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The Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth in Belgium and the creation of national and transnational Egyptological research infrastructures in the 1920s-1940s

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Oriental Societies and Societal Self-Assertion

Associations, Funds and Societies
for the Archaeological Exploration
of the 'Ancient Near East'



Edited by Thomas L. Gertzen and Olaf Matthes

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Oriental Societies and Societal Self-Assertion: Associations, Funds and Societies for the Archaeological Exploration of the ‘Ancient Near East’

Edited by Thomas L. Gertzen and Olaf Matthes

Investigatio Orientis 10

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The Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth in Belgium and the Creation of National and Transnational Egyptological Research Infrastructures in the 1920s–1940s

Marleen De Meyer, Jean-Michel Bruffaerts and Jan Vandersmissen*

When in 1923 Jean Capart ‘baptised’ the *Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth* (FÉRE) in Brussels, it was a relative latecomer in the world of Oriental Societies. Moreover, the scope and aims of the FÉRE were somewhat different from those of other such organisations: it was not primarily created to finance excavations or acquire antiquities for the Royal Museums of Art and History, but rather to help the development of Egyptology in Belgium in its broadest sense for professionals and laymen alike. Making good use of his connections with industrialists and other wealthy patrons of his time, both in Belgium and abroad, Capart managed to finance the FÉRE mainly with private funding. It soon established itself as an active and vibrant organisation, scheduling lectures, conferences, and exhibitions; building a richly furnished Egyptological library and photographic collection; prolifically publishing and creating its own bulletin (*Chronique d’Égypte*, beginning in 1925); and undertaking study trips and excavations in Egypt. This was noted by colleagues, and Brussels came to be recognised as an ideal centre of international Egyptological research. A small country geographically located in the heart of Europe, Belgium was both convenient and non-threatening for the larger national powers surrounding it. In this paper the place of the FÉRE amidst other Oriental Societies is evaluated, its networks of support and influence are mapped, and ultimately also its role is discussed as motor of the creation of transnational research infrastructures for Egyptology.

Introduction

In the world of Oriental Societies, Belgium lagged behind the surrounding greater nation states when the *Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth* was created in 1923. This was mainly due to the fact that Belgium in general had a much later start in the disciplinary development of Egyptology, and only really became a player on this stage at the beginning of the 20th century.¹ A happy concurrence of

* M. De Meyer, KU Leuven & Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo; J.-M. Bruffaerts, Université libre de Bruxelles & Fonds Jean Capart; J. Vandersmissen, Ghent University. The research for this contribution was pursued within the framework of several projects and initiatives investigating the development of Egyptology as a scientific discipline in Belgium in the late 19th to early 20th centuries: “Pyramids & Progress: Belgian expansionism and the making of Egyptology, 1830–1952” (EOS Project 30885993 funded by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO) and the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique – FNRS); the Fonds Jean Capart (under the auspices of the King Baudouin Foundation,

events in 1923 paved the way for the FÉRE to see the light of day, and since then it gradually grew into a platform with a broad societal base on which Belgian Egyptology could deploy many of its activities.

Reflections on the FÉRE's work and activities have appeared in print, helping to reconstruct the organisation's history. Arpag Mekhitarian (1911–2004), one of the original members of the FÉRE, published a booklet on the occasion of its 20th anniversary², and much later his musings on its creation³ and his memories of its heyday.⁴ Jean Capart (1877–1947) published a lecture he gave about the FÉRE on 8 November 1945 at the *Lycée Français du Caire* with the title '*Un conte que Schéhérazade n'a pas connu*'.⁵ A year later Marcelle Werbrouck (1889–1959) wrote about Capart and his 'brainchild' FÉRE on the occasion of his death.⁶ And finally, the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the FÉRE provided grounds for Baudouin van de Walle (1901–1988) to record his thoughts on the subject.⁷

Origins of the FÉRE

The two protagonists in the creation of the *Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth* are Elisabeth of Bavaria and Queen of the Belgians (1876–1965), and Jean Capart, curator of the Egyptian collection at the Royal Museums of Art and History (RMAH) in Brussels, and chief curator at that same museum since 1925. In 1923 the Egyptian and British governments invited the queen to preside over the official opening of the burial chamber in the tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamun discovered only months before.⁸ She asked Jean Capart to accompany her and her eldest son Crown Prince Leopold (1901–1983; later King Leopold III) as their guide. On 18 February 1923 the trio attended the ceremony in the Valley of the Kings, an event that received a great deal of media attention (Fig. 1).⁹

www.jeancapart.org); and the SURA Project (funded by BELSPO as part of the research program Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks (BRAIN-be 2.0 2018–2023, www.sura-project.be). We warmly thank Wouter Claes for valuable comments on the draft of this paper, and Luc Limme, Joffrey Liénart, and Mathieu Geeraerts for their help in the archives of the FÉRE and the RMAH, as well as the entire Pyramids & Progress and SURA teams.

¹ For general overviews of the development of Egyptology in Belgium, see Bruffaerts 2013, De Meyer and de Cartier d'Yves 2020, Bruffaerts 2021, Bruffaerts 2022, all with further references.

² Mekhitarian 1943.

³ Mekhitarian 1991.

⁴ Mekhitarian 1997.

⁵ Capart 1946.

⁶ Werbrouck 1947.

⁷ Van de Walle 1974.

⁸ Bruffaerts 1998.

⁹ For the larger Belgian delegation present at this event, see Warmenbol 2019: 5–19.

TRENTE-NEUVIÈME ANNÉE. — No 10 40 CENTIMES LE NUMÉRO 11 Mars 1923

LE PATRIOTE ILLUSTRÉ

REVUE HEBDOMADAIRE

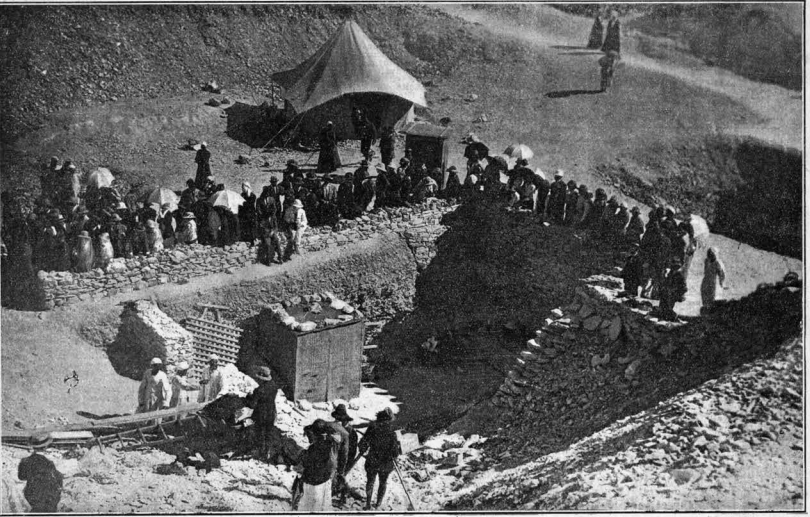
ABONNEMENTS 1923		
PAR TRIMESTRE:	BELGIQUE	fr. 5.00
	ÉTRANGER	8.00
POUR L'ANNÉE:	BELGIQUE	18.00
	ÉTRANGER	30.00

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1. - L'arrivée de S. M. sur le théâtre des fouilles. Bien que voyageant incognito, notre souveraine est reçue par M. Carter, l'égyptologue, Lord Allenby, gouverneur général britannique, Lord Carnarvon, et les représentants du gouvernement égyptien. — 2. - Après l'ouverture du caveau Le pharaon Tout Ankh Amon, enseveli depuis 33 siècles, dans un déploiement d'or, d'œuvres d'art et de pierreries, vient de donner audience à une reine...



L'hypogée de Tout Ankh Amon le dimanche 18 février. Ce coin de la Vallée des Rois, nécropole des pharaons qui régnèrent sur l'Égypte 15 siècles avant l'ère chrétienne attire l'attention du monde entier. Malgré l'atmosphère étouffante, la reine Elisabeth a passé une demi heure dans les salles intérieures de la tombe monumentale. « C'est vraiment merveilleux », a-t-elle déclaré à la sortie.

La Reine à l'ouverture de l'hypogée de Tout-Ankh-Amon à Louqsor

Fig. 1: Front page of *Le Patriote Illustré* (11 March 1923) documenting the travels of Queen Elisabeth, Prince Leopold, and Jean Capart in Egypt.

Four days later, on 22 February 1923, aboard the ship transporting Queen Elisabeth from Luxor to Dendara, Capart had a conversation with Yassa bey Andraos Bishara (1882–1970), the Belgian consular agent in Luxor.¹⁰ This discussion concerned the state of the Egyptian section of the RMAH in Brussels. Capart described the growth of the Egyptian collection, thanks to his subscriptions to the British excavation societies (i.a. Egypt Exploration Society, Egyptian Research Account) and of the Egyptological library, which was initially his personal library but which he had donated to the State, and thus the museum, in 1901. Capart was concerned about the future development of the library and regretted the absence of a well-equipped study centre for Egyptology in Belgium. When Bishara asked him how much money would be needed to achieve his goal, Capart replied that a sum of LE 1.000 would suffice. Bishara then announced that he wanted to be the first subscriber and offered Capart LE 100. Full of enthusiasm, Capart proposed to the queen that she give her patronage to a fund, of which he would be the director, intended to promote Egyptology in Belgium. Queen Elisabeth eagerly accepted.

In the days that followed, Capart presented his funding project to several influential members of the Belgian community in Egypt. Among them was Henri Naus bey (1875–1938), general manager of the *Société Générale des Sucreries et de la Raffinerie d'Égypte*,¹¹ who offered LE 100, like Bishara. To raise the missing LE 800, and in agreement with the queen and Auguste Dauge (1865–1947), Belgian Minister in Cairo, Capart launched a public appeal, relayed in the Egyptian and Belgian press in the first days of March 1923. On 5 March 1923, during a visit to Edfu, Capart had another conversation with Queen Elisabeth and the Belgian Minister Dauge. At Capart's suggestion, they decided to name the fund the *Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth* in commemoration of the queen's presence at the opening of Tutankhamun's burial chamber. They also decided that the income from the FÉRÉ would be used primarily for the acquisition of books for the Egyptological library of the RMAH. Any remaining funds would be used to build up a photographic archive and then for any expenditure likely to promote the study of ancient Egyptian monuments. In April 1923, following Capart's return to Belgium, he tried to raise the necessary funds. He obtained the support of Baron Édouard Empain (1852–1929), while Henri Naus in Cairo and Baron Ernest Eeman (1854–1935) in Alexandria launched a campaign for donations. Quite quickly, the amount acquired exceeded even the most optimistic forecasts. Capart decided to expand the initial plan: he would turn the FÉRÉ into a real research institute.

¹⁰ For Yassa bey Andraos Bishara, see Weens 2014, and Huskens 2023.

¹¹ For Naus, see Kupferschmidt 1999.

Statutes

On 1 October 1923 an *association sans but lucrative* (a non-profit association according to Belgian law) was created under Capart's leadership. It was officially named *Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth* (FÉRÉ), in Dutch *Egyptologische Stichting Koningin Elisabeth* (ESKE) with its seat in Brussels, on the premises of the RMAH. Article 3 of the statutes, registered on 26 November 1923 and published in the *Annexes au Moniteur Belge* on 14 December, sets out its objectives:

Art. 3 – Établie en souvenir du 18 février 1923, jour où S.M. la Reine Élisabeth est entrée dans le tombeau de Toutankhamon, la fondation a pour but de favoriser le développement des études égyptologiques en Belgique. La fondation se préoccupera de l'enrichissement de la bibliothèque égyptologique des Musées Royaux du Cinquantenaire, de la constitution dans les dits musées d'archives photographiques sur l'Égypte ancienne; elle favorisera la participation aux fouilles dans la vallée du Nil, accordera des subsides de voyage, organisera des conférences et des expositions, etc. Cette énumération n'est pas limitative, mais simplement exemplative.

Beginning in 1929, the statutes of the FÉRÉ were revised several times. In 2004, for legal reasons, FÉRÉ was renamed the *Association Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth* (AÉRÉ), in Dutch *Egyptologisch Genootschap Koningin Elisabeth* (EGKE).¹²

Organisational structure

1. High patronage and royal support

The FÉRÉ was set up under the high patronage of both Belgian and Egyptian royalty. In Belgium, Elisabeth, Queen of the Belgians, gave her name in support of the society since its foundation in 1923, and she remained its patron until her death in 1965. Her son, the Duke of Brabant, Crown Prince Leopold, was honorary president of the FÉRÉ since 1928.¹³ Elisabeth was succeeded by Queen Fabiola, wife of King Baudouin, until she passed away in 2014. Thereafter no member of the Belgian royal family assumed patronage.

In Egypt King Fouad I (1868–1936) was patron of the FÉRÉ from 1923 until his death in 1936. His successor King Farouk I (1920–1965) remained patron until the Egyptian revolution of 1952.

¹² <http://www.aere-egke.be/aere.eng.htm> (accessed 2 August 2022).

¹³ Capart 1928a: 1.

2. *Directorship*

The FÉRÉ enjoyed stable management throughout Capart's directorship, from its foundation until his death in 1947 (Fig. 2). Marcelle Werbrouck¹⁴ remained at his side as deputy director from 1933 and took over the directorship after her mentor passed away, holding that position until 1958, when deputy director Pierre Gilbert (1904–1986) took over. He remained in office until renouncing it in 1973¹⁵ when Papyrologist Jean Bingen (1920–2012) became the director, after having been co-director with Gilbert since 1963. In 1975 Egyptologist Herman De Meulenaere (1923–2011) joined Bingen as co-director.¹⁶ The fact that these men joined forces for the following decades reflects the double focus on Egyptology and Papyrology which characterises FÉRÉ. For Papyrology Alain Martin took over from Bingen in 2002, and Luc Limme became director for Egyptology after De Meulenaere's death in 2011. In 2023 René Preys became the new director for Egyptology and Alain Delattre for papyrology.



Fig. 2: The FÉRÉ team around 1930 in the new library at the RMAH. Standing (from left to right): Marcel Hombert, Arpag Mekhitarian, Jean Capart, and Sergei Miasnikoff. Sitting (from left to right): Claire Préaux, Marcelle Werbrouck and Suzanne Berger.

¹⁴ For Werbrouck, see Bruffaerts 2018.

¹⁵ Bingen 1987.

¹⁶ Limme and Martin 2012.

Directors of the FÉRE¹⁷

1923–1947: Jean Capart

1947–1958: Marcelle Werbrouck

1958–1963: Pierre Gilbert

1963–1973: Pierre Gilbert and Jean Bingen

1973–1975: Jean Bingen

1975–2002: Jean Bingen and Herman De Meulenaere

2002–2011: Herman De Meulenaere and Alain Martin

2011–2023: Luc Limme and Alain Martin

2023–today: René Preys and Alain Delattre

3. Board of administrators

The presidency of the board of administrators underwent but few changes in the course of the past century. A change of management was often due to the advanced age or death of the person concerned. The board in general reflects the FÉRE's close ties with networks of influence (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: A selection of FÉRE board members (top from left to right: Henri Naus bey, Firmin van den Bosch, Georges Theunis, Émile Francqui; bottom from left to right: Félicien Cattier, Jean Willems, Henri Lavachery, Sadek Wahba Pasha).

¹⁷ All persons in this list were curator of the Egyptian collection of the RMAH, except Bingen and Martin, and recently also Preys and Delattre. Three of them (Capart, Gilbert, and De Meulenaere) were also chief curator of the museum.

During Capart's lifetime there were only two presidents: Henri Naus bey in the years 1923–1938 and Georges Theunis (1873–1966) in 1938–1958 (surviving Capart). As mentioned above, Naus was a leading Belgian industrialist in Egypt. The Egyptian sugar industry owed its prosperity to his business acumen. He had excellent contacts with politicians and cultural institutions in Egypt and in Belgium, and with the royal houses of both countries. Theunis was a key figure in the Belgian industrial, financial, and political world. He was twice Prime Minister of Belgium (1921–1925 and 1934–1935) before becoming president of the FÉRE. As a director of many companies belonging to the Empain group he was familiar with the business world. He served as Minister of Finance, as ambassador of Belgium to the USA during WW II, and afterwards as governor of the National Bank of Belgium. The FÉRE was thus assured a promoter who could open all doors, both nationally and internationally. His successor as the FÉRE's chairman in the 1950s was the banker Paul Ramlot (1879–1967), whose career began in Egypt and who had served as vice-president of the *Chambre de Commerce belgo-égyptienne*.¹⁸

Presidents of the FÉRE

1923–1938: Henri Naus bey (general director of the *Société Générale des Sucreries et de la Raffinerie d'Égypte*)

1938–1958: Georges Theunis (former prime minister of Belgium)

1958–1964: Paul Ramlot (banker)

1965–1972: Henri Lavachery (former chief curator of the RMAH in Brussels)

1973–1985: Baron Emmanuel de Bonvoisin (general director of the *Banque belge et internationale en Égypte*)

1986–today: Count Arnoul d'Arschot Schoonhoven (businessman)

The board of administrators was almost exclusively composed of Belgians, many of them with excellent contacts in Egypt. The board at the creation of the FÉRE in 1923 provides an example¹⁹, but its composition would change throughout the years. These changes are documented in the front matter of *Chronique d'Égypte*, the FÉRE journal that appeared twice yearly. Firmin van den Bosch (1864–1949) had been attorney general at the Mixed Courts in Alexandria, and had held a position on the board of the *Société royale archéologique d'Alexandrie*. In 1940, he became vice-president of the FÉRE, and wrote his memoirs of his earlier years in Egypt.²⁰ The engineer and businessman Léon Rolin (1871–1950) was a dominant figure in the Egyptian construction industry. Through his companies he had

¹⁸ 'Ramlot, Paul,' *Made in Belgium. Industriels belges en Égypte (1830–1952)*, <https://industrielsbelgesenegypte.omeka.net/items/show/1180> (accessed 6 August 2022). For Belgian industrialists in Egypt, see also Urbain *et al.* 2020.

¹⁹ Capart 1925: 3.

²⁰ Van den Bosch 1932.

made a fortune, transforming Cairo into a modern city, and he had contacts at all levels. Moreover, he was a collector of art with an influence on cultural activities in Cairo.

Members of the Board of Administrators of FÉRE at the time of its creation in 1923

President: Henri Naus bey

Director: Jean Capart

Members:

Léon Rolin (engineer in Cairo)

Adolphe Stoclet (engineer, financier, and member of the Supervisory Commission of Museums)

Firmin van den Bosch (attorney general of the Mixed Courts of Egypt)

Eugène van Overloop (chief curator of the RMAH in Brussels)

Maurice van Regemorter²¹ (director of the *Banque belge pour l'Étranger* in Cairo and treasurer of FÉRE in Egypt)

Secretary: Marcelle Werbrouck

Treasurer for Belgium: Marie Paul

In later years, several personalities among the highest Belgian elite joined. Émile Francqui (1863–1935) was a business magnate who rose to the top of Belgian banking and business after first making a name for himself in Congo and China. Thanks to his American contacts and their food shipments, Belgium survived WW I, and with the money left over, he ensured the reconstruction of the universities and provided the financial foundation for scientific research in the interwar period.²² After Francqui's death his place was taken by his friend Félicien Cattier (1869–1946), a lawyer, professor of law at the *Université libre de Bruxelles*, and banker. Moreover, like Francqui had been, he was governor of the *Société Générale de Belgique*, Belgium's most important financial institution. After WW II Jean Willems (1895–1970), director of the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research, the country's main financier of research, joined the FÉRE's board.²³

²¹ Maurice was the brother of famous Belgian book binder Berthe van Regemorter, who designed the luxurious cover of a copy of Capart's *Memphis* (1930) that was presented by Belgian Queen Elisabeth to King Fouad during their 1930 official state visit to Egypt (11 March 1930). For a photo of this cover, see Capart 1930: 169. On Berthe van Regemorter, see Cockx-Indestege 2014. We thank Wouter Claes for this addition.

²² In 1932 he created the *Fondation Francqui* together with Herbert Hoover to promote the development of higher education and scientific research in Belgium, and the Francqui Prize is still awarded yearly today; <http://www.francquifoundation.be/> (accessed 2 August 2022).

²³ Willems 1945.

The FÉRE had two treasurers, one in Belgium and one in Egypt. In Belgium the function was originally in the hands of Marie Paul (d. 1981), one of Capart's close collaborators and confidantes. For the position in Egypt Maurice van Regemorter (1876–1938) appeared the ideal man. He was a banker and general director of the Egyptian branch of the *Banque belge pour l'Étranger* in Cairo, which would be transformed into the *Banque belge et internationale en Égypte*. This institution became key to the FÉRE's financial operations in Egypt. Van Regemorter was succeeded as treasurer in Egypt by Oscar Ellsworth Lambiotte (1898–1969) and Louis van Damme, his successors as directors of the *Banque belge et internationale en Égypte*.

The ties with the RMAH remained strong, too. Before and after Capart's term as chief curator at the RMAH, other chief curators had a seat on the board – for example, Eugène van Overloop (1847–1926) and Henri Lavachery (1885–1972). Finally, among the FÉRE administrators there were wealthy capitalists who were known especially as collectors and philanthropists. Two prime examples are baron Arnilde Lheureux (1872–1957), who donated several ancient Egyptian artefacts to the RMAH, and Adolphe Stoclet (1871–1949), an industrialist who assembled an eclectic collection for his impressive mansion in the style of the 'Vienna Secession' at 281 Avenue de Tervuren, Brussels, known as the Stoclet Palace. There were only two Egyptian board members: diplomat Sadek Wahba Pasha (1885–1971), during his term as Egyptian minister in Brussels, and Arakel Nubar (1881–1954), son of Édouard Empain's business partner Boghos Nubar, who had helped build Heliopolis.

4. Membership categories

There were different categories of membership in the FÉRE. Initially, in 1923 they numbered three.

Membres protecteurs (= institutions, societies, individuals, and even some cities)

Membres effectifs

Membres adhérents

Later, two other membership categories were added:

Membres correspondants (= scientific members)

Membres donateurs (since 1930, a select group of wealthy individuals contributing the largest donations)

The positioning of the FÉRE at the heart of a wide-ranging network of influence, supported by big business, is also apparent when considering the two main categories of supporting members: the *membres donateurs* and the *membres protecteurs*. Perhaps one of the main assets to win over these personalities was the fact that the FÉRE stood under the patronage both of Elisabeth, Queen of the Belgians,

and of the King of Egypt, successively Fouad I and Farouk I. Among the donors were Belgians who belonged to the highest elite: Stoclet and Lheureux, mentioned above, but also engineer Louis Solvay (1876–1952) and his wife Odile Fontaine (1877–1962), of the leading chemical firm Solvay; banker and entrepreneur Louis Empain (1908–1976, Édouard's son); and industrialist and financier count Paul de Launoit (1891–1981). But Capart also actively recruited donors internationally, especially during his many voyages abroad. His tenure as advisory curator of the Egyptian collection at the Brooklyn Museum in the 1930s gave him a broad American network.²⁴ Prominent New Yorkers like Julius Goldman (1852–1938) of the well-known American banking family Goldman-Sachs, and Edward C. Blum (1863–1946), president of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, became FÉRÉ members. Mention should also be made of Marius de Zayas (1880–1961), a wealthy Mexican artist and gallery owner in New York City who would end up financing the first Belgian excavations at Elkab in 1937.

There were also several Egyptian donors, among them the previously mentioned Yassa bey Andraos Bishara; Wasif Boutros Ghali (1878–1958; Egyptian writer, diplomat, and politician who was Foreign Minister of Egypt four times in the 1920s–1930s); Theodore Cozzika (1899–1965; a wealthy Greek businessman and President of the Greek community of Cairo); and Moïse Lévy de Benzion (1873–1943; born into a wealthy Jewish family in Alexandria, and an Egyptian department store owner who built an important collection of art and antiquities).

The broader category of *membres protecteurs* illustrates the international mobilisation of funding and influence all the more. Apart from the rank and file of Belgian nobility, haute finance, and industry, many Americans were involved, addressed, and their support encouraged during Capart's various stays in the USA in the 1920s and 1930s. For the maintenance of contacts abroad and the recruitment of foreign members, the FÉRÉ had for a time specific secretaries for the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, and Romania, respectively Irène Donne Duke Burton, Anton Hoyneck van Papendrecht, Marcelle Baud, and Georges Matei Cantacuzino.

5. *Egyptology and Papyrology*

From the outset, the FÉRÉ was concerned with the study of pharaonic Egypt, the first section created. In 1926 the scope broadened to include Graeco-Roman Egypt and Papyrology; the latter would gradually become a separate branch within the foundation with its own director (cf. *supra*). In 1927–1928 Capart also attempted to create a section on Christian (or Coptic) Egypt, approaching Jozef Vergote (1910–1992) at the Catholic University of Leuven. But Capart failed, notably because the Orientalist Institute of Leuven seemed to view his initiative as competition.

²⁴ De Meyer 2023 and forthcoming.

Capart gathered around himself a number of collaborators, primarily women, contrary to common practice at the time (Fig. 2). The main cast of characters from the early days of the FÉRE consisted of:

1. **Pharaonic Egypt** (from 1923): Jean Capart (director), Marcelle Werbrouck (secretary, then deputy director, and director from 1947), Arpag Mekhitarian (assistant, secretary, then secretary-general), Eléonore Bille De-Mot (assistant), Suzanne Berger (assistant), Marie Weynants-Ronday (assistant), Pierre Gilbert (assistant; later director)
2. **Graeco-Roman Egypt/Papyrology** (from 1926): Marcel Hombert (director), Claire Préaux (assistant from 1928; co-director from 1945)

The FÉRE at the RMAH

The offices of the FÉRE were (and still are) located at the RMAH in Brussels. This also means that the library, the photographic archive, the archive of correspondence, and the stock of publications are located within the museum. The FÉRE kept up an active international correspondence, of which a new inventory has recently been drawn up in the framework of the Pyramids & Progress Project, and the digitisation of a selection of the material is in progress. While there is some more recent material in these archives, most files cover the period from 1923 to the late 1950s, the heyday of the FÉRE.

Establishing a photographic archive, not just for use by the members of the FÉRE but at the disposition of the international community, was one of Capart's strategic goals.²⁵ The collection of glass plate negatives kept in the Library of Antiquity at the RMAH was compiled by him and his collaborators throughout their careers, feeding it with photos they took during their travels throughout Egypt and in museums worldwide, and with photos bought from colleagues and institutions abroad. The oldest photographs date back to 1901 when Capart made his first trip to Egypt, while the most recent relate to the excavations of Pierre Gilbert at Elkab in 1955. This collection thus documents the pioneering years of Egyptology in Belgium in the first half of the 20th century. Momentarily, the historical collection of ca. 7,000 glass plate negatives is being worked on within the framework of the SURA Project.²⁶

Activities of the FÉRE

The FÉRE pursued activities both in the fields of communicating and popularising scholarship, as well as in professional Egyptology. For the general public, lectures (Fig. 4), tours, and temporary exhibitions were organised. The first exhibition took place at the RMAH in 1924, *Peintures thébaines* (Fig. 5), followed by several others, among them *L'Art d'Amarna* in 1933. Occasionally a special event was

²⁵ Capart 1928a: 9–10.

²⁶ Gräzer Ohara *et al.* 2023; Claes *et al.* 2022; Van der Perre *et al.* 2021.

orchestrated, such as the fundraising event ‘Réception chez Toutankhamon’ in 1926 (Brussels) and 1927 (Heliopolis).²⁷ Disseminating scholarship was Capart’s forte, which translated itself into the (re-)organisation of the RMAH under his directorship between 1925–1942.²⁸



Fig. 4: Poster of a lecture by Jean Capart for the Liège section of the FÉRÉ, 9 May 1947. This was one of the last lectures Capart ever gave.

²⁷ Capart 1926.

²⁸ Capart 1931.



Fig. 5: The exhibition *Peintures thébaines* at the RMAH in 1924.

More importantly, the FÉRÉ established itself as a respected association in the field of Egyptology through the organisation of scientific colloquia, excavations, and an extensive program of publications. Twice the team organised a *Semaine égyptologique et papyrologique de Bruxelles* (1930 and 1935), which is discussed in more detail below (see p. 158). These were the first international conferences ever held exclusively for Egyptologists and Papyrologists. In Egypt, archaeological activity was only gradually undertaken, beginning modestly with short seasons at Sheikh Fadl (1924) and Tell Hiw (1927), then growing into a long term project at Elkab, starting in 1937.²⁹

In terms of publications, the journal *Chronique d'Égypte: Bulletin périodique de la Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth* was initiated in 1925 with two issues annually. As Capart stated in the first volume, the journal's aim was not to be yet another scholarly journal – many were already established in the field – but rather to form a direct link between the FÉRÉ and its members everywhere.³⁰ Much like today's *Egyptian Archaeology* (the contemporary publication of the EES), *Chronique d'Égypte* originally was intended to keep its membership *au courant* with news, short reports about recent excavations, book reviews, obituaries, etc. In 1932 the FÉRÉ started its own series, *Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca*, with the

²⁹ Bruffaerts 2012.

³⁰ Capart 1925: 1.

goal of publishing ancient Egyptian texts and inscriptions.³¹ To date, nineteen volumes have appeared (1932–2006). Another, shorter series is *La médecine égyptienne*, initiated after the Belgian physician Frans Jonckheere (1903–1956)³² published the volume on the so-called mummy of Butehamon at the RMAH. Three volumes appeared in this series (1944–1958), all authored by Jonckheere. Several monographs were published independent of a series, but often related to the collection of the RMAH and its excavations. The publisher for most of the FÉRÉ volumes during its heyday was Vromant in Brussels. In later times, long after the death of Capart, several other series were initiated by the FÉRÉ:

Rites égyptiens: 11 volumes, 1962–2005

Papyrologica Bruxellensia: 40 volumes, 1962–2020

Monumenta Aegyptiaca: 15 volumes, 1968–2020

Monographies Reine Élisabeth: 16 volumes, 1971–2015

Elkab: 8 volumes, 1971–2010

Influence of the FÉRÉ on other societies

When in 1923 Jean Capart brought the FÉRÉ to life in Brussels, it was a relative latecomer in the world of oriental societies. Moreover, the scope and aims of the FÉRÉ were somewhat different from those of other such organisations: it was not primarily created to finance excavations or to acquire antiquities for the Royal Museums of Art and History, but rather to foster the development of Egyptology in Belgium in the broadest possible sense for professionals and laymen alike. Making good use of his connections with industrialists and other wealthy patrons of his time, both in Belgium and abroad, Capart managed to finance the FÉRÉ mainly with private funding, and it soon established itself as an active and vibrant organisation. Colleagues took note of this, and Brussels was quickly acknowledged as an ideal place to form the nucleus of international Egyptological research. Belgium – a small country geographically located in the heart of Europe – was both convenient and non-threatening for the surrounding larger national powers. In this regard, it also played a role as a model for other societies, both in Belgium and abroad.

Various institutes and associations were set up in Brussels within the RMAH following the example of the FÉRÉ. In each case, Capart (as chief curator of the museum since 1925) played a direct or indirect role.

Société des Américanistes de Belgique (1927)

Les Amis du Musée Historique de la Voiture (1927)

Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises (1929)

Les Amies de la Dentelle (1929)

³¹ A list of the monographs published by the FÉRÉ over the years can be consulted at <http://www.aere-egke.be/publications-publicaties.htm> (accessed 6 August 2022).

³² On Jonckheere, see Oeters 2023.

Société des Amis de l'Orient (1930)

Ars Photographica (1935)

To the *Académie Royale de Belgique* Capart declared in 1931:

Chaque fois que des circonstances favorables le justifieront on pourra créer successivement des instituts, dont chacun aura la mission de réaliser, pour un des départements de nos musées, ce que la Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth a réussi à faire pour le département égyptien.³³

A model and an inspiration

In the 1930s and 1940s, the FÉRE had a special relationship with at least two societies abroad, which were also at home in fairly small nations: the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, Denmark, and the Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Gezelschap 'Ex Oriente Lux' in Leiden, the Netherlands. In 1919, when Capart visited Denmark for the first time, he offered Valdemar Schmidt (1836–1925),³⁴ with whom he had been corresponding for twenty years, two boxes of photographic plates of Egyptian artefacts intended for the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. This was the beginning of close collegial ties between Capart and various Danish Egyptologists: Valdemar Schmidt, Frederik Poulsen (1876–1950), Maria Mogensen (1882–1932), etc. In 1938, Hans O. Lange (1863–1943), Director of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, wrote to Capart that his and the FÉRE's achievements "*servent et continuent à servir de modèle à la Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*."³⁵

In the Netherlands inspiration was taken from Capart's FÉRE for the creation in 1933 of its own Oriental Society 'Ex Oriente Lux', and both organisations set up collaborative ties.³⁶ Arie Abraham Kampman (1911–1977), the General Secretary of EOL, wrote to Capart on 14 March 1939:

In April I plan to come to Belgium for a few days and I would highly appreciate it if during my stay in Brussels I could exchange thoughts with you about a closer cooperation between the Fondation Égyptologique and 'Ex Oriente Lux'. Our board thinks that it should be possible to work together much more than has so far been the case. This collaboration could in the first place take the form of mutually inviting speakers. We would highly appreciate it should you come and speak personally to our departments Amsterdam, Utrecht, and The Hague, in return for which Mr. de Buck could give a lecture in Brussels. I merely mention this to indicate the direction in which our collaboration could take form in the beginning. Secondly, we could work together in inviting Egyptologists from England,

³³ Capart 1931: 87–88.

³⁴ On Schmidt, see Alm 2023.

³⁵ Archives of the RMAH, AÉRE-EGKE: BE/380469/2/504, folder Lange, Hans Ostfeld: Letters from Lange to Capart, 8/04/1938 and 20/11/1938.

³⁶ Kampman 1947.

France, and other countries. Thirdly we could join forces in publishing special publications and exchanging information.³⁷

The substantial folder of correspondence between EOL and the FÉRE preserved in the archives of the RMAH forms tangible testimony to their resulting collaboration. Kampman wrote in Dutch, a language Capart was perfectly capable of reading but not writing.³⁸ However, a language shared by Belgium and the Netherlands, and the close ties that historically existed between the two countries likely contributed to this proposal for cooperation on the eve of WW II. On 1 August 1939 EOL granted Capart honorary membership in the society, an honour that included free copies of EOL publications. Kampman declared: “Our Society considers the embodiment of your organisational activities, the Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, always as the shining example and the principles according to which this Society was erected, as the right ones as proven by practice.”³⁹ Their ties continued throughout the war.

Admiration for the active society under the directorship of Capart was also expressed in 1944 by Henri Asselberghs (1887–1980),⁴⁰ the director of the Dutch Railway Museum in Utrecht and Egyptologist ‘on the side’: “A country that has come to the fore in a completely new way is Belgium, where the interest in everything concerning Ancient Egypt has found an unrivalled pacesetter in Jean Capart since the end of the last century. The Egyptian section of the Cinquante-naire Museum in Brussels grew to its full glory under him and the Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth is the first institution I know of that specialises exclusively in Egypt. It is thanks to its initiative that much has been achieved in Belgium and beyond, that would otherwise not have been achieved.”

The FÉRE and the creation of international Egyptological research infrastructures

In the 1920s there were several voices calling for the FÉRE to become an international study centre for Egyptologists. In 1926, Günther Roeder (1889–1966, Hildesheim) told the Berlin newspaper *Der Tag*: “Brussels is easily accessible from England, France, Holland or Germany, and is also favourably situated for Americans coming to Europe. Professor Capart should make it an international

³⁷ Translated from Dutch. Archives of the RMAH, AÉRE-EGKE: BE/380469/2/319, folder Ex Oriente Lux: Letter from Kampman to Capart, 14/03/1939.

³⁸ During the linguistic survey made by the Germans during WW I, Capart averred: “I speak Flemish as it is spoken in Brussels”. But he also declared being unable to write in Dutch (Archives of the RMAH, Dir./59/12 and 134/2).

³⁹ Translated from Dutch. Archives of the RMAH, AÉRE-EGKE: BE/380469/2/319, folder Ex Oriente Lux: Letter from Kampman to Capart, 07/08/1939.

⁴⁰ For the relationship between Asselberghs and Capart, see De Meyer 2021, and p. 333 for this quote in particular.

centre for joint Egyptological work.”⁴¹ In 1928, at the 17th International Congress of Orientalists in Oxford, Capart emphasised the centralising role he wished to give the FÉRÉ: “La situation géographique de la Belgique facilite à nos collègues l’utilisation des matériaux ainsi réunis. (...) Si notre institut est belge par sa formation, il aspire à devenir une œuvre plus générale, utile aux progrès de la science.”⁴²

In response several European Egyptologists – Wilhelm Spiegelberg (1870–1930), Henry R. Hall (1873–1930), and Alan H. Gardiner (1879–1963) among them – testified to the importance of the work the FÉRÉ had already accomplished and asked that it become the Egyptological documentation centre of Europe. They proposed that Egyptologists deposit not only their books and articles in Brussels with the FÉRÉ, but also their photographs of Egyptian antiquities. Finally, they suggested that *Chronique d’Égypte* should act as a bulletin for Egyptologists to keep their colleagues informed of their research and to solicit their collaboration, thereby eliminating needless duplication. From that moment on, more and more Egyptologists felt that the FÉRÉ was destined to play an international role. In 1929, for example, Bernard Bruyère (1879–1971, IFAO) declared, “this centre for Egyptological studies would soon become the meeting place for all scholars and artists who were interested in Egypt.”⁴³

In 1930, Capart organised the *Semaine égyptologique et papyrologique de Bruxelles* (14–20 September 1930), the first international conference that brought together Egyptologists and Papyrologists only (80 participants), and no longer all orientalists. Here it should be mentioned that the FÉRÉ had the same ambitions for Papyrology as it did for Egyptology, in terms of becoming an international study centre for Papyrologists. And so, in that same *Semaine égyptologique et papyrologique* in 1930, the Papyrologists in attendance decided to establish an International Papyrology Committee with a permanent secretariat at the RMAH. This still exists today as the ‘International Association of Papyrologists’ (AIP).⁴⁴

The first *Semaine* was a great success, and the FÉRÉ organised a second one, 7–13 July 1935, again bringing numerous Egyptologists to Brussels. Five years later, a third *Semaine* could not take place due to the outbreak of WW II. After the war, Europe licked its wounds. Not all oriental societies, generally speaking, survived this ordeal unscathed. Capart, too, feared for the continued existence of the FÉRÉ; thus he reacted enthusiastically when his Danish colleague Constantin-Emiel Sander-Hansen (1905–1963) proposed to him the idea of an International Egyptological Association, bridging national borders and creating a united international society. This idea appeared in print for the first time in *Chronique*

⁴¹ *Der Tag* (Berlin), 20 June 1926.

⁴² Capart 1928b: 20–22.

⁴³ Archives of the RMAH, AÉRÉ-EGKE: BE/380469/2/127, folder Bruyère, Bernard: Letter from Bruyère to Capart, 11/09/1929.

⁴⁴ <https://aip.ulb.be//index.html> (accessed 8 August 2022).

d'Égypte on 1 October 1945.⁴⁵ In April 1947, Capart discussed the statutes of the future body with Sander-Hansen in Brussels and they decided that Capart should become its first president, with the initial meeting to be held at Copenhagen in August 1947.⁴⁶ But Capart's unexpected death on 16 June 1947 intervened, and Adriaan de Buck (1892–1959) of Leiden University became the first president.⁴⁷ While in August 1947 the International Association of Egyptologists (IAE) was officially founded, it would take almost thirty years before the first International Congress of Egyptology (ICE) was held, in Cairo, 2–10 October 1976. Until that moment, Egyptology remained merely a section in the International Orientalist Congresses, as it had been since the late 19th century.⁴⁸ Capart's *Semaines* were thus in many ways visionary, cut short by WW II and his demise. The IAE itself also did not really physically exist until it was (re)vivified at the 1976 ICE, having existed literally only on the title page of every volume of the 'Annual Egyptological Bibliography' (AEB) that appeared since 1947.⁴⁹

The creation of the AEB at the first meeting of the IAE in Copenhagen under the presidency of de Buck – and, since then, a Dutch undertaking until its transfer to Oxford in 2009 as the 'Online Egyptological Bibliography' (OEB)⁵⁰ – also did not come *ex nihilo*, but seems to have had its roots in the activities of the FÉRE. During the 1935 *Semaine* in Brussels, the attending Egyptologists expressed the wish that the FÉRE would distribute *fiches bibliographiques* for Egyptological publications, just as it already had for papyrological ones since 1932⁵¹ (Fig. 6).

Les égyptologues réunis en congrès à Bruxelles, en juillet 1935, ont émis le vœu que la Fondation Égyptologique leur distribue, à partir du 1^{er} janvier 1936, des fiches bibliographiques semblables à celles qu'elle envoie, depuis 1932, aux papyrologues. L'instrument d'études le plus utile pour eux, ont-ils déclaré, est la masse abondante de références sur les divers problèmes de l'archéologie et de la philologie égyptiennes. Par suite de la grande dispersion des ouvrages scientifiques, c'est, pour chacun, une tâche presque irréalisable de se tenir au courant des publications récentes.

⁴⁵ Bruffaerts 2013: 236.

⁴⁶ Bruffaerts 2013: 236–237.

⁴⁷ Werbrouck 1948: 10.

⁴⁸ Reineke (ed.) 1979: 3.

⁴⁹ Janssen 1979: 333.

⁵⁰ In 2009 the AEB changed into a digital online format (OEB), and its seat was moved to Oxford where the University of Oxford and the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich jointly collaborate on it.

⁵¹ The history of the papyrological *fiches bibliographiques* is presented in Martin 2010.

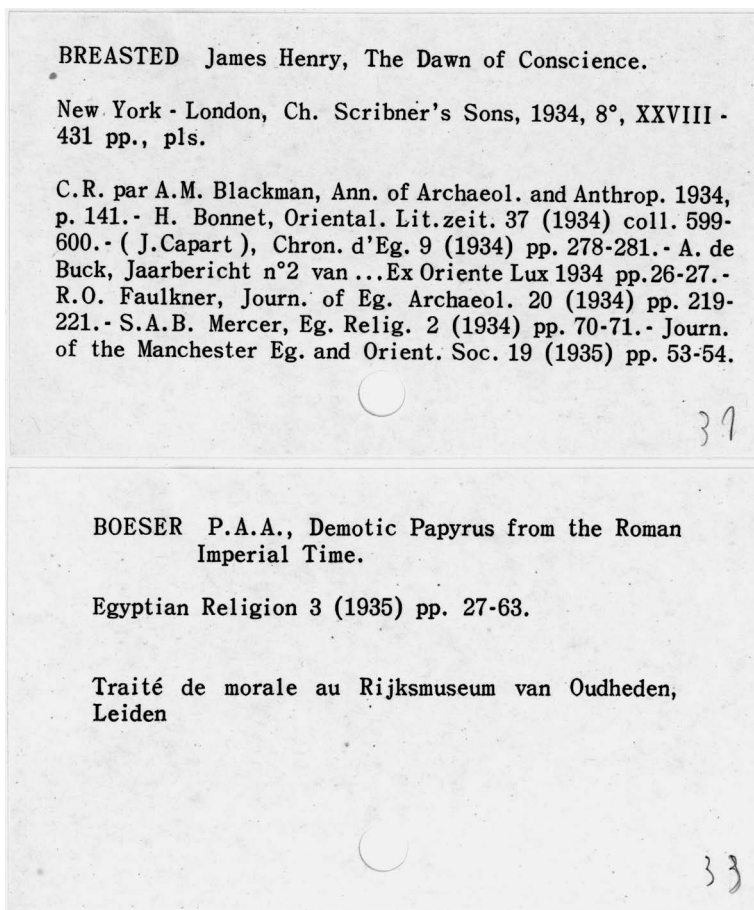


Fig. 6: Two specimens of the *fiches bibliographiques*, showing that references to (book) reviews were also included (CR = *compte rendu*) and sometimes brief comments on the contents, just like in the later AEB.

La Fondation va donc entreprendre ce travail. Pour le mener à bien, elle croit devoir compter sur la collaboration et l'adhésion des savants et des organismes qui s'intéressent au développement de l'égyptologie. Elle espère qu'ils voudront bien lui signaler sans délai leurs nouvelles publications (spécialement celles qui paraissent dans des revues non égyptologiques) ou, si possible, les lui faire parvenir pour un compte rendu dans la « Chronique d'Égypte ». Elle estime pouvoir recueillir ainsi, en moyenne, six cents références par année, qu'elle enverra périodiquement à ses abonnés sous la forme de fiches bibliographiques. Elle mettra de la sorte à la disposition des égyptologues un moyen d'information particulièrement sûr et rapide. La première série de fiches sera expédiée aux adhérents vers le début d'avril.

Le prix de l'abonnement annuel sera de 10 belgas. Il a été intentionnellement fixé à un taux bien inférieur à celui des frais réels de reproduction et d'envoi pour permettre à tous les égyptologues, et même aux étudiants, de se préparer une sérieuse documentation bibliographique. La Fondation, en acceptant la mission que lui ont confiée les membres de la Semaine Égyptologique de 1935, n'a pour but que de rendre service aux chercheurs qui consacrent leurs efforts à l'étude de l'histoire pharaonique.⁵²

Until now, it has gone unnoticed in the literature that these *fiches bibliographiques* that the FÉRE distributed among its members worldwide, are in fact the immediate forerunner of the AEB and ergo also of the OEB.⁵³ Since its creation in 1947 at the International Congress of Egyptologists in Copenhagen, the AEB had its home in Leiden where de Buck was Professor of Egyptology, and it remained there for sixty years. Perhaps things would have gone differently had Capart not died in 1947, just before he was to have become president of the IAE. The work on the AEB might have gone to Brussels, as a logical continuation of the *fiches bibliographiques*.

After the death of Capart, Werbrouck reported in 1948:

Les informations bibliographiques ont été une des activités sérieuses de la Fondation Égyptologique. La section papyrologique pourra maintenir l'impression et le service des fiches; pour la section pharaonique nous verrons ce que les circonstances d'après guerre et l'association internationale nous suggéreront de faire.⁵⁴

The distribution of the Egyptological *fiches bibliographiques* was abandoned not long after Capart's demise.

Nevertheless, the FÉRE played an important role in the creation of an international research infrastructure for the discipline of Egyptology – by organising the first international conferences of Egyptology, collecting and distributing references in Egyptological literature, setting up a photographic archive available to everyone, and compiling one of the most exhaustive Egyptological libraries worldwide. Possibly, it is because of the much smaller *Hinterland* that a Belgian society – by contrast to those in the surrounding larger nation states – transcended national concerns and instead took transnational and international research infrastructures to heart. Moreover, the presence in Brussels of the Mundaneum in the *Palais du Cinquantenaire*, the same premises where Capart presided over his Royal Museums of Art and History, may have influenced his mindset in the wish to create an overarching universal documentation centre for Egyptology.⁵⁵

⁵² Anonymous 1936.

⁵³ Not mentioned in historical overviews of and reflections on the AEB/OEB such as Arnaudès 2003; Baines 2020.

⁵⁴ Werbrouck 1948: 11.

⁵⁵ For the Mundaneum, see Wright 2014 and the comments by Van Rinsveld 2017: 77,

Aftermath

The creation of the FÉRE owed everything to the personal ambitions and aspirations of one man, Jean Capart. His enduring enthusiasm and energy made the society thrive throughout his lifetime; after his death in 1947 the society would never again reach the zenith that it had known before. Moreover, during the mid-twentieth century privately funded learned societies, as a means to support academia, lost traction to the benefit of national research councils. In Belgium the *Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique* (FNRS) / *Nationaal Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek* (NFWO) – the National Fund for Scientific Research – was created by King Albert I (1875–1934), the husband of Queen Elisabeth, on 27 April 1928. It was one of the first research councils on the European continent. Several of the same individuals who were on the board of administrators of the FÉRE also were key figures in the creation of the NFWO: bankers Émile Francqui and Félicien Cattier signed the document while the start-up capital of just over 109 million Belgian francs came primarily from businesses.⁵⁶ Jean Willems, who was also in the board of administrators of the FÉRE, was in charge of the day-to-day management of the FNRS/NFWO from its foundation until his death in 1970. Willems also managed the University Foundation, which stemmed from the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) in 1920, in charge of the provision of food to the suffering population during WW I. After the war the remaining funds were used to set up a foundation to support higher education and scholarship, and it is this foundation that funded Capart's visiting professorship to the USA in 1924–25.⁵⁷ Thus Capart tapped networks and resources of wealthy businessmen and bankers, politicians and administrators, to set up his own foundation for the benefit of Belgian Egyptology, and to navigate the current of upcoming national scientific research councils. Having the FÉRE embedded in the RMAH has helped sustain its position, and in 2023 the FÉRE celebrated its first 100 years as an active society.

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Marleen De Meyer, Jean-Michel Bruffaerts and Jan Vandersmissen

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Thomas L. Gertzen

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- Fig. 5 Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – PK, Abteilung Handschriften und Historische Drucke: Portr. Slg./Philol. kl/Gueterbock, Bruno, Nr. 1s.
- Fig. 6 Anton Jirku (ed.), Beiträge zur Religionsgeschichte und Archäologie Palästinas. Ernst Sellin zum 60. Geburtstag dargebracht, Leipzig 1927, frontispiece.
- Fig. 7 Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums 76.4. July/August, frontispiece. Digitalisiert durch die Universitätsbibliothek J.C. Senckenberg Frankfurt am Main [2022]: Compact Memory (<https://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/cm/id/12661203>).

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