

Three things you may not know about
GIOVANNI BELZONI,
SIR JOHN SOANE,
and the
SARCOPHAGUS OF SETI I

“

The last exhibition of the valuable rarities of this spacious mansion ... was, as before, attended by a numerous concourse of visitors, among whom were... a large assemblage of private friends and elegant females...



All seemed to rejoice that the power of possessing such a treasure had fallen into the hands of a gentleman whose taste in selecting, and magnificence in acquiring, so strikingly mark the whole collection.”

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Newspaper report of John Soane's final "sarcophagus party",
London Morning Post, April 1, 1825

“SIR JOHN SOANE'S MUSEUM IN LINCOLN'S-INN-FIELDS: THE SARCOPHAGUS ROOM”
The Illustrated London News, June 25, 1864

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1. GIOVANNI BELZONI

Did Belzoni *really* discover Seti I's tomb?

IN APRIL 1821, English painter Benjamin Haydon made the acquaintance of the renowned Italian adventurer, Giovanni Belzoni, who seemed to make quite an impression on the artist. Haydon later diarised that “Belzoni is a glorious instance of what singleness of aim and energy of intention will accomplish... by his indomitable energy he has attached his name to Egypt forever.”

Belzoni had found fame after his discovery of the tomb of Seti I (KV 17)—and its stunning alabaster sarcophagus—four years earlier. But did Belzoni discover the tomb unaided? Or was he tipped-off by a Qurna local?

According to Belzoni's record, and a popular account published by Samuel Sharpe half a century later, on the 16th of October 1817, Belzoni “directed his men to open the earth at the foot of one of the hills in the Biban el Molook, or Valley of the Kings' Tombs, in the very bed of a water-course, down which, when the rain falls, a torrent of water rushes towards the Nile. Their labours were soon rewarded by their finding in this unlikely spot that the ground had been before opened.”

It was an “unlikely spot” to place a tomb, subject as it was to periodic inundation (although its poor location may have been a deceptive device to foil thieves). It seems, however, that the spot's exposure to water may have been what “gave the game away”. In 1843 the pioneering British Egyptologist, Sir John Gardner Wilkinson published *Modern Egypt and Thebes: Being a Description of Egypt; Including The Information Required For Travellers In That Country*. In it, he makes it clear that “the tomb, which of all others

stands pre-eminently conspicuous, as well for the beauty of its sculpture as the state of its preservation, is undoubtedly that discovered and opened by Belzoni.” Intriguingly, Wilkinson then goes on to reveal that “the sinking of the ground at this part, from the water that had soaked through into the tomb, led the peasants to suspect the secret of its position, which was first mentioned to Dr. Rüppell, and afterwards to Belzoni.” (Dr. Wilhelm Rüppell was a German zoologist who had visited Egypt in 1817.)

With that information in mind, Belzoni's recollection of the day does seem to be trying to make one point clear (italicised for emphasis): “I went to this plain *quite alone*, and spent the whole day in making observations. ... Here I must acquaint my reader, that *the only guide I had* in these discoveries was *the knowledge I had acquired* in the continued researches for tombs *I made* in Gournou. ... *I had strong reasons* to suppose, that there was a tomb in that place, from *indications I had observed* in my pursuit.”

Was Belzoni proactively trying to shut down any suspicion that he might have, in fact, been steered towards Seti I's tomb? Or are we just seeing a healthy ego at work?

Whether Belzoni was acting on local knowledge or not, he will always deserve full credit for the tomb's exploration and documentation (which was pretty good for the standards of the day), as well as the removal of *that* sarcophagus. As Benjamin Haydon put it: “In every sense Belzoni is a grand fellow. He suffered in his progress, as all suffer who dash at once upon great undertakings which thousands have feared to touch.”

2. SIR JOHN SOANE

The opposition to his great gift

John Soane was the epitome of success. In 1864, almost three decades after his death, *The Illustrated London News* ran an article on “The Museum of Sir John Soane” and marvelled “that the son of a Berkshire bricklayer or petty builder should by his own energies have raised himself from poverty and obscurity to a position of opulence and celebrity is a memorable triumph of ‘self help’...”

Soane, a Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy,

was knighted in 1831 and announced his plans for his eclectic collection to the Academy two years later. His idea was to bequeath to the nation his property at Lincoln's Inn Fields, his “Museum of Antiquities” (including one 3,000-year-old Egyptian sarcophagus), and his massive library of books, manuscripts and artwork. To accompany this would be a £30,000 endowment to ensure that the house and contents would be forever preserved as is.

(FACING PAGE)

“Joseph Michael Gandy, *The sepulchral chamber of Sir John Soane's house, viewed from the head of the sarcophagus, September 8 1825.*”

Like Soane, Joseph Gandy was an architect, but was hired by Soane more for his artistic talents. His watercolours of Soane's designs were shown at the Royal Academy's annual exhibition of contemporary art and architecture to great acclaim—and helped Soane attract some high profile (and lucrative) commissions.

Gandy's painting reveals the appearance of the sarcophagus a year after Soane bought it. Blue pigment was used by the Egyptians to highlight the delicately-incised hieroglyphs. It wasn't designed for the English climate, however, and within a few years, the paste had begun falling out. Museum number: M470



© THE TRUSTEES OF SIR JOHN SOANE'S MUSEUM

View of part of the Collection of Antiquities - from the head of the Sarcos. —

Today, Owen Hopkins, a Senior Curator at Sir John Soane's Museum, describes walking through the mansion as "like walking into the inside of Soane's mind. He filled its spaces with his collection of art, architecture and of sculpture; it was in a constant process of change."

However, as *The Illustrated London News* reported, when Soane approached Parliament to have the act enshrined in law, "some opposition to the bill was manifested; this feeling having arisen from Sir John disinheriting his only surviving son to make this bequest to the country. Between father and son [George] a most violent breach had existed for many years, notwithstanding many attempts at reconciliation."

John's wife, Elizabeth, had died in 1815, which meant that George, as the direct male heir, was due to inherit his father's property by law. Soane's bequest to the nation was

effectively cutting George out of the will.

John Soane's family dramas were debated in Parliament for an hour before a compromise could be reached: an "escape clause". John would be able to change his mind if, by some miracle, he and George made up. As *The Illustrated London News* explained, Sir John Soane could, at any time, "bequeath his valuable relics to the British Museum, instead of allowing them to remain in the house... thus placing again in Sir John's control the disposal of the £30,000 and the mansion." The reconciliation never happened. Four years later, Sir John Soane died in his favourite place: his home at Lincoln's Inn Fields, which has been open—and free—to the public ever since.

The current exhibition, *Egypt Uncovered—Belzoni and the Tomb of Pharaoh Seti I*, is showing at Sir John Soane's Museum until April 14, 2018.

3. THE SARCOPHAGUS OF SETI I

Who really owned it?

When Belzoni crated up Seti I's sarcophagus and had it shipped to England, he had a clear destination in mind: the Egyptian Hall in the British Museum. After all, the Trustees of the Museum had so eagerly accepted the seven-ton bust of Ramesses II that Belzoni had earlier hauled from the Ramesseum, so why would they balk at such a magnificent prize as the alabaster sarcophagus?

The Trustees, on the other hand, weren't so sure. The sarcophagus arrived at the Museum for inspection in September 1821. London's *The Gentleman's Magazine* reported that "the pecuniary value of this Sarcophagus has been estimated at a very large sum." It is precisely that "pecuniary value" that saw the sarcophagus languish in the British Museum for the next three years.

Belzoni had wanted £2,000 for the sarcophagus—an extraordinary sum, equivalent to around £150,000 today. In addition to the phenomenal price tag, the Trustees were also unsure of the sarcophagus' ownership—was it Belzoni's, who had discovered it in his private time? Or did it belong to Henry Salt, the British Consul-General in Egypt, who considered Belzoni an employee? In 1824, the Trustees of the British Museum finally decided that—in the end—the sarcophagus was too pricey and turned it down. The cashed-up architect, John Soane, pounced.

Soane had followed Belzoni's travels with great interest and kept newspaper cuttings of the discovery of Seti I's sarcophagus, which form part of Soane's vast archive today.

Soane paid full-price for the sarcophagus, but Belzoni didn't see a penny. He had died a few months before, in December 1823—ambushed by dysentery in a small village in West Africa. Forever the adventurer, Belzoni was on an expedition to Timbuktu, the legendary city of gold.

The Gentleman's Magazine goes on to state that "It

[Seti I's sarcophagus] was the property of Mr. Salt." It may have been questions over ownership that led Belzoni to carve "G. BELZONI" (with the 'N' oddly incised in reverse) on the rim of the sarcophagus, probably prior to its removal from Seti I's tomb.

Both Belzoni (and his widow, Sarah) and Salt firmly believed the sarcophagus was their own exclusive property. This was despite the agreement signed by both of them in April 1818 that "Belzoni shall be considered as entitled to one half of the surplus of whatever price may be given for the said Sarcophagus exceeding the sum of two thousand pounds sterling..."

Soane sided with Salt who received the full £2,000, and the sarcophagus was delivered to Soane's house—not far from the British Museum—in May 1824.

In honour of "the Belzoni sarcophagus", as it was still called, Soane threw three lavish receptions at his house, with almost 900 invitations being sent out. For Soane, this was his opportunity to present his grand collection—with the sarcophagus as its centrepiece—to the cream of London society. A mystical atmosphere was created by countless wax lights, candles and gas lamps illuminating the rooms.

Benjamin Haydon, the painter who had gushed about Belzoni four years earlier, attended one of Soane's soirées and wrote to a friend with this colourful account:

"I was at Soane's last night to see his sarcophagus by lamplight... and was carried off my legs, and irretrievably hustled to where the sarcophagus lay... It was the finest fun imaginable to see the people come into the Library after wandering about below, amidst tombs and capitals, and shafts, and noseless heads, with a sort of expression of



© RUEDI HABEGGER, ANTIKENMUSEUM BASEL UND SAMMLUNG LUDWIG

A replica of Seti I's translucent white alabaster coffin, on display at the Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig in Switzerland for the exhibition, *Scanning Seti—The Regeneration of a Pharaonic Tomb*. In March 2016, *Factum Arte*, a Madrid-based company that makes pixel-perfect recreations of historic works, recorded the sarcophagus in Sir John Soane's Museum, taking over 4,500 high-resolution images.

Although the basin is usually referred to as an alabaster or calcite sarcophagus, it may be that it is actually the outermost of Seti's three coffins, and was once stunningly embossed in gold foil. No confirmed trace of the royal sarcophagus, which was always box-shaped, has been found. The coffins and sarcophagus would have been surrounded by a series of nested gilded shrines—in the same manner as those found in Tutankhamun's tomb.

delighted relief at finding themselves among the living, and with coffee and cake! They looked as if they were pleased to feel their blood circulate once more... Fancy, delicate ladies of fashion dipping their pretty heads into an old, mouldy, fusty, hieroglyphicked coffin, blessing their stars at its age, wondering whom it contained... The Duke of Sussex ...came squeezing and wheezing along the narrow passage... and putting his royal head into the coffin, added his wonder to the wonder of the rest."

The *London Morning Post* of April 1, 1825, ran a review of Soane's third and final collection showcase, where "the Company remained on the spot till a late hour." (Some of that review is on the title page of this article.) Directly below the coverage of Soane's high-flying function was a report on Sarah Belzoni's exhibition of a different kind. Sarah was

showing some of the artefacts collected by her late husband, which he had presented in 1821. The centrepiece of the exhibition was a recreation of part of Seti I's tomb, based on the paintings that Belzoni and his assistant, Alessandro Ricci, had made from the original reliefs.

It may be that Soane encouraged the *London Morning Post* to let his lavish event advertise her exhibition. The newspaper wrote, "To those who have not seen this wonder of antiquity, we can hardly conceive an Exhibition more calculated to require the trouble of an hour's inspection." In 1825 that was high praise indeed.



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On entering Seti I's tomb, Giovanni Belzoni later wrote that "We perceived, that the paintings became more perfect as we advanced farther into the interior." He named the tomb's Antechamber—which immediately preceded the king's burial chamber—the "Hall of Beauties". Above is the Factum Arte replica, currently in Basel.

The decorations in Seti I's tomb lay untouched for over 3,000 years. Within the last 200, they have deteriorated quickly. The walls are now patchy and, in places, almost entirely bleached of colour. The regeneration of the Hall of Beauties has demonstrated the potential for replicas to show more than what you could see in the real tomb.

The pillared portion of Seti I's Burial Chamber. The level of detail is so good that some say the only way you can tell the difference between the real thing and the facsimile is that the real reliefs are usually behind protective glass. The portion of the wall on the right lets visitors see the contoured details of the reliefs before the colour skin is added.



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Giovanni Belzoni hired an assistant, Alessandro Ricci, to help copy the vivid reliefs in Seti I's tomb. This drawing of the goddess Ma'at is one of Ricci's. Naturally, any physically copied piece is going to be affected greatly by the talent of the artist, as well as include some degree of artistic interpretation—whether it's intentional or not. The aim of a digital process is to cut out a lot of these influences and create facsimiles that would impress even the original artists.

The exhibition being held at Sir John Soane's Museum in London dovetails nicely with one now on at the Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig in Switzerland: *Scanning Seti—The Regeneration of a Pharaonic Tomb*.

In Seti I's short 15 years as pharaoh, his talented craftsmen created the longest and most elaborately-decorated royal tomb (KV 17) in Egypt's history. The tomb was built to last forever, but it was never intended to be visited. The Basel exhibition is a precise re-creation of how parts of Seti's tomb looked 200 years ago when it was first explored by Belzoni—and also how it has suffered since.

Seti's tomb has been a victim of its own beauty, attracting vandals (both scholars and souvenir-hunters) who have hacked away at its reliefs, or pulled vast sections of colour from the walls using wet squeezes to create moulds. Add to this the smoke from candles and torches used by early visitors, plus the occasional twitch from earth tremors, and many of Seti I's reliefs are looking quite worse for wear.

Both the "Hall of Beauties" (above) and the pillared part of the Burial Chamber (facing page) have been replicated in full-scale by Factum Arte, a Madrid-based company that specialises in creating facsimiles of historic works that are threatened by time and tourism. They have also brought

in the hi-res replica of Seti I's sarcophagus/coffin in Sir John Soane's Museum in London, and put in place digital copies of all known fragments that they have been able to record in museums and private collections around the world.

THE NILE Quiz
ANSWERS

1. A single obelisk was raised near Karnak's eastern gateway by Thutmose IV, however it was begun for his grandfather, Thutmose III.
2. This year—May (hopefully). A grand opening is planned for 2022—the centenary, appropriately enough, of the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb.
3. Three.
4. Pepi I. He gave the title of Vizier to his wife, Inenek-Inty and his mother-in-law Nebet (mother of Ankhnesneferibre II). It would be over 1,500 years (26th Dynasty) before Egypt would see another woman in the post.
5. The Book of Gates, which follows the journey of the sun through the underworld during the hours of the night.
6. 109—it's been an amazing season!
7. The founder of the 5th Dynasty, Userkaf, placed his pyramid close to King Djoser's at Saqqara, built around 150 years earlier.
8. "White Chapel" of Senusret, "Red Chapel" of Queen Hatshepsut, Alabaster Shrine of Thutmose IV, Peristyle Hall of Thutmose IV.
9. Amenemhat I, who built his pyramid at Lisht, close to the Faiyum.
10. King Scorpion I (Skeret I), ca. 3250 B.C.

Visitors to the exhibition will experience these two chambers from Seti's tomb as no-one has seen them for over 200 years. In theory, it would be possible to restore the entire tomb to suggest how it may have looked when it was revealed in 1817—or even how it may have originally appeared in the days of Seti I.

Factum Arte's methods are a far cry from the squeezes used to record reliefs in Belzoni's day. The company captures the details in ultra-high resolution using laser scans that record even the most minute details, such as overlapping brushmarks, and the grain of the paint surface. Nothing ever touches any wall. Next, sophisticated moulds are created using custom 3-D printing technology, with a flexible skin added that carries a hi-res print-out of the decorations.

After the exhibition at the Antikenmuseum in Basel, the two replica rooms from Seti I's tomb will be installed near another of Factum Arte's pharaonic recreations: the tomb of Tutankhamun, close to Howard Carter's house near the entrance to the Valley of the Kings. But that's just the beginning. Factum Arte are now documenting the rest of Seti I's enormous, gloriously-decorated tomb, micron-by-micron, with a view to creating a replica of the entire thing.

We'll be revisiting Seti I's tomb and Factum Arte's incredible replica work in upcoming issues of **NILE Magazine**.

Scanning Seti—The Regeneration of a Pharaonic Tomb is showing at the Antikenmuseum Basel und Sammlung Ludwig, Switzerland until 6 May 2018.