

CONFERENCE REVIEWS

“The Tomb of Seti I: Preservation and Presentation”, Hunterian Institute, Royal College of Surgeons, London, 17th July 2002

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This conference announced the results of the initial stages of research and development of a proposal to create, as part of the Desert Valley Project, a replica (referred to as a ‘facsimile’) of the 19th Dynasty royal tomb of Seti I, one of the most elaborately decorated tombs in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt. The conference was held at the Royal College of Surgeons near the Sir John Soane’s Museum, where an evening reception gave participants the opportunity to see the original carved alabaster sarcophagus of Seti I, purchased directly from Giovanni Belzoni. Seti I’s tomb has suffered serious natural and human damage since its discovery by Belzoni in 1817, in order to protect it from further deterioration it has been closed to the public for the last 12 years. The conference speakers, all of whom are involved in some capacity in the project, argued that the best way of preserving the tomb and at the same time making it accessible to the public, would be to create a facsimile. The proposal is inspired by the success of the facsimile of the Altamira Cave in Spain with its Palaeolithic rock paintings. The speakers included an inter-disciplinary mix of academic Egyptologists, conservators, architects and engineers: Dr Fayza Haikal (The American University in Cairo), Prof. Erik Hornung (retired from University of Basle), Prof. Theodor Abt (University of Basle), Dr Aidan Dodson (University of Bristol), Dr Salima Ikram (The American University in Cairo), Prof. Gaballah Ali Gaballah (Cairo University, former Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA)), conservator Dr John Larson (National Museum and Galleries of Merseyside, Liverpool), curator Pilar Fatàs (Altamira Cave), computer graphics specialists Adam Lowe (Factum Arte, London) and Neil Briggs (University of Salford), structural and environmental engineers Jane Wernick (Wernick and Associates) and Andy Ford (Fulcrum Consulting), architect Michael Mallinson (Mallinson Architects) and entrepreneur Dr Ahmed Bahgat (Bahgat Group), who is providing the financial backing for the project.

The long-term aims of the Desert Valley Project are:

- To create facsimiles of inaccessible ancient Egyptian monuments (including royal tombs and desert monuments)
- To encourage investment in the conservation and protection of these monuments
- To create a new centre for visitors to the Giza Plateau area

The project site is located in an abandoned modern quarry pit, and thus does not require an archaeological survey prior to construction. There are three proposed 'valleys' within the quarry, each of which will support different themes. The first is the 'Desert Valley', intended to educate the public about rock inscriptions, ancient quarrying expeditions, gold mining and anchorites. The second is the 'Museum Valley', where two large mounds will house the royal tomb facsimiles, lecture theatre, and a museum. There are proposals for six royal tomb 'reconstructions' to be created in this area after that of Seti I (due to be completed in about two years time), including Akhenaten, Tutankhamun, Ramses VI, Thutmose III, Amenhotep III and Hatchepsut. The third area is the 'Historic Nile Valley Landscape'. This is an ambitious idea to rediscover the flora of ancient Egypt, as almost none still grows in Egypt today. It is proposed to recreate an ancient landscape filled with plant and animal species, working under the guidance of Dr Alan Chapman, a leading Cambridge archaeobotanist.

The technology proposed to visually recreate Seti I's tomb is truly impressive. Specialised scanning equipment has been created specifically for this project. Full-size sample panels reproduced from scanned data taken from the tomb were on display at the conference and showed themselves to be practically indistinguishable from the original. The scanner has a 10m three-dimensional range, such that the paintings, relief details and the curve of the ceiling can be reproduced within 1/10mm accuracy. The audience was reassured, by conservator John Larson, that the laser technology required to scan the tomb would not damage the monument. The laser scanning of the tomb scenes is valuable as a documentation of conservation, and to monitor the continuous decay of the tomb, even if the 'reconstructed' tomb never materialises. The colours have been recorded with a high degree of precision using Munsell colour charts and, where necessary, by matching colours using gouache paints. Daylight, channelled through light pipes, will be used to complement the artificial lighting and render the colours as natural as possible. The aim is to create an experience close to the feeling of the environment when the tomb was first discovered. Factum Arte Consultants, who are responsible for the recording procedures, plan to give workshops to an Egyptian workforce who will then be given the task of recording further tombs independently.

Dr Barry Kemp (Cambridge University) who chaired the morning session, raised the question of whether the facsimile should be recreated as the tomb was originally intended, as it was found, or in its current state of decay. These representational issues were discussed, but the audience was not told exactly how the final tomb is to be presented. Haikal and Hornung, who both addressed these questions, saw significant academic value in the venture. Haikal reminded us that while photographs and drawings will never be able to capture the tomb fully, the proposed 3-D digital facsimile will allow for greater accuracy and depth perception, and will thus play an important role not only as a visitor attraction, but also as a precise recording of the tomb before it deteriorates further. Hornung suggested that a facsimile of the tomb will allow for all the missing pieces of wall-painting, which are scattered around international museums, to be comprehensively reassembled. This would be an impossible task to undertake on the original monument. Lost pieces would have to be reconstructed from other sources, in particular, from early drawings and squeezes (a

technique for taking imprints of reliefs using papier-mâché moulds) which sometimes preserve the original colours, now completely vanished from the original. Hornung compared several early drawings of the tomb paintings, particularly those by Belzoni, Henry Salt and Robert Hays, an exercise that needs to be undertaken for each specific case, to establish which is the most accurate rendering to incorporate in the facsimile. Neil Briggs brought to the audience's attention the possibility of combining the facsimile with a virtual reality model. In this case visitors would have access to virtual reality models showing the phases of the tomb not represented by the facsimile.

A key issue was the location of the facsimile tomb near Cairo, a considerable distance from the Valley of the Kings in Luxor. Alternative locations were not discussed. Mallinson justified this location by claiming that seven-eight million tourists visit Cairo every year and only two-three million travel to Luxor. The location, 7km south-west of the Giza pyramids, and close to the new site for the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, will attract an estimated five million tourists every year. Aside from the obvious financial benefit of this location, archaeologists are likely to question how much of the original landscape context of the tomb would be lost, in particular the vicinity of the pyramid-shaped Mount Qurn which overlooks the Valley of the Kings. In this new location, the Giza pyramids are visible on the distant horizon but should have no visual impact on the Giza Plateau itself. It could be argued that the pyramid symbolism is maintained by the close proximity to Giza. Mallinson pointed out that the external facade of the tomb was purposely designed to leave the visitor under no illusion that they were entering the original tomb. On the other hand, the two mound shells, built on the valley floor, are intended to create landscape features that evoke the scree hills of the Valley of the Kings. These mounds provide large spaces needed to house the new tomb facsimiles and are also an effort to maintain the natural landscape. In sum, this approach attempts to recreate the original landscape, while at the same time housing the tomb in a structure that is an expression of modernity.

The Desert Valley Project has support from the Egyptological community and endorsement from the private sector. However, one cannot help but wonder how much of this ambitious commercial project will actually benefit Egyptian archaeology. The Desert Valley Project is part of a larger development, 'Dreamland', which seeks to attract both tourists and Egyptians, incorporating hotels, residential areas and recreational facilities, including a golf course and theme park stretching over nine million square metres of desert. While private investment in Egyptian archaeology is much needed, there is some doubt as to whether the preservation of archaeological heritage is being subsumed to business interests. While the Bahgat Group will be able to retain control of the facsimile site and run it on commercial lines, Egyptian law safeguards against the exploitation of original antiquities in two specific ways. First, a museum such as the one proposed for this project, cannot be owned by a private company insofar as it houses real antiquities, but must belong to the State. To get around this obstacle, the museum will be built by the Bahgat Group and will then be given to the State. Second, as far as the use of facsimiles is concerned, the Supreme Council of Antiquities has copyright on all monuments and can therefore exercise a degree of control over the project in this way also. The success of the enter-

prise will ultimately depend on achieving a fair balance between archaeological and business interests and on convincing tourists of the attraction of visiting a facsimile tomb. Gaballah stated that the concept of a facsimile has yet to be accepted by Egyptians and tourists alike – those very visitors who significantly contributed to the on-going deterioration of the original monument and to its closure.

As it stands, no one is allowed to visit the tomb of Seti I, so the question seems to be restricted to a choice between a facsimile or nothing at all (if the tomb remains permanently closed). To summarise, the conference was highly informative on the potential of the venture. However, it would seem that more feedback from the archaeological community would be beneficial regarding the broader issues about the use of such facsimiles. This would allow more scope for dialogue on what are controversial questions surrounding the creation of replicas of archaeological monuments.