

Studying the Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts in the Era of Digital Humanities:

An Interview with Carlos Gracia Zamacona



Carlos Gracia Zamacona in Edinburgh (2024).

The Coffin Texts are one of the most important sources for revealing the beliefs ancient Egyptians had on their afterlife, and more generally, provide great information about their cult. We interviewed Carlos Gracia Zamacona, Egyptologist from the Universidad de Alcalá (Spain), who recently published the book **Los Textos de los Ataúdes del Egipto antiguo: Variabilidad, legitimación y diálogo** in the Ancient Near East Monographs series (ANEM) edited by the Society of Biblical Literature and the CEHAO (see www.uca.edu.ar/anem for an open-access version of the book).

Hello Carlos, thanks for having you in Damqatum. You are an expert in Egyptology and specifically on ancient Egyptian linguistics, which is a highly specific field. How did you get interested on it and where did you study?

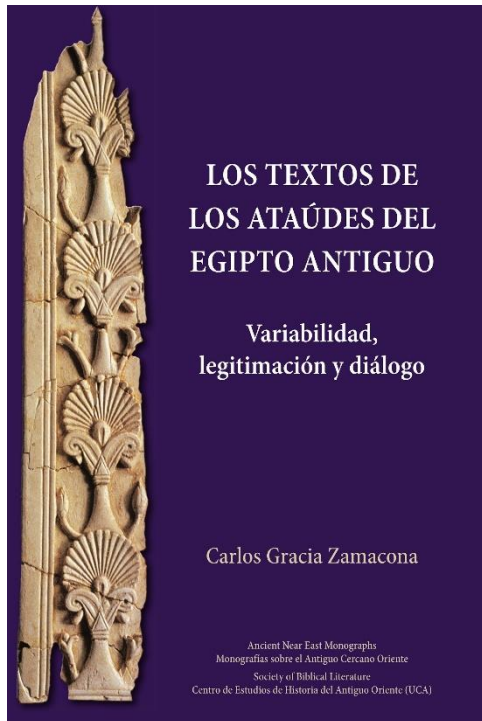
First of all, let me thank you for your interest in my work.

The question is a very good one because I consider myself a historian rather than a linguist. I am primarily interested in the history of ideas, those strange and slow elements that influence us—consciously or not, rationally or not—in how we act, according to or against them. These elements can be active for centuries, even when we have forgotten them and do what we do without knowing why—what we usually call “tradition.”

I clearly remember starting to study linguistics when I became interested in the Coffin Texts. There were many things I did not understand in those texts. Many things simply did not fit. In the first place, the contents. If you compare the modern translations and interpretations available, they considerably differ. Sometimes, they are so different that you would say they do not refer to the same original text. As a historian, this made me think that we had a problem with the sources, and that I would need to understand the texts, to an acceptable level, before I could understand the culture that produced them. So I started to do linguistics out of ignorance or—if you prefer a kinder word—curiosity.

That was in the early nineties. I was working then at a high school in Budapest, teaching history and geography, and attended the Middle Egyptian and Hieratic courses by Ulrich Luft at

the ELTE University. I told him I wanted to do a PhD in Egyptology and was very interested in the language. He suggested I contact Pascal Vernus, and that is how it all started. After more than thirty years of working with these texts, I still feel the same hunger for knowledge, so I suppose I will keep doing the same while still hungry.



Cover of [Los textos de los ataúdes del Egipto Antiguo](#)
(ANEM 32)

You have just published the book *Los textos de los ataúdes del Egipto Antiguo* in our ANEM monograph series. Why did you write the book and what are its main points?

This book is an outcome of the second matter that puzzled me most about the Coffin Texts: why write them on the inside of a coffin, bury it in a tomb underground and shut it forever? According to the Western traditional vision, this would be considered a topic for philology—if you focus on the texts—or archaeology—if you focus on the coffin and tomb—but again, this felt wrong. As a historian, I find this approach too partial. I need a more integral approach that can bring me closer to the persons who created

these captivating objects that look like “tridimensional ideas”. I had never seen the like before and was captivated by it. It took me many years and a lot of effort to open this new line of research, of which the book you mention is the first main outcome. Anyone who looks for answers in this book will be disappointed. The book opens a new path of analysis and asks questions about the material and ourselves as interpreters of the past.

During the last years you have been working in the Mortexvar database (<http://database.mortexvar.com/>), which according to its website “manages data extracted from the ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts to digitise them, analyse them and make them accessible.” What was your experience in working in this digital humanities project?

To answer the two big questions I have just mentioned, I needed empirical ground. I am not too fond of approaches that focus on making sense of data according to a previous *prêt-à-porter* frame. The database allowed me to check the questions I was interested in within a frame that I felt was real: the text corpus. I am not saying that all interpretations based on such an approach are correct—far from that—but I am convinced that the approach is fruitful. And considering the difficulty of the material we are discussing, that is good enough for me.

The best thing about the MORTEXVAR project was working with an interdisciplinary and international team and a populated network of collaborators. I had the chance to discuss the problems these texts pose and possible solutions with several other Egyptologists and colleagues from different disciplines (data management, computational analysis, machine vision, OCR, and natural language processing). These conversations were utterly beneficial in

many senses, mainly because they opened my mind to questions I had never asked myself. In particular, the issues related to the entextualisation (i.e. the instantiation of the texts on specific documents) are virtually unexplored for this corpus' materials. I plan to continue this line of research as thoroughly as I can shortly. In fact, we are about to start two related projects, one in text mining and the other in 3D visualisation, which anyone interested can follow on the MORTEXVAR project website and social media.

One of the most challenging aspects of the MORTEXVAR project was managing the funding. The sheer amount of administrative work involved was often overwhelming. Like many research directors, I found myself juggling multiple responsibilities, from managing the project and conducting research to publishing results, disseminating findings, and teaching and supervising students. At times, it felt like a one-man band, and the pressure was both tiring and stressful.

In the end, I am satisfied with doing something that I hope will last: the MORTEXVAR database will be available for anyone interested in these texts and will remain useful for other people's research.



The [Mortexvar database](http://database.mortexvar.com/)

In your opinion, what is the role of digital humanities in Egyptology and, more broadly, in the studies of the ancient Near East?

You could easily label digital technology in ancient studies as a “telescope to antiquity”. It gives you access to large amounts of data in a structured manner, which allows you to retrieve and manage information meaningfully. The keyword here is “large”. This technology is a magnifier that may propose patterns based on the large amount of data and the structuring criteria so that the researcher can interpret them and find further questions about the material, impossible to spot at first sight. Some Egyptologists consider this technology threatening or pointless, but it is neither. Could you possibly imagine an astronomer thinking of telescopes that way?

Besides, digital technology can compensate for the lack of information due to unfortunate circumstances, including, as the most relevant, destruction of the sources, improper or no publication, or copyright restrictions to their reproduction. Granting access to the sources is essential to meet the Open Science practices, especially in managing the research outputs in line with the FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable) principles, and it is difficult to guess how that would be feasible without digital technology.



The [Red Iberoamericana de Investigadores en Próximo Oriente Antiguo \(RIPOA\)](https://riipoa.web.uah.es/).

You have spent your scholarly career in France, United States, and United Kingdom, but you are now based in Spain. During the last years, you have directed a network of ancient Near Eastern scholars working in Ibero-American countries, the Red Iberoamericana de Investigadores en Próximo Oriente Antiguo (RIPOA, <https://riipoa.web.uah.es/>) What are the pros and cons of doing research in Ibero-America?

That is correct. I also studied Egyptology in Rome and Budapest before going to Paris. In 2020, I started the RIPOA network with Roxana Flammini. Our idea was to connect researchers on Ancient Near East Studies

working in or coming from the Iberoamerican cultural area with a strong interest in the texts and their contexts (material, social, critical and linguistic).

The response was amazing, and the network now has thirty scholars from eleven countries. RIPOA has since organised or participated in several activities, including conferences and seminars, and the publication of a series of monographs, *Estudios Orientales – Monografías RIPOA*, which produces Open Access research works downloadable from the RIPOA website.

The advantage of working within the Iberoamerican area is obvious: the Spanish-Portuguese linguistic continuum and its growing presence in other cultural areas, especially the United States of America. The presence of scientific activities in our research areas and in our languages is, in my opinion, our most important asset, and RIPOA can help to visualise that. The issues, on the other hand, have been well known for a long time: institutional sclerosis, lack of tradition in Near Eastern Studies—which explains the lack of clarity in research quality assessment—, difficult access to sources and bibliography, and lack of funding.

What can Ibero-American scholars contribute to the study of the ancient Near East?

Individually, I think there is no answer to that. I believe that talent is randomly distributed around the world. The real problem resides in getting the chance to devote oneself to these studies, and this is really difficult without an institutional implication and proper assessing criteria. It is the lack of opportunities what risks to hamper the development of ancient Near East studies in our cultural area.

What would you suggest to young people that are thinking in studying Egyptology?

I am not sure I can give useful advice on this. In my case, it was very vocational, so I would say you need to feel it and then do it your way. However, for another person, it can work differently. I think we all would agree in stating that reading English, French, German, and Italian is a minimum, as well as having scholarly training in the language (Old and Middle Egyptian, Late Egyptian, Demotic and Coptic) and material culture, fieldwork

experience, as well as knowledge of other ancient cultures, especially those which were closer to ancient Egypt such as ancient Greece and Mesopotamia.

Well, thanks Carlos for your words. Is there anything else you would like to add that wasn't mentioned?

Thank you for having me.