The Golden Mummies live

British and Egyptian viewers were fastened simultaneously to their TVs on Sunday as archaeologists drew them into a live excavation to find more secrets hidden in the Valley of the Golden Mummies. Nevine El-Aref was there

Cold, darkness and silence reigned over the desert night near Bahariya Oasis, but the Valley of the Golden Mummies was as bright as day under six moon-shaped halogen lamps. Attached to the sand by four iron bars, the lamps hung over an excavation pit which would be the first part to be explored in an innovative TV programme.

The serenity and divinity of the valley -- six kilometres from the oasis into the parched desert -- was disturbed last Sunday as a TV crew of about 200 producers and technicians arrived laden with nearly a million kilogrammes of equipment. Alongside were 10 caravans for Egyptologists and anchors and a large, white plastic hemispheric tent equipped with X-ray machines, computers and cameras to serve the programme.

Suddenly, the valley was turned into a movie set. Inside a yellow caravan sat Zahi Hawass, secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) and the star of the show, along with the BBC Channel 5 presenter. Their concentration was now and then disturbed by directions from Richard Belfielt, joint managing director of Fulcrum TV, who was in charge of the live broadcast.

Belfielt described the live event as an archaeological appetiser for viewers, who would join in a thrilling experience never before attempted.

"We choose Bahariya Oasis as our broadcast location because it is a completely different ancient site, which shows the life of ancient, ordinary people like us and not like royalty," he said. He said their lifestyle, religious beliefs and domestic life would be revealed.

"This live adventure beneath the treasured sand could be our lucky occasion, or we could end up with false hopes," Hawass told Al-Ahram Weekly shortly before the broadcast began.

Hawass conceded that between the start of an excavation and the moment of discovery lay a world of toil, trouble and sometimes disappointment; but the rigours were sweetened by the thrill of a find.

At 11pm sharp Egypt time -- 9pm in the UK, and peak viewing time -- as a chilly breeze ruffled the hair of the onlookers, a hushed silence descended, broken only by the countdown of the TV crew. As the camera rolled a dramatic musical rhythm filled the air, and onscreen appeared the sand of the Valley of the Golden Mummies, dotted with thousands of ancient skeletons. Bones were scattered everywhere. "Here is a right hand missing, there is a deteriorated skull along with another one of a woman who once suffered from leprosy. But that one is a skeleton of a very healthy individual," an anthropologist was saying, pointing out to the overwhelming number of limb bones.

Skimming over the ancient bones, cameras took viewers beneath the sand where the golden mummies lay in their graves. The presenter, along with a Roman Period specialist, related the story of the mummies' memorable discovery. A donkey belonging to an antiquities guard, who was riding round the Graeco-Roman monuments in Bahariya Oasis and making a safety check of the site, tripped and fell into a hole. This led to the discovery of the first golden mummies. (Meanwhile donkeys are braying, brought in to add ambiance to the set.)

At the selected pit Hawass, wielding an axe, cleared the sand from the entrance so as to take onlookers into the heart of a live discovery. This time Hawass was not wearing his usual Indiana Jones hat, but had donned a site helmet with an affixed camera. Before the programme began he was concerned that they might not find anything inside, and in order not to disappoint viewers had prepared another site rich in burial treasures that the team had stumbled upon earlier in the day.
While the digging went on, Egyptologist Salima Ikram, a professor at the American University in Cairo (AUC) explained, along with computer graphic simulation, how Ancient Egyptians mummified the bodies of their Pharaohs and preserved their grave goods. In the hemispheric working area, Aymen Abdel-Ghani of the National Research Centre pointed out recent studies made on bones. He said X-rays showed that the average lifespan of oasis dwellers in the Roman Period ranged from 35-40, but that they had good medical care and some broken bones had been correctly treated.

Earlier Hawass told the Weekly that examination of some of the unearthed skulls revealed that some had died from severe headache, while one woman had a broken hand but lived 10 years after treatment. A 50-year-old man had two broken legs and died following his accident, while another suffered from sinusitis.

"We believe that the early death of people who lived in the oasis can be attributed to the water they drank from wells that could contain iron, which affected their bones," Hawass said. He added that this theory would be put to the test when the water was analysed.

While Hawass removed a pile of stone rubble from the tomb entrance, a beauty specialist in the working zone of the hemisphere was using ancient implements to fabricate an artificial mummy with a golden mask featuring the presenter, who was now entering the tomb with Hawass. But when they were only a few steps inside there was a technical problem. Perhaps the Pharaohs' curse had found its way on set, but as technicians attempted to solve the problem a computer graphic simulation featuring the architectural design and decoration of a Roman tomb was screened. The simulation showed reliefs, drawings and paintings found two years ago in Djed Khonsu's tomb at the Al-Sheikh Subi site at Bahariya.

Graphic designer Maya Gavin made the four-minute computer simulation from 174 photographs of Ged Khunsu's tomb. It was a difficult and complicated task which took three months to complete.

The technical problem solved, the burial chamber appeared on screen to disclose a beautiful anthropoid clay coffin of a woman. "This woman was her husband's beloved," Hawass said, "because she has the largest tomb ever found for one person." He added that his first examination indicated the tomb belonged to a middle class family but was robbed in antiquity, perhaps right after the burial. The sarcophagus contained a well-preserved skeleton.

Further inside the tomb was another sealed entrance, but opening it might take another hour. Hawass promised to make another episode to discover what lay behind this sealed block.

Mansour Borek, chief inspector of the Giza Plateau and a member of the Bahariya excavation team, told the Weekly that 20 mummies, some gilded, were recently discovered. This discovery was broadcast live last week to America in the Discovery Channel. Early studies revealed they belonged to a middle class family since they had been wrapped in linen with no decoration. Meanwhile another cemetery for upper class families had been uncovered, but it had been robbed in antiquity and reused in successive periods.

Hawass pointed out that the most important tomb was the one containing eight "beautifully mummified" bodies and one covered with gold. Near the mummies were some unique necklaces, bracelets, and clay wine jars. Clay vessels decorated with the face of Bes, the deity of joy and pleasure, were also unearthed.

In the Al-Sheikh Subi area of Al-Bawiti, Bahariya's capital, four other tombs have been discovered. Borek said they belonged to the family of the Bahariya governor, Djed Khonsu, who held office during the reign of Ahmose II in the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty.

The expedition opened the sealed shaft that descended 30 feet underground and found a large limestone anthropoid sarcophagus. It belonged to Iry-Hr-Kheib, brother of Djed Khonsu.
On both sides of the sarcophagus are scenes with the sign of Maat, the goddess of justice and truth, and lines of hieroglyphic text written from the head to the foot of the lid. Hawass said it conveyed the message that this man was "the one who makes the perfect eye", meaning that he conducted rituals. "So that means that he was a priest performing this act in the temple of Bes or the one of Ain Al-Muftilla nearby," Hawass said.

The wealth of Bahariya oasis during the 26th Dynasty can be seen through both discoveries. Many oasis dwellers were traders who monopolised the wine trade, as wine was much desired in the afterlife. This wealth bought gold from the mines in Nubia. "Bahariya was the Napa Valley of Egypt," Hawass said.

Caption: A collection of 20 mummies, some gilded, burned or wearing cement masks, at the moment of their discovery

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