Note on the Life and Work of Jean Leclant

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EDITOR’S NOTE

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1 It was at primary school in the Rue Robert Estienne, in the 8th arrondissement of Paris, that, as he sometimes liked to point out, Jean Leclant learnt the surest foundations on which to build his life – foundations which he acquired from the age of seven: reading, writing, counting, and especially the historical, geographical and civic frameworks that the hussar of republican schooling (“les hussards noirs”) were so good at inculcating into the future citizens entrusted to them, and to which he himself remained deeply attached throughout his life.
If he was with us today, he would probably comment that the rest goes without saying. Secondary studies, still in Paris, led him to obtain the first prize for Greek translation in the concours général in 1938 and to the khâgne at the Lycée Henri IV. Times were hard, and following the German invasion, it was in Rennes that he had to sit the École normale supérieure (ENS) entrance examination in May 1940.

He had barely joined the ENS when he took part in the 11 November 1940 demonstrations following Paul Langevin’s arrest. Himself arrested by the occupier, he subsequently had to report to his neighbourhood police station every week, like the rest of his fellow students. He remembered this lesson, painfully experienced during those miserable years: without ever denying the values of the Republic, he later learnt to find paths for action that were all the more effective in that they favoured discretion.

At the École normale supérieure, Jean Leclant was able to give free reign to the immense curiosity that would always characterize him. It is true that he met masters who matched his thirst for knowledge: Jérôme Carcopino, Jean Bayet, Jean Bérard, Charles Picard, and André Piganiol, whose lectures he attended. He also attended Isidore Lévy’s classes at the École pratique des hautes études (EPHE), alongside Georges Dumézil. His course mates were Pierre Levêque, René Marill – who was not yet René M. Alberès at the time –, Louis Déroche, Jean Pouilloux, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, Jean Marcadé, Gilbert Lazard, Jacques Fontaine, Gilles Granger, and many others: the generation of our masters. Their paths were later to cross continuously, from university to the Collège de France, the École pratique des hautes études and the Institut de France.

In 1943, shortly after presenting his master thesis (mémoire) entitled Ammon, son oracle à l’Oasis, son culte chez les Grecs (Ammon, his Oracle in the Oasis, his Worship by the Greeks), Jean Leclant fled to the free zone to escape the threat of compulsory labour. There he built other equally strong friendships within the resistance circles in the Grenoble region, where he experienced times which his modest silence told us had been difficult. After the Liberation, in 1945, he returned to Paris and obtained the
geography *agrégation*, which had just been created and was so well suited to his insatiable mind and curiosity.

6 In the meantime, he had two decisive encounters: one with Emmanuel de Martonne, who initiated him to the language of landscapes and places; and, most importantly, the other with Jean Sainte-Fare Garnot, who introduced him to Egyptology and for whom he had deep respect. A strong friendship developed between the two. Jean Leclant’s young master guided him through the intricacies of the Egyptian language and along the paths of the captivating world of the *Pyramid Texts*. At the time he was preparing a *Doctorat d’État* on this fascinating body of texts, and his student was soon enthralled. Much later, Jean Leclant succeeded him, far too early, as he so often said, with gratitude and friendship.

7 Jean Leclant then attended Pierre Lacau’s lectures at the Collège de France, and those of Gustave Lefebvre at the École pratique des hautes études. From the former he kept the crucial complementarity between knowledge from the field and the use of other sources, as well as methodological rigour. The second confirmed his idea that philology should remain the basis of his research.

8 As soon as he passed his *agrégation*, he began his *Wanderjahre*. He enrolled in the French navy, and was posted in Vienna as an aspiring interpreter and cipher officer. He would sometimes recall this episode of his life with some amusement, which had an undertone of “The Third Man”, and during which he made fruitful contacts with the Austrian Egyptologists. He finished his military career as a Commander, and the navy riflemen were the ones to pay the last tribute on the day of his funeral.

9 From 1946 to 1948, the CNRS assigned him as a research officer for the National Museums. Thus, alongside Jacques Vandier, he completed his training in collections before leaving – at last! – for the field. The field was Egypt, where the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology (FIOA) recruited him as a scientific member, from 1948 to 1952. He travelled across the country with Paul Barguet, Serge Sauneron and the Bernand brothers. While taking part in the excavations of the FIOA, particularly in Thebes, he began to focus on an area that was to be central to his career: the buildings and inscriptions of the “Ethiopian” era, both within the precincts of Karnak and on the west bank. That is how he came to undertake two monographs that were to constitute his EPHE degree and his two theses: *Les Enquêtes sur les sacerdoces et les sanctuaires égyptiens à l’époque dite “éthiopienne”* (XXV<sup>e</sup> dynastie), and then for his *Doctorat d’État, Recherches sur les monuments thébains de la XXV<sup>e</sup> dynastie dites “éthiopienne”* (main thesis), and *Montouemhat, quatrième prophète d’Amon, prince de la ville* (complementary thesis).

10 After those four years, aged only 32, Jean Leclant founded the Ethiopian Archaeological Service at the Negus’s request, and headed it until 1956. He created a scientific and human organization from scratch, which was able to survive the difficult future that awaited the kingdom of the Queen of Sheba, the mythical gate of Africa and of the Red Sea, both of which fascinated the young scholar.

11 He returned to France, having already lived so many adventures, and completed his EPHE degree in 1953. He was then recruited by the University of Strasburg, first as a lecturer and then, after defending his *Doctorat d’État ès-Lettres*, in 1955, as a professor. He taught there until 1963, perpetuating the tradition of excellence inaugurated by Johannes Dümichen, then Wilhelm Spiegelberg, and maintained, once Alsace had been returned to France, by Pierre Montet, whom he succeeded after being his student.
The premature death of his first master, Jean Sainte-Fare Garnot, on 20 June 1962, brought him back to Paris. He was elected to succeed him at the Sorbonne in 1963, and then at the 5th Section of the EPHE, in the following year. He thus took over the important research on Saqqara, which he studied jointly with Jean-Philippe Lauer for almost forty years, carrying out fruitful research on the complex funerals of Pepi and of seven of his queens. These were further added to the body of the Pyramid Texts, which he had started studying again and was busy re-editing.

At the EPHE and at the Sorbonne, Jean Leclant extended teaching to the domains which he pioneered. This started with the study of belated cults, linked to the Hellenistic world and the expansion of the Roman Empire, the “Isiac” world, whose development on the scale of the ancient oikoumene he studied with his inexhaustible energy. These studies, entirely owed to him, are now taught in several universities.

The other focus of his research at the time was Sudan. As the epigrapher for Michela Schiff Giorgini’s mission in Soleb from 1960, he fell under the irresistible charm of the Upper Nile Valley. He continued the excavations on the site close to Sedeinga, after the end of this mission and Michela Schiff Giorgini’s tragic death.

At the EPHE, he invented Meroitic studies, tackling the challenge of deciphering the language spoken by the sovereign heirs of the Kushites. A small handful of disciples followed him on this adventure, which only one team dared to join, that of Fritz Hintze from Humboldt University in Berlin. Our two groups accompanied each other for years in this austere enterprise.

This specific research constituted one of the themes he taught at the Collège de France, where he was elected in 1979. He then left the Sorbonne, after sixteen years during which he had developed a fully-fledged research centre that still welcomes students from across the world.

Jean Leclant continued to teach in parallel at the Collège and the EPHE until 1990, constantly opening up new research paths to his audience, presenting and commenting on ongoing excavations as well as the numerous new publications that he devoured and savoured daily.

His election to the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres in 1974, to replace Jacques Vandier, was undoubtedly, from both a scientific and a personal point of view, a turning point in his life, which the warm and discrete presence of his wife, Marie-Françoise brightened up.

Throughout his life, he was concerned with the common scientific interest. Creator of the Archaeological chronicle that he published every year in the Orientalia from 1948 to 2002, he initiated many collective enterprises: not only bibliographies and tools adapted to modern technologies, but also, wherever he had the opportunity, the development of education and of the means for research in Egyptology. He always gave of himself with the same generosity, whether to support and encourage French programmes or to reinforce the international scientific network of Egyptologists, and, more generally, of Orientalists.

Jean Leclant headed the French Society of Egyptology, was the secretary-general of the International Association of Egyptologists after encouraging its creation in 1973, successfully organized the 1972 and 1990 celebrations dedicated to Jean-François Champollion, and headed the Society of Africanist Archaeologists, the French Society for Ethiopian Studies, and the Society for Nubian Studies. Honorary president of both
the Asian Society and the Society for the History of Religion–Ernest Renan, he chaired, until his death, the Michela Schiff Giorgini Foundation, created in 1984 in memory of the “Lady of Soleb”.

21 Elected permanent secretary of the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres in 1983, he broadened his activity further by becoming secretary-general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Consultative Committee for French Excavations Abroad from 1973 to 1988, and then chairman of the Ministry of Culture’s High Committee of National Celebrations from 1988 to 2008, as well as vice-chairman of the French commission for UNESCO.

22 As the tireless permanent secretary of his Compagnie, he invested himself in it unsparingly, mobilizing a wealth of energy, contributing to the creation of the Simone and Cino del Luca Grand Prize for Archaeology, and making the annual symposia of the Kérylos villa an international scientific event. He was head of publications at the Académie, looking after everything, proofreading every draft book, always allowing the authors to benefit from his remarks and comments.

23 That is not to say that he neglected his own scientific production, which was so abundant that we decided to dedicate a website to it – over 1,700 titles recorded to date.


25 He was a member of several foreign and French academies: the British Academy, the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome, the Science Academies of Russia, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Munich, Romania, Madrid, and Barcelona, the Accademia Pontaniana of Naples, the Institute of Egypt in Cairo, the German and Austrian Archaeological Institute, the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, and the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia. He also had an honoris causa doctorate from the Leuven, Bologna and Vienna Universities.

26 His international renown surely had to do with the immensity of his knowledge and work. It just as certainly came from the man himself, whose qualities were never concealed by the cloak of science and honours.

27 Always even-tempered, simple and smiling, Jean Leclant knew how to listen and always sought to understand before judging, just as curious about others as he was about everything else. He admired Gaston Maspéro, who was always his model. As fate had it, they are only a few metres away from each other in the Montparnasse cemetery, where he was buried by his friends and colleagues on 23 September 2011.

Jean Leclant was born in Paris on 8 August 1920. He passed away on 16 September 2011, aged 91. As an Egyptologist specialized in Pharaonic history and civilisation, particularly of the 25th Dynasty, he was nominated Professor at the Collège de France in 1979, where he held the Chair of Egyptology until 1990.
NOTES

1. Second year of preparatory course for the arts section of the École normale supérieure

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Pharaonic Civilization: Archaeology, Philology, History