More than 35 Years in Egyptology: An Interview with Roxana Flammini

Roxana Flammini in Egypt (2023)

She needs little introduction: Roxana Flammini has worked for more than 35 years in Egyptology in Argentina and now has just retired from all her research and teaching positions. More than anyone else, Roxana has promoted the field of ancient Near Eastern studies in Argentina and Latin America, founding the CEHAO in 2002 and its flagship journal **Antiguo Oriente** a year later. Her retirement and recent publication of the book **La Segunda Estela de Kamose: Un estudio integral en contexto** in the Ancient Near East Monograph series is a perfect occasion for interviewing Roxana on the history of her research and the current state of the field.

Roxana, a pleasure having you with us. You have worked for more than 35 years in the field of Egyptology in Argentina and you just retired from your research positions at the National Research Council (CONICET) and your teaching duties at the National University of Lujan. How do you see the state of Egyptology, and of the ancient Near Eastern studies in general, in Argentina? What changes have you seen during this time?

Before we begin, I would like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to share this moment with you. The first question encompasses two issues that share certain commonalities while diverging in other aspects.

I believe that over the last 40 years in Argentina, new areas of study have consolidated—such as Hittitology and studies of peripheral populations outside traditional centers (such as those of the Arabian Desert)—joining the established fields of Assyriology and Biblical Studies. As for Egyptology, it maintains the prominence that began during the era of Abraham Rosenvasser.

Archaeological perspectives have been enriched by specialists working from theoretical frameworks or through the study of ancient scripts.

However, I am concerned by a certain tendency to view linguistic mastery as secondary, prioritizing the construction of theoretical frameworks over the analysis of primary textual sources. I do not wish to be misunderstood: I have spent several years working on theoretical perspectives myself, but I consider theory to be a subsidiary tool to the evidence; that is to say, it must be changed or adjusted if new materials emerge that render a previous interpretation invalid. Unfortunately, some people cling to a pre-constructed theoretical framework and find it very difficult to remain flexible, turning a tool into a dogma to be defended at all costs. I stand very far from that approach, as I believe it stifles critical thinking.

Regarding the changes I have witnessed and experienced, I believe the most significant has been the arrival of the internet and globalization. On one hand, this has granted us access to colleagues from across the globe in record time—now reduced to mere hours. Consequently, access to bibliographical and documentary material has changed substantially. On the other, what has also changed, in my view, is the feasibility of covering vast periods of time in our analysis: the sheer volume of publications appearing today in a wide array of languages necessitates narrowing one's research focus in order to achieve true depth and mastery.

Another issue that I believe deserves close attention is the preponderance of large databases like Scopus and their metrics, which lead researchers to be more concerned with their output volume—specifically articles in Q1 or Q2 journals—than with the actual quality of their work. The famous "publish or perish" paradigm is dominating our disciplines, and I view this with concern. Ultimately, this has become a massive business in which researchers do not truly participate—they simply gain another line on their CV.

This paradigm has many consequences. For instance, to secure a research position at CONICET, the quantity of publications often outweighs their quality (and I say this from experience); I truly hope this changes at some point. It is unacceptable that a peer-reviewed book is valued less than an article in the same condition. As a way of countering this trend, I have dedicated a significant part of my academic life to fostering free, open-access, peer-reviewed monograph series. One of them was precisely ANEM, a pioneering project initiated in 2008. Others include Lecturas Sociales (IICS, Social Sciences Research Institute, UCA) and Estudios Orientales (RIIPOA, Ibero-American Network of Ancient Near Eastern Researchers, University of Alcalá).

Today, we are experiencing another major transformation with the arrival of AI; we shall see how we adapt to its proper use. We'll see what time brings.

There is a lot of interest among people about the history of ancient Egypt, with a current exhibition in the Museo de Bellas Artes having many visitors, plus a couple of other Egyptomania-related attractions in Buenos Aires. How do you explain this attraction? How can we as scholars translate

that interest into a more proper understanding of ancient Egypt?

Ancient Egypt has fascinated generations in the West for several centuries, and Argentina is no exception. As early as the nineteenth century, we can already see the interest that ancient Egypt awakened among the educated sectors of society—an audience drawn not only by the desire for knowledge, but also by the allure of mystery. A civilization capable of building pyramids that have stood for thousands of years, and that granted death a place we find almost inconceivable today, can only inspire genuine curiosity.

Nowadays, the opening of the Grand Museum at Giza is the reason to encourage diverse activities regarding ancient Egypt, renewing the interest in this ancient society. As researchers, our role involves trying to "translate" highly specialized information for the general public, much like a medical researcher would explain the importance of DNA to non-specialists. Many of us have carried out—and continue to carry out—a wide variety of outreach activities: lectures, talks, interviews, and more. In this sense, we can consider ourselves channels that transmit reliable, evidence-based information.

You have done a lot to promote ancient Near Eastern studies in Argentina, particularly with the founding of the CEHAO in 2002 and of the journal Antiguo Oriente in 2003. Tell us how you came up with the idea for these two projects and how you developed them over time.

I began working at the Catholic University of Argentina (UCA) with Graciela Gestoso Singer around 1993, shortly before she moved to Israel, where she later settled. At that time, the History program had recently been reopened, and I quickly recognized it as an open and promising space for developing a field in which the university itself had a clear interest. These ideas were present from the beginning, although it took time for the right conditions to align.

That opportunity finally emerged in the early 2000s. By then, I had gained extensive experience through my work at the Institute of Ancient Near Eastern History (IHAO) at the University of Buenos Aires—where I was trained—as well as through my involvement in CONICET's Egyptology Program (PREDE). This background made it relatively easy to propose the creation of both a research center and an academic journal at UCA, particularly as the university leadership was very receptive to these initiatives.

As a result, the Center for Studies of Ancient Near Eastern History (CEHAO) was founded in 2002. The first issue of the journal Antiguo Oriente followed the next year. The most visible challenge in Argentina—largely due to economic instability, but not only for that reason—was ensuring continuity. While many initiatives faltered under these pressures, I believe a key factor in our success was my leadership philosophy: the set of principles that guided how I formed and managed teams.

From the start, I knew I did not want to remain director of CEHAO or the journal indefinitely. Therefore, I made it a priority to train teams capable of taking over whenever I chose to focus on other projects. Juan Manuel Tebes and Romina Della Casa, for example, were the ones who stepped into those roles, continuing the work I

helped set in motion.

On my side, I have dedicated significant time to building a strong relationship with the Society of Biblical Literature since 2008. In recent years, I have focused on strengthening the first Ibero-American Network of Ancient Near Eastern Researchers (RIIPOA), a collaborative initiative that began as a conversation with Carlos Gracia Zamacona at the University of Alcalá and formally took shape as a network in 2020. Today, the Network brings together more than thirty colleagues from universities and research institutes around the world.

Ultimately, I believe the key to maintaining continuity—beyond financial considerations—is knowing how to build strong teams, learning to navigate inevitable differences, and fostering mutual respect. My approach has always been grounded in a "win-win" philosophy: for things to go well for me, they must also go well for you. I am convinced that this perspective is what allowed these projects to remain active for such a long time, and I am confident they have a promising future ahead.

Of course, when you started these projects, you didn't do it in a vacuum, as professional Egyptology has a long history in Argentina, starting with the work of Abraham Rosenvasser, and later with important scholars like Perla Fuscaldo and Alicia Daneri Rodrigo. What can you tell us about them?

I began my training in 1985, while I was still an undergraduate student at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Buenos Aires. It started mainly with the study of languages taught at the Institute of Ancient Near Eastern History (IHAO). Over time, I began my specialized training under Perla's supervision, with whom I completed my bachelor's thesis. Later, Alicia supervised my doctoral dissertation. Both are scholars who achieved significant international recognition, working at major archaeological sites.

Although their own careers took a turn toward archaeology, they never prevented me from developing my own interests, which were more closely related to theoretical issues at that time. Both trained under Rosenvasser: Perla graduated from the University of Buenos Aires, and Alicia from the National University of La Plata. Perla took part, together with Rosenvasser, in the French-Argentine mission to Aksha, within the UNESCO-funded project to save the monuments of Lower Nubia during the construction of the Aswan Dam in the 1960s. Alicia continued her postgraduate studies in Canada, earning a master's degree from the University of Toronto.

Both worked together at the University of Buenos Aires and at PREDE, training a large number of specialists—among whom I am honored to be included. Perla later worked at one of the most important archaeological sites in Egypt, Tell el-Dab'a, the location of the Hyksos capital, Avaris, under the direction of Manfred Bietak. And Alicia worked with another leading Egyptologist, Donald B. Redford, first at El-Amarna and later at the site of Mendes, in the Nile Delta. Perla also directed the first entirely Argentine archaeological expedition to Egypt, at Tell el-Ghaba, a Late Period site located in northern Sinai during the 1990s. They were my teachers, and the most wonderful part is that we still keep in touch to this day, and they remain associated with CEHAO

as honorary researchers.

During the last years, your research has focused on Egypt's Second Intermediate Period and the role of the people known as the Hyksos. What are the main problems you encountered for this period? What conclusions did you arrive at?

In fact, referring to the "Hyksos" as a population is a mistake, given that the term actually refers to the designation Egyptians gave to foreign rulers (heqa khasut, "ruler of the foreign countries"), which some of the rulers of Avaris later adopted into their royal protocol. The Nile Delta, particularly the Eastern Delta, has been a very fluid area of interaction with Western Asian populations since Predynastic times. What happened at the end of the Middle Kingdom, during the reign of Amenemhat III, is that the crown likely decided to encourage the settlement of Western Asiatics on Egypt's eastern border. Over time, and due to other historical circumstances, these groups gradually became independent, eventually establishing a dynasty—the 15th, also known as the Hyksos Dynasty.

One of the greatest challenges in working on a period as complex as the Second Intermediate Period is precisely the scarcity of sources, especially for its earliest stages. I consider that a long-term process—beginning toward the end of the 12th Dynasty—led to an increasingly pronounced fragmentation of power. Leaders of small local towns established in Upper Egypt and the southwestern oases gained greater authonomy and probably competed among themselves for access to scarce resources, all within a landscape shaped by foreign political powers that, at various times, controlled key exchange routes: the so-called Hyksos rulers in the north and the Nubians in the south.

Over time, and through a process that is still not fully understood, the Theban region became the setting from which the reunification of Egypt was once again initiated, following military conflict with these foreign powers. Out of this complex historical trajectory emerged the 18th Dynasty, whose rulers—figures such as Ahmose, Thutmose I, and Thutmose III—were characterized by strong militarization and expansive political ambitions. The Second Intermediate Period was, to my knowledge, a watershed moment in the way monarchy was conceived in ancient Egypt.

Your research was one of the earliest in Latin America to provide a more theoretical "world-systems" perspective of ancient Egypt's relationships with the outer world. What are the main points of your approach to this topic?

I believe that some of the most important aspects of a macro theoretical framework, such as World-Systems Analysis, lie precisely in its ability to analyze historical dynamics over the *longue durée* from an exceptionally broad perspective. In this view, Egypt is never seen as an autarkic entity, nor is it always a 'center'. Instead, these characterizations are situational; depending on the historical dynamics under analysis, it can function as either a core area or a peripheral one.

I have dedicated a large part of my research to characterizing Egypt's border regions during the Middle Kingdom, which I have termed 'linking areas' (the Eastern Delta and Lower Nubia). In these regions, the Egyptian state operated in a substantially different way than it did in more central locations near major cities like Ity-tawy or

Thebes and, precisely, it gave place to the establishment of foreign populations in the Eastern Delta, as mentioned above, and of a chain of fortresses from Elephantine to the Second Cataract in the south.

Your last book, La Segunda Estela de Kamose: Un estudio integral en contexto, published with us in ANEM (Ancient Near East Monographs Series), is focused on the Second Stela of Kamose. How were you attracted to this source? Why is this stela so important for the history of ancient Egypt?

I was re-examining the stela while studying various terms associated with power structures during the Second Intermediate Period—chiefs, rulers, kings, and so on. In fact, this research grew out of my earlier work on Middle Kingdom political dynamics. However, when I reviewed the existing translations of the stela, I noticed that certain lines were difficult to interpret. They repeated several times the word "ruler" as if referring to two distinct concepts, yet without marking any differentiation between them.
This prompted me to seek a high-quality photograph of the monument, which was kindly provided by the Luxor Museum, where it is currently on display. It was only upon examining the image closely that I realized the word for "ruler" appeared with different determinatives. Before moving forward, I needed to verify—very carefully—whether anyone else had already identified and recorded this distinction in a translation. Given the monument's renown and accessibility, I assumed this was highly likely. To my surprise, after reconstructing the scholarship as thoroughly as possible, I found no indication that this particular feature had ever been noted.

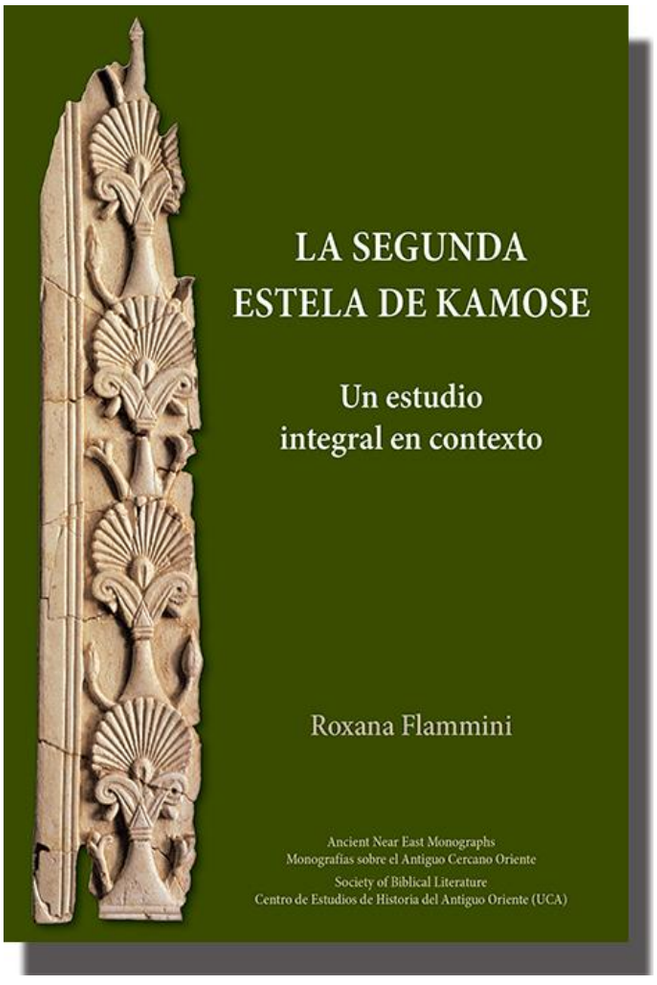
That discovery marked the beginning of a study that ultimately lasted almost ten years. Over time, I observed that the scribe had crafted an exceptionally sophisticated play on words, as well as intricate links between human representations and royal protocols, among other nuances. Today, I encourage Egyptologists to undertake similar work with other monumental inscriptions, treating visual information as equally meaningful as the written text and making it explicit in their translations.

Lastly: If you have to tell young people who are interested in Egyptology or ancient Near Eastern studies a few pieces of advice to increase the chances of a successful career, what would you tell them?

I believe that one of the most important factors is choosing the right supervisor—someone who must also be a true mentor. This should be a person who can sincerely tell you what needs to be done: for example, studying both ancient and modern languages. Among the modern ones, English, French, and German are indispensable. Fortunately, we now have AI translators, but if you want to participate in international academic discussions, you must be able to speak and write fluent English, at the very least. My advice is that the earlier you start, the better.

A good mentor is someone who devotes time to their students, who reads and corrects what they write, who encourages them when their energy wanes, and who knows how to guide them because they truly "know the ropes," as the saying goes. You should also look at the teams they have built: Are they all excellent scholars? Are they good colleagues and respectful people? Does it

look like a place where you can grow? My advice is that before choosing a supervisor, you should investigate very carefully, because unfortunately, not everything that glitters is gold.



Cover of La Segunda Estela de Kamose: Un estudio integral en contexto (ANEM 34)

Of course, success does not depend solely on external factors—important as those are. Personal qualities are equally essential: being disciplined, listening to those who know, and dedicating real time to study are all necessary to build a successful academic career. In the end, I simply hope that young scholars pursue this field with passion, integrity, and curiosity—and that they find in it the same joy and sense of purpose that I found throughout my career.