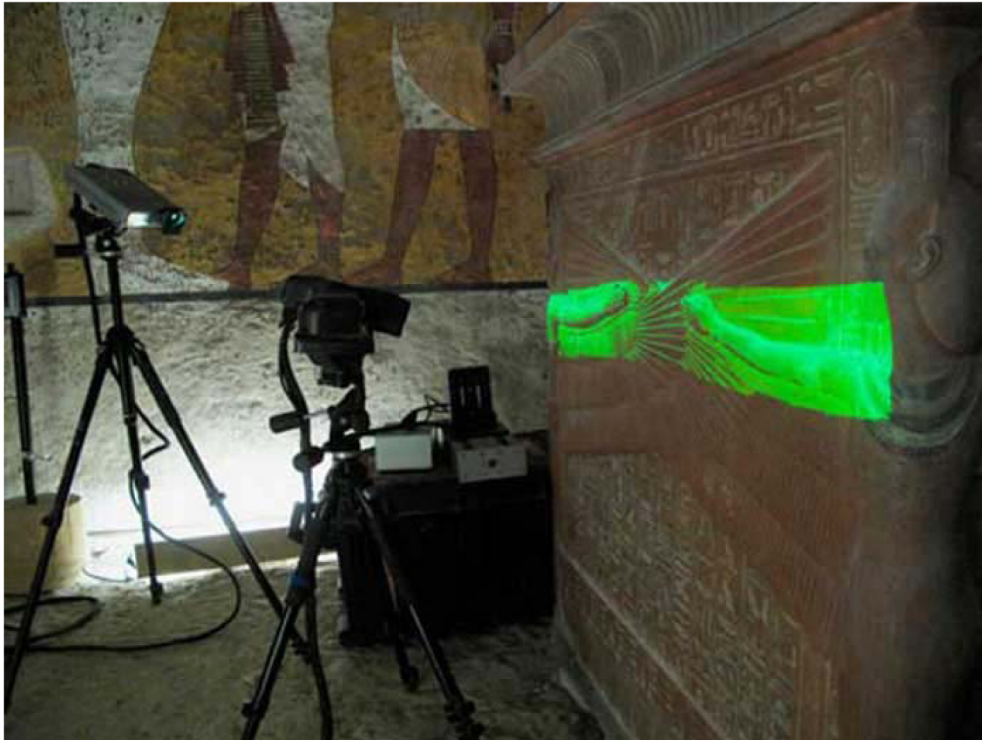Antiquities and Archaeology   Conservation   News

Tut's tomb, take two

A replica of the famous pharaoh's burial chamber in Egypt could
boost the trend for reproductions in sustainable tourism

By Emily Sharpe. Web only
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A 3D scanner records the west side of Tut's sarcophagus

A life-size facsimile of the tomb of King Tutankhamun opens to the public
in Egypt tomorrow, 1 May. Installed two-meters underground, in a building
next to the archaeologist Howard Carter's house at the entrance of the
Valley of the Kings, the project gives a boost to the trend of using precise
replicas to promote sustainable tourism at massively popular ancient sites.

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Although the idea to build a replica of Tut's tomb was first suggested more than 20 years ago, a detailed recording of the site by the Madrid-based workshop Factum Arte—a pioneer in the field of three-dimension scanning and high-resolution photography—only began in 2009. The company has already completed other scanning projects in Egypt, including making a replica of the tomb of Thutmose III for a touring exhibition. As part of the Tut project, a lost "Isis" fragment, known only from a photograph taken by Harry Burton shortly after Carter's discovery of the burial chamber in 1922, was recovered.

With the number of annual visitors to the Valley of the Kings expected to reach 15 million by 2015, replicas could offer a much-needed balance between the demands of tourism and long-term preservation efforts. King Tut's tomb has suffered from the fluctuations in temperature and humidity caused by the vast number of visitors over the years; the daily number of visitors is now restricted to 1,000. And visits to other tombs, including those of Seti I and Queen Nefertari, are strictly limited for conservation reasons.

The public's acceptance of replicas seems to be gaining ground: copies of the painted caves at Lascaux and Altamira have proved popular, with the latter attracting around 500,000 people annually.