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EGYPT: THE TREASURE OF THE SACRED BULLS

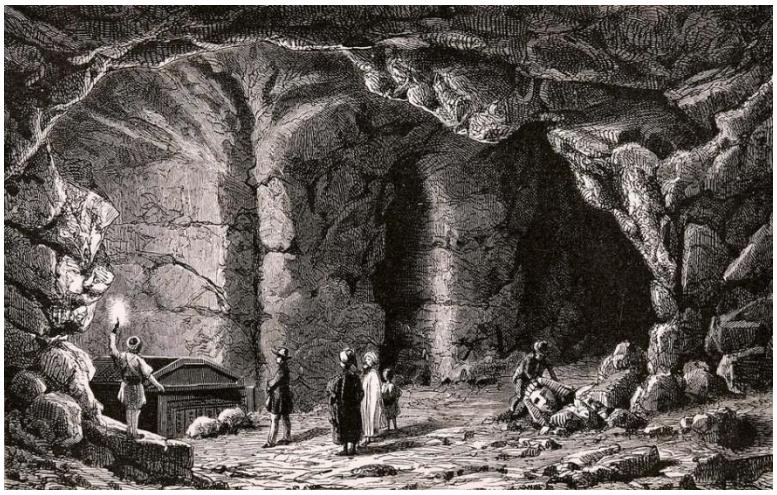
A 52' and 90' film written and directed
by Frédéric Wilner and Moataz Madi

Saqqara, Egypt, 1850. Auguste Mariette discovered the Serapeum, the burial place of the Apis bull, one of the most sacred sites in ancient Egypt. Today, a mission mandated by the Louvre museum picks up the work where the French Egyptologist had left off – writing the next chapter in one of the greatest adventures in the history of archaeology.

ILIADE PRODUCTIONS

SYNOPSIS

Saqqara, 30 km south of Cairo, is the vastest and wealthiest necropolis in ancient Egypt, located on an immense desert plateau on the western bank of the Nile, facing Memphis, the ancient kingdom's capital for 2,500 years of its history. This is where, nearly two centuries ago, the first truly "scientifically-sound" excavation work in Egypt occurred. Indeed, it wasn't a treasure hunt – as had been the case up until then – but the culmination of methodical historical research conducted by Auguste Mariette. A French Egyptologist, he was a great figure in this discipline and later founded the Museum of Cairo as well the Egyptian department dedicated to pharaonic antiquities – a man whose life followed an exceptional course.



Mariette was a resourceful and learned person: he had read Strabo, a Greek philosopher and one of the founders of geography, and remembered the latter's account of his travels through Egypt. Written at the beginning of the Christian era, his chronicles related his visit of the necropolis in Saqqara and described, among others, a fascinating monument that he'd had the good fortune to see, which boasted a majestic path bordered with sphinxes running a kilometer and a half from the Nile riverbed, leading to the tomb of the sacred bulls.

The story came back to Mariette's mind, as he had just heard of large stone sphinxes recently unearthed in Saqqara by amateur archeologists (that would more accurately be qualified today as "early antiquities traffickers and offered for sale by antique dealers in Old Cairo. Mariette suspected that the sculptures in question may belong to the sphinx-flanked path described by Strabo and decided to undertake a search to find the burial place of the Apis bulls with the unused money that the Louvre had entrusted him with. This was how he discovered the Serapeum – an underground maze of numerous chambers directly carved out of the rock, containing enormous stone sarcophagi (all empty when he entered the necropolis).

The Egyptologist managed to excavate "late" areas in the funerary complex, but when he attempted to further explore older galleries, the task became impossible, for they had partially collapsed (the situation has since considerably worsened): the archaeological search therefore had to be interrupted. In the meantime, however, Mariette had discovered 6,000 objects, some of which were shipped to Paris (while the rest stayed in Cairo), where they represent, today, 10% of the artifacts in the Louvre's department of Egyptian antiquities – including among others the famed Seated Scribe (discovered in a tomb near the aligned Sphinxes) as well as the treasure of Prince Khaemwaset, son of Ramses II, who probably instigated the construction of the necropolis of the Apis bulls, 12 centuries B.C..

180 years have passed: today, Vincent Rondot, head of the museum's department of Egyptian antiquities, and Hélène Guichard, his deputy, are following in the footsteps of Auguste Mariette, to continue the excavation work that the latter had to abandon, for lack of technical means at his disposal to prop up the building's structure. The Louvre's two scientists (along with their team made up of a dozen or so people mostly coming from the university of Lille, which includes an important department dedicated to the study of ancient Egypt) will start their work next March.

The first step will be to shore up the collapsed galleries. Then the excavation work itself will start – an exploratory search whose outcome is somewhat unknown, since the depth of the galleries itself hasn't been established precisely. Mariette was able to squeeze through the fallen rocks (before the damage became any greater, making any headway impossible) and hastily sketch a rough layout of the underground tunnels still to be explored, but this design is probably incomplete, given the perilous conditions in which it was drawn.

It is likely that the site expands beyond what Mariette indicated, and especially that there are further unexplored levels below, under the inventoried galleries. How can we make that assumption? With a simple calculation: we know that the Serapeum was built upon the initiative of Khaemwaset, son of Ramses II, circa 1220 B.C.; we also know that the necropolis was active during the Ptolemaic period (that is to say the very beginning of the Christian era) and that all the Apis bulls were buried there; and we know that only the parts corresponding to the last centuries of ancient Egyptian history were explored by Auguste Mariette. Consequently, 800 years of activity remain to be discovered and excavated – and if we consider that the life-span of a bull is approximately 30 years, the population buried there must have been particularly significant !

The excavation team

The gallery where the excavation will take place.

What kind of objects do the archaeologists expect to find under the rubble of the unexplored galleries, approximately five meters beneath the ground? To surmise what may be there, one needs to refer to what is characteristically involved in the Apis bull cult. An incarnation on earth of the god Ptah – the divinity that shapes the world – the Apis bull was unique: there was only one per generation.

Selected by priests that traveled the land over to find the right specimen, it had extremely specific physical features: it had to be a very young bull whose coat was black with, among other things, a triangular mark on the forehead, the shape of a scarab under its tongue and the outline of a falcon with its wings spread open on its back. The bull in question would then be taken to Memphis and worshipped in an enclosure adjacent to the temple of Ptah. Upon its death, the Apis bull was transported to Saqqara and buried in a sarcophagus subsequently placed in one of the Serapeum's chambers. A new calf was thereafter chosen and worshipped (the spirit of the bull having been reincarnated in it).

Jewel from the prince Khaemwaset grave

Khaemwaset golden mask was discovered in the.

The Serapeum was an open place: pilgrims could come and deposit their offerings to honor the sacred bull. They could also leave inscribed steles marking their visit, on which they'd refer to the pharaoh reigning at the time (these constitute extremely precious documentation when establishing the list of pharaohs and the precise dates of their respective reigns over Egypt). Besides the bulls, Mariette discovered magnificent canopies, stone carved, with tops of the shapes of the bulls. He also discovered several human shape stone statues, small to medium size, with inscriptions mentioning nobles Egyptians, who wanted to stay beside the sacred animal in the afterlife.

But that wasn't all: at the entrance of the galleries obstructed by the rubble (which prevented the continuance of the excavation work), Mariette unearthed the remains of the treasure of Ramses II's son, Khaemwaset (who is deemed the founder of the necropolis), including precious artifacts such as jewelry or a golden mortuary mask, today on display at the Louvre museum. Although the necropolis of the Serapeum is dedicated to the sacred animal, such discoveries show that finding other objects beyond those reserved for the cult of Apis can be expected when exploring the monument, among which in particular possible remains from private individuals' gravesites.

Usheptis found by Mariette in the underground gallery where the excavation will take place.

Exploring and studying eight centuries of one of ancient Egypt's most emblematic sacred places, which could symbolically be compared to the small town of Lourdes, in France: such is the scientific goal of the Louvre's new mission. However, this exploration takes on an even greater significance when considered as the continuation of an adventure dating back to the 19th century that is intrinsically intermingled with the history of the museum's Egyptian collections. This dual dimension, covering Mariette's excavation work and that conducted by the Louvre's team today, will stand at the very heart of the narrative of this documentary film.

CGI from King Tut documentary
Similar CGIs will be produced for the Treasure of the Sacred Bulls

Egypt: The Treasure of The Sacred Bulls is a 90 and 52-minute documentary that tells both the story of an exceptional archaeological excavation conducted by the Louvre museum team in the present and the story of the adventure initiated in the mid-19th century by one of the fathers of modern archaeology and Egyptology, Auguste Mariette. Furthermore, it's a tale depicting the strange religious traditions practiced in ancient times under the reigns of the pharaohs: the incarnation of a preeminent divinity of the Egyptian pantheon into a sacred animal; the process required to select the young bull; the worshipping rites performed within the great temple of Ptah; the procession along the avenue bordered with sphinxes when taking the animal's mortal remains to their final resting place within the necropolis; as well as the throngs of pilgrims depositing offerings and inscribed tablets by the animal's sarcophagus. A lost world that the scientists will once again bring to life through their investigational field work.

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