

THE CURSE OF THE
MUMMY

UNCOVERING
TUTANKHAMUN'S TOMB

CANDACE FLEMING

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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 Elephantine 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.

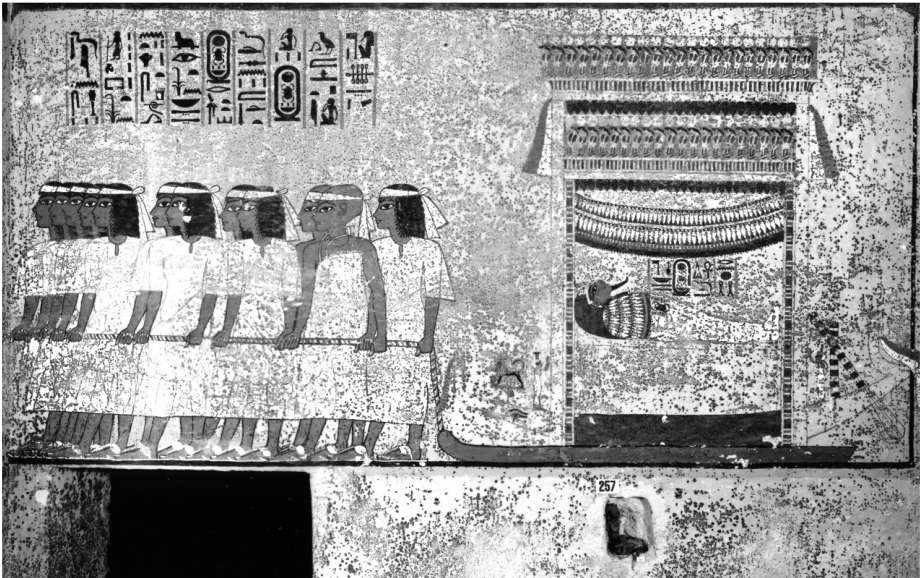
At last, they began encasing Tutankhamun's body in bandages. Each limb was wrapped separately. Golden covers were slipped over fingers and toes. A pair of golden sandals were placed on the feet. As the entire body disappeared beneath lengths of fine linen, the priests recited prayers and placed dozens 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.