Antiquities

Roman mosaic discovered

Egypt opens ancient 'Avenue of Sphinxes'

LUXOR, Egypt, Nov 27, (AP): Egyptian authorities were unveiling Thursday a renovated ancient promenade in the city of Luxor dating back 3,000 years, the latest government project undertaken to highlight the country's archaeological treasures.

Egypt has struggled to revive its tourism industry, battered by years of political turmoil following the 2011 popular uprising that toppled longtime autocrat **Hosni Mubarak**, and more lately, the coronavirus pandemic.

The ancient walkway — known as the Avenue of the Sphinxes, but also dubbed the Way of the Rams and the Path of the Gods - connects the famous Karnak and Luxor temples in what was the city of Thebes, which used to be Egypt's capital in antiquity. It is believed to have been the path that pilgrims trod to visit the temples and pay tribute to their deities.

Mubarak

Lined with statues of rams and sphinxes on pedestals, the ancient road in Luxor, which sits on the banks of the Nile River and is located about 650 kilometers (400 miles) south of Cairo, stretches for several miles and had been under excavation for more than 50 years.

President Abdel Fatah el-Sissi attended the made-for-TV event, a late evening ceremony that nodded to an ancient fall holiday, along with other senior officials.

Mohamed Abd el-Badei, a top Egyptian archeology officials, said the oldest ruins along the pathway are six structures built by Queen Hatshepsut, Egypt's only woman pharaoh, that date to 1400 B.C.

He said that according to hieroglyphics on the walls of one of the temples, the ancient holiday was known as "Opet" and was marked by parades and dancers in celebration of the bounty that the Nile's annual flooding brought to the fields. There was also a flotilla of sacred boats that made their way to the temple, according to the transcriptions.

Ceremony

Thursday's event is the second glitzy ceremony this year to honor Egypt's heritage. In April, the government hosted a procession to mark the transfer of some of the famous mummies from the Egyptian Museum in downtown Cairo to the newly built museum south of the Egyptian capital.

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A team of archaeologists from the University of Leicester in central England certainly appear to have the golden touch.

Nearly a decade on from uncovering the remains of **King Richard III** under a car park near Leicester Cathedral, the university's archaeological team have unearthed a Roman mosaic featuring the great Greek hero of Achilles in battle with brave Hector during the Trojan War — this time in a farmer's field about 160 kilometers (100 miles) north of London.

The mosaic is the first depiction ever found in the U.K. of events from Homer's classic 'The Iliad.'"

John Thomas, deputy director of University of Leicester Archaeological Services and project manager on the excavations, said the mosaic says a lot about the person who commissioned it in the late Roman period, between the 3rd and 4th century.

"This is someone with a knowledge of the classics, who had the money to commission a piece of such detail, and it's the very first depiction of these stories that we've ever found in Britain," he said. "This is certainly the most exciting Roman mosaic discovery in the UK in the last century."

In light of its rarity and importance, Britain's Department of Culture, Media and Sport on Thursday granted the mosaic the country's oldest form of heritage protection. It is now a scheduled monument, which makes it a criminal offense for anyone to go digging around the site or even metal-detecting.

"By protecting this site we are able to continue learning from it, and look forward to what future excavations may teach us about the people who lived there over 1,500 years ago," said Duncan Wilson, chief executive of Historic England.

The mosaic in the county of Rutland was found by **Jim Irvine**, whose father **Brian Naylor** owns the land, in the midst of last year's lockdown during excavations of an elaborate villa complex made up of a host of structures and other buildings. Irvine then notified the authorities, leading to an excavation by the university's archaeological team.

He described how what started as "a ramble through the fields with the family" led to the "incredible discovery."

"The last year has been a total thrill to have been involved with," he said.

The archaeologists discovered remains of the mosaic, measuring 11 meters (36 feet) by almost 7 meters (22.9 feet). Human remains were also discovered in the rubble covering the mosaic and are thought to have been interred after the building was no longer occupied.

The dig, which remains on private land, has now been back-filled to protect the site and work will continue to potentially turn over the field to grassland to lower the risk of future damage from ploughing.

There's little time for the team at the university to rest up following their latest excavation success. In January, they are due to start digging near Leicester Cathedral, in what is expected to be the city's deepest ever excavation, in the hope of finding long-lost treasures from medieval times and ancient times.

The team is best-known for its search of the lost grave of Richard III, which began in August 2012. In February of the following year, the university announced that they had found the remains of England's last Plantagenet king and the last English monarch to have died on the battlefield. He died in 1485.

Also:

NEW ORLEANS: A New Orleans museum plans to launch an elaborate nighttime sound-and-light show next year to showcase individual stories of bravery and sacrifice during World War II.

The National WII Museum plans to premier its Expressions of America show next November, on Veterans Day 2022. It will use music, art installations and projections of what the museum calls "living murals" on the various facades of the expansive museum in downtown New Orleans. The plan is to draw from the museum's archives to tell personal stories of soldiers, nurses and chaplains who served, their loved ones and others who played a role on the home front, including factory workers, artists and entertainers.

"All of the words in the show will come directly from the men and women of the WWII generation, and the production's original musical score will feature 1940s-era songs performed by New Orleans's legendary Preservation Hall Jazz Band," the museum said in a news release.

The show also will feature actor and veterans advocate Gary Sinise.

Expressions of America is being produced at an estimated cost of about $5 million, according to museum spokesman **Keith Darcey**. It will be sponsored by the Bob & Dolores Hope Foundation, a charitable organization founded in the name of the late comedian who famously entertained troops overseas, and his wife.

"I know my father would be so honored not only to be featured in such an innovative production but also for the Bob & Dolores Hope Foundation to be supporting an effort that will inspire the same appreciation that he had for all those who served in World War II and beyond," said **Bob Hope**'s daughter, **Linda Hope**, CEO of the foundation.

Fireworks light the sky during the reopening ceremony of the Avenue of Sphinxes commonly known as El Kebbash Road on Thursday, Nov. 25, in Luxor, Egypt. The ceremony was meant to highlight the country's archaeological treasures as Egypt struggles to revive its tourism industry, battered by years of political turmoil and more lately, the coronavirus pandemic. (AP)

In this undated photo issued on Thursday Nov. 25, by the University of Leicester Archaeological a view of a Roman mosaic unique to Britain and depicting one of the most famous battles of the Trojan War. (AP)

Vande Hei

Artemyev

Discovery

Russian module docks with ISS: A Russian cargo craft carrying a new docking module successfully hooked up with the International Space Station Friday after a two-day space journey.

The new spherical module, named Prichal (Pier), docked with the orbiting outpost at 6:19 p.m. Moscow time (1519 GMT). It has six docking ports and will allow potential future expansion of the Russian segment of the station.

The module has moored to the docking port of the new Russian Nauka (Science) laboratory module.

On Wednesday, a Soyuz rocket took off from the Russian launch facility in Baikonur, Kazakhstan, carrying the Progress cargo ship with Prichal attached to it. After entering space, the cargo ship with the module went into orbit.

Progress is also delivering 700 kilos of various cargoes to the space station and is expected to undock from the station on Dec 22.

The first Soyuz spacecraft is expected to dock at the new module on March 18, 2022, with a crew of three cosmonauts: **Oleg Artemyev**, Denis Matveev and Sergei Korsakov.

Earlier this week, the Russian crew on the station started training for the module's arrival, simulating the use of manual controls in case the automatic docking system failed.

The space outpost is currently operated by NASA astronauts Raja Chari, Thomas Marshburn, Kayla Barron, and Mark **Vande Hei**; Russian cosmonauts Anton Shkaplerov and Pyotr Dubrov; and Matthias Maurer of the European Space Agency. (AP)

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Portugal to stop using coal: Environmental activists are welcoming the end of electricity generation from coal in Portugal, though they said the possible conversion of the country's last coal-fired power plant into one that burns wood pellets would be a step in the wrong direction.

The Pego plant located 150 kilometers (90 miles) northeast of the Portuguese capital Lisbon stopped generating over the weekend, as Portugal became the fourth European Union country to stop burning coal to produce electricity. Belgium quit coal in 2016, and Austria and Sweden followed suit last year.

Portugal has no coal, oil or gas, which are all imported, and has been investing heavily in green energy in recent decades.

"Coal's dire economics and public desire for climate action are driving faster and faster phase outs across Europe," said Kathrin Gutmann, campaign director for Europe Beyond Coal, which aims to ensure coal is phased out in Europe by 2030.

Coal power is the single biggest source of greenhouse gas emissions.

"The challenge now is to ensure utilities do not make the mistake of replacing coal with fossil gas, or unsustainable biomass," Gutmann said said in a statement.(AP)

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Trees scorched in heat wave: This summer's heat scorched Oregon trees — maybe worse than ever before — and scientists are beginning to piece together what that means for the trees' long-term health.

Reports of fading foliage and crispy conifers started coming within days of a June heat wave, during which many parts of the state endured consecutive days with temperatures higher than 110 degrees Fahrenheit (43 degrees Celsius).

Aerial surveys from the US Forest Service, Oregon Department of Forestry and Washington Department of Natural Resources documented tree scorching on about 229,000 acres (92,673 hectares) in Oregon, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported. That's likely an undercount, given the method's limitations.

"By some estimates, it's probably the largest scorch event in history," Oregon State University researcher Christopher Still told OPB's "Think Out Loud" this week. "I mean this is a new thing for us to be seeing on Earth, so it's sort of a dubious milestone." (AP)

Coronavirus

Experts will review safety

Merck COVID-19 pill effective: FDA

NEW YORK, Nov 27, (AP): Federal health regulators say an experimental COVID-19 pill from Merck is effective against the virus, but they will seek input from outside experts on risks of birth defects and other potential problems during pregnancy.

The Food and Drug Administration posted its analysis of the pill ahead of a public meeting next week where academic and other experts will weigh in on its safety and effectiveness. The agency isn't required to follow the group's advice.

The FDA scientists said their review identified several potential risks, including possible toxicity to developing fetuses and birth defects that were identified in studies of the pill in animals.

Given those risks the FDA will ask its advisers next Tuesday whether the drug should never be given during pregnancy or whether it could be made available in certain cases.

Under that scenario, the FDA said the drug would carry warnings about risks during pregnancy, but doctors would still have the option to prescribe it in certain cases where its benefits could outweigh its risks for patients.

Given the safety concerns, FDA said Merck agreed the drug would not be used in children.

Other side effects were mild and rare, with about 2% of patients experiencing diarrhea.

Regulators also noted that Merck collected far less safety data overall on its drug than was gathered for other COVID-19 therapies.

"While the clinical safety data base was small, there were no major safety concerns identified," FDA reviewers concluded.

Additionally, the FDA flagged a concern that Merck's drug led to small changes in the coronavirus' signature spike protein, which it uses to penetrate human cells. Theoretically, FDA cautioned, those changes could lead to dangerous new variants.

FDA will ask its independent advisers to discuss all those issues and then vote on whether the drug's overall benefits outweigh its risks.

All COVID-19 drugs currently authorized by the FDA require an injection or IV and can only be given by health professionals. If authorized, Merck's drug would be the first that US patients could take at home to ease symptoms and speed recovery. It is already authorized for emergency use in the UK.

The meeting marks the first time regulators have publicly reviewed a new drug for COVID-19, reflecting the intense interest and scrutiny of a pill that could be soon used by millions of Americans.

The drug, molnupiravir, has been shown to significantly cut the rate of hospitalizations and deaths among people with mild-to-moderate coronavirus infections.

Mutations

Merck's drug uses a novel approach to fight COVID-19: it inserts tiny mutations into the coronavirus' genetic code to stop the virus from reproducing.

But that genetic effect has raised concerns that in rare cases the drug could cause birth defects or even spur more virulent strains of the virus.

Pregnant women were excluded from Merck's study, and both women and men in the study were instructed to use contraception or abstain from sex.

For its part, Merck says results from two company studies in rodents show the drug does not cause mutations or damage to DNA at the doses studied .

FDA reviewers also confirmed previously reported interim results from Merck that the pill cut the rate of hospitalization and death by about half among patients with early symptoms of COVID-19 who faced increased risk due to health problems.

However, on Friday morning Merck announced updated results from the same study that showed a smaller benefit from the drug. The FDA said it is still reviewing the updated data and would present a new assessment of the drug's effectiveness next Tuesday.

Among more than 1,400 adults in a company study, molnupiravir reduced the combined risk of hospitalization and death by 30%, less than the 50% initially reported based on incomplete results.

Nearly 7% of patients who received Merck's drug within five days of COVID-19 symptoms ended up in the hospital and one died. That compared to 10% of patients hospitalized who were taking the placebo and nine deaths.

Merck didn't study its drug in people who were vaccinated for COVID-19. But the FDA will ask advisers to recommend which patients may stand to benefit the most from the drug, based on vaccination status and underlying health problems.

This undated file image provided by Merck & Co. shows their new antiviral medication. U.S. health officials say Merck's experimental COVID-19 pill is effective but raises safety issues for pregnant women. The Food and Drug Administration posted its review Friday, Nov. 26, ahead of a public meeting next week where outside experts will debate the drug's benefits and risks. (AP)

EU regulator authorizes Pfizer's COVID vaccine for children 5-11

THE HAGUE, Netherlands, Nov 27, (AP): The European Union's drug regulator on Thursday authorized Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine for use on children from 5 to 11 years old, clearing the way for shots to be administered to millions of elementary school pupils amid a new wave of infections sweeping across the continent.

It is the first time the European Medicines Agency has cleared a COVID-19 vaccine for use in young children.

The agency said it "recommended granting an extension of indication for the COVID-19 vaccine Comirnaty to include use in children aged 5 to 11."

After evaluating a study of the vaccine in more than 2,000 children, the EMA estimated that the vaccine was about 90% effective in preventing symptomatic COVID-19 in young children and said the most common side effects were pain at the injection site, headaches, muscle pain and chills. The agency said the two-dose regimen should be given to children three weeks apart.

At least one country facing spiking infections didn't wait for the EMA approval. Authorities in the Austrian capital, Vienna, already have begun vaccinating the 5 to 11 age group. Europe is currently at the epicenter of the pandemic and the World Health Organization has warned the continent could see deaths top 2 million by the spring unless urgent measures are taken.

The EMA green light for the vaccine developed by Pfizer and German company BioNTech has to be rubber-stamped by the EU's executive branch, the European Commission, before health authorities in member states can begin administering shots.

Earlier this week, Germany's health minister Jens Spahn said shipping of vaccines for younger children in the EU would begin on Dec. 20.