When a black granite sarcophagus was recently found at the bottom of a pit in Alexandria, Egypt, the discovery set off questions and theories ranging from the sensible to the supernatural.

Images of the 30-tonne stone vessel — dating back some 2,000 years — were striking. And people were curious: Who, or what, was inside? Some suggested it could contain the remains of a nobleman, or even Alexander the Great.

The answer was decidedly less exciting when the sarcophagus was opened on Thursday. Inside were three skeletons floating in foul-smelling sewage that had leaked into the vessel from the road above through a small crack in the sarcophagus, according to Egypt’s Ministry of Antiquities.

“Unfortunately the mummies inside were not in the best condition, and only the bones remain,” Mostafa Waziri, secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, told reporters at the site.

‘No curse unleashed’

Mr. Waziri was also quick to dispel the notion that opening the sarcophagus might unleash a curse, a rumour that had spread quickly online when the sarcophagus was discovered. “We’ve opened it and, thank God, the world has not fallen into darkness,” Mr. Waziri said. “I was the first to put my whole head inside the sarcophagus, and here I stand before you. I am fine.”

Shaaban Abdel Moneim, an expert on mummies, said in a statement, that the preliminary examination of the skeletons indicated they most likely were the remains of three military officers.

One skeleton appears to show signs that the skull was punctured by an arrow.

The skeletons and sarcophagus are being transferred to the Alexandria National Museum, where experts will try to determine the cause of death and the approximate age of the skeletons.

The Antiquities Ministry has excavated 10 other sealed sarcophagi in Minya, which lies south of Cairo, this year.

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