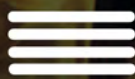


TUTANKHAMUN

DISCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN PHARAOH



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TUTANKHAMUN

DISCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN PHARAOH

Catalogue edited by
Simon CONNOR and Dimitri LABOURY

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Agostinho da Cunha, untimely seized by the Abductor, as ancient Egyptians called it.

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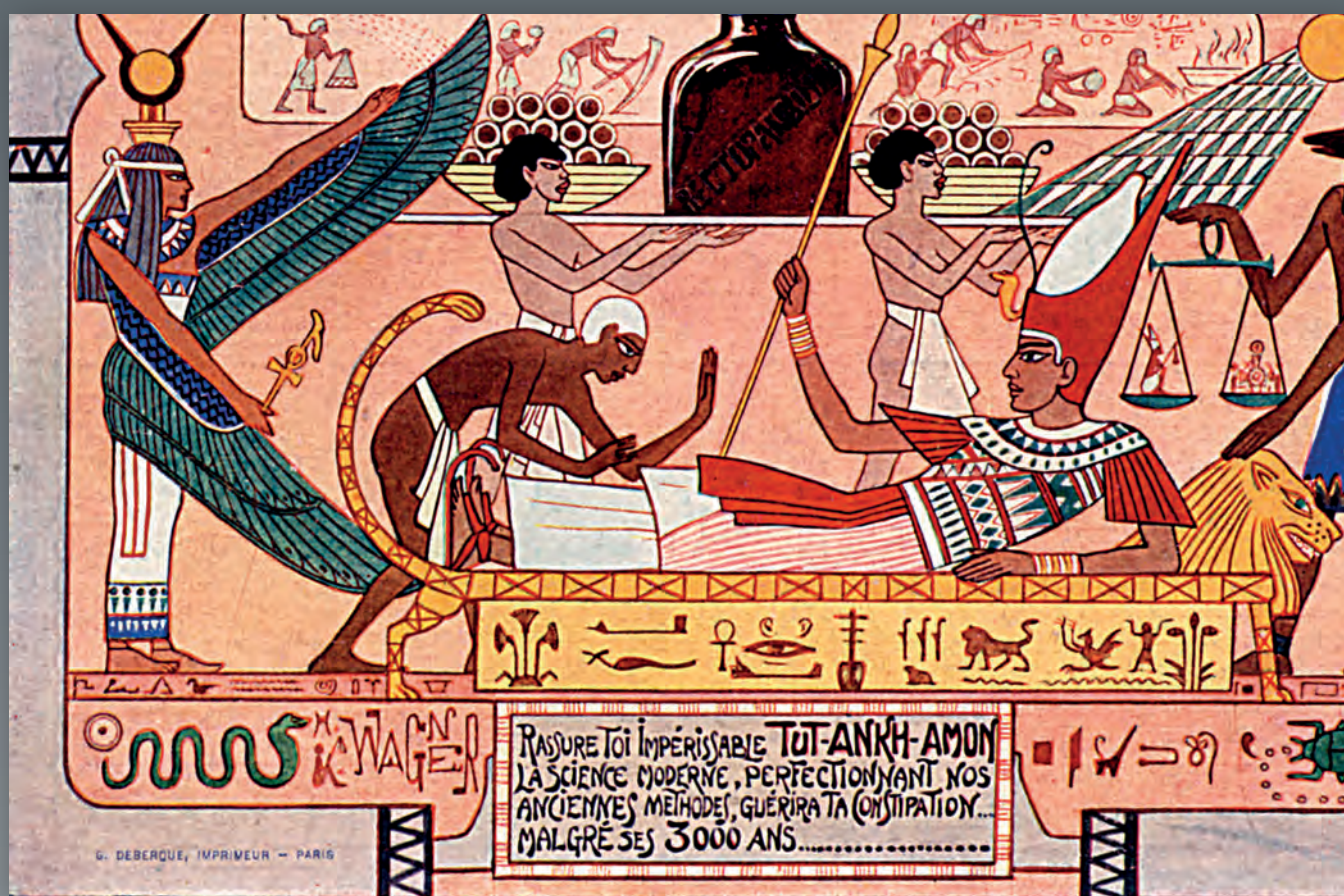
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Resurrecting Tutankhamun

Jean-Michel BRUFFAERTS

Belgians Cursed by Tutankhamun

At the end of March 1923, during a dinner in honour of Queen Elisabeth of Belgium at the Residence of the British High Commissioner, Lady Allenby (the spouse of the British High Commissioner) disclosed to her guests that a mysterious illness had just affected Lord Carnarvon, the patron who had guided them through the tomb of Tutankhamun a few weeks earlier. Turning towards the Duke of Brabant (and future King Leopold III), she made a bizarre prediction which he would later reveal to his close family members: “She warned me (legends spread out quickly) without any trace of humour that all those who had entered the tomb of

Tutankhamun — including me — were doomed to die soon.” To the strange words of Lady Allenby, the Belgians responded with a smile. However, on April 5th, the day of their homecoming to Belgium, that smile turned into a grimace: a telegram stated that Carnarvon had died that same morning in Cairo. The British aristocrat, notoriously of weak constitution, passed away following a generalized infection from a mosquito bite he cut while shaving.

Soon enough, the “mysterious” death of Carnarvon was sparking off rumours, and all of a sudden the newspapers were crammed with articles. Those of a more serious inclination suspected a



Fig. 1: Lady Allenby's strange prediction. Reception at the “Cairo Residence” (Cairo, March 1923). Queen Elisabeth is seated between the British High Commissioner Lord Edmund Allenby and Lady Allenby (born Adélaïde Chapman). Behind, between others: Jean Capart and Prince Léopold.

secret venom deposited inside the tomb of the pharaoh at the moment of his funeral, the presence of fungi or other pathogenic agents. Those of a more sensationalist nature were inclined to believe in a supernatural intervention, and were quick to mention the *curse of the pharaoh*. They even listed the coincidences: at the moment of Carnarvon's death, his dog — who had remained in England — dropped dead; Howard Carter's canary was swallowed by a snake; and an electrical malfunction plunged Cairo into darkness... And what else?

The years rolled on and the conjectures continued unabated. Journalists tirelessly enumerated the “suspicious” deaths of those who desecrated the tomb. However, they forgot to recall that many people had visited the tomb since its opening, and that death is — after all — quite a widespread phenomenon among human beings. Moreover, they also refused to explain the selectiveness of the curse: some people seemed to resist it better than others, starting with Howard Carter who, notwithstanding his “cardinal sin”, refused to die until 1939, close to his 65th birthday. Turning our attention to the Belgians who participated in the inauguration ceremony of the funerary chapel, we may be surprised to learn that even they managed to stick around for a fair old while: Queen Elisabeth passed away at 89 years old in 1965, while her son, Leopold, died in 1983, at the age of 82. But let us trust the occultists: the curse does encompass a few variants. After all, didn't Leopold III have a tormented reign, which ended up in his abdication in 1951? And isn't it odd that 1951 turns out to be the year in which Queen Elisabeth entrusted the *Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire* of Brussels with the piece of funerary cloth of Tutankhamun that was offered to her by Lord Carnarvon? These cannot be simple coincidences...

What about Jean Capart, the pioneer of Belgian Egyptology, who — another coincidence? — inspired Hergé for the character of Professor Bergamotte, the last among the seven victims of the curse cast by Rascar-Capac in *Tintin and the Seven Crystal Balls*? Although he had chosen to accompany the Queen and her son to Egypt in 1923, and ended up setting Tutankhamun at the centre of several



Fig. 2: *Historama*, 299 (October 1976)

of his publications and conferences, he did not die immediately; on the contrary, he waited until the year of his 70th birthday to pass away. But can we honestly state without any shadow of a doubt that the curse did not touch him whatsoever?

In February 1924, the journalist Myriam Harry published in the French magazines “*L’Illustration*” and “*Conferencia*” two articles in which she reported that Carnarvon had fallen victim to a curse cast by the two “human-jackal statues with a black, pointy snout” placed at the entrance of the funerary chamber. It also slipped out that these same statues (which are actually representations of Tutankhamun himself) had caused Queen Elisabeth to run away. This statement attracted the rage of Capart, who



Fig. 3: the Hall of the Apamea of Syria after the fire. Brussels, Royal Museums of Art and History (February 1946. Photograph © IRPA).

demanded and obtained the right to answer back. In 1930, in his own journal *Chronique d'Égypte*, Capart himself made fun of all the “mysterious attacks” that had been attributed to Tutankhamun. In recalling the death of Carnarvon’s and Carter’s friend, Richard Bethel, he ironically wrote: “This is, as we have been told, the ninth victim of Tutankhamun. We should probably learn how to count them, given that one of these magazines assures us that ‘collaborators of Sir (*sic*) Howard Carter and himself died one after the other in the time span of a few years’. Carter will probably think this is a bad joke!” The following year, Queen Elisabeth asked her personal Egyptologist for elucidations on the Frenchman Henry Durville, who had just presented her with a gift of his latest book, *Les Portes du Temple*. Capart answered that, in a recent conference in Paris, this occultist — whom he described as being a “parasite” and a “charlatan” — had declared that the revenge of Tutankhamun was going to hunt down all those misbelievers who had violated his tomb, before shouting: “And rightly so!”

The myth became entrenched and Capart had to deal with it on a daily basis. On his own admission, he couldn’t teach a class on Tutankhamun without someone asking his opinion on the pharaoh’s revenge. In 1932, at the International Garden Club of New York, he was questioned at length about the “dangers” that the tomb presented. In 1934, he accepted an invitation to speak about the evil curses of Tutankhamun at the “*Conférences populaires de Bruxelles*” on condition that he would have been allowed to play down the myth: “If knowledge is to be spread among the people, he wrote, one has to carefully refrain from being ‘brainwashed’.” And what about the journalists whose only interest lied in this matter? “Eventually,” he wrote in his own diary in 1935, “it will all just become a boring saga.” From this mediatic excitement, Capart drew the following conclusion: “Thinking about it, I begin to believe that there may be a specific fate for this discovery, as there has also been for a whole series of other sensational discoveries in the Egyptological world...”

In February 1946, a year before passing away, Jean Capart was struck by the curse of Tutankhamun for the last time, experiencing several twists of fate within three days. In Cairo, pursued by a group of Egyptian nationalists who had set fire to his hotel, he managed to flee onto the roof, clinging on to an Egyptian statuette. He escaped death by a whisker. The next day, just after he had recovered from this emotional swirl, he was informed that during the night a violent fire had struck the Musée du Cinquantenaire, where he had been head curator since 1925. The information arriving from Brussels seemed to suggest the damage had been enormous. In need of distraction, he decided to visit the royal necropolis at Tanis. Along the road, his car dived into an irrigation canal. He emerged unscathed, although shaken to the bone. He then left Egypt and never went back again. The tale of Capart's misfortunes travelled the world, and in response he received several compassionate messages. Many alluded to the revenge of the pharaoh. What did the interested

party think about it? "The mummies are getting their revenge, say those with a weak spirit, when what they should really be saying is: without Tutankhamun's protection, we would not have managed to escape and the Foundation's library would have burned to the ground..." While he refused to believe that Tutankhamun could have wanted vengeance over him, Capart was never able to debunk the myth. And just as Lady Winifred Burghclere, the sister of Carnarvon, had emphasized earlier, a story that begins like a tale from *A Thousand and One Nights*, and ends with the Greek myth of Nemesis — the divine personification of the fair wrath of the gods — cannot but strike the imagination of men and women, who continue to be enchanted by what is wonderful, even in their everyday lives...

FURTHER READING

Luckhurst 2012.

Fig. 4: *Toutankhamon* game marketed by Jumbo in 1991 and capitalizing on the theme of the king's curse.

