

Mixed Mess

A tomb on the Giza Plateau yields chewing-gum wrappers, Cairo tram tickets, a 1944 newspaper, and a 4,500-year-old burial.

by W. B. HAFFORD

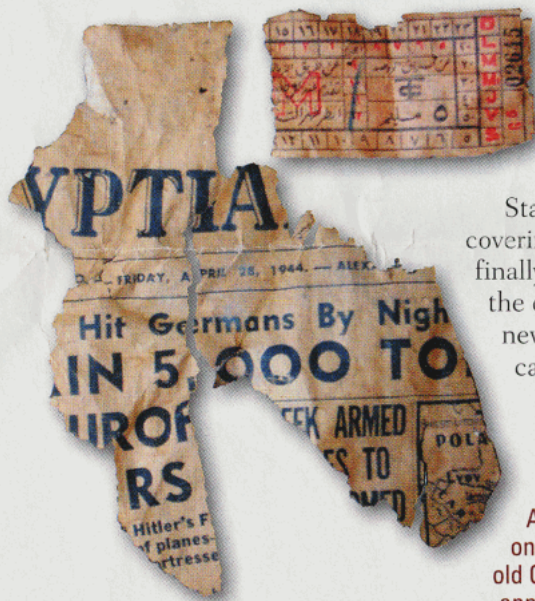
AS I CHIPPED AWAY THE FINAL SEAL on the entrance to the burial chamber, I was gripped by both anticipation of what might lie inside and a sense of mystery. The other chambers of this tomb, lying in the shadow of Khufu's monumental pyramid at Giza, had been opened in the 1930s by George Reisner, Harvard's highly respected archaeologist, but for some unknown reason this one had escaped his notice.

Standing in a shaft only twenty inches wide, I rocked the long limestone slab covering the chamber's entryway back on its base. It took a good deal of effort, but finally the stone slid back, kicking up fine sand. As the dust settled I peered into the darkness, only to find myself face to face with... modern garbage: shredded newspaper and bits of plastic and foil. Anticlimactic perhaps, but archaeology can be just that at times.

I was at a loss to determine how modern material had gotten into the ancient tomb. It certainly hadn't come in the way I had; there'd been a heavy, unbroken mud-plaster sealing at the entrance. To find out just what had happened, I wadded myself up into a ball and gingerly began investigating the small, low chamber. It extended south beyond the shaft opening, and there, reaching to the ceiling, was a large pile of sand.

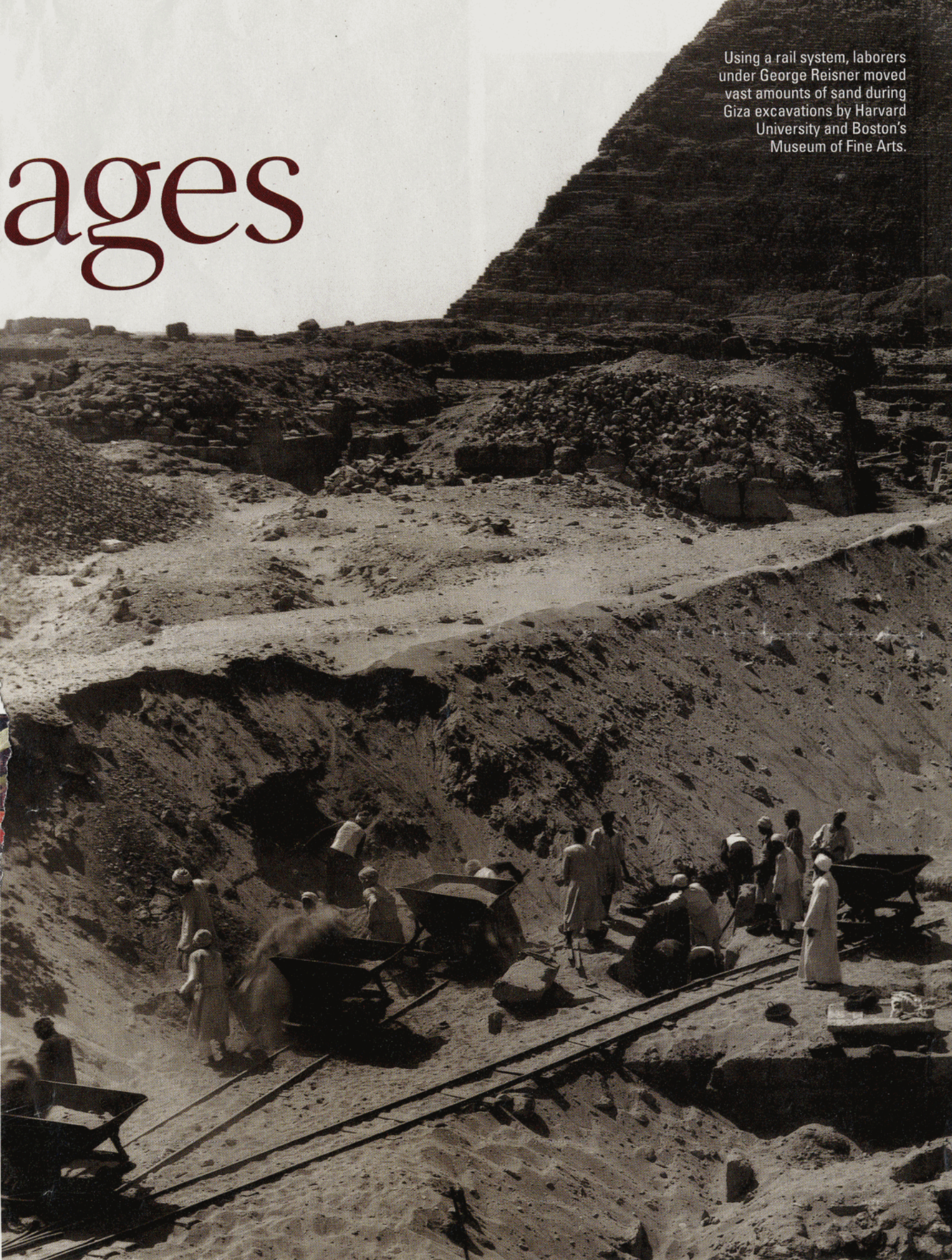
Over the next few days, I returned again and again to my cramped position, carefully excavating the sand pile, documenting its contents despite the fact that much of it was modern debris. I found many things of chronological interest in that pile, including a 1940s or 1950s chewing-gum wrapper and Cairo tram tickets of the same period. Finally the definitive time frame for the "invasion" of the chamber appeared. Nestled in the sand was a torn piece of the *Egyptian Mail*, an English-language newspaper, dated April 28, 1944. Its partially preserved headline read "...Hit

Germans By Night," and on the reverse were pictures of SS head Heinrich Himmler and Luftwaffe chief Hermann Goering. I hadn't expected to come up against the Nazis at this dig, but now perhaps I could claim a kinship with the action-adventure archaeologists of motion-picture fame.



ages

Using a rail system, laborers under George Reisner moved vast amounts of sand during Giza excavations by Harvard University and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts.





W.B. Halford (2)

Modern excavators found the blocking stones still in place at the burial chamber's entrance, above, but a cascade of sand and modern trash had poured into it from a small opening at the back.

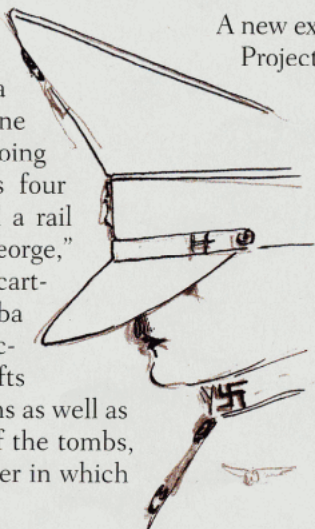


Slowly, I pulled the remaining sand away from the ceiling and began to understand what had happened. Reisner's team had found three burial shafts and chambers in this tomb, and during excavation they had weakened a fourth. Not long after they stopped work, a minor collapse had occurred, leaving a small hole in the unexcavated chamber's southwestern corner. Over the next five to ten years, sand and windblown trash had filled it, sealing the burial once more.

Nazis aside, most exciting of all was the fact that the chamber's original occupant remained intact. As I continued to work in the small area, I found her, still in the position in which she had been placed so long ago. Curled into the tiny space, her knees were at her chin and her hands beneath her head, resting on a stone pillow in her eternal sleep. There were no burial goods, apart from the much later newsprint, so we had nothing more than her bones to tell us how she had lived.

Why had this woman's burial chamber escaped Reisner's notice? Let me roll back the clock to 1939, when the spectre of World War II was beginning to cast its shadow over the world. At that time, Reisner and his crew were busy excavating a group of tombs in the western cemetery at Giza for Harvard and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The season's endeavors were part of ongoing research that Reisner had conducted in his four decades at Giza. With a large workforce and a rail system to carry away the overburden, "Papa George," as he was known, moved more than 11,000 cartloads of sand, and excavated twenty-two mastaba tombs, low rectangular brick or stone structures. He investigated a hundred burial shafts and chambers and recovered forty-two skeletons as well as a few small statues and other artifacts. One of the tombs, designated G2061, included the burial chamber in which I was now working.

The 1939 season was particularly difficult. Reisner was plagued by increasing blindness—caused by cataracts and a detached retina in his left eye—and the possibility of war was on everyone's mind. The work log kept by his Egyptian foreman, Mohammed Said Ahmed, records the preparation of the most stable tombs as bomb shelters, the beginning of the war with Hitler's invasion of Poland on September first, and these entries three days later: "Mr. Frank Allen went in town and brought Gas Masks for all the Egyptians, guards, house boys and the children" and "At 5 p.m. we went to the rock cut tombs after hearing the [air-raid] whistle...it finished after 15–20 minutes." One cataloger even scribbled a caricature of Adolf Hitler on an inventory card while recording the finds. With the outbreak of war, Reisner called an end to the year's excavation, and the woman's burial chamber was never found. Three years later, at age 74, he died at the Harvard camp at Giza, where he had lived and worked for four decades, and most of the tombs excavated in 1939 remain unpublished.



A new expedition, the Howard University Giza Cemetery Project, led by Ann Macy Roth and including myself, has returned to the site to record what Reisner had seen and done in that last prewar season. Most of our work is concerned with mapping, drawing, and documentation to bring the old field notes and Reisner's manuscript up to par with modern archaeological publication standards. The discovery of the unopened burial chamber in G2061 was an unexpected dividend of these efforts.

When Reisner's team was working in the

In an idle moment, a member of the Giza excavation staff sketched Hitler on the back of an inventory card.



funerary chapel attached to the G2061 tomb, they uncovered a small statue—now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo—of a husband and wife. They sit together and the woman holds her arm about her husband's shoulders in an affectionate manner. Almost undoubtedly, this statue represents the couple who owned and built the funerary chapel and tomb with its four burial chambers. Judging from inscriptions in the nearest cluster of tombs, one or both of them may have held the title "Palace Attendant." We are uncertain what duties such officials performed, but they were honored enough to warrant burial in a sacred place near the Great Pyramids. They were probably the parents of the woman whose skeleton I had just uncovered, and would have occupied the tomb's two deepest chambers. Unfortunately, both had been emptied long before Reisner found them. The third chamber Reisner investigated contained a complete burial, but his notes do not record the individual's gender, age, or stature. They do provide a scale drawing, however, and the bones are shown small, perhaps from a teenager.

The statue of the mother and father gives us some idea of what the woman in the fourth chamber may have looked like, but because there were no inscriptions anywhere in the tomb, we don't know her name. Her bones, however, tell a great deal. They reveal not only her gender but also that she was between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age when she died and that she had lived a relatively hard life. Lack of calcium caused her bones to be thin and brittle, and her lower back was in a deteriorated condition. She'd broken a finger during her lifetime, and patterned wear on her teeth might be an indication of habitual work, such as processing leather or stripping reeds for basketmaking.

Scientific techniques for studying human bones have improved greatly since the 1930s, and we are fortunate to have obtained a complete skeleton for comparison with the sometimes scantily recorded data about those that Reisner found six decades ago. Recovering the body was not a quick or easy task. After I excavated her fragile remains, I still had to draw them, take a multitude of pho-

"Papa George" Reisner, below left, chats with George H. Edgell, director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In Reisner's day, excavations were fast and dress formal. Today, excavations are slower and dress practical, as demonstrated by the author, below right.



Reisner and Edgell: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Far right: A. M. Roth



Forty-five centuries ago, a tomb was built near the Giza pyramids for a family of minor officials. In 1939, George Reisner discovered a statue depicting the mother and father of this family. Six decades later, a new excavation found a chamber with the remains of a daughter of the couple. Study of her bones revealed the difficult life she and her parents faced.

tographs, and collect, label, and store the bones. Such painstaking disinterment and investigation is time-consuming and costly, but the information gained is substantial. Positioning of the body and lack of burial goods provide indications of burial customs, and in this, we are adding to what Reisner documented. But finer detail, such as tooth wear and the development of muscle attachments on the bones, gives us an idea of the sort of work she may have conducted, and her thin bone walls and compacted vertebrae tell us about her diet and health. Such information was not noted and perhaps even sought in Reisner's day.

At the same time, we've learned something about the archaeologist who first investigated her family's tomb. Much of our personal knowledge of Reisner comes from the copious written material he left behind—an unpublished manuscript and notes and the daily record kept by Mohammed Said Ahmed. Although Reisner worked at a pace much faster than archaeologists today, clearing many tombs in one or two days where now several weeks are spent on each, he was extremely careful for his time. His photographic record was meticulous, and he is sometimes cited as the first to excavate by systematically following the natural layers of deposits rather than arbitrary levels, beginning as early as 1909 in his work at Samaria.

Reisner's unfinished Giza monograph is filled with information and shows both his love of the work and his attention to detail, but the diary of his Egyptian foreman contained more personal entries. As I read through this log, mostly recording the number of cartloads of sand removed each day, I stumbled across an entry that began "What a day!" It went on to describe the great pride felt by the entire

crew at Reisner's latest award, an honorary doctorate to be given by Harvard. At the same time, there was a note of sadness that he would be away for two months making the long trek back to Boston to attend the ceremony. His return received an equally excited entry in the diary, describing the joyful preparations—the outfitting of his quarters with new linens and flowers, and the stocking of the kitchen for a welcome-home feast—made in expectation of his arrival.

Such love and respect came from Reisner's equal show of admiration for his fellows, including his local workers. Indeed, he had a great respect for the Egyptians, both modern and ancient. This devotion was often remarked upon by his students, his foreman, and crew, and was echoed in the moniker "Papa George" given him by his many friends. His genuine concern for the crew was reflected in his arrangements to keep them safe in the event of war. He was dedicated not just to archaeology but to Egypt as a whole, and he was prepared to do what he could for its living people even while he researched its dead.

The double slice of history we uncovered in this one small tomb among thousands on the Giza Plateau demonstrates that we archaeologists experience history at the same instant we study it, as Reisner's work here on the eve of World War II shows. And I like to think our work is akin to the rebirth the ancient Egyptians sought. They believed they would carry on in the afterlife, and their hope was that they would continue to be remembered in the physical world as well. Perhaps it is something that, thousands of years later, we remember and honor this woman by trying to learn more about her and her people. ■

W.B. HAFFORD is the Robert H. Dyson, Jr., Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania Museum and assistant director of the Howard University Giza Cemetery Project. The project acknowledges the generous support of the National Endowment for the Humanities and supervision of Zahi Hawass, General Secretary of the Supreme Council of Antiquities. For further reading visit www.archaeology.org.