The Curse of the Curse of the Pharaohs

DAVID SILVERMAN

“Cursed be those that disturb the rest of Pharaoh. They that shall break the seal of this tomb shall meet death by a disease which no doctor can diagnose.” (Inscription reported to have been carved on an Egyptian royal tomb)

Throughout the centuries, ancient Egypt and its civilization have often been referred to in terms of the dark and mysterious. Encounters with its strange customs have frequently led people, both ancient and modern, to have misconceptions about this land. The Greeks acknowledged that much ancient wisdom, such as the basic of mathematics, architecture, art, science, medicine, and even philosophy, ultimately derived from the Egyptians; but they still had some difficulty in understanding, accepting, or even dealing with the alien and unfamiliar aspects of the religion. Greek historians often wrote about the mysterious ways in which the Egyptians worshiped their deities, such as this note by Herodotus: "There are not a great many wild animals in Egypt...Such as there are—are both wild and tame— are without exception held to be sacred” (II, 65). He also wrote a disclaimer: “I am not anxious to repeat what I was told about the Egyptian religion...for I do not think that any one nation knows more about such things than any other” (II, 4). Of course he then goes on to state: "[The Egyptians] are religious to excess” (II, 35-39).

Egyptian; the history of the rest of the ancient world, with its pantheon of fantastic deities, part animal, part human, its cultures derived from an alien culture from outer space, rather than to accept the documented evidence of their earthly origin. This and other equally inaccurate theories are espoused by people fondly referred to by Egyptologists as “pyramidologists”. But while some modern ideas about ancient Egypt are based on a mixture of mis-guided awe and respect, others appear to have originated under less innocent circumstances. One of the most persistent examples of the latter type is the so-called curse of the pharaohs.

An Egyptologist Cursed

During the last hundred years or so, the phrase “curse of the pharaohs” has been used to describe the cause of a large assortment of ills. These range from natural disasters to a mild stomach disorder that often plagues tourists to Egypt (also known as “pharaoh’s revenge,” or “gippy tummy”—derived from “Egyptian tummy”). I became personally involved with this curse (I mean that supposedly written by or for the pharaohs), when I became Project Egyptologist for the Treasures of Tutankhamun Exhibit that traveled across the United States from 1976 to 1979. Charged with writing the text that appeared in the exhibit, I conducted research on all aspects of the discovery, excavation, and recording of Tutankhamun’s tomb and its contents. Naturally, I came across several references to the famous “curse of King Tut.” But before I had begun to deal with that matter on more than a superficial level, I came into contact with the “curse of the king’s pharaoh mask was opened. I was circumspect, cautious, and at my scholarly best. Moreover, the entire discussion was taped; this way, I thought, I would be sure that the real facts behind the curse of King Tut were included, and any misunderstandings avoided. Afterward I waited expectantly for the newspaper to appear. The front page was as accurate as I could have hoped, but on the follow-up, the headline read: “Egyptologist admits there was a curse.” In fact, this line did bear some relationship to what I had said. In discussing the deaths of those associated with the tomb of King Tut I had remarked: “It is true that everyone who enters the tomb will die, just as it is true that everyone who crosses Woodlawn Avenue (a main thoroughfare on the University of Chicago campus) will eventually die.” I never expected to have my remark edited in such a creative way and taken out of context. While this kind of misinformation may seem innocuous enough, there were several other articles that gratuitously included unsubstantiated “facts”, such as that which appeared in the Washington Post (March 16, 1977): “Curse be those that disturb the rest of the pharaohs” read an inscription on his tomb. There was in fact no curse on either the walls of the tomb or on any object found inside it. So, you may well ask, if there was no curse, how is it that there are so many of them attributed to the tomb and its owner? In the case of the “curse” articles written during the latest King Tut exhibit, I venture to say that most if not all references to the curse derived from ignorance and a desire for a catchy headline—not necessarily in that order.

The Troubles of Carter and Carnarvon

From the time of the discovery of the young pharaoh’s tomb in 1922 it was surrounded by controversy. The original concession granted to the excavators by the Egyptian government called for some division of the finds between the host country and the excavator, as had been the custom in the past.
In the end, such a division was precluded, primarily because of the destructiveness of keeping together the contents of a nearly intact tomb that was such an important part of the heritage of the country, not to mention the magnitude of the discovery, its impact on the world, and its effect on our knowledge of the past. While Lord Carnarvon, the sponsor of the expedition, hardly needed or indeed expected vast remuneration for his archaeological efforts, there was the question of the cost of six years of field work conducted for Carnarvon by Howard Carter before the tomb was discovered. Moreover, there were six and one-half more years of work ahead in order to clear the tomb, and then four years of work to be completed in the laboratory before the last of the artifacts would leave the Valley of the Kings for the Cairo Museum.

In a stunning move that was calculated to deal with all of his problems (not the least of which was the overwhelming demand for information from the press), Lord Carnarvon sold the exclusive rights to publish anything about the tomb to the Times of London. By this action, Carnarvon was able not only to offset the costs of previous and future work at the site, but also to avoid constant interruptions by the press. In the past, members of the expedition had been badgered to utter distraction by reporters hungry for stories about an event that had aroused the interest of the public; now, reporters no longer had direct access to such sources. This is not to say that the Times withheld all information; it did give out stories—but only after they appeared in the Times, with the result that all other newspapers were always at least a day behind the Times with any news about the boy king.

This situation angered the press, but they were not the only ones who were disgruntled. In an effort to keep tourists from interrupting those who were trying to record and clear the tomb, Carter and Carnarvon had barred virtually all but a select few from the excavation. Some officials of the Antiquities Service, other Egyptologists, and political figures from Egypt and around the world could not gain access to the tomb easily. Such secrecy caused rumors to flourish, the most malicious of which referred to the planned theft of some objects. Unfortunately, there may well have been a bit of truth to these stories, and some authors claim that a few artifacts now in the collections of museums outside Egypt may have originated in Tut's tomb.

Conversely, one of the objects that remained in the collection and is now on exhibit in the Cairo Museum may not have come from its designated find spot. A head of Tutankhamun portrayed as the god Nefertum emerging from a lotus depicts one of the ancient creation myths. According to Carter's later published reports, it was found in the corridor to Tut's tomb; this location, however, really did not make much sense, since all similar objects were found in the Treasury. Carter did not include any real information about the head in his original field reports, nor did he note it in the first volumes of his book. In fact, the figure was "discovered" in a neighboring tomb (used for storage) when a committee of officials visited the site during Carter's absence. It was carefully wrapped, and stored in a crate with labels from a European provision shop. Despite these irregularities, no scandal emerged, and the apparently hastily devised version of its origin has become the official story: it was found in debris in the corridor, where it had been left by (ancient) thieves.

While the media missed out on this particular episode, they did have a field day when Lord Carnarvon died on May 6, 1923—less than a year after the discovery of the tomb. There were all sorts of versions of the specific "curse" to which Carnarvon's death could be attributed, but most tried to relate it to an inscription of warning in the tomb. Some of the reporters had the aid of disgruntled Egyptologists, who had not only been denied access to the tomb, but also any information about it. Since there was no love lost between Carter and Carnarvon and some of their scholarly colleagues, there was always someone who was willing to provide information about certain objects or inscriptions in the tomb, based solely on published photographs. In this manner, many inscriptions could be construed as curses by the public, especially after a "re-translation" by the press. For example, an innocuous text inscribed on mud plaster before the Anubis shrine in the Treasury stated: "I am the one who prevents the sand from blocking the secret chamber." In the newspaper, it metamorphized into: "...I will kill all of those who cross this threshold into the sacred precincts of the royal king who lives forever."

Such misrepresentation proliferates...
malaria bite on the cheek, cut open by a ca'or during shaving.

Corroboration for Tutankhamun’s curse mounted as people died who could be associated in some way with Carter or with the tomb. More rational explanations of these deaths were overlooked by the reporters, who could finally get a scoop and not have to wait for the Times to present their facts. Throughout the world, the story of the death of Carter and Carnarvon had been reported in detail, though not necessarily with accuracy. The press had been tricked before by the death of Carter’s conservator (A.C. Mace of the Metropolitan Museum of Art); the fact that Mace had had pneumonia for a long time did not appear to affect the story. So another man fell to the curse. A friend of Carnarvon’s who was in far and elderly was the next to succumb. Then the Egyptologist, archaeologist, and writer Weigall, (who Carter and Carnarvon had attempted to keep out of the tomb under any circumstances) died too, supposedly from the curse.

An Egyptian prince was murdered in London by his jealous French wife—another victim! Soon there was talk of the curse of Tutankhamun, stories of curses and killings from museums all over the world, in which some answer the jinns that come in close contact with any of its contents, but had nevertheless been struck down. Nevertheless, some people are still cleaning out their basements and attics and sending their Egyptian relics to museums in order to avoid being the next victim.

There have been explanations of how the curse of Tutankhamun could have been spread. About 15 years ago, the Director General of the Egyptian Antiquities Department (Dr. Gamal Meheer) died; he had been chronically ill, but his death was attributed to the movement of King Tut’s treasures for an exhibition in England. Even more recently, I had to testify for the prosecution at the trial of a man who had murdered his wife because of the defense claimed he had been cursed by an Egyptian object. We had come into the couple’s possession.

Carter, it should be noted, died in bed of malaria. The report that appeared in the New York Times (March 2, 1939) more than 17 years after he discovered the tombs of Tutankhamun.

Some Real Egyptian Curses

All of the fabrications and exaggerations described above neglect two points. The first is that there may well have been some natural phenomena in Tut’s tomb (or any tomb, for that matter) that could cause disease, for example, mold or spores. It is a fact that paleo-pathologists and micro-British archaeologists and anthropologists now suggest that mummies be examined by people wearing gloves and masks to prevent the spread of any infection. Indeed, the Philadelphia Inquirer recently ran an article on this topic, entitled “Thesis: Fungi, not a curse, killed the finders of King Tut’s Tomb” (July 30, 1985). Of course, this theory does not account for Carter’s remarkable resistance to the micro-organisms, not to mention the workers and scientists attached to the project, officials, and tourists who also survived.

The second point is that the ancient Egyptians did in fact use curses. Most of them are couched in the form of threats, and they occur mainly on the monuments of private citizens rather than on those of royalty (see box). This interesting observation may indicate that royalty had protection against its enemies through other sources. In fact, most of the curses come from inscriptions on the walls of private tombs of the Old Kingdom, during a time when the royal tombs (pyramids) were decorated with a set of spells called Pyramid Texts that were meant as aids, advice, and directions for the king. Because of their size, prominence, and the existence of a large number of private tombs, the New Kingdom inscriptions in the funerary temples, the royal funerary monuments obviously had the protection they needed.
Some Non-Royal Curses

Most genuine Egyptian curses take a particular form, and, once established, the pattern remains intact. Those placed on private tombs during the Old Kingdom are usually preceded by a formula such as: "As for any [here is a putative title of any one of several professions] who shall pass by [this monument], may he be a thousand of...[a variety of provisions]; he will receive...[one of several benefactions]." Then follows the threat:

As for anyone who will do something evil against this my grave seize a stone from this my tomb remove any stone or any brick from this my tomb enter this tomb in impurity enter upon these my images in impurity (the last two can be emblazoned with "after he has eaten the abomination which the beneficent ones detest")

which is then followed by the punishment: he will be judged regarding it by the great god. I will write his back like a goose [or like a bird] and cause those who live upon earth to fear the spirits who are in the West. I will exterminate his survivors.

I will not allow their farms to be occupied. Other forms of threat do occur: "As for everything which you shall do against this my grave, the like shall be done against yours."

Examples of curses from the Middle Kingdom are rarer, perhaps in part because of the use of protective spells that occur in the Coffin Texts. Every man who will interfere with my or my sister, I will free him with the place in which judgement is made. (Seth 1959: 57, 17-18).

As for anyone who has committed a sin against my images, I will destroy its writings or who will do damage to its images, they will fall to the wrath of Thoth. (Seth 1959:85, 1-3).

Less formidable are the warnings that occur in the Letters to the Dead, in which those on earth ask the spirits of the dead for aid and protection. Sometimes the living greet the issue with a threat: "Am I being injured in your presence?... who then will pour out water for you?" (Gardiner and Seth 1959: 4).

Even private letters can contain expressions of ill will such as that written by one Middle Kingdom woman from el Lahun to another, with the closing expression: "May the gods of the underworld come into being against him forever and ever. As for the one who will obliterate [this decree] the gods of the underworld, goddess Neith will come into being against him forever and ever. His son shall not be born..."

He will live in the sky with the gods of the underworld. His family will not be able to remain on earth. (Translation based on transcription of the stela in Spiegelberg 1905:59-60)

Important decrees could also be protected by threats, especially in regard to specific individuals already proclaimed guilty, as this injunction shows:

As to any king and powerful person who will forgive him, he will not receive the white crown, he will not raise upon him the crown, he will not dwell upon the throne of Horus of the living. As for any commoner who has not received public judgment, he will not receive the lord to punish him, his property and his fields will be put as offerings for my father Min of Captos." (Sethe 1959:68, 1ff.).

It is clear that while the Egyptians rarely made the kind of curses that you find in the headlines, they did understand the power of negative thinking and saying. Their curses are hardly a mystery, hardly an enigma. Their suggestive remarks and threats were meant to dissuade those who would not act against them. The means by which this was accomplished was the written word, so important a part of Egyptian culture. The curse would survive as long as the monument on which it was written.