

Zahi Hawass: A hat is a hat

Author: Nevine El-Aref

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'I would never endanger Tutankhamun's mummy. Before becoming SCA secretary-general I was an Egyptian archaeologist, working to preserve my country's heritage. I would never compromise that heritage'

Whatever is said about the secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) -- and a great deal is -- one thing is certain, he is never going to be accused of being a wallflower. Since being appointed to the post three years ago Zahi Hawass has courted the media spotlight with a fervour few would have imagined in the rarefied world of archaeology.

Strolling across our television screens in his trademark Indiana Jones hat, he has no doubts about his own abilities. "I'm damn good," he says at one point in our interview. And later: "I am already famous and powerful. [What] I do I do for Egypt. It is the first time that Egypt has been correctly explained to the public."

He most recently hit the headlines when he demanded the return of five key ancient Egyptian treasures -- including the Rosetta stone -- from foreign museums. A little earlier, he was leading the team that carried out the much publicised -- and televised -- CT scan on the mummy of Tutankhamun. Yet at the same time his job involves a great deal that is less newsworthy, and much of his time and effort has been spent on upgrading the skills and knowledge of the SCA's 30,000 employees, the better to conserve and protect Egypt's ancient heritage.

So, publicity addict or serious scholar? Al-Ahram Weekly speaks with the often controversial -- and never less than colourful. -- Zahi Hawass

The walls of Zahi Hawass's office are covered with photographs, a great many of them of its occupant. There he is in jeans, entering a narrow burial shaft in Saqqara. And brushing sand from an exquisitely coloured mummy. There are photographs of Hawass excavating in the Valley of the Golden Mummies, of Hawass sitting behind Champollion's desk in Paris, of Hawass lecturing President Hosni Mubarak and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder at the opening of the Tutankhamun exhibition in Bonn. The few gaps between these images are punctuated by 19th-century drawings of the Giza Plateau, the Valley of the Kings, Abu Simbel and the Egyptian Museum that seem somehow to have insinuated themselves into this personal hall of fame.

On the desk is a plastic replica of Tutankhamun's skull, a marble model of the Pyramid of Senefru, the father of Khufu, and the bank of telephones that normally ring incessantly. Indeed, securing two hours with Hawass without him fiddling with his mobile, or being constantly interrupted by the bank of telephones is itself a feat.

Hawass was born and grew up in the small village of Abeyda, close to Damietta. It was there, he says, that he learned "how to deal with people, how to show strength and courage... how to be a real man".

"I was raised without any of the modern amenities that today we take for granted. But without television you read more, spend more time communicating. I listened to the tales of The Arabian Nights along the shores of the Nile." Then, almost as an afterthought, he tells me that the family always "had good dinners".

As much as he loved the village Hawass knew early that he would have to move away, and soon university beckoned.

"The faculty of arts appeared too passive for me and I originally thought of taking up a diplomatic career. But I failed the oral exam -- they were not convinced of my sincerity. But fortunately I had another passion, my love of archaeology. I was lucky enough to get a Fulbright scholarship and went to America where I studied at the University of Pennsylvania and gained my PhD in 1987."

His archaeological career has included several discoveries -- the workmen's cemetery at Giza, the Valley of the Golden Mummies in Bahariya and the tomb of the oasis's Graeco-Roman governor, a 5,000-year-old tomb in Saqqara, new evidence of granite quarries in Aswan and traces of a gigantic temple at Akhmim. He has also unearthed more details about the Great Pyramid, for which work he has received a number of local and international awards, among them the Crystal Obelisk of the Egyptian Scholars Association of the USA and Canada; the Golden Plate of the American Academy for Achievement and an Egyptian State Award for Art and Science presented by President Mubarak following Hawass's work on the Sphinx restoration project.

Then, three years ago, Hawass was appointed secretary-general of the SCA, since when the normally closed world of Egyptology has been divided between those who complain about his policies and what they say is heavy-handedness, and those who applaud his attempts to shake up the establishment and promote new methods of conservation.

He has been accused of being pro-American -- among the evidence cited being the Indiana Jones hat and his efforts to secure a law allowing the Tutankhamun exhibition to tour the US for up to two years. And he has been accused of being driven by an overwhelming desire for personal publicity, hogging the limelight and casting a shadow over his rivals.

"Hawass is ruling the SCA with an iron fist and censorious tongue," said the British Sunday Times magazine. "People are cowering round Hawass... No Egyptologist gets in without his permission and few will chance his anger. No body crosses Hawass and gets away with it."

What does Hawass have to say to such accusations?

"Before I respond," he tells me, "people have to understand that I am an Egyptian and all my efforts are in the service of Egyptian antiquities, not America, France or Germany."

"Sending exhibitions abroad has been the SCA's policy for years. I did not invent it. Such exhibitions promote Egypt's cultural face... at a time when cultural tension between the Muslim- Arab world and the West is running high. They provide a free promotional campaign, attracting tourists as well as generating money for conservation. The first exhibition, Quest for Immortality, was organised in 2002 during the tenure of my predecessor. Egypt made \$1 million from every state in which the exhibition was held."

He also points out that the Tutankhamun exhibition visited Basel in Switzerland and Bonn in Germany, where it earned \$6 million, before embarking on its two year tour of four American states, from each of which it will earn \$9 million. And the hat?

"The hat is just a hat," he says. He bought it one day in California, where he was lecturing at UCLA. The first time he wore it he made a major discovery in the Valley of the Golden Mummies, since when it has been a good-luck token.

"I don't want to talk about myself. I am an archaeologist who works with dust. Other archeologists sit behind their desks and do nothing. This hat does not change me. I studied in America and that's why I understand Americans. I use Americans to help Egypt, not vise-versa."

"I am already famous and powerful. What I do I do for Egypt. It is the first time that Egypt has been correctly explained to the public... No one in the history of archaeology has helped Egypt more than I."

There is no doubt that Hawass is one of Egypt's most recognisable public servants, regularly stopped by strangers at international airports, in restaurants and in the street.

He is, says Egyptian scientist Farouk El-Baz, director of the Remote Sensing Centre at Boston University, something of "a media whore" which is not, El-Baz is quick to add, necessarily a bad thing.

Indeed, Hawass's enthusiasm for his subject is infectious, and as the increasingly visible public face of Egyptology that is clearly an advantage. He has the ability to turn what most audiences would find a dry subject into something thrilling and exciting enough to learn more about.

"His passion for his profession makes people listen when he talks. His ability to captivate an audience is like the Refai charming a cobra with the rhythm of a flute," said Omar Sharif during July's inauguration of the Tutankhamun exhibition in Los Angeles.

Not that Hawass is nonplused by the attention. "I am a star... in Egypt," he says, "and this did not happen haphazardly but because I give all my passion to my work. Many people love their job but for me it is different. I really live with my discoveries and my passion. When you speak from your heart people listen. That is why for the first time ever an archaeologist has become a star."

There are those, however, who suggest the balance between entertainment and scholarship is rather more difficult to strike, and that the pursuit of publicity sits uneasily with real archaeological research.

"This is the jealousy," Hawass says angrily, "of the followers of the evil god Seth."

"I am damn good. I am doing all this for Egypt and nothing else. I reject 70 per cent of media interviews while these people who accuse me are running after them."

Early last month Hawass stirred up a hornet's nest in the antiquities community when he demanded the return of five objects held in museums abroad: "Egypt has been deprived of five artefacts that are regarded as key items of the Egyptian cultural heritage and which should be handed over to us," he said during a speech at a meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin held at UNESCO in Paris. (He was referring to the Rosetta Stone held by the British Museum, the bust of Nefertiti in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, the statue of the pyramid architect Hemiunnu in the Roemer- Pelizaeus Museum in Hilesheim, the Zodiac from Dendera Temple in the Louvre and the bust of Ankhhaf in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts).

In some ways the move is an extension of the campaign, launched three years ago, to recuperate antiquities stolen and illegally smuggled out of Egypt. With the help of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the office of the general prosecutor Egypt has so far recovered 3,000 objects and broken two international smuggling rings.

Through its Recovered Antiquities Department the SCA combs auction house catalogues and websites, identifying stolen items so they can be withdrawn from sale and returned. Meanwhile, local antiquities inspection units are compiling an inventory of items missing from storehouses or chipped from monuments to be checked against items up for auction. Security systems have been upgraded at archaeological sites, 30 new storehouses built and new legislation increasing the penalties for those found guilty of illegally dealing in antiquities is being prepared.

In an attempt to preserve archaeological sites and protect monuments Hawass has also introduced new regulations covering the work of foreign missions, which are now required to publish all discoveries within five years after first clearing their finds with the SCA, in addition to mapping and photographing the site of their concession. Any mission that breaks the rules will automatically be prevented from working in Egypt. New concessions have also been put on hold, the better to focus attention on existing sites, especially in the Delta.

The new rules, charge some archaeologists, are no more than an attempt by the SCA secretary- general to hog the most glamorous sites and areas of research.

Famously, in 2003, Hawass banned British archaeologist Joann Fletcher from working in Egypt, denouncing her as "nuts" when she announced that a previously-discovered mummy in the Valley of the Kings might be that of Nefertiti. And last year two French architects accused Hawass of treating Egypt as a private fiefdom after they were refused permission to place a small camera in the floor of the Great Pyramid to search for a possible chamber. At the time Hawass denounced them as amateurs though they had made successful discoveries using the same technique in the Medium Pyramid.

The decision to ban Joann Fletcher was taken, he says, by the 100-member SCA permanent committee which decided she had broken the rules by not informing the SCA of her theories.

"These are the kind of people who seek publicity, who want to make their name. And it is not me that makes the decisions, we have a permanent committee. The scholars on the committee gave their opinion and came up with a conclusion."

Hawass is growing animated. "No amateurs allowed," he suddenly shouts. "This is Egypt's archaeological law."

Not that he begrudges anyone their own moment of glory, he insists. (Fletcher made her theory public via a Discovery channel documentary, which may, suggest some, have involved stepping on the secretary-general's toes).

"The SCA allows any scholar to announce their discoveries on TV. They are on TV every day," he says. But, as he himself told television viewers, before announcing her conclusion Fletcher should have given the SCA a detailed report accompanied by evidence about her theory and why she believed the mummy belonged to Nefertiti. She did not, and is now banned.

Hawass, of course, as well as being SCA secretary-general, is the National Geographic's honorary explorer-in-residence, something that has led to accusations of a conflict of interests, particularly when it comes to subjects, like the CT-scan of Tutankhamun's mummy, that excite widespread public interest. The methodology and forensic recreation of the boy king's face has been questioned by several Egyptologists who suggest the project smacks more of the media circus than science, and who question the role of National Geographic, whose media arm appeared to have exclusive rights in broadcasting the project. Why, they ask, was the Egyptian media, but not the foreign press, excluded from witnessing the event? And what did National Geographic pay for such exclusivity?

"I used National Geographic to help carry out the project," Hawass responds. "They don't, after all, need the SCA to screen a movie about Tutankhamun. Like any other channel they can make four films a week about Egypt if they want, and for the very low fee of LE100 a day. But National Geographic provided the CT scanner -- which costs \$1 million -- in collaboration with Siemens. They offered another \$500,000 to maintain the device though it was decided that \$50,000 would be sufficient."

Excluding the Egyptian media was intentional since a large number of journalists inside the tomb was potentially damaging. "To protect the mummy the press was excluded and my press office fed them with all the information and photographs they needed for their articles."

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"I asked National Geographic to support our research not because they are sponsoring the Tutankhamun exhibition but because they are a non-profit scientific institution and can be addressed should any mistakes occur. I don't think any other archaeologists, in Arab countries like Libya or Jordan, for instance, would have the same opportunities Hawass has to help his country. I used National Geographic to help Egypt and they received nothing in return. All they got was a film about Tutankhamun and nothing else, a film they share with Japanese, French, and British channels."

Hawass is satisfied with his achievements over the last three years but believes there is much still to do. He is establishing a holding company to generate revenue for the SCA by offering professional services alongside high-quality commercial products. Implementing site management projects and providing cultural programmes for children and adults in an attempt to emphasise their sense of national belonging and raise their cultural and archaeological awareness will all be part of the holding company's mandate.

He also hopes that during his tenure he will be able to raise the living standards of archaeologists, providing them with medical insurance, a syndicate and allowing them to take the lead in archaeological work in their native land.

And after his tenure?

The word retirement does not seem to exist in Hawass's vocabulary. He is looking forward to his own research and writing, and will remain behind the scenes "to protect Egypt's monuments".

"I will never give my successors the chance to ruin what I have done," he says. "I have given all my energy and strength to archaeology, which is my love."