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Film Review: *Secrets of the Saqqara Tomb*

By Erika Kelley

The documentary *Secrets of the Saqqara Tomb*, released on Netflix on October 28, 2020, focuses on one of the excavations taking place at Saqqara, Egypt, about twenty miles from Cairo, and the team that has worked to better understand the life and beliefs of the tomb owner. The film is directed by James Tovell and examines the discovery and excavation of the tomb of Wahtye which had been unopened for 4,400 years. While the tomb is the main emphasis of the film, Tovell also focuses on the archeological process of excavation and the different specialists and workers that are a part of the process. Tovell includes testimonies and cameos from a long list of specialists, all of which provide thoughtful commentary about the excavation process and their area of specialization.¹ *Secrets of the Saqqara Tomb* is an insightful documentary that thoroughly communicates the process of archaeological excavation and the personal feelings of the site workers, all while keeping the overall tone of the film suspenseful and interesting.

As the name suggests, the archaeological site that Dr. Mohammad Mohammad Yousef directed is located in the ancient necropolis of Saqqara, which was very important to the ancient Egyptians. Saqqara is covered with hundreds of tombs and is home

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¹ The people who provided testimonies and cameos include site director Dr. Mohammad Mohammad Yousef, director general of the Saqqara Necropolis Dr. Sabry Mohyeldin Farag, site supervisor Ahmed Zikrey Abdellhak, archaeologist Hamada Shehata Ahmed Mansour, Dr. Mostafa Waziri the secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities of Egypt, funerary archeologist and archaeozoologist Dr. Salima Ikram, foreman Mustafa Abdo Sadek Mahmoud, translators Nermien Momen Mohamed and Nabil Eldaleel, workman Ghareeb Ali Mohammed Abushousha, and rheumatologists Dr. Amira Shaheen
to several of Egypt’s pharaoh’s funerary monuments with the oldest belonging to King Djoser (c. 2668–c. 2575 BCE) who ruled during the Third Dynasty of Egypt’s Old Kingdom, approximately 4700 years ago. Due to the amount and types of tombs present at Saqqara, it is clear for archeologists to see that this area was an incredibly important funerary site for Egyptian royals and elites throughout its history. While the Saqqara area has been looted and unofficially excavated, legal excavation of the area started in the mid to late twentieth century by a series of different institutions that have persisted until today.

In 2018, Dr. Yousef and his archaeological team discovered a completely hidden tomb dating to Egypt’s Fifth Dynasty located in the Bubasteion necropolis in Saqqara. This tomb was somewhat of an anomaly as a majority of Egyptian tombs are looted before archaeologists can begin excavating them, therefore the full extent of a tomb’s statuary, grave goods, artwork, and mummies are never really known. The tomb Dr. Yousef and his team discovered was completely untouched and was filled with mummies, hieroglyphs, authentic colors, statues, and other grave goods. Since the tomb had so much information still inside it, the documentary explores many disciplines of Egyptology, whether it be the workmen looking for the tomb or a biological anthropologist studying the mummies contained within. The director, James Tovell, realized this and took advantage of it which is partly what makes this documentary so interesting. *Secrets of the Saqqara Tomb* does not just focus on the tomb and the people that might have owned it, it also focuses on how much work and pressure go into an excavation and takes into account all the perspectives of the people involved. Tovell skillfully weaves together all of the perspectives and experiences of the specialists and workmen to

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3 Some of the specific institutions include the Egypt Exploration Society, Leiden Museum, and Cairo University.
show just how diverse the work that goes into an archeological site can be.

The first specialist introduced in the documentary is Dr. Salima Ikram who is a funerary archeologist and an archaeozoologist. Her knowledge and experience are incredibly vital to the team as the area that the team is excavating in Bubasteion “was a cult center and temple devoted to the goddess Bastet” who is most commonly depicted as a cat or a human with a cat’s head. Dr. Ikram’s expertise is needed when the team is analyzing the different animal mummies found at the site but also when understanding the funerary practices that these animals could have played in larger Egyptian history. The next specialists introduced are Nermeen Momen Mohamed and Nabil Eldaleel who have been tasked with decoding the story of Wahtye written in hieroglyphs on his tomb walls. The tomb walls need to be translated before any excavations can begin inside the tomb itself as the Egyptologists need to understand and investigate who Wahtye was and what his life was like. Decoding these walls is extremely important as it gives insight as to who Wahtye was and what he wanted out of this life and in the afterlife. The information found on ancient Egyptian tomb walls is important because it allows historians to piece together the social, political, cultural, and religious history of the civilization and gives them insight into ancient Egyptians’ own understanding of their society and culture.

The last specialist introduced in the documentary is Dr. Amira Shaheen, a rheumatologist, who is tasked with analyzing the remains found in Wahtye’s burial shafts. Dr. Shaheen’s work is important to the team because it gives a direct, unbiased look into what life was like for Wahtye and other ancient Egyptians living at the time. Bones and human remains can directly tell a historian what kind of life a person lived, how old they were when they died, and if they were suffering from any major illnesses and diseases. This is important when trying to gain a better

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understanding of ancient Egyptian people since historians can actually see what kind of lives these people lived without relying on the Egyptians’ idealized portrayal of themselves found within their art. While all these professionals focus on different topics, their combined findings provide answers and help current historians understand ancient Egyptian people, culture, religion, and society.

Finally, Tovell focuses on the workmen at the site. For many of them, generations of their family have been employed as workmen and it is the only job they know or want to do. One example of this is Ghareeb Ali Mohammed Abushousha who stated: “I’ve been working here since long ago. My father worked here before me. Thirty or forty...maybe fifty years ago.” Abushousha worked as a digger, but it is not simply a mindless activity for him and he takes immense pride in his job saying, “you have to have some sense...you have to be prepared” to find or stumble upon anything. And just like his father, Abushousha began taking his son to the site as well so he can “learn the ropes. So when the foreman needs him to work, he’ll have experience. If he stayed at home, he’d learn nothing. Then I wouldn’t be happy. My happiness is having him here.” For them, the pressures to find another tomb or discover and secure funding are just as high as it is for Dr. Yousef because it is their livelihood. Furthermore, this is a craft that has been passed down in their family for generations and it is something that they are extremely proud of. An archaeological site is a very diverse workplace as it brings together many workers and professionals that provide unique skills that contribute to the overall goal of a better understanding of ancient Egyptian history.

While the near-perfect condition of Wahtye’s tomb is uncommon, it is the unprecedented findings of animal mummies and disease that made it extraordinary. Around Wahtye’s tomb, archaeologists were able to find additional shaft tombs, with one of

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5 Secrets of the Saqqara Tomb, 1:02:00–1:03:09.
6 Ibid., 1:03:09–1:03:45.
7 Ibid., 1:04:21–1:04:58.
the oldest and deepest being only 10 meters to the west. It is in this shaft that archaeologist Shehata Ahmed Mansour and workman Abushousha found dozens of mummies shaped like cats, one shaped like a crocodile, and an unidentifiable animal much larger than the others. Once these mummies had been excavated, they were given to Dr. Ikram, who analyzed and x-rayed them. It is through her analysis that the team classified the larger, feline mummy as a lion cub. This lion cub has been confirmed as the “first mummified lion ever discovered.” According to Dr. Ikram, this lion cub completely changed historians’ understandings of Egyptian religion, economy, culture, and “how the ancient Egyptians were interacting with wild animals” regarding breeding, taming, and using them in worship. In the actual tomb itself, the workers found more than one human skeleton. The archaeologists theorized that these bodies were that of Wahtye and his family who were depicted in his tomb walls. After further analysis, Dr. Shaheen concluded that the bones of the older male were not healthy. She stated:

[They were] eager for blood and that’s why the bones are distended which can tell us that this person may have some sort of anemia. And the same swelling was found in the mom. We have a congenital cause of anemia...we may think of some sort of a disease or epidemic. Most probably malaria, which would affect the whole family. And if that’s true, that would change ancient Egyptian history.

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8 Ibid., 2020, 32:09.
11 Ibid., 1:51:54.
While Dr. Shaheen’s theory of malaria has yet to be proven, if it is, the death of Wahtye and his family would be the first documented case of malaria in history by more than one thousand years.\(^\text{14}\) Tovell also includes the historical impacts that this tomb has had on the Egyptological community and how the information gained from this tomb is actively rewriting the history of ancient Egypt.

Tovell does not only focus on the objects and information gained from Wahtye’s tomb in his documentary but also allows the worker’s and professional’s perspectives on archaeology and excavation to shine as well. Tovell interviewed the site’s directors and supervisors, the professionals, and the workmen hired to help which ultimately adds to the viewer’s understanding of what actually happens at an archaeological site. While the director and supervisors of this excavation mainly speak about the history of the site and what the discovery will do regarding our understanding of ancient Egypt, Tovell also chooses to focus on the pressure to secure funding. Funding and finances are often overlooked by the general public when the topic of archaeology is brought up as the objects found at the site are usually the “star of the show.” Funding, however, is a very real issue that archaeologists face at every expedition. Throughout the documentary, Dr. Yousef and site supervisor Ahmed Zikrey constantly feel this pressure at the site as their funding is only secured for one archaeological season or expedition at a time. This is extremely troublesome when there is no guarantee that the team will finish their work in one season but also when confronted with the fact that the income of hundreds of workmen also relies on that funding. According to Ahmed: “We have hundreds of people working at the mission. It is the only source of income for them. All of the team is hoping for next season but everybody is not sure that they will come back again because there may be no money from the government this time.”\(^\text{15}\)

In order to secure funding for next season, Dr. Yousef and his team needed another major discovery or another site to

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\(^{14}\) *Secrets of the Saqqara Tomb*, 1:51:45.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 13:20–13:59.
excavate before the current season was over as that is one of the only ways they could secure their funding. The cut-off for their expedition was the holy month of Ramadan, May 5 to June 3, 2019, as that is when their funding at the site was due to run out. Fortunately for Dr. Yousef, there were clues that led him to believe that there was another tomb nearby. If this was not the case, it would be virtually impossible for him to secure funding. These clues manifested in the form of different grave goods resurfacing through the expedition area.

Ironically, Dr. Yousef and his team embodied Wahtye in this struggle as they were both enthralled with securing their future. For example, Wahtye was devoted to ensuring that he and his family were reborn and provided for in the afterlife which was accomplished by living a good life and being a good citizen as depicted on his tomb walls. Dr. Yousef was devoted to securing funding for the next expedition and ensuring that his work could continue. The only problem is that securing what was next for Dr. Yousef was much harder since he had to do more than just depict what he wanted on a tomb wall and there was no clear way to tell where or when there would be another tomb or large discovery.

Unfortunately for the team, a week before Ramadan their government funding dried up and they were given two days to leave the site. In one season, the team was able to uncover more than 3,100 artifacts, in addition to the other unexpected theories and finds mentioned earlier. However, the ending of the film is somewhat ambiguous as it closes on the team unearthing a new tomb separate from Wahtye’s. Whether or not the new tomb is actively being excavated is unknown but it does leave the viewer with a sense of curiosity and intrigue for what mysteries will be

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16 *Secrets of the Saqqara Tomb*, 1:40. Ramadan is a religious, holy month for Muslims. While each Muslim celebrates differently during this time, one of the usual practices is fasting from sunrise to sunset and more frequent praying. While Muslims are still encouraged to work during this time, they may request a change in schedule to better align with the activities of the holy month. This could have been one of the reasons the team had to finish their work at the site by Ramadan. James
uncovered or answered with its eventual excavation. Regardless of if this tomb is later excavated, continuous archaeological discoveries will eventually unearth the mysteries of the civilization with the help of Egyptologists. The most recent example of this is “the Lost Golden City” of Luxor whose discovery was announced in early April 2021. This find is historical for the Egyptological community and professionals hope that further investigation of the city may reveal why the capital was moved from Thebes to Amarna in the year 38 BCE.17

Secrets of the Saqqara Tomb is an interesting and skillfully directed documentary. While the focus of the film is a hidden tomb and the contents found within it, the director also uses this documentary to give a more human-centered perspective to archaeology. He incorporates the struggles, successes, and personal testimonies from the archeological site and team that leave the viewer with a better understanding of what archaeology is, what this excavation means to this Egyptian team, and the connection it creates between them and their ancestors. This sentiment is made especially clear when Mansour states: “We are the people who can best give a voice to our ancestors because they are our ancestors. We are one step closer to them than the foreigner.”18

18 Secrets of the Saqqara Tomb, 10:55–11:07.
Reviews

Bibliography


Author Bio

Erika Kelley is a third-year undergraduate student at California State University, San Bernardino currently majoring in Public History and minoring in Anthropology. After graduating, Erika hopes to continue her education by obtaining a master’s degree. She enjoys learning about ancient civilizations and museum studies. In her free time she enjoys being outside in nature and visiting different museums and botanical gardens with her friends and family. Erika would like to thank her family for supporting her and her endeavors. She would also like to thank the journal editors and the rest of the team for all their hard work and dedication.