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Tut's tomb yields more surprises

Seals apparently unnoticed by first excavators

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PHILADELPHIA — Egypt's top antiquities official was down in the fabled tomb of Tutankhamen a few weeks ago — doing a television interview, of all things — when he noticed something curious he had never seen before.

In a back room closed to public view, Zahi Hawass spotted a cluster of reed boxes crammed with plaster fragments and limestone seals used to stamp hieroglyphs. Intrigued, the scholar took a closer look and saw that both were marked with a trio of icons — sun, scarab and basket — whose meaning he recognized instantly:

Neb-kheperu-re, the throne name of the boy pharaoh.

Eighty-five years after his tomb was discovered, and after his treasures have been ogled by millions of museumgoers, King Tut is still revealing surprises. Besides the seals, apparently left behind by the original excavators in the early 1920s, Egyptian workers recently found 20 sealed jars with the pharaoh's name in an old storage facility nearby. Neither group of items is part of the Tut inventory at Cairo's Egyptian antiquities museum.

On Thursday, Hawass visits Philadelphia to speak about these surprises and another: For the first time, Tut's mummified body will go on public display, protected in a climate-controlled case in his tomb in Egypt's Valley of the Kings.

The "new" seals and jars will not be added to the exhibit, Hawass said. Though they are not the sort of gilded wonders that have drawn the museum crowds, they are of interest to archaeologists and historians, for whom much of the pharaoh's brief life remains a mystery.

"My God," David O'Connor, a professor of ancient Egyptian art at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts, said upon hearing from a reporter about the finds.

O'Connor, former head of the Egyptian collection at Penn's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, said he could easily see how the jars would have been forgotten.

Egypt has many antiquities, and the original finders of Tut's tomb may have thought some of the less spectacular objects were not worth taking to the Cairo museum, O'Connor said. More surprising is that the boxes of seals were somehow overlooked, he said.

Penn's David Silverman, curator of the traveling Tut exhibit, said he had never seen the boxes in more than 30 visits to the tomb. That's because they were in the treasury room beyond the king's burial chamber, which is typically not open even to scholars, he said.

Hawass, who studied under Silverman at Penn, said he planned to open the jars after returning to Egypt following the Philadelphia lecture.

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