

From: <http://www.beforeus.com>

Curse of the Pharaohs

“Even God could not sink her,” it was boasted. The Titanic was the biggest and the fastest ship in the world. It was also considered to be the most beautiful, Oh yes,... and unsinkable.

Then on April 14, 1912, occurred the most spectacular ship catastrophe of the past 100 years. The Titanic, on her maiden voyage from Southampton to New York, collided with an iceberg and sank with a loss of fifteen hundred people.

The Titanic's skipper, Captain Edward J. Smith, played a puzzling role in this catastrophe. Smith was a top-rate, experienced seaman. He was considered a logical choice for his post. But on that April day he acted quite strangely. It began with the course he steered, then the ship's unusually high speed, followed by his singular reaction to asking for help, and it ended with a rescue plan announced only at the last minute. For such a first-rate seaman, such a pattern of behaviour is mysterious and not yet fully explained.

The mummy passenger

The Titanic carried on board 2,200 passengers, as well as forty tons of potatoes, 35,000 eggs, 12,000 bottles of mineral water and 7,000 sacks of coffee. But it had another item of cargo – an Egyptian mummy. Lord Canterville had asked for this to be shipped from England to New York.

This mummy was the carefully prepared body of an ancient Egyptian prophetess who had enjoyed popularity during the reign of Amenhotep IV, the so-called “heretic” pharaoh who took the name of Ikhnaton. A small temple had been built for her. It was known as the "Temple of the Eyes". Her grave had more recently been found in Tell el-Amarna.

The female mummy had been embellished with the usual amulets and artifacts. One of the artifacts was an amulet with the figure of Osiris and an inscription which said:

Awake from the swoon in which you sleep and a glance of your eyes will triumph over everything that is done against you.

This inscription had been placed beneath her head. The question has since been asked, Was this a hint that the remains of the prophetess enjoyed special protection?

This priceless mummy was encased in a wooden crate. Due to its great value, it had not been placed in the hold of the Titanic but behind the Titanic's command bridge.

Now here is something odd. Quite a number of scientists who handled mummies are reported to have shown clear signs of mental derangement. Was this the result of

some curse attending the mummies? In particular, one question that has been asked since the Titanic went down is this: Did Captain Smith, also, look into that mummy's fatal radiant eyes? Could he, also, have been the victim of a curse?

The strange fate of the “mummy handlers”

Here is an example of the misfortune that has attended “mummy handlers” over the years.

One inspector general of the Egyptian antiquities administration was a man named Engelbach. He discovered a tomb near the Medum pyramid. And in the tomb's antechamber he came upon a curse tablet with this inscription:

The spirit of the dead will wring the neck of a grave robber as if it were that of a goose.

Of course, the tablet referred to the spirit of one dead person only. However, Engelbach found two corpses in the chamber. The first corpse was mummified; that was the corpse for whom the tomb had been built. But the other corpse was not. The second corpse was that of a grave robber killed by a stone that plummeted from the ceiling just as he stretched out his hand to take the mummy's jewellery. Had he become a victim of the curse?

On November 11, 1925 at the Anatomical Institute of Cairo University, Tutankhamen's corpse was subjected to an autopsy. Tragic consequences followed. Two scientists who dealt with the pharaoh's mummy were Alfred Lucas and Professor Derry. Lucas died soon after from a heart attack, and shortly after this Professor Derry died of circulatory collapse.

The deaths of two scientists who had dealt so briefly with the mummy's corpse spread concern among scholars around the world. Up to this point, the curse of the pharaohs had been dismissed by many, as a matter of chance. But the sudden demise of Lucas and Derry made even skeptics sit up and take notice.

Another mysterious casualty

Let's fast-forward now to Wednesday, March 10, 1971. We are at Sakkara, on the edge of the desert 20 miles south of Cairo. Labourers on the huge archaeological digging grounds are getting ready to quit work. It is only two o'clock in the afternoon. But the workmen, grey with desert dust, noisily toss their baskets, made from halved truck tyres, into the sand.

Since seven that morning they have been bringing sand, dust, and rocks to the surface from 30 feet below. Although it is not an easy job, it is a well-paid one. And where else can a man earn good money, here at the edge of the Libyan desert?

The village of Sakkara has become an attractive place in the years since 1935 when all those crazy archaeologists began coming. The cemetery here has been identified as Memphis' ancient city of the dead. It stretches for 4 ½ miles long and anywhere from

500 to 1,500 yards wide. Dominating it is the 4,000-year-old pyramid of King Djoser, the oldest still-intact building in the world.

This afternoon, an English archaeologist stands at the edge of the shaft that is being dug. He is Walter Bryan Emery, an Englishman, professor of Egyptology, and head of the digging operations at Sakkara.

Emery holds in his hands a small statuette, perhaps 8 inches high. It is a statuette of the death god Osiris. Again and again he examines the statuette from every angle; then, with his Egyptian assistant, he walks towards the village.

In Sakkara village the diggers have a small one-story house with an office and a washroom. However, this is not where the archaeologists live. As Emery and his assistant, Ali al Khouli, arrive in the office, Ali, exhausted from the heat, collapses on a couch. Emery strides into the washroom.

The assistant will later report:

"I sat here on the couch. Suddenly I heard moaning coming from the washroom. I looked through the door, which was ajar, and saw Emery holding onto the basin. 'Are you sick?' I called out, but the professor did not reply. He stood there as if paralyzed. I grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him onto the couch. Then I ran for the telephone."

An ambulance is called. It rushes Emery to the British hospital in Cairo. The diagnosis: paralysis of the right side. Emery is unable to speak. Mary, his wife, who has been accompanying him on most of his expeditions, stays with him throughout the night. But the next day - Thursday, March 11, 1971 - Walter Bryan Emery is dead.

The next day, the Cairo newspaper *Al Ahram* writes, "This strange occurrence leads us to believe that the legendary curse of the pharaohs has been reactivated."

Valley of the Kings

Let's now travel back in time about 3,500 years.

Some 600 miles up the Nile valley, south of Cairo, you come upon the Valley of the Kings. Here the pharaohs made secret tombs in the sides of mountains.

The Valley of the Kings is one of the most desolate spots on earth. Virtually nothing grows there – no tree, shrub or blade of grass. The sun beats down from an eternally cloudless sky whose brilliant blue is the only colour contrast to the monotonous, unrelieved dark gold of rock and sand, hills and valley floor.

All along the desert cliffs toward the Valley of the Kings are tunnels, some of them going back hundreds of feet into the mountain where the pharaohs were buried. The ancient Egyptians made them with many different branches, pitfalls and traps to keep people from finding the kings.

The valley itself is literally honeycombed with tombs, which, over the millennia, contained some of the richest treasures ever deposited by men to the honour of their dead.

Some 17 tombs may be visited, among which Tutankhamen's (the smallest of the tombs) is the only one not plundered during the centuries. The largest is that of Rameses III.

In the tombs, extensive wall paintings and inscriptions still show the original colours.

In July 1881, one of these tombs was found and opened. It contained nearly 40 mummies, including that of Rameses II.

Tutankhamen

Tutankhamen was a comparatively unimportant royal personage. He died at the age of about 18. He was not buried in his own tomb because it was not completed. It is thought that the tomb in which he was buried was the tomb of the high priest.

Modern analysis of a pin-sized piece of tissue has enabled us to determine Tutankhamen's blood group. It has been found that Tutankhamen and Ikhnoton shared the same rare A2 blood group, suggesting that Tutankhamen was an illegitimate son of the latter. Thus his father-in-law was also his father.

Ikhnoton had three daughters – the oldest having been married off, the second daughter died young. That left the youngest, named Enhosnamon. It was determined that she should marry Tutankhamen. Thus Tutankhamen was married off to his half sister. She was only nine at the time of her marriage, which was extremely young for marriage even in Egypt. The child wife had to pay bitterly for it; she suffered two miscarriages.

Tutankhamen died suddenly, from a blood clot in the brain. That left Enhosnamon a widow at fifteen. There was no heir to the throne. This was a perfect situation for Ay, the high priest, to seize power.

So the 15 year old widow was desperate. To carry on the royal line, she could not find a suitable man in all Egypt. In her despair she finally turned to Shuppiluliuma, the King of the Hittite Empire. She wrote to him:

My husband is dead and I do not have a son. I am told that you have many grown sons. Send me one of your sons and I shall take him as my husband because I do not want to marry any of my subjects."

The Hittite king was at first baffled. This was a most unusual request – for one of his sons to marry her and become king of Egypt! So he made an investigation as to the sincerity of the young widow. Satisfied at last, he sent one of the sons to Egypt. However on his way that son was ambushed and murdered.

This crime was probably arranged by Ay. In any case, Ay forced Tutankhamen's widow to marry him.

In Tutankhamen's tomb, flowers had been placed. This was a common procedure. The leaves of wild celery (*Apium graveolens*), had been wound into wreaths.

Probably the most touching of all bouquets was the one placed on Tutankhamen's coffin, inside the sarcophagus. It was a small bunch of flowers. Tutankhamen's fifteen-year-old widow must have plucked these from the shore of Nile River, to send as a last greeting to her beloved young husband.

Search for the tomb

The explorer Howard Carter was spurred to look for Tutankhamen's tomb by the discovery of a water-pot bearing his name, which indicated that his tomb was probably somewhere in the valley. Carter decided to start digging in the area in front of the tomb of Rameses VI (c. 1150 BC). This rubble pile had not been examined previously because it would have barred access to Rameses' tomb.

The only reason the tomb had not been found and robbed before, was that it was down in the bottom of a deep valley – and a number of pharaohs had their tombs cut in the cliffs above. Hundreds of thousands of tons of stone cut out of those tombs came rolling down, filling the whole valley and covering several tombs below. Some of these had since been found. But Tutankhamen's tomb was down so deep that all through the ages it had been hidden from the Arabs and other tomb hunters who sought to rob them of their treasures.

But the men who were searching for Tutankhamen's tomb knew it was there somewhere. So they kept digging. And finally they came to a place where they could tell that the natural rock had been removed, regardless of how carefully the Egyptians had tried to conceal it.

Stairway... door... passage... door

And so, in this “mountain” of rock below Rameses VI's tomb, a rubble-covered step was uncovered – then fifteen more forming a stairway which led to a door. **THEY WERE ABOUT TO MAKE AN EXCITING DISCOVERY!**

Behind the door, Howard Carter and his men found a 25 foot long passage driven far into the rock.

This ended at a second door, which had at some time been opened and resealed.

It appears that robbers had made two attempts to break into the tomb shortly after the burial, but were apprehended before they reached the burial chamber. And the passageway was then resealed. And, of course, later falling rubble from Rameses' tomb hid it all from sight – and from memory – until 1922.

Ante-chamber treasures

This second door was the door of the antechamber.

Carter recalled later:

“At last we had the whole door clear before us. The decisive moment had arrived. With trembling hands I made a tiny breach in the left hand corner. Darkness and blank space, as far as an iron testing rod could reach... then widening the hole a little I inserted the candle and peered in... At first I could see nothing... But presently as my eyes grew accustomed to the light, details of the room emerged slowly from the mist, strange animals, statues, and gold – everywhere the glint of gold. For a moment – an eternity it must have been to the others standing by – I was struck dumb; then Lord Caernarvon inquired anxiously – ‘Can you see anything?’ ‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘wonderful things....’”

Carter was gazing into the antechamber of Tutankhamen’s tomb.

Carter got through it. And inside “piled up like furniture in a warehouse” (probably the result of hasty tidying up by surprised plunderers) were burst-open chests and coffers, and pieces of furniture.

Unbelievable wealth in gold

In the antechamber alone, the wealth was estimated at 6 million British pounds. The richness of it all was breathtaking... as many as 600 objects. Both gold and alabaster were freely used.

In front of a great statue of blackened wood was a magnificent painted timber chest, on the panels of which were depicted hunting and battle scenes. It was magnificently decorated with miniature work.

Also in the room were three couches encased with gold, and with animal heads. Golden beds! Around them were scattered boxes containing garments and personal belongings. And wooden cases containing mummified birds.

Against one wall lay a pile of four dismantled chariots. These were completely covered with gold: every inch decorated either with embossed design and scenes hammered into the gold itself, or with inlaid design made of colored glass and stone, Together with baskets, pottery, and alabaster vases.

Perhaps the most beautiful piece of furniture in the room was a dazzling gold, silver and glass-inlaid throne, decorated with a design showing Tutankhamen and his wife.

Oh, and there was so much more... solid gold daggers, pendants, necklaces, miniature figures portraying daily life in Egypt, a golden table, two golden statues of Tutankhamen, his earrings, a model boat of alabaster, a triple lamp of translucent alabaster.... I could go on.

Today the wonderful objects that stood in that tomb now occupy about a whole floor of the Cairo Museum. You can walk around and look at them. There is his golden chair and his golden table. There is his golden bed, if you please. And his golden chariot. HE LIVED A GOLDEN LIFE.

How wrong were the critics!

Interesting, isn't it? Before this discovery, critics were telling the world that the Bible could not be true history because it speaks of the Israelites' having so much gold when they fled Egypt... gold to make two golden cherubim to put on a gold-covered box called the Ark, and a golden table for the shew-bread, and a golden lampstand, and a golden altar of incense. "Impossible," it was claimed. "There wasn't that much gold in all the world at that time."

But now, in this tomb alone was found enough gold to make probably half a dozen Israelite tabernacles!

Of course all that was still unknown on February 17, 1923, when Howard Carter and Lord Caernarvon were ready to open the main chamber of Tutankhamen's grave.

Warning over the last inner door

It was 2 pm on that hot February day. In the passageway of the tomb crowded twenty excited workers. None of them knew if they would find a pharaoh's mummy in it. And certainly no one suspected that thirteen of them would soon die.

The opening of the door leading into the burial chamber was almost as exciting as the entry into the antechamber.

As their eyes roved over this last inner door, they noticed a warning cut into the stone. In essence, this is what it announced:

"IF ANYONE GOES IN HERE AND VIOLATES THE SLEEP OF THE PHARAOH, THE CURSE OF THE GODS WILL BE ON HIM."

And it is a fact that practically every man, but one or two, who broke down the final stone, died within a short while.

The man who was buried in a 6 million dollar coffin

As Carter removed the upper part of the wall, the crew members "saw beyond it what seemed to be a wall of solid gold."

This was the mummy's casket or outer shrine. It measured 16 feet 5 inches long by 10 feet 10 inches wide by 9 feet high. The burial chamber was almost totally filled up by this great box. It had been built in sections, then taken in there and put together and covered with pure gold. This outer casket was of gilt wood inlaid with lapis-paste.

They opened the doors of this outer casket. And inside it they found a second casket, overlaid inside and out with gold. This one was decorated in relief with deities and hieroglyphics.

Within this, was a third casket, overlaid inside and out with gold. Around this were scattered ceremonial bows and arrows.

And inside this third casket was a final casket – which contained a sarcophagus of the finest yellow quartzite, with a lid of red granite. The lid alone weighed 1350 pounds (more than half a ton). Each corner of this great stone sarcophagus was decorated with a protective goddess.

The crew had a hard time trying to get it out. In fact, they had to break it, to get it open.

But they were to discover further wonders. For within this fourth, inner, casket were **THREE SEPARATE COFFINS**, one fitted within the other.

Yes, it was difficult to get these out, too – because the mass weighed several tons.

These coffins were made in the shape of the human body. They were - you guessed it – golden coffins. Each was set beautifully with lapis lazuli and turquoise.

The first coffin, made of a large log, fitted exactly. It was gilded over. They had to take that out. Then they had a most difficult job getting into it without destroying it. It fitted like glove around the second coffin.

The second coffin was likewise made of wood covered with gold leaf and inlaid with multi-colored glass-paste.

Inside this was the third coffin of solid gold ¼ inch thick. The lid represented Tutankhamen in all his regalia, his garments encrusted with precious stones. This coffin was 6 feet long. It was embellished with turquoise, lapis lazuli and carnelion.

The value of this coffin alone is said to be 6 million dollars. But they had to literally cut it open.

And inside it they beheld the royal mummy itself... the mummy of Tutankhamen!

Over his face was a solid gold mask – one of the most beautiful portraits ever made – all of pure gold. It was polished and shone like the sun. It was an exact likeness of the young man's face when he was buried. The features revealed a serene, placid face. The face was refined, cultured and well-formed.

The mummy itself was covered with 22 layers of mummy cloth. Inside the bindings, 143 pieces of jewelry of various kinds were discovered.

The body was laid and wrapped in several layers of gold and precious stones.

But the naked body was sadly decayed, marred by the very unguents and ointments which were meant to increase its hopes of survival.

In the underground complex were two other rooms – the Annex (adjoining the antechamber) and the Treasury (adjacent to the Burial Room). Both these contained other treasures. There were signs that plunderers had been at work here. In the Annex, there were even ancient greasy fingerprints on some of the jars from which precious oils had been robbed.

Compared with other pharaohs' treasures

So here, in this tomb, was a teenager who was buried in a \$6 million coffin of solid gold. Not made like a box, but in the shape of the man himself! And not only that! Here were chests and boxes, thrones, beds, weapons, statues, jars, jewels... and gold, gold, more gold – a fabulous accumulation of treasure, bewildering in its variety, quality and quantity. And all this was buried with an almost unknown boy, for his enjoyment in the after-world.

You may well wonder, what did the tombs of the famous conquerors Thutmoses I and Rameses II once contain?

We shall never know, because practically all tombs discovered had been robbed thousands of years before, the mummies removed, and the rooms left in a wrecked condition.

Lord Caernarvon's death

It was just a few weeks later, early in April, that Howard Carter received word that Lord Caernarvon was seriously ill. However, Carter did not attach any great importance to the message.

It was only after he received a second telegram, LORD CAERNARVON GRAVELY ILL, HIGH FEVER, that Carter dropped everything to go to Cairo.

One morning at breakfast, the fifty-seven-year-old earl had simply announced, "I feel like hell."

The man already had a temperature of 104 degrees and he was shaking with chills. The next day, however, his condition improved. But the high fever returned. And for twelve days, it kept doing this. A medical doctor suggested that Caernarvon had cut himself shaving, having probably opened an old wound with his razor. But would that would have caused the fever to continue so long?

His son quickly came to his father's side.

"When I arrived in Cairo," he recalled later, "I drove at once to the Hotel Continental. My father was unconscious. Howard Carter was there, and my mother, Lady Almina. I was awakened during the night. It was ten minutes before two. The nurse came and told me Father had died."

Others begin to die

For the first time, whispers began to circulate about the curse of the pharaohs. There was mention of the tablet that had been found and then lost. Scholars and newspapermen started talking seriously. Other men connected with the Tutankhamen excavations began to die. Panic spread.

Carter had asked an American archaeologist by the name of Arthur Mace, to help open the tomb. Mace had ripped out the last chunk of wall blocking the entry to the main chamber. After Caernarvon's death, the American complained about growing exhaustion. Finally he fell into a deep coma. Doctors were unable to diagnose the cause. Mace never came out of his coma. In fact, he died in the same hotel as had Lord Caernarvon.

Hearing of Caernarvon's death, a long-time friend by the name of George Jay Gould, travelled to Egypt. Gould was the son of the American financier. From Cairo, Gould travelled up the Nile to Luxor and out to the Valley of the Kings. Here he met Carter who showed him the sensational tomb discovery.

The very next morning Gould came down with a high fever. By that evening he was dead. At first, doctors said they could not diagnose the fatal illness. However, later they concluded that the cause of death was bubonic plague.

Death after death followed, unabated. The mystery grew.

Howard Carter continued his archaeological exploration of the tomb. Joel Wood, a British industrialist, visited the tomb site. And after returning to England by ship, he died of a high fever.

A radiologist named Archibald Douglas Reid was the first to cut the cords around the mummy so as to X-ray the body. Shortly after that he suffered strange attacks of debilitating feebleness. Then in 1924, upon his return to England, he died.

By 1929, twenty-two individuals who had been involved with Tutankhamen and his tomb directly or indirectly, had died prematurely. Of these, thirteen had participated in opening the grave. Those dead included the archaeologists Garry Davies, Harkness, and Douglas Derry, and the assistants Astor and Callender, as well as Professors Winlock and Foucrat.

Lord Caernarvon's wife, Lady Almina, also died in 1929, from an insect bite, so it was thought. Richard Bethell, Carter's secretary, died that year too.

In this mysterious chain of events, the circumstances attending Bethell's death were strange indeed.

Bethell was found in his bed. Cause of death was stated as a circulatory collapse. His father, Lord Westbury, upon hearing of his son's death, plunged from the seventh story of his London house. Then, on the way to the cemetery, the hearse ran over a little boy.

Howard Carter himself died of inflammation of the lungs, although he lived much longer than his unfortunate colleagues.

Another man connected with the tomb discovery was Dr John Kinnaman. By the time he got back to the United States, he was seriously ill. He went to the Madison Sanitarium in Tennessee, to get help. Dr Sutherland told him, "We can't do anything more for you, but I am going to pray for you."

John Kinnaman told radio broadcaster H.M.S. Richards that he was convinced his life was saved by prayer.

DEATH WILL SLAY WITH HIS WINGS WHOEVER DISTURBS THE PEACE OF THE PHARAOH. So says the ancient curse.

So what killed them?

Very well, how can we explain this set of events? What does the curse signify? Is it possible that dead men can really influence or even stop the life rhythms of others? Were there scientific secrets in ancient Egypt that are now forgotten? Could poisons have been used which retained their potency for thousands of years? Was deadly radiation the cause? Or is it just coincidence – chance - that so many died prematurely?

Traps to kill intruders

The ancient Egyptians may well have developed effective methods to protect their tombs against grave robbers.

It is probable that priests and magicians used their technical knowledge to retain power over the people - and fear of the curses. And so when a stone dropped from a tomb's vaulted ceiling when the mummy was touched, that would not be by accident. Rather, it might be as part of a simple yet effective trap to foil grave robbers.

They had scientific expertise

It is not easy to discover how much ancient civilizations such as Egypt knew of modern science. It is clear that in Egypt such knowledge was shrouded in secrecy, to be the heritage of the select few who practised it.

There was certainly a sophisticated state of medical knowledge. Bones and joints were set. Broken bones were put in splints. Sterilization concepts were understood. Tubes - reeds wrapped in linen - were used for artificial nourishment. Dental bridges fastened with gold wire, were used. And that's just for starters.

Medicinal prescriptions were many. They comprised juices, salves, powders, and suppositories. Instructions for taking pills and drugs produced by Egyptian doctors (which have survived and been translated) are similar to those of modern pharmacology.

For example, common directions were to "Take before going to bed," or "Take twice a day," and so on.

I dare say that wise men in Egypt had knowledge that would be of incalculable value for our world if we could only regain it.

Guess what the thousands of workers employed in the construction of the great pyramid at Giza were given to eat? If you didn't know, it was radishes, onions, and

leeks. And with good reason. You see, a major problem with such huge numbers of men working together was hygiene. An epidemic could spread fast and kill many in a very short time.

So the workers were given antibiotics - contained in leeks, onions, and radishes. These would prevent infections breaking out. Modern research has proved the effectiveness of such things against streptococci, staphylococci, pneumococci, and Bacillus coli.

It is evident that the ancient Egyptians did understand the physiological effect of bacteria. Staphylococci, as we know today, can produce pus able to infect skin, kidneys, and bone marrow, while streptococci can cause diphtheria, blood poisoning, and scarlet fever. And in ancient Egypt, all these diseases were treated with drugs derived from nature's pharmacy.

It should not surprise us, then, if scientific secrets are part of the explanation for the curse of the pharaohs.

Power in an amulet?

Carter found an amulet made of iron lying on the dead Tutankhamen's pillow. - This was actually a semicircle atop a stalk, and believed to represent a neck support. But there was a symbolic meaning in its presence, as we see in Chapter 166 of the Book of the Dead:

"Awake from the swoon in which you sleep. You will triumph over everything done against you. Ptah has overcome your enemies. They no longer exist."

Radiologists have been puzzled concerning this strange amulet. And it is a startling fact that what may be interpreted to be a pronouncement of doom in the Book of the Dead came true so quickly for two scientists who officiated at Tutankhamen's autopsy.

A radioactive diadem?

Tutankhamen was the only mummy that still wore a diadem when his tomb was discovered.

Every pharaoh wore on his diadem the image of an asp. According to various ancient sources, the asp was believed to have "the power to destroy enemies".

The question has been asked, was the diadem a source of radioactivity? If so, that could certainly be one explanation as to why so many died who were involved in excavating.

Tutankhamen's skin was literally burned and blackened in spots. But that has been attributed to the unguents that were poured over the mummy before burial, which had triggered a chemical reaction and which, in turn, produced heat.

Fungus theory

The Egyptians knew of a type of nerve poison. Anciently, Egypt was the world's granary. Ergot is a grain fungus. It can spread illnesses such as the "cold fire". The victim first suffers strong itching or tingling sensations in the fingers. Other symptoms follow, such as numbness of the body surface, muscle cramps, paralysis, and mental derangement.

Were the tombs of the pharaohs protected by narcotic fungi?

Over an extended period of time Dr. Ezzeddin Taha, a physician and biologist at Cairo University, examined both archaeologists and employees of museums. He found that many suffered from a fungus that caused feverish inflammations of the respiratory system.

He noted that for a long time archaeologists had suffered what was known as the "Coptic Itch". This itch was linked to skin rashes and laboured breathing. These strange symptoms had been observed only in people who had worked intensively with Egyptian papyri.

Taha worked at Cairo University's Institute for Microbiology, where he was able to prove the existence of a series of dangerous disease agents, among them *Aspergillus niger*. The biologist did not think that this fungus was hardy enough to survive in mummies or grave chambers thousands of years.

On November 3, 1962, Dr Taha held a press conference, in which he claimed to have tracked down the cause of the curse of the pharaohs, or at least one cause.

"This discovery," he announced, "has once and for all destroyed the superstition that explorers who worked in ancient tombs died as a result of some kind of curse. They were victims of morbidic agents encountered at work. Some people may still believe that the curse of the pharaohs can be attributed to some supernatural powers, but that belongs to the realm of fairy tales."

He admitted, however, that infections might not be the only cause of the deaths of so many scientists.

Perhaps more concrete results to Dr Taha's research might have followed had not the scientist himself, soon after his press conference, become a victim of the curse he thought he had demystified.

That day, Dr Taha and two of his co-workers were driving on the desert road between Suez and Cairo. It was fairly empty of traffic. About 70 kilometres from Cairo, on a straight road, Taha's car suddenly swerved to the left, right into the path of an oncoming car. In the crash, Taha and his companions died instantly. The occupants of the other car were injured. According to the autopsy Taha had suffered a circulatory collapse.

Some possible poisons

Dr Kinnaman, whose story we told earlier in this book, said that he did not believe his illness was the result of the curse of the Egyptian gods, but was caused by a very strange poison that the priests of the pharaohs had put in the tombs. After the setting up of everything in the tomb was completed and all the workmen went away, the priests sprinkled this poison all over everything in the tomb. The result was that anybody who might break in would breathe it and die.

After the door had been closed for the final time, it was covered with plaster. Then, seals were either stamped all over the wet plaster, or roll seals were rolled over it.

Judging by the wording found in the curse inscriptions, it appears that the curse of the pharaohs was specifically designed to protect the royal tombs. This being so, we can safely assume that the matter of such protection would not have been left to chance. For this reason, the use of poison is a plausible and realistic theory.

The use or knowledge of poison is as old as civilizations. In fact, over 4,000 years ago the very first pharaoh, Menes, grew poisonous plants. He also had their effects recorded.

Unfortunately, there has been no botanical classification of these plants. However, from later ages we know that hemlock, henbane, opium, monkshood and arsenic, were in use. And 2,500 years ago prussic acid was used for executions in Greece, just as it has been used in the United States during the twentieth century. And it is reported that Mithridates, ruler of Asia Minor, motivated by constant fear that someone would poison him, swallowed daily a small dose of poison so as to increase his tolerance to it. (This is the principle behind modern vaccination.)

Cleopatra was an expert mixer of poisons. In her brews she drew upon ancient tradition, which described the effectiveness of various poisons in great detail.

A little known fact is that Cleopatra regularly tested poisons on slaves. In fact, Mark Antony feared her witch's art; so much so that unless a taster was present he would not eat with her.

Cleopatra regarded Antony's caution as an insult. The self confident lady met her lover's distrust with dramatic flair. She plucked a flower from the garland that was in her hair, threw it into Mark Antony's wine cup, and asked him to drink the wine as a sign of his love.

Seeing this as a seductive gesture, Antony put the cup to his lips (he knew the taster had already drunk from it). However, Cleopatra quickly seized the cup from Antony. Then she called over a man who had been brought out from prison, and handed to him the cup to drink. The prisoner drank from the cup - and dropped dead.

She turned to Mark Antony and said, "I poisoned the blossoms. I only wanted to show you that if I wanted to, I could kill you despite your taster."

Dioscorides, the Greek doctor and pharmacist of the first century, who studied Egyptian culture, wrote, "Poison prophylaxis is difficult because those who work secretly with poisons make sure that even the most experienced are deceived."

The reason we know so little about the preparation of poisons in ancient Egypt, is due to the fact that toxicology was a secret science taught only to a select few.

Aware of the Egyptian achievements in toxicology, the Roman emperors acquired most of their poisons from Egypt. Caligula, Claudius, Nero and Caracalla allegedly possessed large collections of poisons.

Closely related to plant poisons are snake and insect poisons.

Dr. M. Martiny, the Parisian toxicologist, reported that the shrivelling of poisonous glands and even the drying up of poisons themselves does not decrease their potency. Of course, insect poisons can be neutralized by ultraviolet rays. Nevertheless, the pharaohs' tombs, which ultraviolet rays cannot penetrate, would have made ideal places for storing such poisons and keeping their effectiveness unimpaired.

Today, many snake and insect poisons are used as healing drugs. It is known that small doses can result in some immunization. Howard Carter, who spent half his life shut up in the tombs of various pharaohs, must have built up bodily resistance against their poisons. Despite this, he did suffer his share of pain, as well as hallucinations, headaches, a sudden rush of blood to the head and paralysing attacks of dizziness and weakness. Toxicologists such as Martiny attribute all these symptoms to animal poisoning.

An archaeologist need not have oral contact with a poison. To become effective, some poisons need only to brush or penetrate the skin. In pharaohs' tombs, such powerful poisons as aconite, arsenic, and conium were used to paint walls and artifacts. None of them lost their potency even when dried. Poisonous gases and vapours, in precipitated form, were most likely present in the pharaohs' tombs.

As a means of eliminating "unwanted" persons in the Middle Ages, the precipitation technique was popular. One of the easiest methods was to soak a candle wick in arsenic. When the candle was lit, the vapours would be deadly. Both Pope Clement VII in 1534 and Emperor Leopold I of Austria in 1705 are said to have been murdered by this method.

In the airtight chambers of a tomb, such vapours could precipitate and never disappear.

We may well ask whether poisons can retain their effectiveness for thousands of years. Undoubtedly, ordinary poisonous substances lose their potency under the impact of light, air, and sun in a matter of years. But stronger poisons can retain potency for centuries. This is particularly so if they are stored in airtight compartments.

Bats theory

In the search for a scientific explanation of the curse, many scientists have pursued the possibility of an infection.

Dr. John Wiles was a South African geologist. One day in October, 1956, Dr Wiles clambered into the subterranean grottoes of the Rhodesian mountains. He had no suspicion in the world that he might be exposing himself to mortal danger.

His job was to examine the practical application of bat excrement. Bat excrement is similar to guano. The idea was that the many thousands of tons stored there might be used as fertilizer.

When he was some 450 feet underground, Wiles was startled by a sudden noise, as the pitch black roof on the grotto came alive into a swarm of ten thousand bats that had hung there squeezed close to one another. He got out of the cave as fast as he could.

Within a few days Wiles was suffering from indigestion, aching muscles, and high fever. His doctor diagnosed the problem as pneumonia and pleurisy. But when the "appropriate" treatment did not work, Wiles was admitted to Geoffrey Hospital in Port Elizabeth.

Dr. Dean, the hospital's director, recalled that recently a disease had been discovered among explorers who had worked in Inca caves in Peru. Dean took a blood sample from the now seriously ill Wiles and sent it to the United States. It was found that the geologist was suffering from histoplasmosis, a disease caused by an infectious fungus which grows in bat excrement and other rotting matter.

Wiles was given antibiotics, and he survived. But the question now occurred to Dr. Dean, might this very disease also be a cause of the puzzling deaths connected with the pharaohs' tombs?

Bacteria death theory

Rock tombs of the pharaohs would be ideal breeding grounds for bacteria. In fact, the combustion seen on most royal mummies has resulted from bacteriological processes. As fats, oils, and resins covering the mummy decomposed, they produced heat. This led to a charring of the corpse. For decades, archaeologists wondered why mummies were black. We now know that the cause was bacteria.

So how long can bacteria stay alive? Can their death-bearing qualities continue for thousands of years? Is it possible that the curse of the pharaohs is simply a biochemical infection of the royal graves, which was initiated thousands of years ago?

Indeed, say chemists and bacteriologists, this could be one plausible explanation for the curse. Types of bacteria can, under the right conditions, live for centuries.

It is not inconceivable that the ancient Egyptians used bacterial cultures that would produce poisonous gases to protect the royal tomb.

Nerve poison?

Royal Air Force Lieutenant William Cockayne was working at the British defence ministry's research facility for chemical and bacteriological warfare. One evening in 1953, he reached for a bottle to take a closer look at its contents. The capped bottle, he

had just been told by a chemist, contained nerve gas, which “could kill a man in seconds.” Just as he reached for it, Cockayne collapsed.

For the rest of his life, this man, who had always been brimming with life, now suffered deep, periodic depressions. Three times he attempted suicide. He now showed symptoms similar to those that plagued Egyptologists.

It is a fact that numerous Egyptologists became victims of deep depressions. Howard Carter constantly suffered depressions. He even gave up archaeology several times, only to resume it. We noticed earlier that Lord Westbury, the father of Carter's secretary, who often accompanied his son to Egypt, leaped out of a window, during a depressive phase. And five years after that his widow, also, committed suicide.

Another participant in the Tutankhamen's tomb excavation, Dr. Evelyn White, suffered such terrible nervous depressions that he would not let a doctor to see him, seriously ill though he was. "Don't bother," he told every doctor, "I know what the matter is." Another example among many was Dr. Zakariaj Ghoncim, chief inspector for the antiquities department of Upper Egypt, who in 1959 committed suicide. He had suffered from depressions for many years.

Poison vapours theory

One of the most closely guarded secret poisons in ancient Egypt was quicksilver (mercury). Because it evaporates easily, even at very low temperatures, it is a dangerous poison. All the more so, because its vapors are odorless. One dangerous effect of such vapors is that they can damage the nervous system.

Prussic acid is a colourless liquid, which causes death from internal choking.

The Egyptians isolated this deadly poison from peach pits. Some have contended that mummy bandages were soaked in a mixture of prussic acid and volatile oils. This would account for the widespread decomposition of royal mummies.

Not only that. The tombs were sealed airtight. Did the Egyptians who placed the curse on the grave door know that the prussic acid would evaporate its deadly vapor upon contact with oxygen, when the door was opened?

Here is something else that suggests poison vapours may have been used as a device to protect mummies against grave robbers.

The evidence shows that in almost every tomb that grave robbers attacked –including Tutankhamen's – thieves had drilled a hole about the size of an arm. Now, this opening was too narrow to allow them to fish out any treasures. So why was it designed? The obviously use was to let poisonous gases seep out. The robbers must have been aware that others of their kind had died horribly in other tombs, because air had not been allowed to neutralize the poison.

Some other cause?

Quite possibly, there were other scientific secrets used to trigger the curse. Indeed, it is even likely that a security system was in place, in which something deadly was dispersed among the mummies and grave artifacts - so that mere possession of such objects could have dire results.

Uranium theory

In 1949, archaeologists were astonished when the well-known atomic scientist Professor Luis Bulgarinis announced, "I believe that the ancient Egyptians understood the laws of atomic decay. Their priests and wise men were familiar with uranium. It is definitely possible that they used radiation in order to protect their holy places."

So this curse of the pharaohs – Is it a lethal package of death rays? According to Bulgarini, we should not exclude that possibility.

Said he: "The floors of the tombs could have been covered with uranium or the graves could have been finished with radioactive rock. Such radiation could kill a man today or at least damage his health."

In 1895, Wilhelm Conrad Roentgen proved the existence of a "new type of rays". And the very next year French physicist Henri Becquerel discovered that uranium salts emitted radiation similar to X-rays.

We might now ask, were these men simply "rediscoverers" of something the ancient Egyptians had known and used? Did the Egyptians preside over a greater body of knowledge than these two men (who were both Nobel Prize winners)?

I ask that question because at the beginning of the twentieth century Henri Becquerel handled radioactive substances with no protection whatever, as if uranium was a wonderful toy to play with. The story is told that Becquerel travelled to London to deliver a scientific lecture, with loose radium in his vest pocket. As a result, he suffered serious burns.

In the 1920s, not long after it was discovered that radioactive substances glow in the dark, a luminous-clock-face industry was started in New Jersey. Female workers were paid to put radiant paint onto clock faces by means of tiny brushes. Some workers, in order to put points on their brushes pressed the tips with their mouths. Within two years the first died from feverish inflammations.

This awakened the industry into organising better care of on-the-job control. Yet, despite this, over ten years forty-two women died prematurely, mostly from cancer, as a direct result of radiation exposure.

Back to Egypt. And here we discover that many Egyptian scientists and explorers died without any doctor being able to determine a precise cause of death.

A number of archaeologists did complain about excessive fatigue. There were some who demonstrated clear signs of brain damage after working in Egypt. And others who suffered no apparent damage.

Radioactivity is not predictable

Does radioactive decomposition of the nucleus take place at a constant pace? No, according to The Swiss radiation specialist Dr. Jacob Eugster, of the University of Bern. Radiation is subject to outside influence.

To prove this, Dr Eugster carried out an unusual experiment. He took a radioactive substance and divided it. One piece he exposed to ultraviolet rays on the top of the Jungfrau. The other half he deposited in the Simplon rail tunnel.

Do you know what he found? The uranium in the tunnel decomposed much more slowly than that on the mountaintop. The evidence was that materials remain radioactive much longer underground.

The effects of radiation may be so slow as hardly noticeable to outsiders. Or radiation can kill quickly.

On March 1, 1954, when the U.S. detonated an H-bomb in the Marshall Islands, the Japanese fishing boat Lucky Dragon was caught in a rain of radioactive ash. The results were horrendous. All twenty-two fishermen suffered radiation damage. Forty-year-old crew member Kubojama, died within six months.

His physician stated that death was directly attributable to radioactivity. The immediate cause of death was diagnosed as circulatory collapse, resulting from radioactive liver damage. Kubojama's liver had shrunk to a third of its normal size. Kubojama's wife, Suzu, recalled her husband's last words: "I'm so tired. It hurts a lot."

It is interesting to note that most Egyptologists, likewise, complained of excessive fatigue shortly before they died.

Whatever the "mysterious illness" was, doctors could not readily identify any external symptoms. This also raises the possibility that radiation sickness cannot be excluded. Also the fact that its effect varied greatly is additional evidence for the radiation theory.

Among those who began working in the tombs or with the mummies, some suffered from physiological changes soon after. In others these changes took months or years. Some scholars died unexpectedly and fast. Others demonstrated brain damage. While still others showed no adverse effects from their work.

Such varied reaction to radiation damage is reminiscent of the radiation effects seen for twenty years after the 1945 atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Various survivors did not begin to show signs until many years later. As late as 1964, some people were showing symptoms of radiation damage for the first time since their exposure to the bomb.

I recall the news report of a young woman who was just a baby when the bomb fell on Hiroshima. Now, 20 years old, she was to all appearances a fit and healthy bride-to-be. Anticipating the joy of life with her young husband, she was enthusiastically

preparing for the wedding. Suddenly, it happened... The deadly symptoms of radiation struck her. Within a short time she was dead.

Any such comparison between this and any possible radioactive rays in Egyptian tombs is, of course, exaggerated. The point I wish to make is simply this: radiation can have very different effects on different people. Furthermore, damage from lengthy exposure to weak radiation can produce the same results as from a higher but shorter dosage.

It has been theorised that some artifacts placed in tombs contained deadly radioactive elements, designed to carry out the death formulas and curses.

The Egyptians mined gold. And since gold and uranium are found in the same rock, we need not doubt that they also mined uranium. For that matter, uranium is still mined in Egypt today.

Several papyri speak of the ancient gold mines. In the Umm Garayat region, about 40 miles east of the Nile, are several of these mines. It is estimated by mining engineers that in antiquity some 100,000 tons of rock were extracted from them.

Around 1900, several mining companies examined old Egyptian mines with a view to possible renewed activity.

In February, 1903, in the area around Umm Russ, the chief engineer of the Egyptian Mines Exploration Company, C. J. Alford, discovered ancient quartz veins that contained gold and uranium. The seams branched over an area of four square miles. He also came upon the ruins of hundreds of stone huts which had housed miners.

Egyptian Sudan Minerals prospected to the south of this area in the region known today as Derehib.

The prospectors found gold-veined rock. At the end of one ancient tunnel they came on a wall of heavy stones. On the wall were weathered hieroglyphics. In their report, the mining engineers wrote that they considered this "most strange". However, since they could find no explanation, they sealed up the gallery and a nearby vertical shaft.

Southeast of Umm Garayat lies Wadi Ungat. And here too Nile Valley Company engineers discovered hieroglyphics. No one has been able to decipher them. Archaeologists have to this date been able only to identify the author.

The last line says: "Amenhotep, the scribe".

So, we might well wonder, what did a scribe do in a mine? What was it that persuaded him to scratch hieroglyphics into the underground rock? Whatever caused the Egyptians to wall up mine galleries and slap inscriptions on them?

We noted earlier Dr Kinnaman's claim that intruders into Tutankhamen's tomb were killed by the dust that came up just like white flour. If a dust did arise into their nostrils, was it radioactive dust scattered in there deliberately?

What do archaeologists think?

You ask any archaeologist what he thinks of the curse of the pharaohs. Some will dismiss it as plain nonsense. Others will refuse stubbornly even to walk into a pharaoh's tomb. A Munich archaeologist, when asked what he feared, simply replied, "The gods."

Three main causes of death

The accounts of Egyptian archaeologists who died mysteriously during the past 100 years seem to be endless. However, three causes of death appear to crop up more frequently:

1. fever with delusions and premonition of death,
2. circulatory collapse, and
3. sudden cancers that were quickly terminal.

Science doesn't know it all

We pride ourselves on knowing so much more than our early ancestors. But I would like to share something interesting with you. In 1969, the Cairo physicist Dr Amr Gohed conducted a computer analysis of radiation experiments that had been conducted inside the Cheops pyramid.

What he discovered shocked him! The radiation impact inside the royal chamber had been recorded on magnetic tape. The impulses were reproduced both acoustically and visually. The photometric strips showed very clearly line structures and geometric forms. But what startled and perplexed him was this: The symbolism and geometry changed from day to day – even though the same measuring instruments were used under ideal working conditions.

Dr Gohed told the *New York Times*:

“There is a force at work inside the pyramids that contradicts all scientific laws.”

Obviously there is a huge body of lost knowledge that we still don't understand. How much did the ancients know – and achieve – which we still cannot fathom?

To summarise

I have not attempted in this small book to solve this mystery of the curse of the pharaohs, nor to even prove it exists. Rather, I have endeavored to submit to you the known facts, along with some possible answers.

Did the ancient Egyptians deliberately arrange their pharaohs' tombs to become death traps?

If so, how did they set it up? Did they plant inside the tombs some poisons with long potency? Did they use radioactive materials? Did they utilise some other secret?

Does the answer to the curse of the pharaohs lie in one of the solutions we have proposed, or is there a more sinister explanation? This much is certain. The secrets of ancient Egypt still reach across the centuries to tantalize, confound, and humble the arrogance of modern science.

© Copyright Jonathan Gray, 2003
info@archaeologyanswers.com
