

Tutankhamen's Tomb

A talk by Jane Brewer BEM – July 2024

After settling the microphone into place and deciding the best place to stand Janet began to talk on how her interest in Ancient Egypt began. Janet has such a keen interest in her subject that she said she had to use notes to keep her on track as otherwise she could talk for hours. Her enthusiasm for her topic was obvious.

As a little girl she remembers going to the British Museum and marvelling at the Egyptian artefacts. (*I too remember being fascinated by a mummified body, with red hair, lying in a box*). Later on, as a 'grown up' she went on a Nile cruise and this motivated her interest even more – thus Janet began a 5-year course, with learning days and evening classes, at UCL studying Egyptology and also hieroglyphics. The lessons have given her a broad overview of life in Ancient Egypt, not as an 'Egyptologist' but a 'certified studier'. Essex has its own interest group – www.essexegyptology.co.uk – meeting once a month, often with professors and scholars, to discuss and learn about the Egypt of long ago. Janet is the secretary for the group and visits the country twice a year to fulfil her interest and also, as she admitted, to enjoy the wonderful hotels and swimming pools.

Pharaoh Tutankhamen came to the throne in 1330 BCE when he was 9 years of age, a boy with a complex family history. His parents were buried 300 miles away which would indicate that there may have been political unrest at the time but, there was no one else and so the little boy became the King of Egypt.

So strong was the belief in the afterlife that tombs were built whilst the intended was still alive, to ensure that the life after, in the house of eternity was prepared for. (*Not unlike the First Emperor of China*). Whatever was depicted or in the tomb went with the deceased into the hereafter. Many of the tombs were like warrens, Tutankhamen's granddad Amenhotep had a most complicated tomb entrance with tunnels and ante-rooms leading in all directions however, 'Tuts' tomb for all its glory and artefacts was very simple and small. It was decorated and painted but nothing compared to some of the other tombs. Why?

The average life span for the Egyptian elite was 40–50 years but Tutankhamen, the boy king, died at the age of 18/19. (We know this as wine amphorae found in the tomb were vintage-dated). His reign therefore was a short one which did not leave a lot of time to build his last resting place, indeed some believe he may have been buried in a tomb being built for someone else! Perhaps the thought was that 'Tut' would have a long reign and they could leave it a while before they built it. One of the paintings in the tomb showed black dots; perhaps because the tomb was sealed whilst the plaster was still damp. The Valley of the Kings is very hot and very dry so fungal spores are certainly not typical of the region.

The rituals of a royal death had to be carried out within 70 days and then the body had to be sealed. The boy king was cleansed, his organs extracted and then the body was steeped in natron – a salt - which absorbs the fluids and dehydrates the corpse. This had to be done within the first 30 days. All the organs and secretions from the embalming process

were treated with reverence and stored, not with the dead, but nearby in jars. Once this was completed the body was anointed with oils, stuffed and then wrapped in linen. There were 13 layers of cloth wrapped round Tutankhamun, each layer bearing a jewelled artefact. (*A bit like children's pass the parcel I thought.*) One held a stunning dagger made from meteoric iron - a rare metal at the time, as we were still in the Bronze Age. Behold the Mummy!

Once embalmed and mummified, the stunning blue and gold face mask was positioned on the body, this was then placed in the innermost solid gold coffin, next came the middle coffin made from gilded wood and covered with coloured glass, the outer coffin also made of gilded wood and highly decorated. All these were then laid inside a sarcophagus which in turn was put inside many more wooden shrines, box after box like Russian nesting dolls. All this in 70 days! Then the - by now large and heavy - sarcophagus was towed to its final resting place in the Valley of the Kings led by white robed high officials and 'bought in' female mourners who, as they followed, threw sand over themselves wailing and mourning.

Nearby to the valley is the village where the craftsman lived who built the tombs; stonemasons, draughtsman, painters and plasterers. Tools have been found that are still used today; set squares, plumb lines and measuring sticks all preserved in the hot dry air.

The Valley of the Kings – on the West bank of the Nile - lies under the El Qurn Mountain. At present 65 tombs have been discovered 25 of which are known kings, plus all the pots of organs and secretions from all the embalming processes. It was one of these pots that Howard Carter found in 1907 which led him to believe that this vast site was worth excavating. But it was not until 1922 that a worker digging at the site found a step and by the next day the tomb entrance was discovered. It would appear the tomb had been raided twice but the robbers only took 'stuff' they could carry and sell so fortunately most of the extensive range of items was still there, over 5,000 in all.

There were so many relics discovered one theory is that the remains of Tutankhamen's parents were sent down and much of their afterlife artefacts were placed in their son's tomb. One of boy king's most loyal servants was a high official, Nakhtmine, and it is thought that he was responsible for equipping the tomb with the funeral furniture that would serve his king in eternity. He is depicted on one of the wall paintings standing in front of the dead king.

In 1906 Lord Carnarvon (*who lived at Highclere Castle - better known to us as Downtown Abbey*) was recuperating in Egypt after a serious car crash, it was felt the warm air would benefit him and he continued to spend the long winter months out there. He became a patron to Howard Carter and the rest as they say is history.

But Lord Carnarvon never saw the extent of the discovery and legacy of the boy King Tutankhamun; archaeology entails painstaking and delicate search and sometimes a slow returning to the surface. He visited in November 1922 before returning back home and then back to Egypt in the early months of 1923. He received a mosquito bite on his face and

whilst shaving he nicked the top leaving the bite open, subsequently leading to blood poisoning. He died on 5th April and he never ever saw that awe inspiring golden mask.

(I had the good fortune to visit the old Cairo museum in 2011 – just 2 weeks before the uprising-spellbinding.)

Judi Embling