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A handout picture shows curatorial assistant Abeer Eladany posing with pieces of cedar wood originally discovered in 1872 inside the Great Pyramid at Giza in Egypt. — AFP photos

5,000-year-old Great Pyramid artefact found in Scotland

One of only three artefacts ever recovered from inside Egypt's Great Pyramid has been found in a misplaced cigar tin in a Scottish university collection, academics revealed yesterday. The fragment of cedar wood, which has been found to date back 5,000 years to the building of the pyramid at Giza, was first discovered in the late 19th century but had been missing for more than 70 years. A record discovered in 2001 appeared to show the fragment-found alongside a ball and a bronze hook thought to be used for construction — had been donated to the University of Aberdeen.

But the trail ran cold and the ancient artefact disappeared almost without a trace until the end of last year when an assistant curator at the university, Abeer Eladany, originally from Egypt, made a



A handout picture shows pieces of cedar wood originally discovered in 1872 inside the Great Pyramid at Giza.

chance discovery in its Asia collection. Knowing that a small cigar tin she found there bearing an old Egyptian flag did not belong with the other pieces, she cross-referenced it with other records.

"It has been like finding a needle in a haystack," Eladany said after discovering the fragment of wood among hundreds of thousands of items. "I'm an archaeologist and have worked on digs in Egypt but I never imagined it would be here in northeast Scotland that I'd find something so important to the heritage of my own country." The fragment-initially measuring five inches or around 13 centimetres but now in several pieces-was first discovered in the Great Pyramid's Queen's Chamber in 1872 by engineer Wayman Dixon.

It made its way to the Scottish city because of a link between Dixon and a medical doctor named James Grant who studied in Aberdeen and went to Egypt to treat cholera in the mid-1860s. More evidence that the lost piece of wood, as well as the other items known as the

"Dixon relics", could have been used in the construction of the Great Pyramid has come to light following modern tests on the artefact. Carbon dating results, delayed by coronavirus restrictions, placed the wood at somewhere between 3341 and 3094 BC, long before the construction of the pyramid.

This supports the theory the items were left behind by builders rather than by later explorers. Neil Curtis, head of museums and special collections at the University of Aberdeen, called results from the carbon dating a "revelation". "This discovery will certainly reignite interest in the Dixon relics and how they can shed light on the Great Pyramid," he added. — AFP

Flipping the script: China school reforms spark Mongolian writing revival

In a classroom in Mongolia's capital, students pass over the Soviet-era Cyrillic alphabet they grew up with and turn their copybooks sideways to practice the traditional, vertical Mongolian script that dates back to the empire of Genghis Khan. Teacher Batbileg Lkhagvabaatar leads the class, tracing lines of the flowing, dotted characters on a whiteboard and explaining grammar rules to the group of young men and women and a smattering of children. They are among a growing number inspired to learn the ancient letters after protests by their kinsfolk in China's Inner Mongolia region against reforms replacing Mongolian with Mandarin as the language of instruction in schools for core classes.



This photo shows calligrapher Ganzorig Gulguu, who earns money by selling his calligraphy art work mainly to Inner Mongolia, writing Mongolian scripts at his home.

"I was very disappointed to hear what happened to the Inner Mongolians," said Togtokhjargal Battogtokh, 46, one of the students in the Ulaanbaatar classroom. "It hurt me too." "That's why I want to inspire other people to learn our script." Critics of Beijing's language policy in Inner Mongolia-home to an estimated 4.5 million ethnic Mongolians-say it mirrors moves in other border areas like Xinjiang and Tibet to assimilate local minorities into the dominant Han culture. Across the border in Mongolia, whose economy is dependent on mineral exports to its giant southern neighbor, they have touched a nerve.

Javkhlan Samand-Mongolia's most famous country singer-named his most recent concert "Stay Mongolian", paying tribute to those protesting across the border in authoritarian China. And when Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi arrived on a visit in September, more than a hundred protesters wearing traditional Mongolian tunics gathered in Ulaanbaatar's main square. "Let's protect the mother tongue," they shouted. "Let's protect our blood brothers."

'We must care for our language'

Batbileg started teaching the script-also known as Hudum-for free in September after he saw coverage of the protests. "We live in a fast-changing era of globalization, where people have no time to sit and think about the issue of identity,"

he said. "But now I see from the students that they are thinking more about our national values... they want to promote the Mongolian script which has been used by our people for over a thousand years."

Mongolia's government adopted Cyrillic eight decades ago when it was ruled by a Soviet-dominated regime, but now it is also backing the revival of the archaic script that had been left as the preserve of the elderly or language specialists. The state broadcaster now includes captions in both scripts and the government has said all official announcements will be written in both Cyrillic and Hudum from 2025. Even the country's president-and former sambo wrestling champion-Battulga Khaltmaa has launched his own Hudum lessons on television to encourage citizens to take up the traditional writing. Mongolians in Mongolia had become "careless about our traditional language", said Zayabaatar Dalai, head of Mongol Studies at the Mongolian National University.

"Inner Mongolians made us understand how our native language and script is priceless... we must care for our language." But there are challenges ahead, as much of the script uses archaic language which is not familiar to modern Mongolians, and there have also been grammar changes ushered in by the use of Cyrillic alphabet. There is no gender in the Hudum script-in contrast to Cyrillic grammar-and in Hudum, words and prepositions are written separately, where Cyrillic merges them together. School students are currently only required to study the Mongol script for one year, though under the new government plan, textbooks for subjects such as history and literature must also be converted into the traditional script.

Into the digital era

The fresh wave of popularity is also giving Hudum a modern facelift, with activists hoping to make it easier to use on computers and social media-and to help connect ethnic Mongolians spread out across Russia, China and Mongolia. Mongolian tech developers are working to incorporate the vertical script into new apps, language translators and social media platforms.

Ulaanbaatar-based software company Bolorsoft LLC told AFP it is creating a program to turn audio speech files into Mongolian script. Another programmer, Ulzii-Orshikh Dashkhoo, said he is creating a social media open platform similar to Facebook, where users can learn and download the vertical script. "Today we communicate with each other in the digital domain," he told AFP. "If we can transfer our vertical writing into digital platforms, we will preserve our traditional language for the next generation." — AFP



This photo shows teacher Batbileg Lkhagvabaatar (center) teaching traditional Mongolian scripts in a school in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia. — AFP photos



Model train enthusiast Gerhard Berndt explains details of his layout in his living room in Berlin.



Model train enthusiast Gerhard Berndt poses with one of his locomotives in his living room.



A likeness of East Germany's longtime leader Erich Honecker waves to well-wishers from a train in model train enthusiast Gerhard Berndt's "train cabinet".



Model trains and other vehicles are seen in model train enthusiast Gerhard Berndt's "train cabinet".

Pandemic keeps German model trains chugging along

Gerhard Berndt's model railway has been three decades in the making, but this year it's really been full steam ahead for the 72-year-old Berliner. The retired carpenter has had more time on his hands in 2020 because of coronavirus restrictions-and he has dedicated it to building up an intricate small-scale village in his living room. "This stuff takes time. And I have used that in this corona situation," said Berndt, who would otherwise be too busy jetting off to railway conventions to spend hours a day working on his hobby. Berndt is one of many Germans who have turned to model railways and other analogue toys this year as restrictions to curb the spread of Covid-19 leave them looking for ways to entertain themselves and their families at home.

As a result model train sales have surged. Forecasts from the Association of German Toymakers (BVS) predict total turnover for the toy industry will be 3.7 billion euros (\$4.5 billion) in 2020, an increase of eight percent on last year. The boost is being driven by board games and puzzles, outdoor toys and construction kits, according to the BVS.

Toy market boom

The country's toy market grew 11 percent, or 172 million euros, on-year in January-October, according to the market research company npd Group. Germany has the largest toy industry in Europe in terms of both employment and turnover, accounting for a quarter of all people employed in the EU toy industry. Demand for toys has soared with bars, restaurants and leisure facilities closed for large parts of the year and social gatherings limited in the country, which has seen more than 1.3 million cases of the virus so far and more than 22,000 deaths. The model railway market in particular has seen a boost after years of stagnating sales.

The pastime is especially beloved in

Germany, which has the world's largest model railway system-the Miniatur Wunderland in Hamburg-and whose Interior Minister Horst Seehofer is a self-confessed fan. Market leader Maerklin saw orders jump 50 percent on-year in November as Germany entered a second round of restrictions to combat the virus. "We are one of the few industries that have been given a small boost by corona," company CEO Florian Sieber told AFP. "This is certainly due to the fact that many people are staying at home and trying to think of meaningful activities they can do at home without getting infected," he said.

Hobby for life

Orders also rose during Germany's first lockdown in March and April, though not as sharply since the spring is traditionally not a popular time for railway building. Overall, Maerklin is looking at increase in orders of 10 percent

compared to 2019, according to Sieber. Maerklin has employed an extra staff member to help with an increase in enquiries to its help centre, though it is not predicting a substantial increase in earnings since restrictions have also forced up production costs.

But Sieber hopes the higher demand will continue after the pandemic. "We suspect that those who start now will stay with the hobby for a few years or even longer. This is not a hobby that you start today and stop tomorrow," he said. That is certainly true for Berndt, who bought a starter kit for 30 deutschmarks with his first paycheck and has never looked back. Today, his model with 30 trains, 300 figures and fully functioning miniature street lamps takes up the whole of his living room-but if virus rules are eventually lifted, it can be winched up to the ceiling to make space for normal life. — AFP



Model train enthusiast Gerhard Berndt explains details of his layout in his living room in Berlin. — AFP photos