

# PREFACE:

## DECIPHERING TUTANKHAMUN

When, in 1822, the world's first Egyptologist, Jean-François Champollion, announced his initial decipherment of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, no one had heard the name Tutankhamun for some three millennia. Not even fellow specialists in Egyptian history were aware of this pharaoh – unlike, for example, Ramesses, who was known from ancient Egyptian historical sources written in Greek. The 'boy king' had been consigned to oblivion by his own people – which ironically would ensure the survival of his entrancing, gold-filled tomb until modern times. After this was dramatically discovered in 1922 in the Valley of the Kings near modern Luxor (ancient Thebes) by archaeologist Howard Carter, Tutankhamun was immediately identified from its hieroglyphic inscriptions, and rapidly became world famous. Today, Tutankhamun is undoubtedly the most celebrated of ancient Egyptians.

He first peered out of history in the late 1820s when the pioneer Egyptologist John Gardner Wilkinson began exploring the Nile Valley and the Eastern Desert between the river and the Red Sea. At a remote site east of Edfu, Wilkinson's 'eagle eyes noted a stone block bearing the names of Tutankhamun' – notably in the form of his throne name Nebkheperura ('[the sun god] Ra is the lord of manifestations').

At the same time, Wilkinson's friend Lord Prudhoe was exploring Upper Nubia. At Gebel Barkal, near the fourth cataract of the Nile, he discovered two striking statues of recumbent lions, carved from a block of red granite. Created by the pharaoh Amenhotep III, grandfather of Tutankhamun, in the 14th century BC, they had been restored by Tutankhamun with a dedicatory inscription in his name. In 1835, Prudhoe presented the lions to the British Museum, where they later became the first objects to greet visitors to the museum's Egyptian sculpture gallery.

Further references to Tutankhamun followed in the second half of the 19th century. At Amarna, tomb reliefs, royal inscriptions and the clay tablets known as the Amarna Letters revealed that Tutankhamun's father, the pharaoh Akhenaten, had broken so radically with tradition

that after his death he and his associates had been erased from the official record. Hence Tutankhamun's consignment to oblivion.

Another important reference to Tutankhamun appeared in 1905: hieroglyphic inscriptions on a great stone stela in the temple of Karnak, north of Luxor. The dedicatory inscription described the restoration of Karnak and other temples by Tutankhamun after their abandonment by Akhenaten. Apparently, Tutankhamun had rejected his father's teachings and returned Thebes to its former religious and royal status.

Now the hunt was on to find his tomb. In 1909, Theodore Davis – a businessman turned archaeologist – claimed to have located it, when he discovered a small, undecorated, mud-filled chamber in the Valley. Though clearly abandoned in antiquity, it contained fragments of gold foil with the names of Tutankhamun and his wife, plus other objects bearing the king's name. In 1912, Davis controversially concluded that 'the Valley of the Tombs is now exhausted'. Yet the highly experienced Carter, who had once worked for Davis, was unconvinced. With the help of his sponsor Lord Carnarvon, he went on relentlessly searching for Tutankhamun's tomb. On 4 November 1922, he discovered a promising first step, leading down into the Valley floor. He and his workforce began to dig.

Soon Carter revealed the upper part of a door stamped with the seal impressions of the royal necropolis. But it was getting dark, and they had to stop. 'With some reluctance I re-closed the small hole I had made, filled in our excavation for protection during the night, selected the most trustworthy of my workmen – themselves almost as excited as I was – to watch all night above the tomb, and so home by moonlight, riding down the Valley', Carter later wrote in *The Tomb of Tut.Ankh.Amen*. Obligated to alert his sponsor before digging further, he sent a telegram to Carnarvon in Britain and awaited his arrival in Luxor. Then, together, they revealed the whole staircase of sixteen steps on 24 November. '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 name of Tut.ankh.Amen.' This was the key moment in what would become perhaps the greatest of all archaeological discoveries—made possible by the greatest of all archaeological decipherments a century earlier, led by one of the most intriguing figures in the history of archaeology: Champollion.