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SIR JOHN SOANE'S ACQUISITION OF THE SARCOPHAGUS OF SETI I

Helen Dorey

In October 1817 Giovanni Belzoni, Italian strong-man turned Egyptologist, entered the tomb of Pharaoh Seti I in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt. Within the tomb, in a chamber he christened the 'Hall of Pillars', he found 'a sarcophagus of the finest oriental alabaster, 9'5" long, and 3'7" wide . . . [and] transparent when a light is placed in the inside'.¹ This sarcophagus today rests in the 'Sepulchral Chamber' in the basement 'Crypt' of Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

When Belzoni made his discovery he was working under the patronage of the British Consul-General in Egypt, Henry Salt, and it was Salt who had the Sarcophagus conveyed to England in 1821 on the frigate HMS *Diana*. On arrival it was deposited in the British Museum on September 28, 1821, this arrangement in theory pending its purchase by the Museum's Trustees.²

It is clear that Soane was deeply interested in the sarcophagus from the outset. He kept newspaper cuttings relating to its discovery and purchased a copy of Belzoni's 1820 *Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs, and Excavations in Egypt and Nubia*.³ In the same year he purchased a set of the *Plates Illustrative of the Researches and Operations of G. Belzoni in Egypt and Nubia* which included several views of the sarcophagus. Soane's *Notebook* [his diary] records that on February 12, 1822 he visited the British Museum at 1pm and notes that he purchased a Belzoni publication for a friend.⁴ He presumably made this visit in order to see the recently arrived sarcophagus — probably for the first time.

On June 8 the *Notebook* records that he was 'At Mr. Belzoni's Exhibition'. This exhibition, held at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, comprised a full-size model of two chambers in the tomb of Seti I, reconstructed using 'casts in plaster of Paris, from wax impressions [made] on the spot', and many objects from the tomb. Soane purchased a copy of the *Description of the Egyptian Tomb* which accompanied the exhibition, price 1 shilling.⁵ This provided a much more vivid and sensational account of Belzoni's Egyptian discoveries than the earlier *Narrative*, dwelling long on the lack of air in the tombs, the piles of decaying mummies and suffocating dust encountered and the various emotions experienced.

Despite Belzoni's highly popular accounts of his discoveries and the public interest and excitement generated by them and by his exhibition, the British Museum Trustees balked at Salt's asking price of £2,000 for the sarcophagus. Negotiations were prolonged and it was not until February 13, 1824 that Soane approached his neighbour, George Booth Tyndale, a Trustee of the British Museum, asking if he could obtain for him the first refusal of the sarcophagus in the event of the British Museum not purchasing it. Negotiations then continued throughout March between Tyndale, acting as Soane's agent, and Bingham Richards, Henry Salt's agent. On April 1 Soane instructed Tyndale that if the British Museum Trustees had not decided by the end of the month he would be compelled to decline any further thought of purchasing the sarcophagus. On April 12 Tyndale reported that the British Museum had finally resolved not to purchase and on the 13th Bingham Richards wrote to Soane direct, accepting his offer of £2,000 and enclosing the order for the transfer and delivery of the sarcophagus to Soane.⁶ Belzoni himself did not receive a penny from the sale of the sarcophagus because his agreement with Salt was that he would receive half of any proceeds over and above the first £2,000.

Soane's purchase was reported enthusiastically by the newspapers, cuttings from which



Fig. 1. Engraving by Fabroni published by Mrs Belzoni in London in 1824, just after the death of her husband. The explorer is shown with the antiquities he discovered. The sarcophagus is shown in the centre. Soane's copy can be seen in the breakfast room at the Museum.

Soane carefully preserved in a series of large scrapbooks.⁷ On April 22 the *Morning Post* reported, 'We believe that there is no country in Europe which would not be proud of possessing such a rarity and that the Emperor of Russia, in particular, would rejoice to obtain it, if it were possible

to purchase it from the liberal and patriotic individual who is now its proprietor'. Other papers referred additionally, with a certain amount of glee, to the thwarting of French and Bavarian agents in London who had hoped to obtain the sarcophagus for their countries.

On May 12 Soane's *Notebook* records, 'Sarcophagus brought this day'. *The Sun* on May 15 noted, 'On account of its magnitude it was necessary to make a wide opening in the back of [Mr. Soane's] house.' The sarcophagus was lowered down through the dome from the ground floor probably using ropes attached to metal cramps (which can still be seen in the backs of the four dome piers) and placed in its present position.

This acquisition was Soane's greatest coup as a collector. It eclipsed all his other purchases and cost more than any of them. As soon as he saw it he must have known that it would make an ideal centrepiece for his museum. He referred to his own 'melancholy and brooding' temperament and seems to have revelled in the morbid and funereal. Right from its inception he had envisaged a mausoleum and catacombs in the crypt area of the museum and the acquisition of the sarcophagus provided the ideal focus for this area. He was fascinated by its antiquity and the 'human industry and perseverance' involved in its creation and by the mystery of the undecipherable hieroglyphics and unknown occupant.

John Britton's descriptions of Soane's Museum in *The Union of Architecture, Sculpture and Painting*, 1827, must reflect Soane's own views and show that the sarcophagus appealed for its sublime and romantic qualities. Britton writes 'how frivolous and insipid a gew-gaw is the largest diamond in the world, in comparison. It contains no meaning, exacts no emotion but pecuniary value; creates no deep interest; nor does it awaken any latent sentiment of mind'. Just a few days before the sarcophagus was installed at Lincoln's Inn Fields news of Belzoni's death in Africa reached London. Soane always referred to 'the Belzoni sarcophagus' and obviously regarded it as a sort of shrine to its discoverer.

Immediately after Belzoni's death his widow, Sarah, issued an engraving of the explorer, showing him surrounded by the principal antiquities he had discovered — Soane naturally purchased a copy (Fig. 1). She also began planning a new exhibition of the Egyptian tomb to be held at 28 Leicester Square 'for the support of Mr Belzoni's aged mother and numerous relatives at Padua'.⁸ *The Morning Chronicle* for December 11 1824 announced that the exhibition might include the sarcophagus itself since one of the conditions of the sale to John Soane was that it could be repurchased by Belzoni or his heirs. On February 9, 1825 Soane received a letter from the Rev. G. A. Browne of Trinity College, Cambridge, writing on behalf of Mrs Belzoni, asking whether, if she could raise the sum paid by Soane, the sarcophagus would be given up to her in time for its being placed in her exhibition of the tomb. The letter explains that Mrs Belzoni has been told by W. Bankes that the Trustees of the British Museum handed the sarcophagus over to Soane with the full understanding that he would relinquish it to Mr or Mrs Belzoni for the price given for it to Bingham Richards. Soane immediately wrote back saying that no such understanding existed and adding that he could not conceive from what source the information was derived.⁹ This correspondence was published in *The Sun* on March 9 by 'J.B.' (presumably John Britton) with a paragraph repudiating Mrs Belzoni's claim. Soane was obviously extremely anxious to avoid any bad publicity.

It seems to have been this correspondence and a desire to help Mrs Belzoni to make her exhibition a success that prompted Soane to throw open his house on March 23, 26 and 30, 1825 for three receptions in honour of the sarcophagus. *The Literary Gazette* reported that Soane's 'avowed object was to interest [his guests] in the Exhibition of Egyptian Antiquities, which the widow of the unfortunate Belzoni is about to produce in Leicester Square'. In addition, however, the three evenings were also, of course, opportunities for Soane to create a great spectacle.

The preparations were meticulous and all the bills are carefully preserved in the Soane

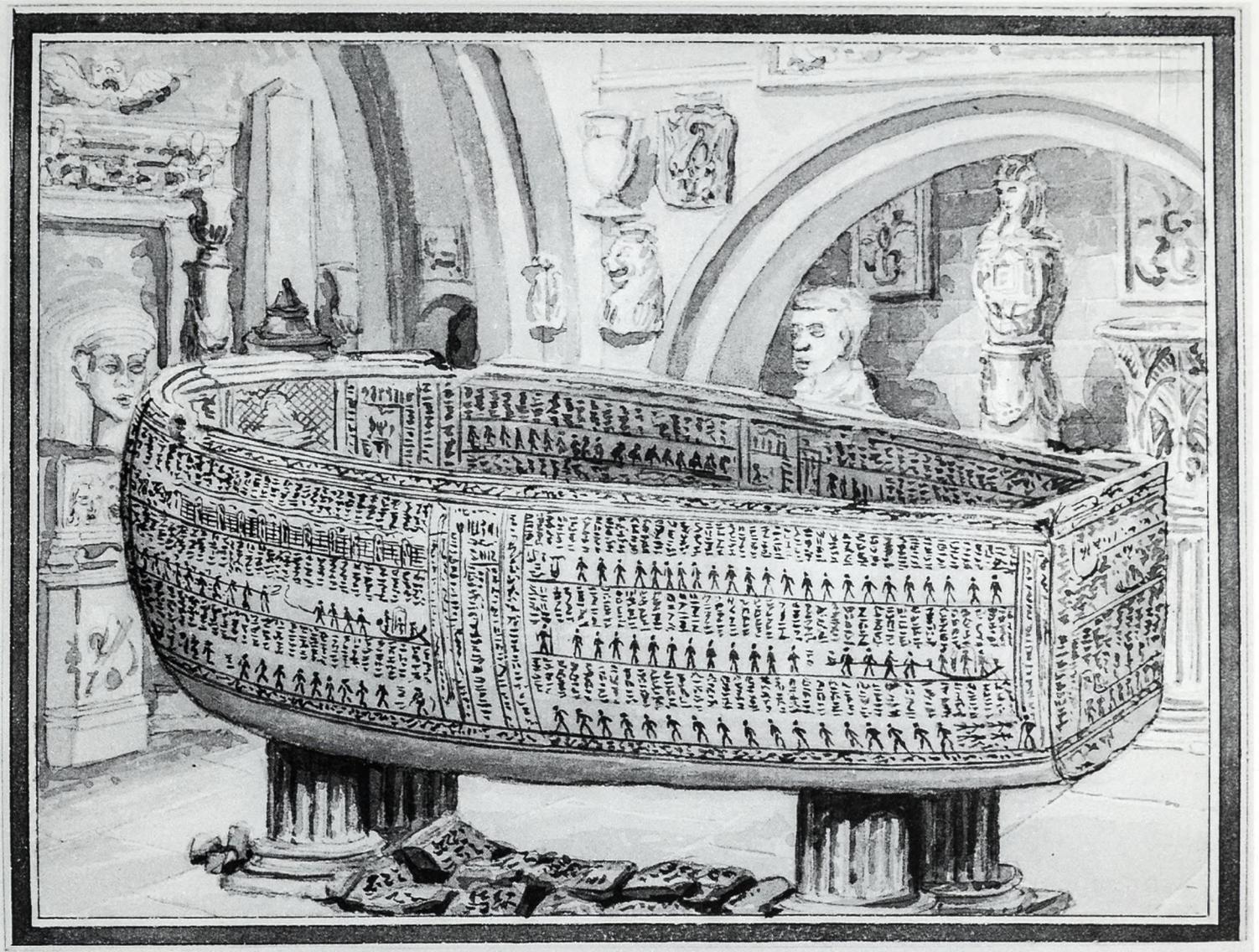


Fig. 2. View of the Sarcophagus in the Soane Museum. Plate VIII from Soane's 1830 *Description*.

Archive.¹⁰ John Britton was closely involved in the organisation, ordering some of the invitations and paying for various items himself and being reimbursed by Soane later. Invitation cards were ordered from Thomas Greswick, 16 Skinner Street, Snowhill; tinted and buff, large and small. Examples of both colours are pasted into Soane's press-cuttings volume and the copper plate used in the engraving (by Benjamin Davies in Compton Street) also survives in the Museum. On March 22, 23, 24, 26 and 28 Soane's pupils were engaged in arranging drawings and in writing invitation cards.¹¹ More than 890 recipients were invited, with Mr Soane's compliments, to view 'The Belzoni Sarcophagus and other antiquities . . . by lamp light', at 8 o'clock on one of three evenings. Staff were employed for all three nights: two waiters at 7s each, Anne Essell and Ann Jones at 5s each and a 'Beadle and Gardner' at 10s each. Three nights-worth of ale and porter at £1 14s 6d was purchased, presumably for the servants, along with a quantity of brandy.

The main beverages served to guests were tea and coffee. '5lb mixt tea, ½lb Hyson Tea' and '½lb of Souchong Tea' was purchased from James Parlett and '½lb Turkey Coffee' from Turnford & Rice, Coffee dealers, 6 Skinner Street, Snowhill. The total amount of loaf and beet sugar purchased for the three nights was 31lb.

Guests were also offered a selection of cakes purchased from Robinson and Todd, Confectioners, of 79 Fleet Street — different quantities of each on each night. For example, on the 26th they consumed, '4 pound cakes, 1 doz sweet rusks, 1 doz Ita [sic] biscuits, 2 doz water cakes and 1 doz tea cakes'.



Fig. 3. J.M. Gandy. Section through the Dome area and basement of Sir John Soane's Museum, September 9th 1825. Soane Museum reference, Sketches and Drawings Volume, 47.

However, the most elaborate planning was that of the lighting in the Museum for the three evenings. As well as purchasing 8lb 'Palace wax lights' and 3lb wax candles from Davies' Candle, Soap and Oil Warehouse at 162 Fleet Street, Soane engaged outside contractors to supply additional lighting. John Patrick of 94 Newgate Street, was paid £24 15s 'To illuminat'g the outside of Mr. Soane's House with 182 Glass Bucket Lamps and 74 Glass Barrel Lamps, 3 nights . . . @ £8 5s pr. nt'. William Collins, manufacturer of stained glass and dealer in lighting appliances, was engaged to provide (on hire) 108 lamps, chandeliers and candelabra to be placed or suspended around the ground floor rooms and in the basement. It seems that guests were not expected to go upstairs to the drawing rooms at all.

Soane himself must have supervised the placing of all the lamps and Collins's bill reflects very precise requirements detailing which lamps were placed in which apartments. Soane refers in his 1830 *Description* to 'those fanciful effects which constitute the poetry of Architecture' created in his house by his manipulation of space and use of light. Collins's bill enables us to see

how he lit the ground floor and basement at night to exploit to the full all the contrasts of light with gloom around the house and to create the maximum romantic atmosphere in which to appreciate the sarcophagus.

The entrance hall was well lit with a lantern with two-light burner and two 'French lamps' with pedestals. The library was allocated two large four-light candelabra, two two-light antique lamps, two single-light 'rich pedestal lamps' and two single-light bronze lamps. Additionally, three lamps were placed outside the dining room window in the Monument Court, which would have enabled guests to see the sculpture arranged around the parapets of the roof above and also to view the Pasticcio in the centre of the courtyard.¹²

In the breakfast room the lighting was modest, just two 'rich five-light candelabra'. This presumably enabled the more than 100 mirrors in the room to provide most of the light by reflection.

A chandelier and four lamps were placed in Soane's 'Old Gallery'. This was his first Picture Room which was on the site of the present New Picture Room (built in 1889). In addition for this room Collins hired out to Soane 'a large looking glass' — this must have wonderfully

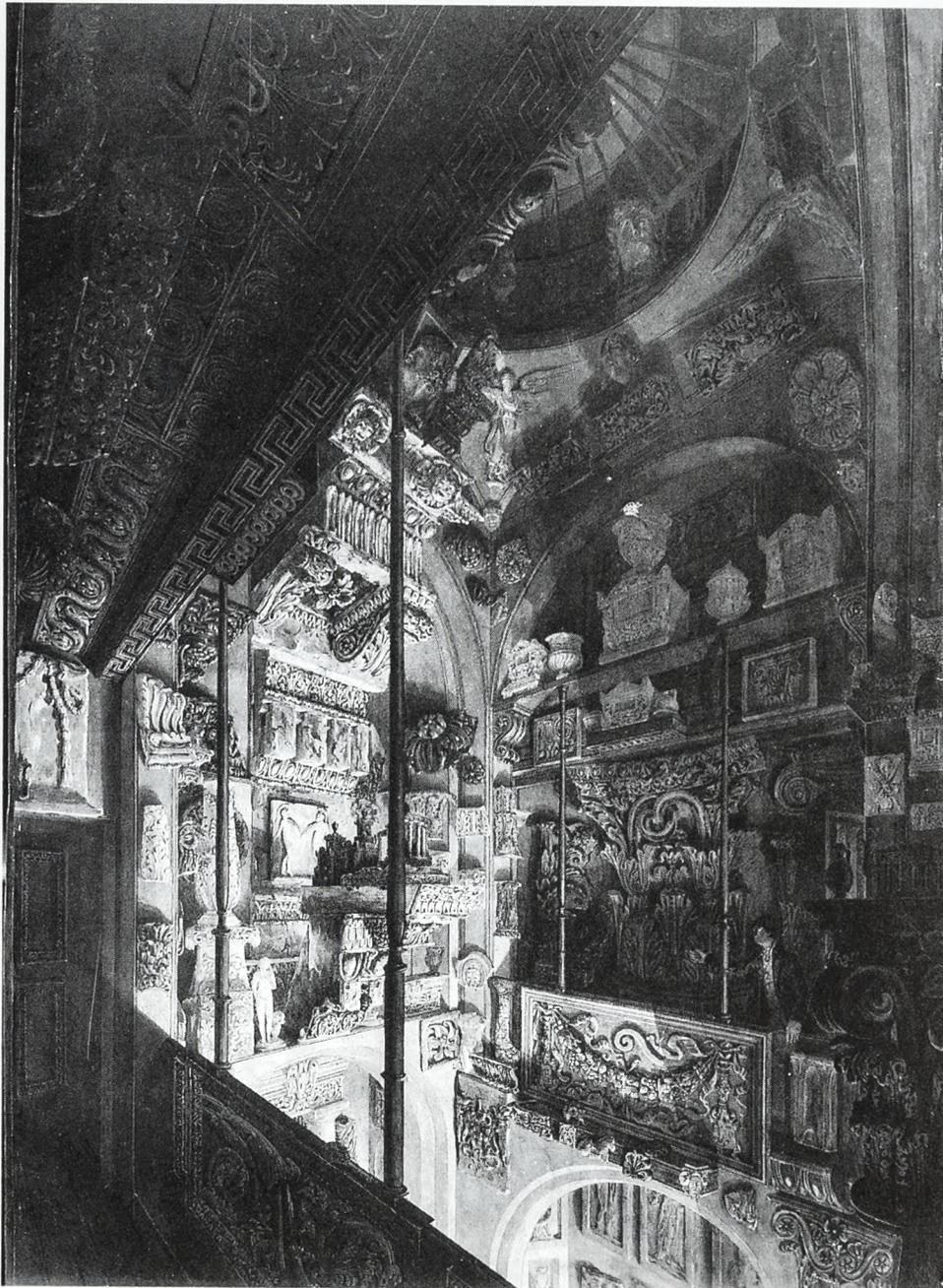


Fig. 4. J.M. Gandy. The Dome at night, dramatically lit from a light source in the Crypt. 1813. Soane Museum reference 14/6/5.

increased the fanciful effects around the dome by reflection. In the dome itself four three-light lamps were suspended and there were also four single-light French lamps (presumably around the balustrades) and two one-light bracket lamps — perhaps fixed to two of the dome piers. The hanging lamps would have illuminated the sarcophagus from above very effectively as well as casting a good light onto the various antiquities displayed around the dome itself.

Soane's 'New Gallery', the present Picture Room, was lit by one six-light lamp suspended in the centre. This room had recently been completed and many of the guests must have been seeing it for the first time and of course viewing Soane's Canalettos and Hogarths on display there.

As for the basement, Collins's bill shows that lighting was less widespread than on the ground floor — in order to heighten the romantic and funereal effect. The Monk's Parlour, another recently completed room, was given four two-light pedestal lamps, two single-light French lamps and two single-light bronze lamps. These must have been placed at waist height on the various tables and would have allowed the effect of the stained glass window reflected in the mirrors to be fully appreciated. The basement passages and the catacombs do not seem to have been lit at all but around the sarcophagus itself were placed one two-light pedestal lamp, one single-light pedestal lamp with reflector and seven 'jappanned lamps'. It is possible that some of these lamps were inside the sarcophagus shining out through the translucent stone. The *New Times* on March 24 commented that the sarcophagus 'seemed to be of a red colour, owing to the red light of the lamps by which it was illuminated'. This may have been achieved by the use of lamp-shades made of red oiled paper.

The total cost of Collins's lighting was £80 9s and the lamps consumed '36 Gallons of best oil'.

All three evening parties were widely reported in the newspapers, which all noted the presence of 'distinguished fashionables and literary characters'; 'persons versed in antiquarian lore'; MPs and Royal Academicians as well as 'private friends and elegant females'. The company seems to have remained 'on the spot till a late hour' each night. Mr Allen (the Master of Dulwich College) writing to thank Soane for the 'very great treat' he had experienced, mentions that he did not arrive until after 11 o'clock. Allen does not mention the sarcophagus at all in his letter but says that Soane's antiquities were 'rendered infinitely more attractive by the Beautiful Women who adorn'd the several apartments'.¹³ Mrs Belzoni attended the first reception and *The Literary Gazette*, under the heading 'Sketches of Society, Sights of London' reported that she 'received every attention from the guests of her kind patron'. Among the guests present on the 30th, the last reception, and listed in *The Sun* on the 31st, were 'Mr. Peel' and 'Don Bernardino Rividavia, one of the Founders of the Republic of Bueno Ayres, a gentleman conspicuous for integrity and learning'.

The grandest of the three occasions, however, seems to have been Saturday, March 26. *The Sun* reported, 'Among the splendid circle of visitors on this occasion we noticed, The Duke of Sussex, Lord and Lady Liverpool, the Chancellor of the Exchequer . . . Lord Gifford, Lady Ellenborough . . . Lord and Lady Caledon, Sir Abraham Hume, Sir Charles Long, the Bishop of London . . . Sir Thomas Lawrence, Sir William Beechey . . . Mr. Colridge [sic] the poet . . . and many other persons of well-known taste'. Soane obviously took great care to ensure in particular that his royal guest was well looked after. Unfortunately, on the morning of the 26th, he received a letter from James Curtin (an assistant of Belzoni's who was also responsible for the erecting of the model of the Egyptian tomb for Mrs Belzoni's Exhibition at Leicester Square), regretting that owing to a sprained ankle he would not be able to 'attend . . . for the purpose of giving some explanation to his Royal Highness the Duke of Sussex concerning the Belzoni Sarcophagus'.¹⁴ Despite this setback Soane must have been extremely gratified by the royal presence,

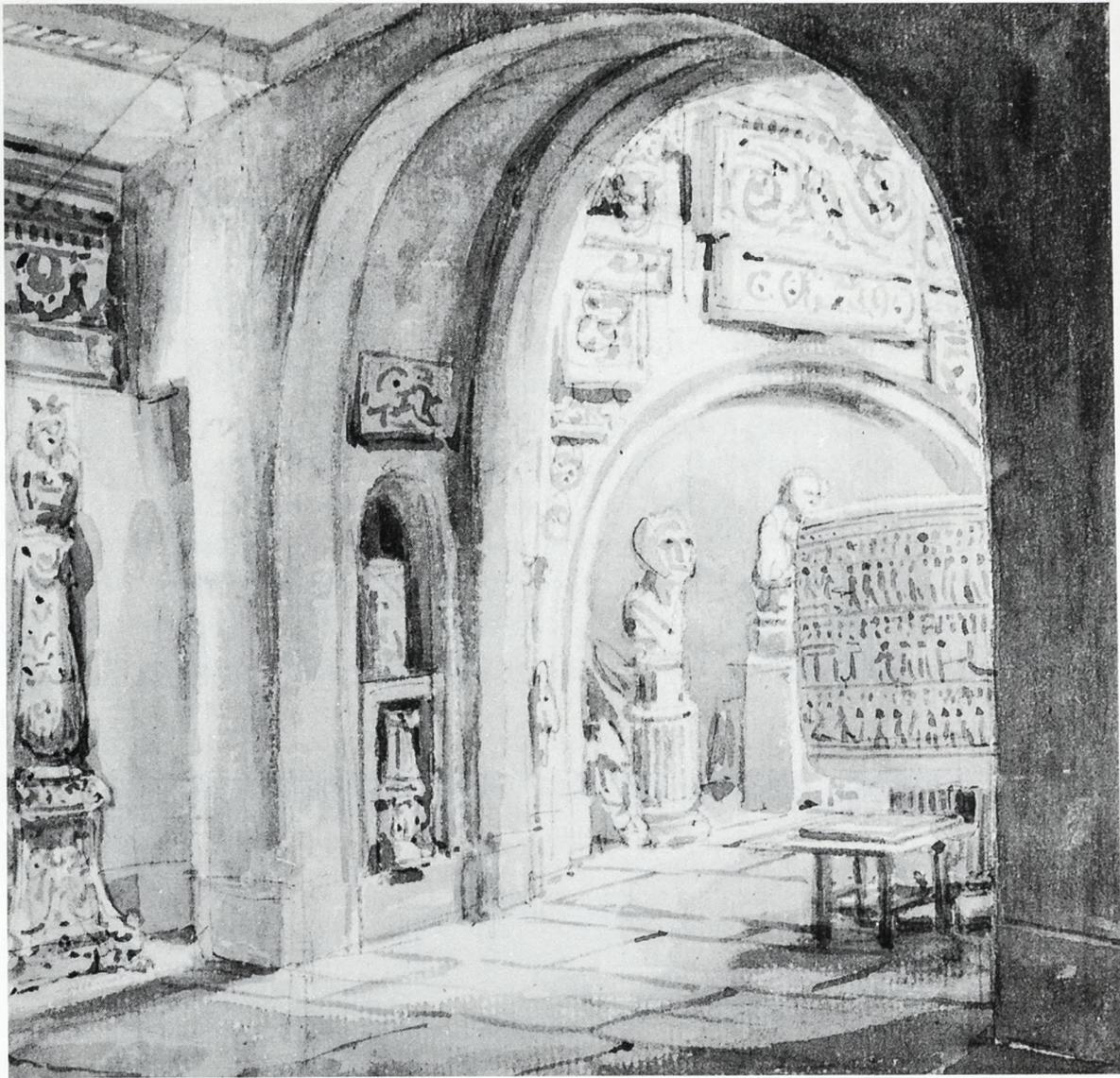


Fig. 5. Sketch dated July 25, 1825. View from the Crypt into the Sepulchral Chamber. This shows the stool provided so that visitors could climb up to look inside the sarcophagus. Soane Museum reference, Sketches and Drawings Volume, 52.

particularly as the duke had belonged to the same Masonic lodge as Belzoni and had been referred to by the explorer as ‘my patron and friend’.

A marvellous description survives by Benjamin Robert Haydon, the diarist, writing to Mary Russell Mitford, of the Saturday reception. ‘The first person I met . . . was Coleridge . . . [then] I was pushed against Turner, the landscape painter with his red face and white waistcoat, and . . . was carried off my legs and irretrievably hustled to where the sarcophagus lay. Soane’s house is a perfect labyrinth . . . It was the finest fun imaginable to see the people come into the Library after wandering about below, amidst tombs and capitals, and shafts, and noseless heads, with a sort of expression of delighted relief at finding themselves again among the living, and with coffee and cake. Fancy delicate ladies of fashion dipping their pretty heads into an old mouldy, fusty, hieroglyphicked coffin, blessing their stars at its age, wondering whom it contained and whispering that it was mentioned in Pliny. You can imagine the associations connected with such contrasts. Just as I was beginning to meditate, the Duke of Sussex, with a star on his breast, and an asthma inside it, came squeezing and wheezing along the narrow passage, driving all the women before him like a Blue-Beard, and putting his royal head into the coffin, added his wonder to the wonder of the rest’.¹⁵

For Soane, these three receptions were a triumph. So much did they fulfill his romantic vision of the sarcophagus and his Museum that 10 years later he included a poetical account of

the sarcophagus by lamp light, written by Mrs. Barbara Hofland, in his 1835 *Description*. It is long but loses much if cut.

'If, in the hour of midday splendour, the sarcophagus appears only a superb and suitable finish to the works of art by which it is surrounded, and more calculated to complete the impression conveyed by the whole, than to claim exclusive and individual preference; it should be viewed by lamplight also. Seen by this medium every surrounding object . . . becomes subservient to the sarcophagus . . . all . . . are but accessories to its dignity and grandeur; a mingled sense of awe, admiration, and delight pervades our faculties and is even oppressive in its intensity, yet endearing in its associations; for sweet and tender memories unite us to the grave. Deep masses of shadow, faint gleams that rise like *ignes fatui* from the adjoining crypt, lights that shine like lustrous halos round marble heads, others more vague and indistinct, yet beautiful in their revealings, present appearances beheld as in a dream of the poets' elysium; and without enlarging the objects, the scene itself, appears considerably expanded. By degrees this space becomes peopled — figure after figure emerges from the crypt and corridors, where they had loitered in the gloom; they assemble round the sarcophagus, which sheds from within a pale, unearthly light on the silent awe-struck beings that surround it. Fair and lovely they appear, the sons and daughters of a high-born race, exempt from the common evils of life, but awake to

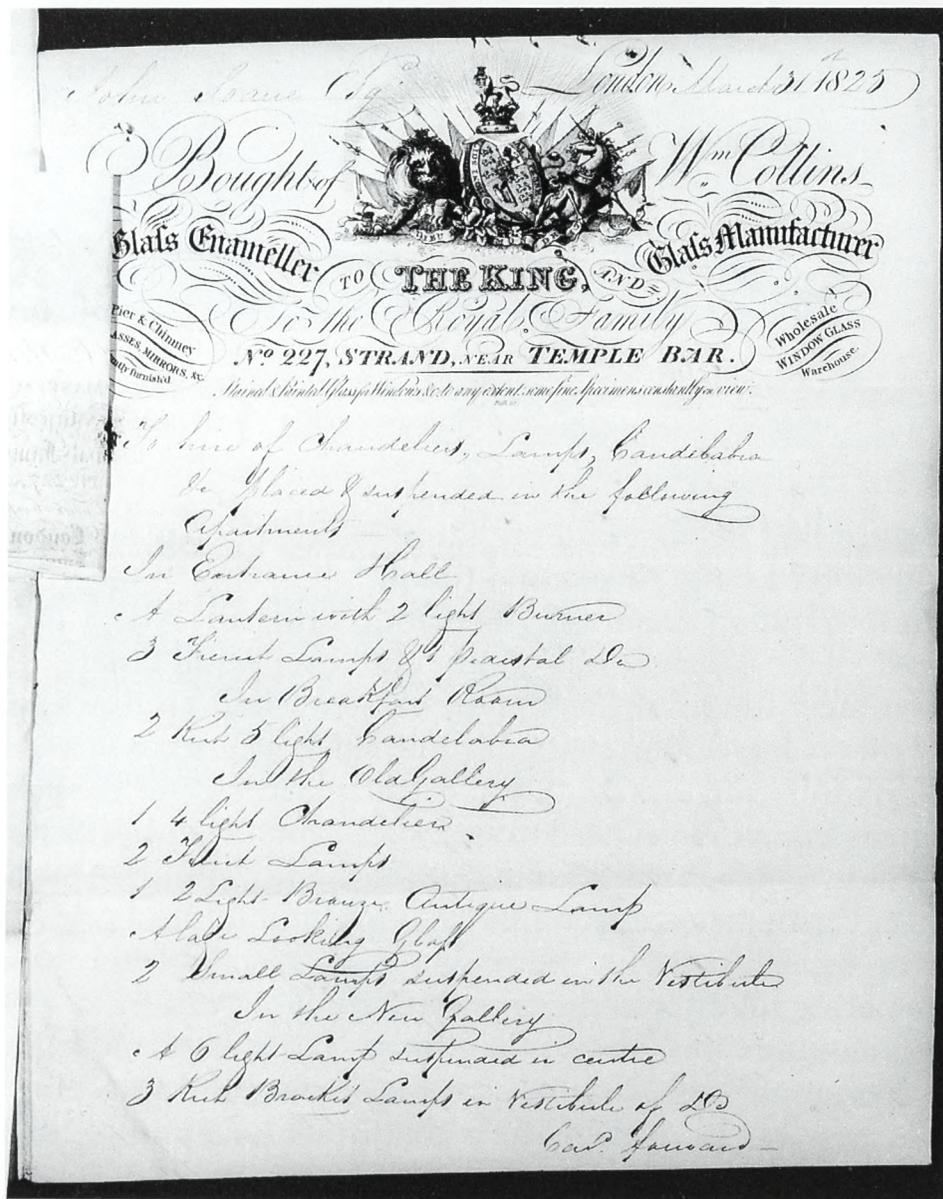


Fig 6. The first page of William Collins's bill for lighting the Museum for March 23, 26 and 30, 1825. Soane Archive reference 7/7/46.

all its generous sensibilities and higher perceptions. Pensive is every countenance, and soft is every falling footstep; yet in gentle accents many a voice breathes thanks to him who hath rolled back the current of time to show them glorious visions of the past, yet taught them to feel even in the hour of pleasure itself that, 'The paths of glory lead but to the grave'. Such, I believe, were the feelings of all who had the gratification of witnessing this most impressive scene in the year 1825, when Sir John Soane had it thus prepared for three evenings, during which the rank and talent of this country, to an immense number, including many foreigners of distinction, enjoyed an exhibition as striking as it must ever be unrivalled.'

NOTES

1. Belzoni's *Narrative* as quoted by Soane in his 1835 *Description of the Residence of John Soane*, 33.
2. For a more detailed account of Belzoni's discoveries and Salt's involvement, see Stanley Mayes, *The Great Belzoni*, 1959.
3. Soane Museum, Architectural Library 21/A.
4. Soane's *Notebooks* are part of the Soane Archive, kept at the Museum, and cover the period 1781-1835.
5. Soane Museum, Architectural Library P.C. 118/17.
6. All this correspondence is in the Soane Archive in a box compiled by Walter L. Spiers, Curator 1904-17.
7. Soane's volumes of newspaper cuttings cover the years 1767-1836 and are part of the Soane Archive.
8. *The Times*, December 11, 1824.
9. This correspondence between Soane and Revd. Browne is in the Spiers box in the Soane Archive.
10. Soane Archive references 7/7/46 and 7/8/35-36.
11. This information comes from the *Day Books* in which Soane's pupils recorded their activities each day. These are now in the Soane Archive.
12. The 'Pasticcio' was a column of architectural fragments, 70 ft high. It was taken down in 1896 because it was unsafe.
13. Soane Archive reference PC I, A/3/2.
14. Soane Archive reference PCII, S/28/3.
15. Eric George, *The Life and Death of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, 1948, 139.