Virtual explorers comb Egypt’s ruins

By Pamela Ferdinand

With a click of his computer mouse, Peter Janosi, a lecturer at the Institute of Egyptology in Vienna, analyses ancient statues and decodes hieroglyphs unearthed in the distant Giza Necropolis.

From the comfort of his study in Newhall, England, Colin Newhall, a retired television repairman, explores rare Giza maps and expedition diaries in an effort to catalog all Old Kingdom tombs.

Meanwhile, Laurel Fenley, a Egyptologist who specializes in art and archaeology, downloads excavation photos and scans inside subterranean chambers, zooming in on relief decorations in tombs around the Sphinx and Great Pyramid from her Cairo home.

They are virtual explorers, traveling through time and space via an online, interactive collection of one of the most famous archaeological sites in the world — the Old Kingdom Giza Necropolis, with its royal tombs, pyramids, temples, and other Egyptian monuments. And it is absolutely unique or special, said project director Peter Der Manuelian.

The free site is helping scholars and the public perceive Giza and its art over time, she said.

The online archives reveal a previously undocumented lower-class cemetery that will revise scholars’ understanding of the early history of Giza before the construction of the Great Pyramid. Other material on the site shows additional examples of what thought was to be a very small group of surviving carved stone slabs on certain tombs, altering thinking among modern scholars about the date of their construction.

The MFA has been a leader in Egyptology ever since its late archaeologist George A. Reisner supervised the longest single-run archaeological site between 1902 and 1947. Reisner, also on Harvard’s faculty, unearthed hundreds of tombs, temples, and other Egyptian monuments in the Giza Necropolis.

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The Giza Archives Project, established by Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts in January 2005, aims to become the world’s central online repository for all archaeological activity at the necropolis, beginning with the major 20th-century excavations that were jointly funded by the museum and Harvard University.

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Tests have been converted to digital form, along with more than 20,000 glass-plate photographic negatives. More than 10,000 maps and plans have been scanned and posted online, as well as serial and satellite photos. The site also offers 360-degree interactive panoramas.

Of particular interest to Egyptologists, Reisner’s extensive excavation records from 1909 to 1940 are available online, soon to be joined by 5,000 unpublished manuscript pages. Manuelian also recently acquired 42 diaries in Arabic detailing Reisner’s excavation work.

In Cairo, Flentye said she supplemented her field work at Giza with the online archives to make certain she had the most accurate information. By computer, she saw features such as figures and hieroglyphs on tomb relief decorations that are now eroded or missing, and she discovered stelae that once lay in the open.

The data that she added to her dissertation will contribute to how scholars and the public perceive Giza and its art over time, she said.

"It is wonderful to see Reisner's original photos because they show features that are now, in most cases, covered by sand. The original excavation photos provided many surprises for me," she wrote in an e-mail. "The archives provide essential data that may not be retrievable in the field."
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With a click of his computer mouse, Peter Janosi, a lecturer at the Institute of Egyptology in Vienna, analyzes ancient statues and inscribed stone slabs on certain tombs, allowing users to re-examine and perhaps find answers, Manuelian said. And it is becoming even more valuable as the monuments and artifacts themselves crumble — victims of pollution, vandalism, tourism, and time, he said.

The online archives reveal a previously undocumented lower-class temple that will revive scholars’ understanding of the early history of Giza before the construction of the Great Pyramid. Other material on the site shows additional examples of what was thought to be a very small group of surviving carved stone slabs on certain tombs, allowing thinking among modern scholars about the date of their construction.

A limestone relief with the cartouche of a tomb occupant, now in a European museum, was thought to come from a particular tomb. But a small note card sketch made by one of the expedition staff in 1946 and now available online shows the same relief in its original place in Giza — but in a different tomb about 1,000 yards away.

"You can study a certain tomb and realize what you thought came from that tomb actually comes from somewhere else, something unique is actually very common, or something that you never paid very much attention to is absolutely unique or special," Manuelian said.

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Via Web, explorers comb ruins

The ruins of the pyramid temple of King Menkaure (foreground) and the second pyramid of King Khafre are among the Giza sites that users can view online.