

Some remarks on King Tut 's grave

The discovery of the almost intact burial of King Tutankhamun by Howard Carter in 1922 spurred imagination beyond belief. And no wonder. The combination was just too appealing: fabulous riches, enchanting beauty, touching details, exciting palace intrigue, and a boy-king of just 18 years old, with the handsomest face you'd ever seen.

"King Tut" is now an icon in the Hall of Fame, right alongside Caesar and Hannibal, Joan of Arc, Napoleon and Elvis. And as is usual with this category, his myth has completely eclipsed his true contours.

The purpose of this article is, to see if we can still catch a glimpse of the real Tutankhamun behind the myth. We will do so by examining the following statements, that are now firmly embedded in it:

1. The size of his grave proves that this was just an insignificant king.
2. The size of his grave proves that he died unexpectedly.
3. These are just the gravegoods of a petty king: those of an important king would be much more numerous, and much more elaborate.
4. Additional proof of this are the bigger graves of other kings: they needed bigger graves because they had more gravegoods to store.
5. Originally, this grave was not even meant for Tutankhamun: it was intended for a noble, and only hastily prepared for him.

As we will see, only the last of these remarks is entirely valid.

1. The size of his grave proves that this was just an insignificant king

For the AE's, there was no such thing as an insignificant king. Their king was a god who conversed with the other gods, and they were totally dependent on him for their wellbeing. Without this "good and beneficent king", laughter and happiness would disappear from the land; Sand Dwellers, Libyans and Nubians would roam at will, the yearly floods of the Nile would not come, crops would not grow, men and beasts alike would remain barren, and the people would suffer without end.

On the throne, the king was Horus, and in death, he would become Osiris. Then his son would be Horus, who buried his father and then gloriously ascended the throne - and so forth. It was vital for the continuation of Egypt as a nation, that this cycle was never interrupted. Therefore, as soon as a king came to the throne, his people would start preparing for his burial. A ritually impeccable burial was a prerequisite for the king's later successful ascend to heaven - which in turn was the indispensable proof that his heir needed to show the gods that *he* was worthy of the throne.

Nonetheless, the fact that Tutankhamun's successor Ay had him buried here, in this small grave, does prove a point. It remains to be seen however, *what* point that is. We will come to this later.

2. The size of his grave proves that he died unexpectedly

As we just mentioned, it was customary to begin the cutting of his tomb and the fashioning of his burial equipment right after the ascension of the new king - completely in accordance with the well-known AE saying "better safe than sorry".

Now the start of Tutankhaton's reign was probably still in Achet-Aton, the city of king Achnaton. Most likely this means, that one started preparing a grave there, in the necropolis that was so uncharacteristically - for a *royal* necropolis - situated on the eastern bank of the Nile.

Very soon however, Tutankhaton's name was changed to Tutankhamun, signaling the return to the orthodoxy of traditional faith. This happened in his second regnal year¹, so there would still have been 8 years left to spend on a grave in the Valley of the Kings, at Thebes.

Clearly the tomb where he was buried did not take 8 years to dig. There are much larger ones known, from NK kings that reigned considerably shorter. Some examples:

- Siptah (19th dynasty): 6 years.
- Tausert (19th dynasty) & Setnacht (20th dynasty) (they both contributed in succession to one grave): 4 years in total.
- Ramesses I (19th dynasty): only 1 year.
- And interestingly enough, the tomb of king Ay, who ruled for only 4 years, is also considerably larger than that of his predecessor...

Even if there would have been no other indication (and there is) that this grave was originally not meant for king Tutankhamun, then it's size, in combination with the number of his regnal years, would all but prove it.

Obviously, when the king died at approximately the age of 18, he went before his time². But a grave was prepared for him, together with a lavish burial equipment. That his fine (and, as we shall see: fairly complete) burial equipment was subsequently packed into a tiny grave had other reasons than the untimeliness of his death.

3. These are just the gravegoods of a petty king: those of an important king would be much more numerous, much more elaborate

How much is "much more"? In the absence of a quantification, the matter is left entirely to our imagination. And that knows what to do: we can see a mountain of gold as big as a pyramid...

"Much more" may refer to:

- more types of objects,
- more objects per type,
- more valuable objects because of the use of more precious materials,
- and objects of more value because of a higher artistic quality.

We will discuss these in turn.

It is often thought that we don't have any material from other royal burials, but this is not true. We have the following sources available for comparison:

- Some remnants of funerary equipment, found in various graves in the Valley of the Kings.
- Depictions of funerary equipment in some royal graves.
- A plan from a grave from the 20th dynasty.
- And the completely untouched burials of several kings from the TIP in Tanis, (notably from Psusennes I and Sheshonk II) discovered in 1939 and 1940 by Pierre Montet.

Categories of objects

In the British Museum there are two life-size, heavily damaged wooden statues of Ramesses I, from his grave in the Valley of the Kings. One of them wears the Nemes-headcloth, and the other the Afnet-headcloth³. Without king Tut's burial, we would not have known what these were originally about. Now it is clear, that these are equivalents of the life-size wooden, partly black and partly gilded statues from Tutankhamun's grave that are usually referred to as "the guardians". The tomb robbers no doubt took off the gold foil, and left the battered remains behind.

Likewise, in the grave of Tutmosis IV, Carter found part of a chariot that was much like the chariots of Tutankhamun⁴.

From remnants as these, scant as they are, there are no indications that a complete royal burial of the NK ever included types of objects that were not present in Tutankhamun's grave.

Apart from actual remains of funerary equipment, we also have some depictions of funerary objects in royal tombs. A good example are the depictions of certain ritual statuettes in the grave of Seti II⁵. Since the discovery of Tutankhamun's grave, we know that these pictures refer to the small gilded wooden statues of the king and of deities, that were discovered in black wooden shrines.

From these depictions, we are aware of two classes of "missing objects". The first are ritual vessels. Fortunately, we know these from another source - as we shall see shortly. The second is a type of very elaborate golden "tableware". Rosellini made some copies of these from the grave of Ramesses III⁶. No examples have ever been found.

The kings from Tanis clearly were less powerful than those of the NK, but they could still raise a considerable wealth of exquisite objects of art - and their supply of gold and silver was still very satisfactorily. Nevertheless, their burial chambers were quite modest in size, so these could hold only that what was deemed the most indispensable. Fortunately for us, this included a series of golden and silver ritual vessels. These vessels were already known from depictions in other graves⁷, but Tanis has supplied us with the only known examples "in the flesh".

That these objects only had a slim chance of survival is not surprising. They carried every characteristic of the ideal loot: small, portable, valuable and meltable. No doubt this is why they were gone from Tutankhamun's grave, probably already at the robbers first trip. (Apart from this, a possibly massive golden statue of the queen was taken from the "little gilded shrine", and maybe "as much as 60 % of the jewelry"⁸).

So, as far as the evidence now goes, we might say that a total set of objects in a royal burial of the NK would have consisted of the object classes found in Tu-

tankhamun's grave, supplemented with the ritual vessels from Tanis, and the golden "tableware" from Ramesses III.

Number of objects per category

From the 20th dynasty we have a plan on papyrus of the grave of Ramesses IV⁹. This plan shows a/o the lay-out of shrines around the sarcophagus. It is almost identical with that in king Tut's grave. In the latter, there were (going from inside out) first three shrines, then a gantry carrying a linen veil, and finally a fourth shrine. From the plan it seems, that around Ramesses IV's sarcophagus there were first *four* shrines, then the veil, and finally a fifth shrine.

So, it is not exactly the same, but close enough.

When we carefully look at T's gravegoods, we can see that a surprisingly high proportion of these had a religious or ceremonial function. There was very little of general supplies, such as food, drink and raw materials. There were only some 30 wine jars¹⁰, and 48 white boxes with meat¹¹. This might well be due to the limited space in the tomb. I would suspect that more room in the grave would in the first place have been used for a lot more emmer, barley, beer, different types of bread and cake, wine and meat, but also base materials such as timber, copper and bronze. An indication for the latter can be found in one of the chambers of Ramesses III's grave, where next to pots and jars also oxhide-shaped plates of copper or bronze are depicted.

The total extra quantity of valuables in a larger grave might therefore have been limited.

Tutankhamun's reign of 10 years was not excessively short. Nevertheless, some kings reigned (considerably) longer.

After a long reign, a king may have had two sets of ritual vessels (e.g. an extra set that was specially made for his jubilee). He may have had more alabaster vessels, filled with unguents. And a longer life would result in more personal belongings, such as clothing, furniture, scepters, weapons and chariots. But I would seriously doubt if any royal burial ever would have held more than twice the quantity of "valuables" that originally was packed in Tutankhamun's grave.

The use of more precious materials

In non-royal burials, the use of "dummies" is not uncommon. Well-known examples are "golden" or "stone" vessels of painted wood. This kind of practice has never been attested in royal burials. On the contrary, the evidence that we have seems to indicate that one would rather leave an item out, than use a cheaper version.

From Tutankhamun's burial to those of the kings of Tanis, we descend considerably on the stairways of power. This is mirrored by the smaller graves, and smaller burial outfits – but not by the materials used.

Three intact royal mummies were found: of Psusennes I and his successor Amenemope (21st dynasty) and of Sheshonk II (22nd dynasty). All three wore a golden mummy-mask (Amenemope even had two). Apparently Sheshonk could no longer afford a mask that would include the Nemes-headcloth, so his golden mask only covered his face and throat – rather than making a traditional mask including the Nemes-cloth, made from gilded crating. And although even

Psusennes did not have enough gold for a massive golden mummy-case, one stooped no deeper than silver.

Now if this holds true "downward", from Tut to Tanis, it may be true "upward" also, to e.g. Amenhotep III and Ramesses II. In any event, there is no indication for the contrary, anywhere.

Higher artistic quality

On this, we can be both brief and definitive. There have not been found many objects, from whatever period, that really surpass those from king Tut in artistic refinement. Even if we would have known all the gravegoods from every NK king, there is a good chance that we still would have ranked king Tut's collection among our favorites.

4. Additional proof of this are the bigger graves of other kings: they needed bigger graves because they had more gravegoods to store

If one compares the grave of Tutankhamun with that of other kings of the NK, the difference in size is quite apparent. On closer inspection however, this difference is to a very large extent due to the absence of long stairways and corridors. Clearly, stairways and corridors don't make the best storage facilities.

The total floor surface of Tutankhamun's grave (excluding the stairway and the descending corridor) is somewhat over 80 m² ¹². The surface of the tomb of Tutmosis III (not your everyday little kinglet) is approx. 225 m², excluding stairways, corridors and the "well".¹³ The tomb of Amenhotep II has roughly the same dimensions. This is 2,8 times as much as in king Tut's grave. Yes, it is larger, but not as much as you may have expected.

As already discussed, I would guess that more room in the grave would first of all have been used for the inclusion of more food, drink and raw materials. But one would also have wanted to arrange the gravegoods in a better way. Had one had more room, the beds e.g. could have been displayed without lots of other stuff on and below them, and the chariots could have remained intact, instead of being dismantled.

So, I would not expect 2,8 times as much room to mean that there were 2,8 times as many gravegoods.

(Another matter is the question of the extremely long, straight corridors in the graves of the 19th and 20th dynasty. As already mentioned, corridors are not the most convenient storage rooms. There would however be one type of object that would have suited here just fine: boats. The long corridors, with their inscriptions from the "Book of what is in the Underworld", the "Book of Gates" and so forth, are an image of the long voyage (by boat) that the sun god has to make every night through the Duat or Underworld. At the end of his journey, he arrives in the burial chamber of the king, who then most conveniently can hoist himself aboard the solar bark. Then both the king and the sun god will proudly rise in the sky, for yet another day of jubilant glory.

So, to store boats in these corridors would be most appropriate. And since boats generally are long and narrow, fairly light and easily disassembled, it would also be feasible to put them there, right after the funeral. Even the tomb robbers

would have appreciated this: the boats would have supplied them with all the wood they needed to melt the stolen gold....)

If we take the actual volume of king Tut's burial equipment as 1,0 "units", we might arrive at the following range of possible distributions in a "normal" royal grave of the 18th dynasty:

(In this comparison, T's presumed burial equipment under normal conditions - that is: in a normal seized royal grave and before robbery - is taken as the "minimum").

Category	Minimum volume	Maximum volume
Valuables (including furniture and statuary) in "packed density" (= as found in T.'s tomb)	1,0	2,0
Extra: the lost 60 % of jewelry, and the ritual vessels: all but negligible	-	-
Extra space, used for better display of the valuables (20 % of the "packed density")	0,2	0,4
Extra for general supplies (50 % of the valuables in "packed" condition)	0,5	1,0
Total	1,7	3.4

This is of course rather speculative, but it fits reasonably well with the measurements, that indicate that a normal 18th dynasty royal grave would have been 2,8 times as large as king Tut's.

If we try the same for value (as opposed to space), we might get something like this:

Category	Minimum value	Maximum value
Valuables (including furniture and statuary) as found after the robbery	1,0	2,0
Extra: the lost jewelry, and ritual vessels	x	2x
Value of general supplies: all but negligible	-	-
Total	1,0 + x	2,0 + 2x

If "x" would be 0,7 we would end up with the same ratio as with respect to space.

Again, this is speculative - but it sets a mark.

5. Originally, this grave was not even meant for Tutankhamun: it was intended for a noble, and only hastily prepared for him

When one enters the grave, the first feature that draws attention is the long and really spacious descending corridor: not at all as narrow as one might have expected for such a "tiny" grave.

Then one arrives in the first room of the grave, the so-called Antechamber. Since the walls of this room have not been finished with plaster, one can still observe the traces that the stonemasons have left of their work. At regular intervals, faint perpendicular lines are visible. These absolutely straight lines show, in what rectangular portions the rock was removed. The planes of the walls have not been smoothed, but only first-class masons could have made them this even with just a hammer and a chisel.

Not just the walls of the Antechamber, but also those of the Annex have the same appearance. (The walls of the Burial Chamber are plastered, and the Treasury is now out of sight for visitors). The floors of all (visible) rooms however are still very rough. Since AE masons worked from top to bottom (they started cutting at the ceiling, and worked their way down to the floor), this gives an indication for the point where carefulness was swapped for haste.

The floors of the Annex and the Burial Chamber lie considerably (about two feet) below the level of that of the Antechamber. Now this kind of "split level" is not unknown in royal graves, but it would also be in line with a hasty conclusion of the work. It is evident that the Burial Chamber needed every inch of its current height, or the shrines just would not have fitted into the room, but for the Antechamber, no such reason to cut any deeper existed.

The carefully executed work shows, that it was being done by expert craftsmen that did not lack in time - at least not during the initial stages of the work. They could go about their business unhurriedly, according to a preconceived plan. Since this was typically the plan of a nobleman's tomb (relatively short descending corridor, immediately followed by transverse room) , it was not originally meant for king Tut.

At some point though haste set in, as can be seen from the fact that the floors and most of the walls were never finished. A possible - though not certain - further indication for haste is that one did not lower the floor of the antechamber to the same level as the rest.

Now then, if this grave was originally not intended for Tutankhamun, for who was it meant? And where is the grave that *was* intended for him?

When the royal court left Amarna, it was logical that the kings would again be buried in the Valley of the Kings. Prospecting for a suitable location must have begun immediately.

Chances are, that this location was found at the very end of the so called West Valley. Here, the cutting of king Tutankhamun's grave began¹⁴.

When 8 years later the king died, work on this grave must have been advanced well enough to accommodate for his burial. But his successor Ay had other priorities.

Ay must have known from the start that his position was not very strong. He was not of royal blood, and too much associated with the "old regime" of Ach-

naton to be really acceptable¹⁵. So the would-be king needed every available means of strengthening his legitimacy, before men and gods.

One way of doing this was to act as the “good son Horus”, burying “his father Osiris”¹⁶. In the Burial Chamber of king Tut’s grave, he had himself portrayed in this role, complete with his cartouches, opening the mouth of Tutankhamun’s mummy. In a royal grave, this is a unique depiction. (The fact that Ay was an old man, who had to act as the son of one who was himself still almost a child, stretched the charade well into the realms of a farce.) But to safeguard his claims before the gods, Ay had to make sure that the boy-king safely reached the heavens. Therefore, we may assume that T’s burial included all the prerequisites necessary for a ritually flawless burial. And as far as the evidence goes, this actually seems to have been the case.

If Ay wanted to do all he could for T.’s benefit, he would of course have to use the grave that was prepared for him in the West Valley. But here another element of Ay’s difficult position crept in. Not being so young anymore, he may have feared that his time would come before a new royal grave could be prepared for him. This may have incited him to “swap graves”: a small grave that was being prepared in the Valley of the Kings (most likely for Ay himself) for T, while Ay took over T.’s grave in the West Valley.

What T’s burial in this small grave mainly proves, is an old man’s desperate fear of losing his only chance to become a god.

Conclusion

Tutankhamun was an “average” AE king, what meant that he was a god, worthy of a god’s burial. Because of Ay’s predicament, he ended up in a much too small grave, but because of the same predicament, he was granted as much of a full burial equipment as the place could hold. Had he been buried in the larger grave that was meant for him, the quantity of valuables that he was buried with would probably not have been significantly higher than it was now, before the robbers. Other kings from the 18th dynasty, with more regnal years, may have had a burial equipment that was about twice as extensive, both in terms of space as of value.

Sources:

DNT = C. Desroches-Noblecourt: Tutankhamen, 1963

Aidan Dodson: Egyptian rock-cut tombs, 1991

HLF = Het land van de farao’s, 1998 (Original title: Ägypten, die Welt der Pharaonen, 1997)

Thomas Hoving: Toetanchamon, de verzwegene feiten, 1980 (Original title: Tutankhamun, the untold story, 1978)

Lange & Hirmer: Aegypten, 1967

NRT = Nicholas Reeves, Toetanchamon, 1991 (Original title: The complete Tutankhamun, 1990)

SGF = Henri Stierlin: Het goud van de farao’s, 1994 (Original title: l’Or des Pharaons, 1993)

N. Reeves – R.H. Wilkinson: *Vallei der Koningen*, 2000 (Original title: *The complete Valley of the Kings*, 1996)

Notes:

¹ NRT 25, Reeves-Wilkinson 122

² Rumours are persistent that he was murdered. A broken fragment at the back of his skull *could* indicate a blow “with a blunt instrument”. But this does not prove anything more, then that foul play can not be excluded. Broken bones were a very common side effect of the mummification proces.

³ Pictures: Reeves-Wilkinson 134-135. Also in the BM is a similar statue from Ramesses II, also from his grave, also with the Nemes-headcloth.

⁴ See Dodson 27, NRT 41

⁵ DNT 248

⁶ SGF 223

⁷ E.g. Ramesses III, SGF 161

⁸ Reeves-Wilkinson 125

⁹ Now in the Museo Egizio, Turin. See HLF 220

¹⁰ NRT 202

¹¹ NRT 205

¹² Measurements taken from a plan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, published in Hoving, plate 17.

¹³ Measurements taken from a plan in Lange & Hirmer, page 123.

¹⁴ This view is shared by Dodson: pages 30-31.

¹⁵ There are some clear indications that he would have been quite right in this assessment. In the later kinglists, Ay’s name is missing, together with those of Achnaton, Smenchkare and Tutanchamun, indicating that he was considered as one of the “Amarna gang”.

¹⁶ Another way was marrying the royal widow, as has often been suggested.