

Elizabeth Margaret Stefanski 1895-1948 by Terry G. Wilfong

Elizabeth Margaret Stefanski (1895-1948) was an Egyptologist and Coptologist who studied and worked at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute. She is known for her editions of a number of Egyptian and Coptic texts, and primarily for her work on the Coptic ostraca excavated during the clearance of the remains of the town of Jeme at the temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu. Stefanski's work on this corpus of texts continues to be of great value, and the texts themselves have proven to be especially significant for the study of women and gender in Late Antique Egypt.

Elizabeth Margaret Stefanski was born in Higginsville, Missouri in 1895 the next-to-youngest of eight children. Her parents were recent immigrants, her mother from Germany and her father from Poland, and they both had a great influence on her subsequent development. Her mother passed on to her a knowledge of and interest in the German language; from her father, a shoemaker who had begun training for the priesthood back in Poland, she acquired a taste for learning that was to grow into great intellectual curiosity. Among her siblings, Elizabeth Stefanski gained a reputation as a voracious reader and good student. Characteristically, she finished her four year high school program in two and a half years, excelling in both history and foreign languages. For college, she chose to leave her small hometown in Missouri for Chicago, influenced both by the reputation of the University of Chicago, and by the presence of a large Polish-American community on the south side of Chicago.

Elizabeth Stefanski earned her B.A. at the University of Chicago in 1919 and in the course of doing so, became interested in Egyptology. She continued her Egyptological studies on the graduate level at the University of Chicago, working primarily with William F. Edgerton and T. George Allen, but did not pursue an advanced degree. This is not surprising, given the scarcity of women holding Ph.D.s in Egyptology at the time and the lack of women with professional appointments in the field. While continuing her studies, Stefanski supported herself by working as secretary to the Administrative and Publications offices of the recently-founded Oriental Institute, where she often worked in collaboration with Elizabeth Hauser, the longtime editor of Oriental Institute publications. Although she never held a formal teaching appointment, she did, for a time, teach Egyptian hieroglyphs in the University of Chicago's Home-Study Department. While working on the earlier phases of the Egyptian language, Stefanski ultimately came to specialize in Coptic, which she studied both in Chicago with Edgerton and at the University of Michigan with Coptologist William H. Worrell. At Michigan, she became part of a group of women who studied Coptic with Worrell and later went on to do important work in this field. These scholars included Winifred Kammerer, who compiled the essential *Coptic Bibliography*, and her assistants on this project Lousie A. Shier and Elinor Mullett Husselman, who both worked at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology and published significant work on the art and archaeology of Coptic Egypt, as well as, in the case of Husselman, editions of Coptic and Greek texts. The frequent involvement of women in Coptic studies in this period does not seem to have been an accident; senior scholars such as Worrell and Edgerton seem to have directed their female students away from Greek papyrology (on the one hand) and traditional pharonic

Egyptology (on the other) towards the study of Coptic. It is not surprising that Elizabeth Stefanski developed such a strong interest in Coptic papyrology in the supportive and predominantly female environment she found in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It was her connection to the Oriental Institute in Chicago, though, that gave her the raw material she needed for applying her studies in Coptic.

Elizabeth Stefanski's earliest known work is an extensive bibliography of ancient literary references to Megiddo, compiled in collaboration with her colleague and friend Ruth C. Wilkins in 1927. During the 1930s, Stefanski began to publish the results of her work on Egyptian materials in the collections of the Oriental Institute Museum. Her first published work was an edition of hieratic funerary texts on mummy linen in the Oriental Institute Museum; publications of this sort of text were uncommon enough then (and indeed still are) to warrant special notice. Following a suggestion from W.F. Edgerton, Stefanski's first Coptic publication was an edition of a Coptic magical text, also from the collection of the Oriental Institute Museum. The nature of the magical text--a spell designed to cause impotence--made its edition a somewhat delicate matter. Stefanski's translation of the spell, while technically just permissible, is a discreet rendering of a text with explicit descriptions of sexual activity and allusions to potential homosexual activity and bestiality that might have otherwise proven unacceptably frank to the editors of *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*.

The most substantial publication project in which Elizabeth Stefanski was involved was the edition of the Coptic ostraca from the Oriental Institute's excavation at Medinet Habu. In 1929 and 1930, the Oriental Institute's Architectural Survey discovered at least two thousand ostraca during its clearance of the remains of the Coptic town of Jeme from the pharaonic temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu. The publication

of the Coptic ostraca from Medinet Habu--originally intended as part of a multi-volume publication of all finds from the site--was assigned to Stefanski. Since many of these ostraca were very fragmentary, very faint and very cursively written, editing them was a difficult task. Stefanski plunged into her work with typical enthusiasm; consultation of University of Chicago library records gives some idea of her very extensive researches into the background of these texts and related corpora. She recognized the importance of the material in her charge and frequently consulted with fellow Copticists in Europe, such as Walter Crum, who used information from Stefanski for his great *Coptic Dictionary*. Elizabeth Stefanski also appreciated that some of her texts might be better published by scholars specializing in a particular type of document: thus she ceded her right to publication on 21 of the ostraca to W.C. Till, for his study of the genre of protective passes in Coptic, and a bilingual Greek-Coptic ostrakon from the find to Allen Wikgren, who was to publish the Medinet Habu Greek ostraca. The Medinet Habu Coptic ostraca were to be her magnum opus, and she took her responsibility toward these texts quite seriously; the work had some urgency in that the ostraca were in Chicago only on a temporary basis and were due to be returned to the Egyptian government by prior agreement on the part of the excavators.

Beyond her work at the Oriental Institute, Elizabeth Stefanski was actively engaged in the world around her. She was an enthusiastic traveler, both within the United States and in Europe. She was fond of the theater and a voracious reader, favoring on one hand the plays of George Bernard Shaw and on the other the novels and stories of Upton Sinclair and Sarah Orne Jewett. Elizabeth Stefanski's interest in literature was not restricted to reading: she is said to have written poetry herself and took a great interest in the activities and publications of the Molehill Press, a small private publisher in Chicago.

Indeed, the Molehill Press received its first font of type through her generosity.

Rejecting the traditional role of an unmarried woman supported by her family, Elizabeth Stefanski placed great importance on her economic and emotional independence. Within her chosen community of the Oriental Institute, Stefanski was remembered as an enthusiastic and generous friend and colleague; her active involvement in the University of Chicago's Near East Club was especially noted.

The lives of the academic community centered on the Oriental Institute were dramatically changed by World War II. Like many of her Oriental Institute colleagues, Elizabeth Stefanski spent much of World War II working for the U.S. military, where she put her experience in deciphering ancient languages to work a cryptographer for the Army Signal Corps. The full history of the involvement of Oriental Institute staff in this endeavor has yet to be written, but recent research gives some idea of the rationale behind the use of specialists in dead languages as decoders and cryptographers and the recruitment procedures involved. Little is known about Stefanski's precise duties as cryptographer; by all accounts she was enthusiastic about her war-time work, and her colleagues were equally enthusiastic about her endeavors. Active work at the Oriental Institute was largely disrupted at this time by the war work of the staff, but perhaps ultimately more disruptive to the Oriental Institute community were the great and sometimes bitter divisions that arose along national and political lines within the international scholarly world. Those who knew Stefanski noted both her intense patriotism and her great concern for friends and colleagues in Central Europe from whom she was cut off during the war.

After the war, Elizabeth Stefanski returned to the Oriental Institute and resumed her work, all the while finding time to assist colleagues in post-war Austria with

packages of food and clothing. She continued to prepare the transcriptions and editions of the Medinet Habu Coptic ostraca for press, but her work was interrupted by events at the Oriental Institute. The 1935 death of James Henry Breasted and the subsequent loss of much of the Institute's funding from John D. Rockefeller severely curtailed available funding for staff but, with the departure of much of the Oriental Institute staff for war work, many of the inevitable layoffs were temporarily delayed. By 1946, the return of Institute workers and the absorption of the Institute's endowment into that of the University of Chicago combined to cause serious financial problems for the Institute. Ultimately, this crisis resulted in the dismissal of some untenured staff members from the Oriental Institute, including Stefanski. Elizabeth valued her independence enormously and the loss of her job forced her to rethink her future. Ultimately, she made plans to go back into the military to work for the Army Security Agency. Her determination to remain financially self-sufficient was a major factor in her decision, but she had also been most enthusiastic about her wartime Army work and perhaps hoped to recapture some of that spirit by returning to it. Elizabeth Stefanski continued to work on her ostraca while preparing to go back into the military and was in the process of compiling a glossary and index of personal names of the texts, but all her plans were cut short by an unexpected heart attack. She died in her apartment in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago on 8 August 1948. Her former teacher T. George Allen delivered a funeral address that was subsequently published by the Molehill Press, using a font that Elizabeth herself had donated to them; this document remains the most extensive biographical notice of Stefanski to date.

As a result of Stefanski's death, Miriam Lichtheim was brought back to the Oriental Institute to finish the volume of Coptic ostraca from Medinet Habu. Lichtheim,

who had herself been dismissed in the 1946 layoffs at the Oriental Institute, had not known Stefanski well, but consented to the difficult task of bringing the project to completion. Lichtheim had the unenviable job of physically sorting the ostraca copied by Stefanski from those left uncopied, prior to the return of the entire collection back to Egypt. Once this was done, she completed translations and writing commentaries for the 400 texts that Elizabeth Stefanski had worked up, as well as writing an introduction to the corpus as a whole and bringing the book into final shape. Financial problems continued to plague the project resulting in drastic cuts in the number of plates of the ostraca permitted in the publication. The volume was published under their joint names in 1952, Lichtheim's excellent introduction providing a valuable setting for the texts, and the book was received with great enthusiasm and interest by Copticists.

Elizabeth Stefanski's body of published work is small but diverse; her writings share the common trait of dealing with neglected groups of texts. The work for which she will be best remembered is her edition of the Medinet Habu Coptic ostraca. To date, the publication by Stefanski and Lichtheim is the most extensive published corpus of excavated Coptic ostraca. Given that the current whereabouts of the Medinet Habu Coptic ostraca that were returned to Cairo is unclear, in many cases the Stefanski-Lichtheim editions represent the only accessible record of these texts. The volume is also a most important contribution to the study of late antique Egypt in general. Given Stefanski's emphasis on her own independence, it is highly appropriate that these ostraca are also very significant for the study of the independent roles women in the Christian town of Jeme under the first century of Muslim rule.

Bibliography

Elizabeth Stefaniski does not appear in any of the standard biographical references for Egyptology and Ancient Near Eastern Studies. I have relied primarily on Stefaniski's own work, obituary and memorial notices (especially the eulogy delivered at her funeral service by T. George Allen, cited below), records from various sources at the University of Chicago, the correspondence of Coptacist Walter E. Crum, and the scattered published references to Stefaniski in the work of other scholars. I have also benefited from the personal reminiscences of Miriam Lichtheim and the late George Hughes, and the bibliographical expertise and encouragement of Charles E. Jones, Archivist and Bibliographer for the Oriental Institute Research Archives.

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