

**Introduction:**

Welcome to the American Research Center in Egypt's podcast. Each month, we will bring you the latest findings in Egyptological research and host engaging discussions about fascinating topics in Egyptian cultural heritage. Each of our guests are world renowned scholars in the fields of Egyptology, Islamic, Coptic, and modern Egyptian history, archaeology and much more. To suggest a topic for this program, please email us at [podcast@arce.org](mailto:podcast@arce.org). We are also available on Apple, Spotify, and Google. If you enjoy this podcast, you can find out more about our other programs and activities, including virtual lectures and tours by visiting our website at [arce.org](http://arce.org). That's [arce.org](http://arce.org). You can also support our work by joining our mailing list, becoming a member or donating to support this podcast. This month's podcast focuses on The Egyptian Priests of the Graeco-Roman Period featuring Dr. Fatma Ismail, ARCE's US Director of Outreach and Programs in conversation with our guest, Dr. Marina Escolano-Poveda who is a Lecturer in Egyptology at the Department of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology of the University of Liverpool. Dr. Escolano-Poveda is also a Research Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation at the University of Tübingen. This is the first podcast in the series "Recent Research and Books." Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you enjoy the episode.

**Fatma Ismail:**

Marina Escolano-Poveda is a lecturer in Egyptology at the Department of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology at the University of Liverpool, and a research fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation at the University of Tübingen. She obtained her PhD in Egyptology from the Johns Hopkins University in 2017. Her research focuses on the intellectual culture of the Egyptian priesthood and temples of the Graeco-Roman Period. Within this area, she works on the study of astronomical, astrological, and early alchemical texts, as well as the so-called *Hermetica*. Her Humboldt project is called "*The Greek Hermetica as a Product of the Egyptian Priestly Milieu of Graeco-Roman Egypt.*" She is currently part of the Athribis-Projekt of the University of Tübingen as specialist in astronomy and astrology, in which she is editing newly discovered astrological documents. She also works on the edition of Demotic texts from several papyrological collections.

Welcome, Marina to ARCE's podcasts on recent books and research.

**Marina Escolano-Poveda:**

Thank you so much. Thank you for having me.

**Ismail:**

Congratulations on your book on Egyptian priests. I feel there are not enough studies done on this topic. I understand your book is going to be out this month inshallah?

**Escolano-Poveda:**

Yeah, Inshallah

**Ismail:**

I should read the full title for our listeners. It's called "The Egyptian Priests of the Graeco Roman Period, An Analysis on the Basis of the Egyptian and the Greco Roman Literary and Paraliterary Sources." First, Marina, I want to ask you, how did you become interested in Egyptian priesthood?

**Escolano-Poveda:**

This is a topic to which I arrived through my interest in Egyptian texts. So during my PhD, I specialized in the Demotic literature. And I became really interested in all the priestly characters that appear in the Demotic text. And I thought that this could be a very interesting topic to research because these texts were written by priests, and were read by priests. So they sort of give an image of what they thought about themselves, or how they sort of saw themselves, even though these are fictional narratives, but they help us enter a little bit into the minds of these people. So this is how I arrived to this topic for my dissertation, and then how it became this book.

**Ismail:**

A group of texts written for priests by priests is significant. Ancient Egyptian priests played many vital roles in the society, in addition to religious responsibilities, they held political, economic and even magical power. These priests were the guardians of the secret knowledge and culture of their time. You studied the Hermetica texts, can you give us a little summary of what the Hermetica texts are and their importance?

**Escolano-Poveda:**

Yeah, this is a fascinating topic. And it's a tricky topic, because it has been seen in many occasions, from an esoteric point of view, and not very rigorous. But these texts are actually really interesting. This is a corpus of texts of very different characteristics, they are all attributed to these mythical figures of Hermes Trismegistus, who is associated with the Egyptian god Thoth, and also to his disciples. These

are a product of the multicultural world of Greco-Roman Egypt. The main ones were written between the first and the third century CE, and they, they can be classified into groups.

We talk about the technical and the philosophical Hermetica. Within the technical Hermetica, we will find texts like the astronomical astrological sources, or alchemical texts, or even magical texts. And then on the other hand, we have the philosophical Hermetica. These are the ones that are mostly known by the public by the corpus Hermeticum. There are these philosophical texts that have a very important ritual part and they mix Egyptian elements with elements from Greek religion, but also religion coming from the Near East. So, they have all these different elements that come together. But the interesting part, and this is something that I actually proposed in the book, is that the context in which these texts were written, is actually Egypt. And normally because they're written in Greek, they have been seen as detached from these Egyptian contexts or even the Egyptian concepts has been seen as some exotic decor and just left aside, you know, you add some Egyptian names and it looks more exotic.

And it's not actually like that. The Egyptian elements are really, at the core of these of these texts. The reason why they use Greek language is probably because that was considered to be the language of philosophy at the time. But what I propose is that the authors of these texts were actually Egyptian priests within the context of the temples and they were not created as a product for foreigners, but as an internal product of these multicultural world, done by the Egyptian priests who were really the intellectuals of the time and were figures well acquainted with many different cultural currents in that in that world. So that's, that's my main interpretation of these, what I contribute for the understanding of this text in that section of the book.

**Ismail:**

And they were mainly found in Alexandria, Egypt, written in Greek, correct?

**Escolano-Poveda:**

Yeah, they have arrived to us through different manuscript traditions, in Greek, and then, especially through Byzantine manuscripts later on. And at some points in their later history, they were translated into other languages, like Latin like Coptic, and then even Syriac and Arabic.

**Ismail:**

I'm glad your rigorous study will shed light on these important texts. It seems to me that some people have either elevated them to an esoteric level, like you said, or claimed that they have influenced not just the Greek and Roman cultures, but also the much later, Florentine and Medieval Islamic cultures. For example, Cosimo De Medici, the ruler of Florence asked one of his scholars to stop translating Plato's dialogues in order to work on translating Egyptian texts from Hermes. What have you learned about the enduring influence of these Hermetic texts and the Greek -Egyptian exchange of ideas?

**Escolano-Poveda:**

The Hermetica, have had a very long tradition afterwards in late antiquity and in medieval times, and as you said, in the Renaissance. They were considered at some point in parallel to the Bible, they were considered as this very old wisdom, a line of transmission of wisdom that came from Egypt, and then moved on throughout antiquity and then up to that point. Yeah, as you say, they first they enter the scene in Europe, through Florence with this translation by Marsilio Ficino, that was ordered by the Medici. So, they kept influencing the society in the European world, and also in the Islamic world, throughout this time, up until the beginning of the 17th century. And it was in the 17th century, when they were proven to be a product of the first centuries of our era when they were revealed not to be as old when they started losing that importance. But up until the beginning of the 17th century, they were considered really important philosophical and theological texts in parallel, as I say, with the Bible. So that was a pretty big influence in all that tradition.

**Interlude:**

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**Ismail:**

So, you have looked at early Alchemical sources. Could you tell us more about these? I remember, you have presented on this at the Tucson ARCE meeting as well.

**Escolano-Poveda:**

Yeah, these are also sources that haven't been looked at very much. They're very interesting. They're also written in Greek. But what I'm doing now is to connect them also with their Egyptian context. This

is as you see that there's this constant because of the language in which they're written, people tend to detach them from their Egyptian context, and I think they'll be some mistake. We see different stages in these sources. In the beginning, we see references to semi mythical figures or real figures, but not treated in a more legendary way.

For example, we have references to Cleopatra in Greek and Arabic sources as being an alchemist herself. That's really interesting, she will belong to these first stages. And we start getting texts that are attributed to some known names. Some of them to Hermes Trismegistus, but also to Greek philosophers like Democritus and these are texts that give recipes that are actually technical texts, recipes on how to make counterfeit gold and silver and tinctures for textiles and precious stone. How to make these very valuable elements. And at some point, we start seeing this blurred difference between what would be actually making counterfeit versions of these metals, for example, and actual transmutations.

Actually the first alchemists for whom we have information that we know that was a real person is Zosimos of Panopolis of, and of course, Panopolis is Akhmim, so he was an Egyptian. But he wrote in Greek, so normally he's seen from a classical perspective not Egyptological. So what I've done in the book is to look at how he describes all these alchemical processes, he uses allegories, and to connect them to the iconography that we find in the Egyptian temples and then by doing these I try to place him within this temple milieu. We don't know exactly if he was a priest, it's not clear, what I think is that he belonged to the temple personnel but perhaps was not an initiated priest. But it's very interesting to see that these first tags that will be the origin of Sciences like chemistry appear within these Egyptian contexts of the of the temples.

**Ismail:**

Wow, fascinating. And let's not forget the term alchemy itself is probably derived from the ancient Egyptian name for Egypt, *keme* in demotic and Coptic. These texts provide further evidence for Egypt's central role in creating and transmitting ideas in the ancient Near East.

**Escolano-Poveda:**

So, Egypt has been a very important place in the transmission of ideas since antiquity in the whole area of the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean and in particular, of scientific ideas. One of my articles that is coming out early next year in the journal *Enchoria*, presents an astronomical table in which we see written in Demotic. We see some concepts that we knew only from astronomical papyri written in

Greek, that appear originally written in Demotic, and we see that some of the vocabulary that we see in the Greek papyri, some of the symbols that are used are actually borrowed from Demotic. And all this is showing us that many of the ideas that originated in Mesopotamia, astronomical ideas that are originated in Mesopotamia, were transmitted to the classical world, through Egypt. So, Egypt was that very important link for the transmission of ideas that then will become the origin of disciplines like astronomy, in later periods and will develop later on in medieval times and even later.

**Ismail:**

Can you please guide us through the different sections of your book? It has two main parts, right?

**Escolano-Poveda:**

Yeah, it has two parts. Part one is sort of like a review of all these priestly characters in three sections. So first, I look at the Egyptian sources and mostly narrative, Demotic sources. And I analyze all the priestly characters that appear in these narratives, of course, in the ones that have been published that are available, because there's so much the Demotic literature that is still being edited.

Then there's a second part within this part one about Greco Egyptian literature, and this is the literature that was written in Greek but was written by Egyptians so we're still in this area of the point of view of the Egyptian priests of themselves in these literary and para Literary Sources. And within this part, I analyze texts written by actual Egyptian priests like Manetho, and Kiramon, and what we call the Hermetica. And within this, I talk about the different types of priests that appear in these Hermetic texts like the Greco Egyptian Magical Papyri or the Philosophical Hermetica.

And then the third part of this part one is about Greco Roman literature. So, these are images of priests, so priestly characters that appear in Greek and Latin sources. So, they have been created by foreigners by non-Egyptians. So, they're very interesting because they help us contrast these images, with the ones created by Egyptians since they're roughly contemporary. And then there's a second part in the book in which I use the conclusions to which I write in this first part on contrasting all these images, to try to obtain an image of what was these contexts of the Egyptian priesthood in in Greco Roman Egypt. And there I question a series of models that have been used very often in this analysis specially by classicists, and I set them up against what we see in the actual primary sources. And my conclusion is that these models, perhaps should not be used anymore. Then in the end, I provide a more nuanced image and of how we should see all these priests from a more nuanced and multifaceted perspective.

**Ismail:**

In the second part of the book, you questioned the validity of some models for the understanding of religion and Egyptian priesthood in Greco Roman Egypt, what are these models? And what issues do you see in them?

**Escolano-Poveda:**

Yeah, so one of the views that dominated the understanding of religion, in especially Roman Egypt, and of the temples, was that once the Romans conquered Egypt, they had this attack against the temples, they try to limit the temples as a source of perhaps rebellion. This has been repeated now and then, like the Romans cut funding to the temples, and then in the end, the temples ended up closing, and then the priests had to find new sources of income. So, this was, in general the narrative and is still followed in publications- in very recent publications- in these past years I'm talking about two, three years ago, so very recent. And, if we look at the actual sources, there's no actual evidence to justify these intentional attacks, there were different economic circumstances surrounding the Roman Egypt at different points. And, we can talk in the same terms of the first century and the third century.

So, what I do in the second part is in three chapters, I try to dissect all these ideas, and to look at the sources, the primary sources, and see if we can actually see that in the primary sources. So, the first chapter is a deconstruction of this idea of the attack of the of the Roman administration to the Egyptian temples and the priesthood. And then in the next two, I deconstruct the models. So the idea of the Egyptian priests turning into magicians, once the temples theoretically had had closed in order to find sources of funding, and then in the third one of these chapters, I look at this idea of stereotype appropriation, the appropriation by the priests of this idea of the exotic magician in order to sell their expertise, especially to foreigners that were traveling to Egypt.

We actually don't see [that] once we look at the sources, we don't see evidence to support these otherwise nice narratives. But they make sense within themselves, once you put them against the actual sources, they really don't work. So what I'm trying to do, and I bring that to the conclusion of the book, is to try to provide an image of what was the actual place of the priests within this historical context, but also their religious and especially philosophical context. I think that we need to highlight more the role of these, of course, the I'm talking about the higher ranking priests, the role as philosophers and as contributors to the different philosophical and religious movements that were

taking place, not just in Egypt, but in general in the in the Mediterranean and in the Near East at the time.

**Ismail:**

What are you working on right now, Marina?

**Escolano-Poveda:**

Well, now that I'm finally done with the book, and that's been a nice relief, I'm focusing mostly on the edition of texts of astronomical texts. So, I work especially on mathematical astronomy, on the edition of astronomical tables, and on the edition of astrological texts like horoscopes. So, I actually have an article that is coming out this year Inshallah. In the next issue of the journal in *Ecoria*, in which I edit and analyze an astronomical table, a planetary table that is pretty unique, it's one of the kind, the only one that has been preserved in Demotic. And it's actually the most complex one that we know and it's really interesting because it gives us the terminology in Egyptian for the different phases of the planets, the events in the cycle of the planets, we only knew that terminology for Mesopotamian texts for and for Greek texts. But we didn't know the Egyptian terms, though, that were used. And they're interesting because to describe the cycle of the planets, the Egyptians use references to the cycle of the moon. And that tells us a lot about how they follow the planets in connection to the other celestial bodies like the moon, and the sun.

The other interesting thing in this table is that it gives us plenty of evidence of the use of a symbol for zero that was then adopted from Demotic to Greek. So actually, it shows us how dependent the Greek tables are from the Demotic ones. And it shows the use of the zero as a divider that was only known until now in Mesopotamian tables. So, it's actually a table that is giving us so much that we didn't know about Egyptian astronomy, that I think that is going to actually expand significantly how we think especially about planetary theory for this period. I'm actually working on an article right now on all these ideas and trying to take them from the Greco Roman period to the pharaonic period, see how far back we can take this. So, it's pretty exciting.

**Ismail:**

Very thrilling and important work indeed. Thank you for speaking with us, Marina and congratulations again on your book.

**Escolano-Poveda:**

Thank you so much Fatma. It has been a pleasure!

**Concluding Note:**

Thank you for listening to this episode of the ARCE podcast and many thanks to Dr. Marina Escolano-Poveda for sharing her expertise. Please join us in February for our next podcast where we will be starting our Kingship series our first guest will be Dr. Miroslav Barta. Please visit our website at [www.arce.org](http://www.arce.org) for more information or contact us at [podcast@arce.org](mailto:podcast@arce.org). Again, we are also available on Apple, Spotify, and Google podcasts.

Thank you so much for listening. Have a great Holiday season and a Happy New Year! And we will see you next time.