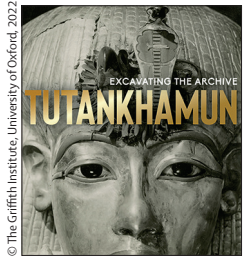




## Exhibition

### Excavating and deciphering Tutankhamun



**Tutankhamun: Excavating the Archive**  
 Weston Library, Bodleian Library,  
 University of Oxford, Oxford, UK,  
 until Feb 5, 2023  
<https://visit.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/event/tutankhamun-excavating-the-archive>

**Tutankhamun: Excavating the Archive**  
 Bodleian Library Publishing  
 published in association with the  
 Griffith Institute, 2022  
 pp 144, £30.00  
 ISBN 9781851245857

A tantalising monochrome photograph of Tutankhamun’s burial chamber in Egypt’s Valley of the Kings compels attention in *Tutankhamun: Excavating the Archive*. This exhibition and accompanying book revitalise the legendary 1920s archaeological discovery, using original excavation documents archived at the UK’s University of Oxford. The image shows ancient doors engraved with hieroglyphs still shuttered by a coiled rope linking two metal hoops with the seal of the royal necropolis: a jackal perched over nine bound enemies. When the doors were opened by archaeologists, they revealed a sarcophagus covered in hieroglyphs, containing three nested coffins and Tutankhamun’s mummy with the youthful pharaoh’s poignant golden death mask.

Until the decipherment of hieroglyphs was initiated in 1822 by Egyptologist Jean-François Champollion, no one had encountered the name Tutankhamun for some three millennia. The “boy king”, who reigned briefly in the 14th century BCE, had been forgotten by his people: an oblivion that preserved his lavish tomb from wholesale ancient robbery. It is the only substantially intact ancient Egyptian royal burial.

Tutankhamun’s tomb was discovered in 1922 by Howard Carter. A gifted

artist and struggling solo archaeologist, sponsored by wealthy Lord Carnarvon, Carter spotted a step in the Valley’s floor. Digging down, his team revealed

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a staircase to the long-concealed entrance. “On the lower part the seal impressions were much clearer, and we were able without any difficulty to make out on several of them the [hieroglyphic] name of Tut.ankh. Amen”, Carter wrote in 1923. Soon the pharaoh—and his discoverer—were world famous.

After Carter’s death in 1939, his estate went to his niece Phyllis Walker, who briefly worked with him in Egypt—pictured as a child in a charming Edwardian family photograph in this exhibition. She gifted her uncle’s records to the University of Oxford’s Griffith Institute: some 48 maps and plans, seven card-index drawers with over 3500 object cards with associated prints, sets of duplicate negatives and photographs by Harry Burton, as well as Carter’s diaries and excavation journals, plus his notes and drawings for the classic three-volume report, *The Tomb of Tut.ankh.Amen* (1923–33).

The selection dug from this unique archive by the institute’s staff with exhibition curators Egyptologist Daniela Rosenow and Oxford’s Professor of Egyptology Richard Bruce Parkinson, makes for a highly personal and historically engaging show. The fascinating accompanying book includes images of 50 archival records. These open with a hand-written journal by the archaeologist Flinders Petrie offering his not-so-prescient 1892

comment on the 17-year-old Carter in Egypt—“Mr Carter is a good-natured lad, whose interest is entirely in painting & natural history...it is of no use for me to work him up as an excavator”—and close with a magnificent Burton photograph of Tutankhamun’s sarcophagus, marking the finale of Carter’s excavations in 1933. This “still stands in the heart of the small tomb that safeguarded the royal burial with all its ‘wonderful things’”, comment the curators, citing Carter’s words on first peering into the tomb’s darkness with a candle, supposedly spoken to an anxiously waiting Carnarvon.

The book’s records provide the exhibition’s narrative, charting Carter’s relentless progress from discovery to worldwide fascination with Tutankhamun from the later 1920s—assisted by several Egyptologists and many Egyptians left unidentified and unrecognised in the colonial manner of the time. But it cannot explain the pharaoh’s premature death. This still provokes archaeological speculation—ranging from murder to malaria—despite recent scientific examination of his mummy. Instead, the exhibition briefly examines Carnarvon’s sudden death in Egypt in 1923. His lethal fate—most likely caused by a mosquito bite infected while he was shaving—notoriously triggered international rumours about “Tutankhamun’s Curse” on his British tomb “robbers”. Parkinson’s diagnosis in the book is more penetrating: “The popular appeal of the ‘treasures’ of Tutankhamun has unwittingly added to the legacy of orientalism and colonialism: this aftermath is perhaps the real ‘curse’ to emerge from the tomb.”

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I am the author of *Cracking the Egyptian Code: The Revolutionary Life of Jean-François Champollion* (Thames & Hudson).



Howard Carter and an Egyptian colleague examining the inner coffin. (Carter no. 255/ original print, 17.2 x 21.2 cm Harry Burton, probably 26 October 1925 Burton A0770/ © The Griffith Institute, University of Oxford, 2022)