was promoted to the Head of the Pharaonic and Graeco-Roman Department and also served as the Dean of the Cairo Institute for Tourism Industry in El-Moqattam, Cairo.

He published many articles and books on Egyptology, including the previously mentioned monograph on Tell el-Basta which is very important for the history and archaeology of the site and better understanding of the cemetery of cats, the sacred animal of the goddess Bastet. He also published a book in German about one of the most beautiful tomb dated to 26th Dynasty that was built for the Vizier of Lower Egypt Panehsy during the reign of King Psammetik I. Very notable are his many articles about the site of Kom Abu Bello, especially the cemetery of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty and love. Together we found six beautiful statues made of faience for Aphrodite at that site. Simultaneously with the Abu Bello excavations, El-Sawi was participating in all the Scientific Department's activities, and especially, he was a member of the Permanent Committee of the Egyptian Antiquities Service.

I was very happy to honour this great man when I became the Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities. Therefore, I decided that we should prepare a volume in his honour. We also commemorated him at the feast of archaeologists, an annual event in which we award esteemed archaeologists.

I would like to state two important points here. Ahmad El-Sawi cared deeply for all the Czech archaeologists and Egyptologists, and he was ready at any time to protect them from any evil act. He was an honest defender who acted for the benefit of the members of the Charles University in Prague. The second point is that Miroslav Verner was a close friend to Ahmad El-Sawi and used to visit him and his family at his house in Heliopolis very often. Miroslav Bárta and Mohamed Megahed also enjoyed Ahmad El-Sawi's friendship and called him all the time.

I called him all the time, until I found out from his wonderful wife, Madame Wafaa, that he had become very sick and began losing his memory. One day, I received a phone call from Doctor Hassan Selim, one of his students, to tell me that El-Sawi had passed away on 30th of September. I went to the mosque in the 6th of October City near to his family tomb to pray for him and say goodbye. I was touched to see all of his students at the mosque and saw tears in their eyes because El-Sawi loved all of them. I think archaeology has lost a great scholar, but he will always be remembered by his students and friends.

Zahi Hawass

Former Egyptian Minister of Antiquities