



Howard Carter (right) and Arthur Callender (left) wrap a guardian statue from Tutankhamun's tomb.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Tales of Tutankhamun

A pair of authors set out to humanize the enigmatic pharaoh 100 years after his tomb's discovery

By Andrew Robinson

When the tomb of Tutankhamun—the pharaoh who died circa 1323 BCE at the age of 19 after a reign of about 9 years—was discovered by archaeologist Howard Carter in November 1922 in the Valley of the Kings near modern Luxor (ancient Thebes), the “boy king” was immediately identified from hieroglyphic inscriptions on seal impressions at its entrance and rapidly became world famous. Today, he is undoubtedly the most celebrated of ancient Egyptians, while at the same time remaining highly enigmatic.

As Carter warned in his three-volume work *The Tomb of Tut. ankh. Amen*, “The mystery of his life still eludes us—the shadows move but the dark is never quite dispersed” (1). There is no certainty about the identity of his mother, for example, or his health, or the cause of his death. Speculations about the latter include a chariot accident, a hippo attack, malaria, and even murder. CT scanning, MRI, and DNA analysis of his mummy, along with other techniques, have

yet to yield an undisputed answer.

The two books about Tutankhamun reviewed here—both published to coincide with the centennial of the tomb's discovery (and the bicentennial of the hieroglyphic decipherment)—could scarcely be more different in appearance and approach. *The Story of Tutankhamun* is a relatively brief, decently illustrated, and widely appealing biography intended for nonexperts. It is written by author and journalist Garry Shaw, who has published several books on ancient Egyptian culture during the past decade. By contrast, *The Complete Tutankhamun* is a lengthy, multi-sectioned catalog of the contents of the tomb and related material with copious highly detailed and magnificently reproduced illustrations, aimed at specialists but also seductive for the dedicated general reader. Its compiler, Nicholas Reeves, is an Egyptologist who has excavated in the Valley of the Kings and a long-time Tutankhamun specialist. First published in 1990, the book has been extensively revised to include new discoveries and in-

formed speculations, with a lovely redesigned cover featuring Tutankhamun's exquisite hieroglyphic cartouche in gold.

Naturally, both books set out to humanize the pharaoh. “My hope is that by the end of this book, you will see Tutankhamun in a new light,” writes Shaw in his introduction. “Not just as a remote and ancient god king, who died young and was buried with fabulous treasures; not just as a symbol or celebrity; but as a real person, with loved ones, personal beliefs, responsibilities, hobbies and health problems.” Likewise, Reeves, in his “Treasures” section, writes: “here, among the boy's treasures, are the materials to flesh out his bones, breathe air into his shrivelled lungs and glimpse something, perhaps, of personality, tastes and affections.”

Note Reeves's cautionary “perhaps,” plus the revealing fact that Shaw brings the story of Tutankhamun's life to an end halfway through his book. (The second half is devoted to the pharaoh's tomb; the history of its rediscovery; and “Tut-mania,” the international fascination with the boy king since 1922.) For any Egyptologist, the chief difficulty in understanding Tutankhamun's life and mind, as opposed to his diverse and richly decorated possessions, is that no writing by Tutankhamun himself survives—only brief and insignificant inscriptions on some of the possessions found with his remains.

The tomb does contain multiple examples of scribal equipment, including two writing palettes bearing the pharaoh's name with evidence of their use. Such objects suggest that the teenager could write the cursive hieratic script and presumably read the more formal hieroglyphic script. But surprisingly, and to the disappointment of Egyptologists, no papyri—blank or inscribed—have been found, despite the discovery of a box probably used to store papyrus rolls. Reeves guesses that the tomb's papyri were stolen during two robberies within a few years of the burial.

Tutankhamun's sandals, walking sticks, tunics, wine jars, toys, heirlooms, and archetypal golden mask thus remain as intriguing as ever, but “the teenager behind the mask” (as Shaw refers to him) remains elusive. ■



The Complete Tutankhamun
Nicholas Reeves
Thames & Hudson,
2023. 464 pp.



The Story of Tutankhamun
Garry J. Shaw
Yale University Press,
2023. 208 pp.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. H. Carter, *The Tomb of Tut. ankh. Amen, Volumes I–III* (Cassell, 1923–1933).

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