
HOWARD CARTER AND THE CURSE OF TUTANKHAMUN

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Abstract: Howard Carter was an Egyptologist who discovered the tomb of the Pharaoh Tutankhamun. After this discovery, some rumours and myths about a curse of the Pharaoh started spreading and gaining attention. Numerous Historians, Egyptologists and Archaeologists have supported this notion and some scholars, with some scientific explanations, rejected the theory of any curse surrounding the Pharaoh.

Key words: Howard, Carter, Pharaoh, curse, Tutankhamun, myth.

Introduction

Humans have a feature that distinguishes them from other species. They love to believe in the unknown than the known. Perhaps that's why, the number of discoveries is not even close to the number of myths all around the world. One such discovery was of the tomb of the boy king of Egypt, Pharaoh Tutankhamun. Howard Carter, a British archaeologist, discovered the tomb of the Pharaoh in November 1922. He was passionate about Egypt from his very childhood. His passion, skill and dedication culminated in this ground-breaking discovery. This gained immense attention and changed the whole world. People were excited by the fact that the Pharaoh was finally found whom they all knew just through myths and stories. However, soon after this discovery, some people associated with it started dying. Some died due to sudden diseases and some died due to mysterious circumstances. These instances somehow spread a myth of a curse of the Pharaoh, which remains a myth even today.

Howard Carter and his journey to Tutankhamun's Tomb

Howard Carter was an eminent British Egyptologist and archaeologist, known for the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun. He was born on May 9, 1874 at Kensington, London. He was the youngest child of Samuel John Carter and Martha Joyce Sands. His father, Samuel John Carter, was an artist of Illustrated London News. Howard's parents once moved in London with their children and three of them died in their infancy. Howard had poor health from his childhood. That's why they moved him to Swaffham in Norfolk to live with his relatives. His residence was near Didlington Hall, a mansion of the Amherst family. Didlington Hall had a great role in igniting a never-ending passion for Egypt in Howard Carter. The Amhersts had an impressive collection of Egyptian artefacts. He saw those artefacts, got to know about Egyptian antiquities and their values, and subsequently grew a strong interest in Egypt. With the help of his father, he worked upon essential skills required for Egyptology. Lady Amherst was so impressed with Howard's sketches and drawings that she decided to recommend him to Percy Newberry who needed assistance in his work at Beni Hassan. In 1891, with the assent of Egypt Exploration Society and by the recommendations of Lady Amherst, Howard Carter got the opportunity to join Percy Newberry to work at Beni Hassan and El-Bersheh.¹ From 1892 to 1899,

Carter gained his initial experiences as an excavator with the help of Flinders Petrie and Henri Édouard Naville after working with them in places like El-Amarna and areas near the Temple of Hatshepsut.

Some years later, in 1899, he was offered the post of Chief Inspector of Antiquities of Upper Egypt of the Egyptian Antiquities Service.² While being in this post, he reformed the administration of the service with the help of Sir Gaston Maspero and Sir William Garstin. Through the years, Carter got many opportunities to excel in the field, e.g. supervising excavations of Theodore Davis. In 1904, he became the Chief Inspector of Antiquities of Lower Egypt and worked there till 1905. His other excavation works included supervising excavations at Aswan, Karnak, Thebes and Luxor.

Like any other person, Carter also had to face hurdles in his way. After being appointed as the Chief Inspector of Antiquities of Lower Egypt, one of the areas under his supervision was Saqqara, also known as Sakkara, Saccara or Saqqareh. This has always been a popular tourist attraction. According to Flinders Petrie, his wife was working at the Saqqara Necropolis at Giza when “some drunken Frenchmen” were trying to intrude. They were confronted by a “cook boy”. Somehow, they managed to get to a place called the “official house” and started a quarrel with the local guards. The quarrel became a fight very soon. They also destroyed some furniture. Sources say that the “drunken Frenchmen” were demanding to see the tombs. This, according to them, was the cause of their hooliganism. Carter, the Chief Inspector of that area, told the local guards to defend themselves against those drunk men. This was unthinkable. The French Consul asked for an apology. On the other hand, this was a very normal thing to Carter. Naturally, Howard Carter refused. The Consul demanded Carter’s resignation and eventually they had it done. Carter was unemployed for three years. For living, he sold water colours to tourists, became a tourist guide and an antique dealer. This unfortunate event in Howard Carter’s life is known as the ‘Saqqara Affair’.

Some years later, Howard Carter met Lord Carnarvon. Lord Carnarvon was an English aristocrat who was the patron of Howard Carter. His full name is George Edward Stanhope Molyneux Herbert. He also had a deep passion for Egypt. He was keenly interested in Egyptian artefacts. He had excavation rights in Luxor. Howard Carter was recommended to Lord Carnarvon by Sir Gaston Maspero. In 1907, they began their work as a team. The First World War was on the verge of occurring and Carter had his diplomatic duties. After the war, he resumed his excavations. The work in the Valley of the Kings commenced in 1917. Howard Carter’s team had Harry Burton, a photographer and archaeologist, and Arthur Mace of Metropolitan Museum of art in New York. Lord Carnarvon was disappointed by the initial failure of the excavations in the first few years and said that he would stop the financial support if nothing was found. Howard Carter somehow managed to assure Lord Carnarvon that they would definitely find something and continued the excavations in a line of huts which he had investigated some years before.

Neither Carter nor his teammates knew that they were very close to making history. The main excavation began on November 1, 1922. On November 4, Howard Carter’s water boy was setting up zeer (water jar) for the workmen. He saw a cut in the

rock and later it was seen that this was the top of a step leading ultimately to the tomb of Tutankhamun. However, debate is the spice of history. Hence, sources have contradictory interpretations. Some sources say that the boy fell over the steps which led to a place decorated with hieroglyphics. Carter got a hunch that this could be something. He asked his team members to fill in the staircase as he did not want it to be revealed. He informed Lord Carnarvon and wrote him a telegram to Highclere Castle. Lord Carnarvon, with his great eagerness and excitement, reached the excavation spot on November 23. Finally, on 26 November, the first stage of the discovery took place. Although he wasn't sure if this was Tutankhamun's tomb, he was sure this was going to be something big. He held a candle and peeped through the hole which he created in the doorway. He was awestruck after seeing the treasures inside the tomb. Lord Carnarvon asked Howard Carter what he saw, to which Carter replied with one of his most famous sayings, 'I see wonderful things.' The day finally came. The course of Howard Carter was changed on that day. He finally achieved his goal and discovered KV62, the tomb of the boy king of Egypt, Pharaoh Tutankhamun.

The Curse of Tutankhamun

The success of this great discovery was followed by the birth of a curse surrounding the tomb of Tutankhamun. It was said that the curse plagued those who disturbed the Pharaoh's rest. This theory gained global attention after the sudden death of Lord Carnarvon. The discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun might be the greatest excavation work of him, but unfortunately, this was his last. He had a mosquito bite on his cheek, and after using razor, it was infected. From that infection he suffered from blood poisoning and later caught Sepsis and Pneumonia. He passed away on April 5, 1923. It is said that on April 5, 1923, during his death, his dog at Highclere Castle also died in the exact moment. However, accuracy of this incident is highly debatable. The sudden death of Lord Carnarvon sparked the media and the news spread like wildfire. The speculation was that the curse would be upon anyone who broke into the Pharaoh's tomb. According to some Egyptologists, an identical injury could be seen on the cheek of Pharaoh Tutankhamun, similar to the one on Lord Carnarvon's cheek. Over the years, this rumour gained more strength as several other members of the team died of sudden illness or mysterious circumstances. George Jay Gould was a rich American financier and railroad executive. He visited the Pharaoh's tomb in 1923 and fell sick immediately after his visit. He died of Pneumonia. Sir Bruce Ingham was a friend of Howard Carter. Carter gave him a paperweight as a gift. According to sources, the paperweight could have contained a mummified hand wearing a bracelet. The bracelet was likely inscribed with a phrase, "Cursed be who moves my body". It is controversial whether his death was caused by the curse, but his house was burned shortly after he received the gift. When he tried to rebuild it, it was again destroyed by a flood. Captain Richard Bethell was Howard Carter's secretary and was probably the first man to enter the tomb after Carter and Lord Carnarvon. His death also involved theories of the curse's effect. Sir Archibald Douglas Reid, who x-rayed the Pharaoh's body before handing it over to the museum authorities also died. James Henry Breasted, a member of Carter's excavation team faced the same fate. Aaron Ember was an American Egyptologist and was friends with many people who were present during the opening of Tutankhamun's tomb. He died when his house burnt down, and his death was eventually associated with the curse. Hugh Evelyn-White also visited the tomb and probably helped excavate it. He saw the death of about two dozen of

his fellow excavators. He committed suicide and left a note written by his own blood. He wrote that he had succumbed to a curse which forced him to disappear.

There are other aspects which help strengthen the theory of the curse. One of these aspects is the death of Howard Carter's pet canary. The story of his pet canary can be seen in a short piece 'The Tomb of the Bird' published in Pearson's magazine in 1923. One day Carter was in an antiquity emporium at Cairo, suddenly he heard a bird singing melodiously. It was a canary. Later, Carter acquired a canary for himself and took it to the Valley of the Kings where it continued its beautiful songs. The teammates of Carter were so delighted by the canary's singing that they considered it lucky. As days passed by and the excavation progressed, the steps of the staircase down to Tutankhamun's tomb were cleared. According to Carter, the canary went strangely silent and melancholy the day before a sealed doorway was to be revealed at the top of the stairway. It began singing after he informed Lord Carnarvon of the initial discovery and again stopped singing after Carnarvon arrived. The day came when the seals were broken and a hole was made on the door of the tomb, through which Carter could see 'wonderful things'. But on that very day he got a shocking news: A cobra entered his house, made its way to a table on which Carter's pet canary was kept and killed it. Howard Carter was shocked, not just by the news of his canary's passing, but by the co-incidental fact that his torch illuminated one of the cobras within the tomb after peeping through the hole. This happened just before receiving the shocking news of his canary's death. Howard Carter did not support the theory and his answers always ended vaguely when asked about this. He sent a telegram to Lady Evelyn, the daughter of Lord Carnarvon and asked her to bring another canary for him. She brought another canary from Cairo. It could also be heard singing and cheerfulness returned to the workers. This incident also has contrasting opinions. According to documents, on 4 November 1922, the first steps to the tomb were cleared and Carter informed Lord Carnarvon when the team found the sealed door of the tomb. On 26 November, Carter and Carnarvon peeped through a hole and first saw the tomb. If the incident of the canary's death is studied, it can be seen that it was killed by a cobra on 26 November after which Lady Evelyn brought another to Carter. However, Howard Carter's pocket diary says that on 24 November 1922, Lady Evelyn arrived and brought another canary. If this happened on 24 November then the canary must have died before the tomb was entered. This theory has its own supporters as some sources say that the bird was killed days before the tomb was opened. Along with this, it is also said that Carter was not even at the Valley of the Kings at the time of the bird's death, he was at Cairo to meet Lord Carnarvon and his daughter. Thus, two groups emerged – one who supported the existence of a curse and another which didn't.

There is another aspect which signalled the existence of a curse. During the excavation process, damage was done to King Tutankhamun's remains. Carter did not mention this clearly in his writings. Carter, after opening the tomb, understood that it would be a difficult task to free the Pharaoh's remains. Therefore, many methods were applied – they brought the remains under Sun hoping that it would soften, used different tools, etc. These processes were led by Douglas Perry, Professor of Anatomy at the Cairo Medical School. He was assisted by Saleh Bey Hamdi. These processes resulted to be ruinous. According to British archaeologist and Egyptologist Joyce Tyldesley, these details were absent from Howard Carter's documents of the autopsy. However, consulting the

archives and observing the photographs taken by Harry Burton are enough to have some evidences regarding these modifications. In some photos, it can be seen that modifications were done to the skull to make it stand for photography purposes. These are preserved in the Griffith Institute. She pointed some reasons that could be the cause of the absence of these details from his account – hesitation to write about the modifications of king Tutankhamun's body as it could be later interpreted as an act of tampering, he might be guilty of this or he wanted to pay respect to the Pharaoh's privacy. In Carter's second volume of 'The Tomb of Tutankhamun', some photos like the head of the Pharaoh are there. It is clearly observable that only those pictures are selected which are suitable for general audience. This was seen as another potential reason for the curse which killed many.

Benito Mussolini, after Lord Carnarvon's death, ordered to remove a mummy on display which he received as a gift. He did it to avoid the possibility of a diabolical death because of the deadly curse. Even today, many writers write fictional writings about Tutankhamun's curse. The curse is still alive through writings and movies. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of the world-famous 'Sherlock Holmes' series wrote that an evil elemental spirit may have caused Lord Carnarvon's death. Famous film historian Paul M. Jensen reviewed a documentary named 'Mummy Dearest: A Horror Tradition Unearthed'. According to his observations, he said that the theory of the curse was so strongly believed by the people that if anybody even distantly related to a person who was present during the opening of Tutankhamun's tomb dies, the news would grab the story in no time and people would link it with the curse.

Scientific Explanation of the Curse

With the rising popularity of the curse among global audiences, many scholars over time have tried to present a scientific explanation of it. In the recent years, experts claim that the curse was indeed biological. According to them, sealed tombs generally contain pathogens which could kill humans. As Egyptians believed in the concept of afterlife, they kept food in the tombs of important persons after their death. A common Mold named *Aspergillus* was found in Tutankhamun's tomb, which is generally present on grains. This Mold causes life-threatening infections in people with weak immune system like Lord Carnarvon. There are some other bacteria which could be present on tomb walls like *Pseudomonas* and *Staphylococcus*.

Sherif El-Tawil and Tariq El-Tawil wrote a letter to the British medical journal 'The Lancet' in 2003. They said that Lord Carnarvon must have breathed in the infected grain dust inside the tomb. Lord Carnarvon was sick throughout his life. As he was highly prone to upper respiratory diseases, he was most likely affected by this as well. According to the Tawils, he caught *Streptococcus* infection. Another study showed two other types of fungi on mummies of ancient Egypt- *Aspergillus Niger* and *Aspergillus flavus*. According to various scientists, these fungi can cause fatal allergic reactions, such as chest congestion, pulmonary haemorrhaging, or bleeding in the lungs. A similar curse was seen in the 1970s in Poland. Some explorers made their way to the tomb of King Casimir IV. Within some months of visit, 10 out of 12 explorers faced sudden death. This was called the Jagiellonian curse. Studies show that there was *Aspergillus* inside the tomb. Although it could not be clearly proven that it was *Aspergillus* which killed persons associated with the opening of Tutankhamun's tomb, it could be noticed that Lord Carnarvon, George Jay Gould and

and Arthur Mace showed symptoms of Aspergillus infection.

These bacteria and fungi are very dangerous to health and could be fatal. The tombs are also considered hazardous because of the existence of these microorganisms. This was believed to be true for Pharaoh Tutankhamun's tomb as well. Some scholars challenged this belief. F. DeWolfe Miller, Professor of Epidemiology at the University of Hawaii, said that Lord Carnarvon was comparatively safer inside the tomb than outside. According to her, Upper Egypt was not so hygienic in the 1920s. Therefore, the notion that a 3,000-year-old tomb contained microorganisms that killed numerous humans by poisoning is bizarre, according to her. She did not even personally know someone who was ever affected by some tomb toxins.

The existence of the curse was further questioned by the fact that there was no curse written in hieroglyphics anywhere in the tomb of Tutankhamun who died around 1323 BCE. According to H. V. F. Winstone in his book 'Howard Carter and the Discovery of the Tomb of Tutankhamun', Howard Carter never believed in these superstitions and completely dismissed them. These were always tommyrot to Howard Carter.

Conclusion

The curse of Tutankhamun remains one of the most heated historical debates even today. Many scholars, researchers, Egyptologists and archaeologists have actively participated in the debate and many more will do so. However, nothing could be fully proven, neither the existence of a curse nor the legitimacy of the theory of human-killing microorganisms. Generally, drawing a conclusion from a debate that is either historical or supernatural is a very difficult task. Interestingly, the debate about Tutankhamun's curse involves both. So, drawing a conclusion seems nearly impossible. Some say that the curse was the brainchild of the media to cash in the opportunity. Eventually, this actually became highly profitable for the media at that time. Today, there are hundreds of opinions, debates, books, articles, documents, reports, etc. regarding the curse. Neither could prove its existence nor could they prove that the curse does not exist. Ultimately, the truth will remain behind the mysteries and debates. However, the legacy of Tutankhamun and the curse will forever captivate historians and remain a contentious issue in academia.

Notes:

1. Egypt Exploration Society: The Egypt Exploration Society (EES) is a British charitable organization founded in 1882, as the Egypt Exploration Fund. It was founded by Amelia Edwards and Reginald Stuart Poole in order to explore, survey, and excavate at ancient sites in Egypt and Sudan, and to publish the results of this work. Today it is one of the leading such archaeological organizations.
2. Egyptian Antiquities Service: The Egyptian Antiquities Service or the Egyptian Antiquities Organization is technically an independent entity from the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (formerly the Ministry of Antiquities). The organization is responsible for managing all archaeological sites, overseeing excavations, conducting conservation efforts, administering Egyptian museums, and handling other related activities in Egypt. Today it is known as Supreme Council of Antiquities.

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