

THE CURSE OF THE
MUMMY

UNCOVERING
TUTANKHAMUN'S TOMB

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ISBN 978-1-338-59663-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 23 24 25 26 27

Printed in the U.S.A. 40
This edition first printing 2023
Book design by Abby Denning

≡ CHAPTER 1 ≡

Sands of the Past

1324 BCE–1906 CE

On a spring night, more than thirty-three hundred years ago, a silver-bright moon cast a ghostly radiance on the cliff and crags of Egypt's Theban foothills. Down a remote desert path came a handful of men. Shovels in hand and sticking to the shadows, they walked silently as cats. Soon they reached the floor of the Valley of the Kings.

A dark figure wearing the uniform of a royal necropolis guard stepped into the moonlight. What had he been promised in return for revealing the burial spot? A precious jar of scented oil? A gold bracelet? Wordlessly, he led the men along the Valley floor.

For the past five centuries, Egypt's pharaohs had been buried in this remote valley. Bounded on all sides by towering cliffs and hills of rocky debris, it seemed the ideal

resting place for their mummies and their treasures. This was crucial. Egyptians believed a tomb was an important symbol of continuity, of eternity, of a ruler passing from the living world to that of the gods. For this reason, it was important that a dead king's body not be disturbed after it had been laid to rest.

Originally, the pharaohs had built huge pyramids as their resting places. But not even these structures' fake doors and secret chambers could keep the kings' remains safe. The showy structures quickly attracted robbers, who broke in, stealing gold and tearing the sacred mummies apart. And so Egypt's rulers, in search of a safer place to be buried, had chosen this valley. They began cutting secret tombs deep into the rock and covering their entrances with rubble and sand. So cleverly hidden were these tombs that they were almost impossible to find.

Even the guard didn't know where most of the pharaohs were buried. But he *did* know the location of one tomb, that of the recently interred King Tutankhamun.

Tutankhamun had ascended to the throne around the age of eight. Too young to rule alone, he'd been guided by powerful advisers with their own plans and policies. They made the decisions, but he got the credit. An inscribed sandstone slab at Karnak Temple in Thebes (modern-day

Luxor) told of the boy king's great accomplishments: "Now when his majesty arose as king, the temples and estates of the gods and goddesses, from Elphantine to the marshes of the Delta had fallen into ruin . . . Their shrines had fallen down and turned into ruin . . . The land was in confusion and the gods had turned their backs on the land . . . Hearts were faint in bodies because everything had been destroyed." But Tutankhamun had stepped forward to rebuild the temples and sanctuaries. He'd offered nourishing foods to the deities. "The [Egyptians] all rejoice and celebrate . . . because good has come back into existence." They praised Tutankhamun for restoring the traditional religion of the land, something his predecessor had tried to change. They saw the boy king's word as law, and his acts as inspired by the gods. And then, when he was just eighteen years old, Tutankhamun unexpectedly died. The ancient funerary rites immediately kicked in.

The pharaoh's corpse was taken from his place of death (the name of which has been lost to history) to a temple on the west bank of the Nile. Here, priests washed the body in natron, a natural dehydrating agent. Next, the embalmers shaved the body and removed the king's brain with an iron hook through the nose. They poured resin into the skull through the nose cavity and made an incision on

the left side of the body. This incision allowed an embalmer to remove the king's stomach, intestines, lungs, and liver. These were embalmed separately and placed in four stone jars, a different one for each organ. Only the heart stayed in the body. It was believed the heart was the "seat of the mind," and that the god Osiris would judge it against a *ma'at* feather, the symbol of truth and rightness.

Once emptied, priests stuffed the body cavity with more packets of natron. They placed even more packets around it. Then they left the body to dry out for thirty to forty days. When they finally returned, they rubbed oil into the now desiccated body, filled it with packing materials, and applied several layers of expensive perfumed ointment. This took another thirty-five days.

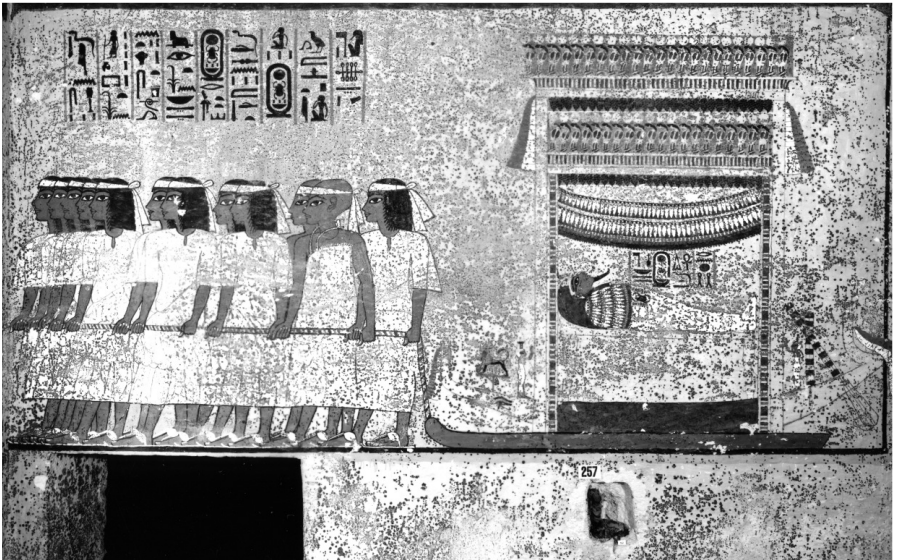
At last, they began encasing Tutankhamun's body in bandages. Each limb was wrapped separately. Golden covers were slipped over fingers and toes. A pair of golden sandals were placed on the feet. As the entire body disappeared beneath lengths of fine linen, the priests recited prayers and placed dozens of amulets and jewelry, as well as two ceremonial daggers, between the layers. Finally, they fitted a golden mask on the head over a linen sheet to which they stitched golden hands holding the crook and flail, symbols of the pharaoh's authority. Four golden

bands inscribed with spells meant to help the king's soul in the afterlife tied everything into place.

About seventy days after Tutankhamun's death, his funeral procession had made its way from the chapel on the bank of the Nile to Tutankhamun's underground tomb in what would become known as the Valley of the Kings.

Had the guard watched the procession pass?

Along the way, priests had chanted. Mourners had wailed. And twelve servants in white tunics had strained



Tutankhamun's funeral procession as depicted on the east wall of his burial chamber.

at the ropes as they pulled the sledge bearing the king's mummy across the hot sand. Behind the mummy came hundreds more servants. They struggled beneath the weight of the king's possessions—chests of clothes and jewelry, weapons and chariots, thrones and beds and chairs, baskets of food and flowers, vessels of oil and wine—*everything* he would need in the afterlife.

When the burial party reached the tomb's entrance, the mummy was propped upright facing the sun so various rituals could be performed. Traditionally, the king's eldest son, who was to succeed his throne, should have carried these out. But Tutankhamun didn't have a son. And so Ay, a high-ranking official who claimed the throne for himself, stepped forward to perform one of the key parts of the funeral rites, the Opening of the Mouth. Using what Egyptians believed was a magical adze, Ay touched the mummy's face mask. This, it was believed, allowed the dead king to breathe, walk, and talk in the afterlife.

Then Ay and the other mourners left the Valley. But the priests remained. They reverently placed the king's mummy in its final resting place and arranged his treasures in the four rooms of his tomb. They uttered spells and prayers. Finally, they left, pressing the seals of the pharaoh as well as the Royal Necropolis into the door's wet



One of the three scenes painted on the north wall of Tutankhamun's burial chamber, this depicts the boy king's heir, the elderly Ay, performing the all-important "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony.

plaster. Then they climbed the rock-cut stairs back into the sunlight. Under their watchful eyes, necropolis workers hid the staircase with sand and rock. Then, sweeping up behind them so their footprints would not disturb the harmony of the tomb, the priests left.

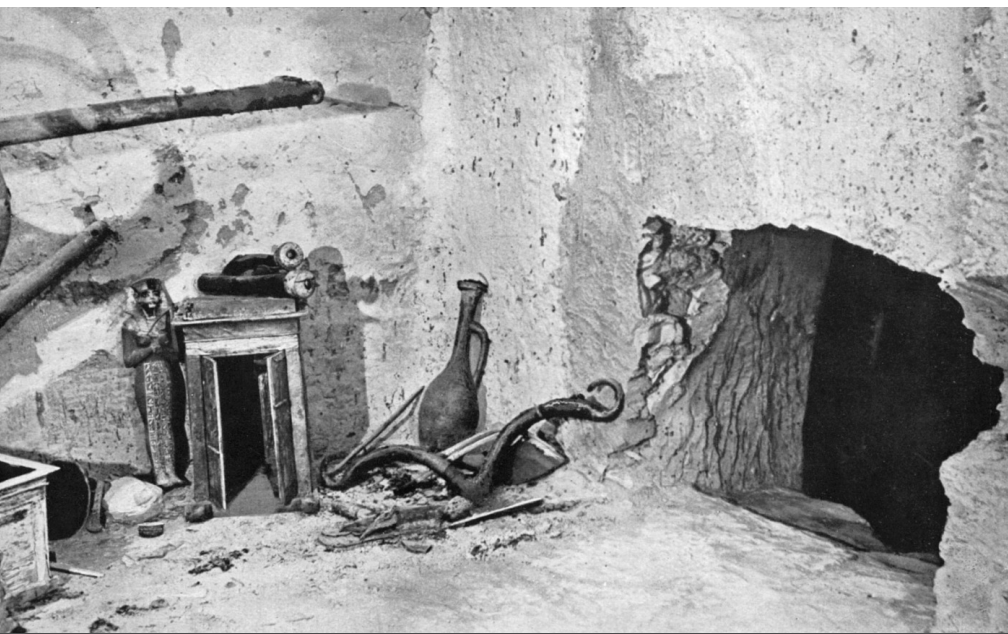
Tutankhamun, they believed, was safely on his way to the afterlife.

But the guard, like so many other necropolis workers, knew the location of this fresh burial site. And this knowledge was worth money.

Now he stopped and pointed. The small depression in the rubble was barely noticeable unless someone was looking for it.

The robbers were looking for it.

Quickly, they dug away sand and gravel, uncovering the rock-cut stairs. Not daring to light a torch, they descended



A photograph showing a hole made by robbers in order to enter the tomb of Tutankhamun.

into the darkness until they came to a door blocked with stone and plastered over. It took but a moment to make a hole and shimmy through. Still in darkness, feeling their way along a narrow passage, they came to a second door. The robbers shimmied through this one, too. They found themselves in a chamber. Blackness pressed in on them. The silence felt close and thick. At last, one of the thieves lit a reed torch with cord and spindle. Shadows suddenly danced over the glittering heaps of treasure. Before them stood a wooden statue of a god with hands upraised as if in horror at finding them there. Entering a pharaoh's tomb was a violation of sacred beliefs. Weren't the thieves terrified of the king's mummy that lay nearby? Did they fear the wrath of ancient gods? Did they worry about a curse?

Obviously not. The thieves scattered, their footsteps echoing as they moved through the tomb's chambers. Unpending chests and rummaging through boxes, they searched for small items of gold and silver, jewelry and beads, jars of perfumes and pots of cosmetics. Easy to carry, these small objects were also easy to sell.

There wasn't much time. Too soon the sun would come up, and with it, the necropolis priests. The men did not



Found near the tomb entrance, a twisted linen scarf into which one of the robbers had wrapped eight gold rings. The robber either dropped his loot on the way out or tossed it back into the chamber because he feared being caught in the act.

want to get caught. The punishment for robbing a royal tomb was death.

At last, bags full, the sweaty, dirt-streaked robbers rushed back through the passageway and up the stairs into the cool of the starry desert night. Drinking in the fresh air, they disappeared into the shadows.