Antiquity 2024 Vol. 98 (401): 1433–1437
https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2024.121

Review Article

Afterlives of discovery: tomb robberies, treasure and untangling Tutankhamun

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Aidan Dodson. 2023. *Tutankhamun, King of Egypt: his life and afterlife*. Cairo & New York: American University in Cairo Press; 978-1-64903-161-7 hardback £29.95.

Maria Golia. 2022. *A short history of tomb-raiding: the epic hunt for Egypt's treasures*. Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press; 978-1-78914-629-5 paperback $27.50.

Frank L. Holt. 2024. *A mystery from the mummy-pits: the amazing journey of Ankh-Hap*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-0-19-769404-6 hardback £16.99.

Nicholas Reeves. 2022. *The complete Tutankhamun*. London: Thames & Hudson; 978-0-500-05216-7 hardback £40.

Egyptology has been changing. At least in the way its practitioners present their findings to a broad public audience. A selection of recent publications for general-interest readership represents something of a reorientation of perspectives on the (Western-led) archaeological 'discovery' of Pharaonic Egyptian remains, and the opening up of a subtle counter-narrative, which is something of an anti-archaeology. Rather than attempting to reconstruct what might positively be said of ancient events, their causes and motivations, Egyptologists are increasingly owning up to what is not known or what happened in the aftermath of the 'main event' that conditions the nature of the evidence we have at our disposal.

No archaeological find in history has exerted more influence on popular perceptions (if not, perhaps, academic practice) than the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun in 1922 by a team led by English Egyptologist, artist and antiquities dealer Howard Carter. This came exactly 100 years after the announcement of the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs by Frenchman Jean-François Champollion, an epistemological double-whammy that established European hegemony in Egyptology down to the present.

Tutankhamun's tomb (the 62nd found in the Kings' Valley—hence its designation KV 62) is often cited as the only royal sepulchre found essentially intact but, conversely, it contained detailed evidence of pilfering by ancient intruders shortly after the time of the burial. They managed to swipe easily portable items such as jewellery, linens and scented unguents; these actions were echoed 3300 years later by Carter's own sticky fingers in keeping aside (and not officially recording) items for himself and his aristocratic patron, the Earl of Carnarvon. It is also worth noting that the fact that there had been previous pharaonic thieves was amplified by the 1922 excavators in the expectation that—according to 'finds division' rules of the time—the finds from robbed royal tombs would be split between the authorities in Cairo and the archaeologists; only the contents of intact royal tombs were to be retained in their entirety by the Egyptian state. In the end, officially at least, everything remained in Egypt.

The tomb's incongruously small chambers were found crammed full not of the stockpiled bullion of an Oriental potentate (a persistent assumption) but of the requisite objects for the deceased king to be fully transformed into a divinity and also reflecting his status as semi-divine during life. It is for the latter reason, for example, that 140-odd loincloths were found—presumably because the linen had touched the royal flesh. This was not, as is often assumed, an attempt to 'pack for eternity' in order to replicate life on earth perpetually. Rather it can be interpreted that the stocking of the royal tomb had more in common with caches of ritual utensils found buried in later temple contexts due to being hallowed by use in the ceremonial service of the gods. Broader considerations of the function of items as an assemblage—involving interpretation that goes beyond describing and typologising—is something Egyptology still lacks.

Although the (ancient) protagonist is a household name, and much has been written about the circumstances surrounding the discovery of his burial, rather little is popularly known about Tutankhamun himself. In the latest instalment in his *Lives and afterlives* series, Aidan Dodson gives a pithy and typically well-informed account of the available evidence for the reign, and of the series of extraordinary (and much-debated) dynastic events that precipitated it. Here, Dodson places an admirable emphasis on the aftermath of Tutankhamun's demise—and especially the unusual extent to which memory of him 'disappeared' in a section on his 'limbo' (Dodson pp.127–35)—while highlighting that Tutankhamun's scholarly resurrection began well before the discovery of the tomb.

It is now a frequently repeated 'truism' that despite the fame of the tomb's contents, detailed publication of them—which Carter had planned but never achieved—has been piecemeal and rather slow. Into this gap Nicholas Reeves's 1990 book *The complete Tutankhamun* has for some 30 years been something of a go-to print source for discussion of what KV 62 actually contained. As a teenager, I clearly remember receiving my own copy of the first edition of this important volume, one that I had borrowed repeatedly from my local library.

Now Tutophiles are treated to a sumptuously reworked edition, clearly invested in by Thames & Hudson as their flagship publication for the centenary of the discovery of the tomb. Since the hullabaloo of the anniversary has faded, it is an opportune moment to assess the impact of the find on the discipline, and few are better placed to do that than Nicholas Reeves. His updated version reflects three decades of scholarship on the king and the contents of his tomb. It represents a detailed state-of-the-art compendium of Tutankhamun studies and very much delivers on the completeness of the title.

Dominating this new edition is Reeves's own claim of the existence of an extended series of chambers in KV 62. This is based on examination of detailed 3D scans of the contours of the burial chamber walls in conjunction with expected patterns of contemporary royal tomb design. Reeves reworks the detailed academic discussion that he (self-)published in 2015 expounding the reasons for this supposition.

The putative chambers could represent additional storage rooms or even a separate burial of Tutankhamun's predecessor, explaining why KV 62 is so small—not simply a modest tomb hurriedly expanded for the young king's burial but in fact the adapted outer section of an existing, much larger sepulchre. The existence of such additional spaces by testing for voids using geophysical techniques has yet to be definitively demonstrated. If found to

be true, even if only in part, such an identification would surely come second only to the original discovery of the tomb in terms of media interest. The fact that nothing further has been announced in nearly a decade is perhaps the most damning indictment of the theories.

Dodson and Reeves both have an admirable track record of acknowledging when their thinking has shifted on an issue, in light of particular evidence —which is rather unusual in Egyptology. The interpretations of the historical events here are significant: for Reeves, Tutankhamun's likely father Akhenaten was succeeded by his wife Nefertiti, transitioning from queen to the status of co-ruler under the name Neferneferuaten and eventually ruling as a fully fledged female pharaoh under the name Smenekhkare. For Dodson, while Neferneferuaten is Nefertiti-as-king, she only takes the throne after the brief reign of a separate (male) king named Smenekhkare. The burial of such a royal woman in the Valley of the Kings would seem to be plausible, and the (re-)appropriation of spaces is in keeping with ancient Egyptian attitudes.

The thread of this double-interment theory runs throughout Reeves's new edition, highlighting the evident reuse of many pieces in Tutankhamun's assemblage to advance the argument that the boy king had to (re)use material once belonging to his predecessor. However, this presupposes that such items had simply been lying around unused 'in storage' and begs the question of why such material was not simply all entombed with Nefertiti/Neferneferuaten/Smenekhkare. Did Tutankhamun's burial party have to reappropriate material directly from the pre-existing burial for that of the boy king?

In service of the reappropriation theory, Reeves confidently asserts certain artistic representations of facial types being more 'feminine' than others. Coming out of the Amarna Period, this was a predominant but evolving style. In many ways, this is why Tutankhamun landed such a punch on the popular consciousness—not so much because of the excess of gold but due to its application in creating faces striking because of their androgeniety—most famously in the case of the king's solid gold funerary mask (itself a composite of various parts, some reused, according to Reeves). These royal visages are much less the product of careful consideration of the physiognomy of an individual biological subject from life—in the manner of the modern concept of a sitter for a portrait—and more a result of the training of artisans of the time. The fact that the supposedly 'youthful' appearance of Tutankhamun appears as an affectation in royal 'portraits' both before and after the reign of that king gives the lie to such faces simply reflecting reality. In Egyptology, arguments predicated on certain living facial characteristics are, without exception in this reviewer's opinion, entirely spurious. This is a relatively minor grumble beside Reeves's otherwise exemplary scholarship and it is worth noting that he is rightly dismissive of the various 'scientific' facial reconstructions that have been offered of Tutankhamun. Just because you can does not mean you should.

Perhaps surprisingly given its title, a rather different approach is taken by Frank Holt in *A mystery from the mummy pits*. It centres on the mortal remains and coffin of one man—a priest named Ankh-hap who was buried at the site of Akhmim around 300 BC—as a case study and focuses on the inglorious history of their treatment. Holt's book reads as something of a sequel to S.J. Wolfe & Robert Singerman's superb 2009 book *Mummies in nineteenth century America*, adeptly de-emphasising the fact and circumstances of discovery and foregrounding the subsequent handling and perception of human remains in the West. From an

Egyptological assessment of the style of Ankh-hap's coffin, it is highly likely that it derives from the important ancient site of Akhmim in southern Middle Egypt. Holt is not himself an Egyptologist by training and skims over this art-historical interpretation rather lightly, resisting a narrative based on the site's surviving archaeology, cultic topography and the considerable (albeit incidental) evidence of the clearance of the vast cemeteries there. Instead, Holt offers some fascinating insights into the modern acquisition and reception of mummified remains. And, for once, no biomedical interpretation is proffered as an apparently direct insight into this man's life. Such an insight is acknowledged as impossible. The same cannot be said of Egyptology's golden boy(king), Tutankhamun. The circumstances of the multiple official (and unofficial) examinations of his body—regretfully observed by both Dodson and Reeves —have left the pharaoh largely atomised, shattered, contaminated and in a condition that is little better than if the tomb robbers had actually succeeded in getting hold of the royal corpse and dragged him from his coffins in ancient times.

Archaeological rhetoric presents its own efforts as an unalloyed positive in the context of rigorous scientific endeavour (precise and sometimes experimental), in obvious contradistinction to tomb robbery. In one of the most refreshing studies to be published recently, Maria Golia's *A short history of tomb-raiding* shows Egyptian archaeology to be a modern and legitimate form of the same frenzied search as Tutankhamun's ancient plunderers undertook: an attempt to extract something of value from forgotten places, even when the fabled treasures only rarely appear as expected. Archaeology has burdened the object(s) of its study with great empirical value to science, creating the conundrum that supposedly dispassionate study stokes the monetary worth of antiquities. Golia pinpoints this sea change to the 1820s, when items that had formed the background fabric of daily existence in a particular culture for centuries became both saleable and profitable.

Anti-archaeologists, as one might frame tomb robbers, have their own mythologies and methodical approaches, to avert the anger of ancient spirits and bring fortune to the seeker. But theirs is especially dangerous work. A particularly grim reminder of the ongoing effects of the voracious appetite for antiquities is the significant number of people living in Egypt killed in pursuit of them for the modern black market. Golia includes accounts of people who know adults and children crushed to death when buildings have been undermined by illicit tunnelling, with many more injured and/or jailed for their part in illegal extraction and sale of antiquities.

Golia considers the well-known (and remarkably well-preserved) court proceedings of those charged during the late New Kingdom (*c.* 1100 BC) with plundering sacred royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. This widespread practice completely missed Tutankhamun both because KV 62 was buried so deep under flash-flood debris and due to the fact that Tutankhamun and his family were presumably omitted from inventories of the tombs of 'official' kings buried in the Valley. While the Middle Ages are often a 'missing millennium' in the popular telling of most histories of Egypt, plentiful accounts written in Arabic survive showing that the country's rulers officially sanctioned (and taxed) the search for treasure. As is so often the case with Egypt's rich heritage, myth and wonder go hand-in-hand with a pragmatic attitude. During the nineteenth century, the intense demand for Egyptian antiquities—a hallmark of refined taste and intellectual curiosity in the West—became a visible symptom of the "calculus of progress" (Golia p.161) expected by European and American agents involved in Egyptian affairs.

Golden treasures, the mummified dead and the thrill of discovery permeate the widely agreed notion of what 'Ancient Egypt' represents and the book market that both reflects and sustains that perception. This was the case since long before Tutankhamun burst onto the international pop-cultural stage in the early twentieth century. It is a sign of the times that the motivations underlying the ongoing fascination with treasure are being interrogated more openly, and the nature of the 'treasures' themselves more closely scrutinised. There is still plenty to be untangled—but at least we are more aware of why we all became so mesmerised by Pharaonic bling in the first place.

Reference

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