

Friday, April 6, 2007

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Giza online

Exit strategy

Book party

Snyder Lecture

In memoriam

40-year teacher

Giza online

Modern technology preserves ancient wonders of Egypt

by Helene Ragovin

Step into the subterranean tomb of Meresankh III, a queen of Egypt, wife to her uncle, the pharaoh Khafre. Turn to the right and examine the hieroglyphs carved into the limestone walls. Spin around and marvel at the vibrantly colored bas-reliefs depicting life and death in the Old Kingdom.



With the Giza Archives Project, Peter Der Manuelian has created what he calls "the largest outdoor museum in the world." © JOHN SOARES

This panoramic view—along with scores of other images of Meresankh's chapel, dating back to its discovery by archaeologists in 1927—is available through the Giza Archives Project (www.mfa.org/giza), an online, interactive collection of photographs and documents from the Giza pyramids and surrounding tombs and temples. Designed as a resource for scholarly research, the site is also a virtual treasure trove for anyone who's ever been fascinated by the wonders of ancient Egypt. When Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, he exclaimed, "*Soldats! Du haut de ces Pyramides, 40 siècles nous contempnent.*" ("Soldiers! From the top of these Pyramids, 40 centuries are looking at us.")

"Through technology, we can put the [Giza] site together again," said Peter Der Manuelian, director of the Giza Archives Project at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and a lecturer in Egyptology and archaeology in the Department of Classics at Tufts. "This is a preservation tool."

In addition to the iconic pyramids, the Giza Necropolis contains an elaborate arrangement of tombs, chapels and other burial artifacts dating to what is known as the Old Kingdom period in the third millennium BC.

In essence, the site is "the largest outdoor museum in the world," Manuelian said, but, the antiquities are far from secure. They are threatened by climate and environmental changes, tourism, vandalism, Cairo's urban sprawl and the natural condition of the stone and its "survivability."

"The pyramids are not indestructible," Manuelian said. "Many predict that tombs and decorated wall scenes and inscriptions may not be there in 25 years, or will be just a fraction of what you can see today ... they are deteriorating as we speak. That's one of the reasons for this website."

Documentation and

CALENDAR

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IN THIS CORNER

Oral health heroes





In this 1927 image, the Nile River floodwaters reach the edge of the Giza Plateau northeast of the Great Pyramid. The completion of the Aswan Dam in 1970 ended the millennia-old inundation cycle. Today, the area is choked with roads and high-rise apartment buildings.

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databases

During the first half of the 20th century, Boston-based archaeologist George Andrew Reisner led the longest-running excavation at Giza, unearthing thousands of artifacts and amassing even more documents, maps and photographs. Considered one of the “founding fathers of the scientific archaeological method,” Reisner was, in contrast to many of his era, “interested in documentation, not treasure-hunting,” Manuelian said.

“If [Reisner] were alive today, he would be the greatest database junkie,”

Manuelian joked. During Reisner’s lifetime—he died in Egypt in 1942—he was not able to catalog all his findings. The job of interpreting and publishing Reisner’s impressive body of work has fallen to subsequent generations of Egyptologists.

Reisner’s expeditions were funded by Harvard and the MFA, leaving the museum with the most extensive collection of Giza artifacts in the United States. Yet the museum’s Egyptian rooms display only 4 percent of the Giza holdings, Manuelian said. Through the Giza Project, scholars and the public can view and evaluate almost anything in the wide-ranging collection.

“One of the big triumphs” of the project is that it links all this diverse material, allowing for cross-references and comparisons, Manuelian said. For instance, visitors can view the striking dark stone statue of the pharaoh Menkaure standing beside a queen—whether it’s his wife, mother or a goddess is still a subject of debate among experts—now on display at the MFA. They can read Reisner’s diary entry for January 18, 1910, the day the statue was discovered: “In the evening, just before work stopped, a small boy ... appeared suddenly at my side and said ‘come.’ In the lower part of this hole, the head of a female statue ... had just come into view in the sand.” Visitors to the site also can see photographs of various stages of the statue’s excavation; see the statue alongside others with similar features and find downloadable, full-text references for books and articles about the statue.

The Giza Project is different from other museum websites “in that this is not object-centric, but archive-centric,” Manuelian said. “I hope it becomes an archaeological and archival model.”



Unexpected discovery

Work on digitizing the collection is ongoing, with the aid of Tufts students from Manuelian’s archaeology seminars, interns, volunteers and MFA employees. Since 2001, 200 Tufts students have assisted with the project, which is funded with \$1.6 million in grants from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Manuelian calls the partnership between Tufts and the MFA on the Giza Project “a happy collaboration.”

The Tufts students “are the engine that has kept us going,” he said. This semester, students are scanning and cataloging a particularly intriguing discovery—72 hand-written Arabic journals, recorded from 1913 to 1942 by the Egyptian foremen who supervised the dig workers at Reisner’s expeditions. Translators with knowledge of both Arabic and archaeology will translate the volumes into English. The diaries

Peter Der Manuelian with one of the 72 hand-written Arabic journals, recorded from 1913 to 1942 by the Egyptian foremen who supervised the dig workers at Giza. © JOHN SOARES

were obtained from the foremen's descendants, following an unexpected chain of events that occurred when Manuelian was in Egypt doing research for a biography of Reisner.

The 72 large bound journals—wonderfully preserved for more than 65 years by the dry Egyptian climate—arrived at the MFA last November, joining the rest of the papers associated with Reisner's expeditions. "I'm delighted now that they are back home," Manuelian said.

The archives project also has been recognized for its educational value. In February, the American Library Association gave the site one of its ABC-CLIO awards, offered to "useful and innovative," freely available Internet-based historical resources.

The scope of the project is expanding. In January, Manuelian announced the formation of Giza International, an agreement with nine other institutions in the United States, Egypt and Europe that hold artifacts or documents relating to the pyramids and other antiquities at Giza. Material from those collections will be entered into the Giza Archives databases and website, making it the central repository worldwide for all information about 20th-century Giza excavations.

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