

**Frédéric Colin is head of the Institute of Egyptology and curator of the Egyptian collection at the University of Strasbourg. He is known, inter alia, for his cross-disciplinary and plurilingual approach in the study of Greek and Egyptian inscriptions and papyri, which helps to better understand Greek-Egyptian interculturality. In 2018 and 2019, he used 3D scanning technology to document in meticulous detail an unscathed tomb containing five**



**sarcophagi of women who lived in the 16th century BC, at the court of Thebes.**

*He has been awarded the Marc Bloch*

*Chair in social sciences and humanities at the University of Strasbourg Institute for Advanced Study (USIAS), for the 2022-2024 period.*

Frédéric Colin has been studying the ancient history of the Mediterranean basin for over 25 years, and in particular that of Greece and Egypt. His interest in science was triggered during his youth when his father, a chemist, took him to museums, and notably the "Palais de la découverte" in Paris (a science museum located in the Grand Palais). He went to the Decroly school in Belgium, where a new and alternative approach to teaching aimed to break down disciplinary borders – an approach that would inspire him for the rest of his career. Towards the end of his school years, his Greek teacher, who at the time was writing her thesis, offered to give her students additional lessons to learn Egyptian. It was during this period that he came across hieroglyphics for the first time during a visit to a museum. *"What really impressed me was when I understood that these small figurative drawings formed sentences, with a syntax and vocabulary, that could be read like any sentence in a modern language",* he recalled.

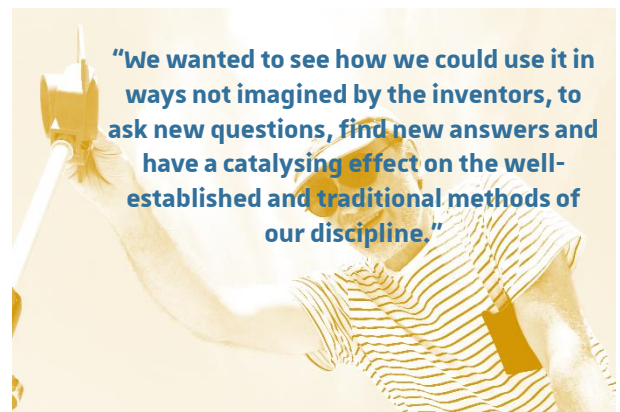
He simultaneously studied ancient history (Greek and Roman) as well as philology and oriental history (Egyptian, Akkadian) at the Free University of Brussels. In 1996, having become a foreign member of the French Institute for Eastern Archaeology in Cairo (Egypt), he ran his first project in the Bahariya Oasis where, alone with only those living in the desert, he learned Arabic. *"It's a necessary skill if one wants to communicate properly with a diverse team that includes local excavation technicians,* he noted,

*when many researchers make do with only English."*

As a rule, site teams rely on a foreman who acts as intermediary between the site manager and the technicians, but Frédéric Colin encourages a direct intellectual dialogue, in which know-how and techniques are exchanged, since he believes in a constant learning process. He sees this experience, which calls for cultural and social skills at a scientific level, as a true human adventure, an *"exploration of our own humanities."*

Much of his work consists in analysing and editing Greek and Demotic literature – the cursive script used in Egypt as from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. For this, he relies on papyrology, namely the study of manuscripts on papyrus. Whereas most papyrologists are either Hellenists or Demoticists, Frédéric Colin stands out due to his plurilingual approach, intrinsically cross-disciplinary, which is necessary to understand the interculturality between Greek and Macedonian settlers on the one hand, and the Egyptian population on the other. *"Many Egyptians were bilingual so that they could work in their administrations, much as we need to speak English nowadays,"* he highlighted.

In 2015, he was forced to abandon his excavations in the desert because of numerous violent attacks, and so he spent two years studying photogrammetry, a technique used to digitise objects and contexts in 3D, namely, all that is related to an archaeological site and its remains. In 2018, equipped with this new expertise, he went to El-Assasif, a small valley in the Theban Necropolis, near Luxor. On arrival at the site, his aim was to set up an experimental laboratory and seize on this innovative method. *"The novelty of our approach was to take command of this new technology, developed by optical engineers and computer scientists, to push the boundaries,"* he explained.



**"We wanted to see how we could use it in ways not imagined by the inventors, to ask new questions, find new answers and have a catalysing effect on the well-established and traditional methods of our discipline."**



But El-Assasif has been an excavation site since Napoléon Bonaparte's expedition two centuries ago, which at the time raised great economic interest and generated a culture of independent excavations in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For a long time, this extraordinary archaeological site, given its situation and stratigraphy<sup>i</sup>, was worn away by archaeologists financed mainly by colonial aristocrats, whose main aim was to fill the shelves of museums and collectors with beautiful objects. *"This practice resulted in the destruction of a phenomenal amount of historical information about the most flourishing period in Egyptian history,"* laments Frédéric Colin. He was therefore looking for a real "sanctuary", which might have escaped the massacre and decided to investigate an area which included the largest tomb in Ancient Egypt. The aim was therefore very technical: he wanted to define the different phases of occupation of the site and use photogrammetry to document them. But one morning, after only two weeks of superficial clearing, he discovered that a stray dog from a local pack had dug a burrow during the night, near his site. In doing so, and to Colin's great surprise, the animal had uncovered the lower part of a hieroglyphic headstone. More advanced excavations near the stone revealed two unscathed sarcophagi, as well as three further ones during a later dig in 2021.

**"It's an extraordinary conjunction of methodology and absolute chance, as is often the case in science"**

A race against time immediately began, but Frédéric Colin was well equipped and together with his only colleague on the site – Cassandre Hartenstein, a research assistant – he was able to document this dig in an unprecedented way. He modelled the stratigraphic context state by state – before, during and after the discovery and extraction of the artefacts. Then, as each sarcophagus was opened and its contents disassembled, he digitised the process step by step. Such a thorough documentation of an Egyptian collection, made in real time during an excavation, had never been done before. As the work

<sup>i</sup> Study of the superposition of soil layers, or strata, to establish a site's succession of human occupation phases.

of Egyptologists is usually based on very old data, dating mostly from the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Frédéric Colin was overjoyed by the potential of this new archaeological site, which brought with it renewed archaeological information. For him, the most important part of his work, over and above finding artefacts and reconstructing their history, lies in *"recording the 'crime scene'"*, in modelling a site in the state in which it was discovered. *"Interpretation and analysis will always be outdated faster than the primary data on which they are based,"* he explained.

Since 2022 and up to 2024, Frédéric Colin is the first incumbent of the Marc Bloch Chair in social sciences and humanities at the University of Strasbourg Institute of Advanced Study, named after the French medieval historian who taught at the University of Strasbourg. He intends to use this position to change from trying to perpetuating his approach, notably by publishing his studies on this astonishing discovery. He also aspires to pass on what he has learned to young researchers, motivated by the same 'acquisition and transmission' mindset that he has held throughout his career.

**"This Chair will give me time and freedom and will allow me to go further"**

He is also involved in reconciling with a wider audience, a task which he believes is an integral part of an archaeologist's work. *"We interact with society, by definition,"* he noted. *"We must explain the reasons for our excavations to the local population and politicians, and show the value that our work brings to our heritage and memory, whether on the scale of a town or an entire nation."*

*Interview by William Rowe-Pirra, science journalist*

