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MIDDLE EAST

Hope for Nefertiti's Tomb, and Egypt's Economy

By **KAREEM FAHIM** NOV. 29, 2015

LUXOR, Egypt — For weeks, a group of explorers have scanned the walls of a tomb in the Valley of the Kings, using radar and infrared devices, in the hopes that science might confirm one Egyptologist's theory: that hidden behind a wall of King Tutankhamen's burial chamber sits the long-sought tomb of Queen Nefertiti.

The prospect of such a discovery is beyond tantalizing, and would be as momentous a find as any here for almost a century, antiquities officials say. It would also come at a time when Egypt's tourism industry, frozen by years of political unrest and fears of militant attacks, is in urgent need of good news.

For the noted Egyptologist, Nicholas Reeves, the tests could vindicate his arguments that two of the walls in the tomb of Tutankhamen, also known as King Tut, are likely to mask hidden rooms, and that the tomb itself was in fact an antechamber to a larger burial complex that belonged to Nefertiti, Pharaoh Akhenaten's powerful queen who according to some theories, succeeded him as ruler of Egypt.

Dr. Reeves acknowledges that Egyptian officials, including some of his

colleagues in the search, do not share the conviction that Nefertiti is waiting to be found in any undiscovered chambers.

For Egypt, there is much at stake. The government is desperate for the kind of earth-shattering archaeological find that would lure tourists back to its ancient monuments. Visitors have been driven away from everywhere in Egypt but its beaches, and in the last few weeks, the seaside resorts have emptied, too, after militants claimed responsibility for downing a plane full of Russian beachgoers in late October, killing everyone onboard.

With that gathering sense of urgency, the explorers emerged from Tutankhamen's tomb this weekend, plainly exhausted by the work but carrying what they said was promising news: Radar scans had provided strong evidence of hollow chambers behind the walls. Mamdouh Eldamaty, Egypt's antiquities minister, said at a news conference announcing the findings that there was an "approximately 90 percent" chance that something — "another chamber, another tomb" — was waiting beyond Tutankhamen's burial chamber.

"I think it's a very good result," he said, adding that more analysis would be carried out over the coming weeks on the radar data to try to determine more precisely what is beyond the walls. After that, researchers may drill into the walls to get an even better look, though there is no set timetable for that step.

Hours after the news conference on Saturday, the explorers returned to Tutankhamen's tomb, where Hirokatsu Watanabe, the Japanese specialist carrying out the radar scans, surveyed an area outside the entrance to the burial chamber. Mr. Watanabe dragged his silver, battered-looking device back and forth across the dirt, as journalists followed his every move and another member of the team took notes.

Among those watching was Mustafa Waziry, the director of antiquities of Luxor. "I'm an archaeologist, I don't know what it means," Mr. Waziry said, speaking of the results of the radar tests. But the implications were clear.

“If we discover something, it will turn the world inside out,” he said. “And they will come.”

He can only hope. Mr. Waziry and his colleagues have watched in anguish over the last four years as tourism in Egypt collapsed since the uprising against President Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

The year before the uprising, he said, 12,000 people stood in long lines each day to visit the attractions in Luxor. By 2012, the number had plummeted to as few as 300 a day, mirroring a broader disappearance across the country of treasured cultural tourists who spent generously on extended tours of Egypt's temples and museums.

The numbers had recently started to inch upward, until the crash of the Russian plane, which increased security concerns at Egypt's airports and caused several countries to either sever or restrict air travel to Egypt.

“We are plowing in the ocean,” Mr. Waziry said, as Mr. Watanabe packed up his equipment. “We need something like this.”

Dr. Reeves, who previously worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, set off the search with a paper last summer titled “The Burial of Nefertiti?” His starting point was an analysis of high-resolution color photographs of the tomb, published in 2014 by Factum Arte, a Spanish company specializing in art replication.

“Cautious evaluation of the Factum Arte scans over the course of several months has yielded results which are beyond intriguing: indications of two previously unknown doorways,” he wrote. One was probably a storeroom, he said, and the other, on the tomb's north wall, was likely a continuation of the tomb containing an “earlier royal internment — that of Nefertiti herself, celebrated consort, co-regent, and eventual successor of Pharaoh Akhenaten.”

Dr. Reeves cited other supporting evidence, positing that what is regarded as Tutankhamen's tomb, which was discovered by Howard Carter in 1922, had in fact “been both initiated and employed for the burial of

Nefertiti.”

When Tutankhamen died unexpectedly at the age of 19 — about a decade after Nefertiti's death — her tomb was reopened, and a portion of it reconfigured to accommodate the young king, according to Dr. Reeves.

At least one prominent Egyptologist believes that the entire project will turn up nothing. Dr. Zahi Hawass, a former Egyptian antiquities minister, who for years was the swaggering, public face of the country's archaeological discoveries and a rainmaker for tourism, ticked off a list of reasons there might be nothing hidden behind the walls — and certainly, he said, not Nefertiti.

“I am an archaeologist for 40 years,” Dr. Hawass said. “I can smell a discovery, and this is no discovery at all.”

But despite his criticisms, Dr. Hawass acknowledged that “all of us are desperate for good news.” Whether a discovery was looming, or not, the search itself had begun to stir hope among the proprietors of Luxor's empty travel agencies and markets.

Bahaa Youssef, who works as a travel manager at Sunrise Tours in the city, said the company was running out of inventive ways to make money. “Egypt needs big events, to make people look at us again,” Mr. Youssef said.

With their camera crews trailing, Dr. Reeves and his colleagues were at the very least creating a buzz, perhaps taking a page from Dr. Hawass, with his showmanship and grand pronouncements.

“If we find what I think is there,” Dr. Reeves said, “it will be bigger than Tutankhamen.”

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