

HISTORY MAGAZINE

This pharaoh's painted tomb was missing its mummy

Seti I had been buried in one of Egypt's most colorful royal tombs, but his body was gone by the time its richly decorated halls were uncovered in 1817.

BY JOSÉ LULL

PUBLISHED JUNE 25, 2020

Nestled among the entrance ways to the tombs of the Valley of the Kings is a structure known to scholars as KV17. Despite its unpoetic designation, this tomb makes the hearts of Egyptologists beat faster: Built for Seti I, who died in 1279 B.C., it was discovered in 1817, surprising excavators with its richly decorated walls depicting religious beliefs through images of the dead pharaoh and the deities of ancient Egypt.

The Valley of the Kings was the burial site of many rulers of Egypt's New Kingdom (circa 1539-1075 B.C.), when Egypt rose to new heights of power and influence. Building this great desert necropolis began during the reign of Thutmose I, third king of the 18th dynasty, whose rule marked the resurgence of Egypt following a long period of instability. A grand tomb was prepared for Thutmose, cut into the rock of the rugged desert valleys on the Nile's west bank. The remote spot was chosen to hide lavish royal burials from tomb raiders. Other New Kingdom rulers placed their tombs there, and the necropolis grew. Judicial power flowed from pharaohs—even after death.

Despite attempts to hide their contents by the use of concealed passages, most tombs—with the famous exception of the tomb of Tutankhamun—were extensively looted, including Seti I's. However, without golden grave goods or even the pharaoh's mummy, Seti's tomb still had myriad treasures. The priceless art that adorns the walls remained intact to give modern scholars a vivid look into the intricate art that revealed Egyptian spirituality and funerary rituals surrounding the death of a king.

Italian adventurer

In the first century B.C., the historian Diodorus Siculus, described the Valley of the Kings as a ruin. The centuries were not kind to the site as both natural and human causes had further degraded the site. The sincere academic interest of French scholars following Napoleon's 1798 invasion of Egypt was matched by keen commercial interest in antiquities. In the early 1800s many objects across Egypt were pillaged for the European market.

When Italian adventurer and former circus strongman Giovanni Belzoni arrived in Egypt in 1815, the country was under British control. Belzoni's status, a combination of explorer and tomb robber, did not deter the British consul, Henry Salt, from using his services to help transport a massive head of Ramses II to Alexandria, from where it was shipped to the British Museum in London. Belzoni also became embroiled in a turf war with the French consul, who employed gangs of tomb raiders to track down antiquities.

As part of his campaign to best a French rival, Belzoni befriended local people near the Valley of the Kings who worked as tomb robbers. Thanks to their information, he became familiar with the site. Despite his mercenary streak, Belzoni was genuinely interested in archaeology. He studied the valley's topography and noted how fast draining rainwater could indicate hidden openings. (Priest-embalmers offered burial packages for every budget.)

In winter 1816 Belzoni located the tomb of the 18th-dynasty pharaoh Ay. In October of the following year, his men discovered the tomb of Ramses I, founder of the 19th dynasty. In the course of that discovery, Belzoni noticed another small hollow that easily absorbed rainwater, suggesting that a cavity lay beneath. On digging, his team found a rubble-filled entrance. Once the debris was cleared, they could glimpse magnificent wall decorations beyond.

While exploring the tomb, Belzoni found an embalmed bull, leading him to believe the tomb was dedicated to Apis, the holy bull worshipped in northern Egypt. He did not identify the tomb as that of Seti I, or of any ruler, because nowhere in the tomb was there a human mummy.

Gallery of wonders

Despite his ignorance as to the identity of the tomb's original occupant, Belzoni recognized that the paintings adorning the interior were exceptional. In the months following the discovery, Belzoni took wax impressions of them, which damaged the reliefs. He also painted watercolors of the tomb art.

When Belzoni reached the burial chamber whose magnificent painted ceiling represents the heavens, he found an empty alabaster sarcophagus. The coffin was found laying across a staircase that led down to a long and mysterious corridor, which Belzoni's men gave up exploring after a hundred yards. The sarcophagus was removed from the tomb and eventually acquired by the English collector Sir John Soane (today it is in London, England, in the museum that bears Soane's name).

Not only were the tomb's artworks breathtaking to see, they also provided today's Egyptologists with the earliest, most complete set of funerary texts from ancient Egypt. Wall paintings depict detailed scenes from the Book of Amduat and texts from the Litany of Re, a collection of invocations and prayers to the solar deity. The giant sarcophagus is decorated with scenes from the Book of Gates—an Egyptian text that recounts the passage of a soul through the underworld—and is today regarded as one of the most important artifacts from Egypt's 19th dynasty. (Discover the sacred and secret rituals in the Book of the Dead.)

For years after the discovery, the tomb would be identified with various rulers. But in 1828 French scholar Jean-François Champollion deciphered hieroglyphics in the tomb to identify it as that of Seti I. One of the 19th dynasty's greatest rulers, and father of Ramses II, Seti I ruled for 11 years during which he expanded Egypt's influence south to Nubia and northeast to Syria. Archaeologists would later find the king's mummy in the Royal Mummy Cache nearby, where it had been moved in antiquity for safekeeping.

Study of the tomb continued into the next century. In 1903 Howard Carter, future discoverer of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922, re-excavated Seti I's tomb using meticulous care and scholarly methods to record the tomb's contents. More than a century later, Egyptologist Zahi Hawass finally excavated the tunnel that Belzoni had found leading downward from the sepulchral chamber. He discovered that it ends abruptly after 570 feet, and concluded it may have been intended to link the burial chamber with the realm of the dead. (Short on time, Carter almost didn't discover King Tut's tomb.)

Since Belzoni's first excavation, exposure to the elements and human visitors have damaged Seti's tomb, but conservation efforts strive to protect and preserve it. In 2016 the Factum Foundation used the latest technology to scan and photograph the entire complex not only to preserve and study its artworks, but also to create high-precision facsimiles that can be printed to erect full-size models of the tomb in full color. Visitors can experience the majesty of a pharaoh's resting place without endangering the original. The excavation of the tomb is largely complete, but its aura of enigma will linger, it seems, for centuries to come.

The first steps

The entrance to Seti's tomb leads to a series of preliminary corridors and chambers. The walls in these opening chambers are covered with myriad artworks (in the form of colored reliefs) depicting funerary texts centering on the sun god Re. One of these is

the New Kingdom Book of Amduat, showing the journey taken each night by Re. Over the course of 12 hours, he must overcome obstacles using the magical texts shown on the walls. The walls also feature texts from the Litany of Re, a collection of invocations and prayers to the solar deity. Visitors descend a set of stairs and then proceed through three corridors.

In the first room, Seti I can be seen greeting the god Re-Horakhty in a scene from the Litany of Re, which associates the deceased pharaoh with the various forms of the sun god. A succession of vultures representing the goddess Nekhbet appear on the ceiling against a starry background. Images from the Litany also appear in the second stairway and depict Re in different forms. The next corridor depicts different stages of Re's nightly journey on the left and right walls, as recounted in the Book of Amduat. A visitor's journey then pauses at the well chamber, which symbolizes the burial of Osiris, god of the underworld. Artworks here show gods welcoming the deceased pharaoh.

Pillars of the gods

After the Well of Osiris, visitors pass into a room supported by four richly adorned pillars. Whereas the preliminary corridors and chambers centered on the role of the solar god Re, this space marks a shift in tone to a type of art that historians term "chthonic" (related to the underworld). The artwork in this room depicts scenes from the Book of Gates, a funerary text that recounts the deceased's journey through the underworld, in which each hour of the night is marked by a heavily guarded gate. Although the Book of Gates may predate the New Kingdom, its first usage in a royal tomb is found in the funerary chamber of Horemheb, the last pharaoh of the 18th dynasty.

On each side of these columns, the soul of the deceased Seti I consults with a divinity. On the rear wall of the chamber, Seti is welcomed by Osiris, god of the underworld. A door leads to a two-pillared side chamber whose walls are covered with unfinished decorations that were sketched out in great detail, but color had not been added when Seti I was entombed. Stairs proceed down to the lower levels of the tomb to continue the journey toward the burial chamber. ([Here's how to make a mummy in 70 days or less.](#))

Closer to the afterlife

Descending the stairs from the pillared chamber, visitors reach another corridor with walls that show Seti I standing in front of an offering table. Artworks on the left wall show a set of texts and images connected with the Opening of the Mouth ritual, a ceremony in which a series of ritual tools are applied to a likeness of the deceased to enable them to regain the faculties of a living, speaking, and eating being in the afterlife. The ceremony has its roots in the Old Kingdom, but its depiction in tomb art is rare. Only one other royal New Kingdom tomb—that of 19th-dynasty Queen Tawosret—has extensive depictions of it.

A passageway begins with stairs and wall paintings of protective winged serpents before entering a room decorated with more scenes of the Opening of the Mouth and excerpts from the Litany of the Eye of Horus. This funerary text allowed the deceased to partake in a series of offerings to the god. An antechamber follows, with breathtaking paintings of the starry sky on the ceiling. The polychrome wall paintings were greatly damaged by Belzoni, who made direct copies of the colored reliefs using wax molds.

The burial chambers

After the antechamber comes the splendor of the burial complex itself, which would have housed the pharaoh's mummy. Following the precedent established in the tomb of Amenhotep II a century before, the room is divided into two sections: an upper chamber, originally supported by six richly adorned pillars, and a lower chamber with a high, vaulted ceiling painted with stunning depictions of Egyptian deities. At 20 feet high, the curved structure symbolizes the celestial vault, and a series of gods and goddesses can be seen proceeding toward symbols of constellations painted in the form of animals. The walls are decorated with scenes from the Book of Amduat. Presiding from the highest point on the rear wall, the goddess Isis spreads her wings.

It was here, under this beautiful vaulted ceiling, that Belzoni found Seti's empty alabaster sarcophagus. Some theorize that ancient looters left it behind because its bulk made it nearly impossible to move. Perplexing archaeologists for nearly two centuries is the long, uncompleted tunnel that stretches downward (Egyptologist Zahi Hawass excavated it in the 2000s and found that it went to nowhere). Many scholars believe the long descending tunnel was meant to link Seti's earthly resting place with the realm of the dead far below. ([Isis was worshipped from Egypt to England.](#))

Storehouses of the dead

The upper burial chamber has two small side annexes. When Howard Carter discovered the largely intact tomb of Tutankhamun in 1922, he found annexes there that served as storage for the afterlife. They were filled with pottery, games, and even food. The annex contents of Seti's tomb may have contained similar objects that were probably looted long ago. The first storeroom is decorated with scenes from the Book of Gates, while a twin annex directly opposite shows scenes from the Book of the Heavenly Cow, which recounts how the goddess Nut ascended to create the celestial vault.

According to the story, when the height made her teeter, she had to be supported by several divinities. The lower burial chamber also has two annexes. A square chamber's two supporting pillars are covered with figures, including the deceased pharaoh, associated with the god Osiris, and more images from the Book of Amduat. At the rear of the complex is another undecorated storeroom. Here Belzoni found the mummified bull and numerous ushabtis, figurines made of wood and faience that would serve the deceased in the afterlife.

Tunnel to the underworld

A mysterious long passageway leads downward from Seti I's funerary chambers, and for nearly two centuries, no one knew where it went. In 1817 Belzoni followed it for some distance before turning back. Speculation mounted that the tunnel, its lower sections filled with rubble, might hide the "real" resting place of the pharaoh. In 1960 an amateur local archaeologist cleared an additional 100 feet but then took a wrong turn and lost the course of the original passageway.

Finally, in 2007, a team led by Egyptian antiquities chief Zahi Hawass began three years of careful rubble-clearing. In 2010 they discovered the 570-foot-long tunnel came to an abrupt end with no further chambers. Hawass believes the corridor may have been intended to link the burial chamber to the underworld, but it was left unfinished when Seti I died.