NO PREP

Tutankhamun's Tomb

The Discovery That Changed Archaeology

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Tutankhamun's Tomb: The Discovery That Changed Archaeology

A Valley of Hidden Kings

By the time Howard Carter arrived in Egypt in the 1890s as a seventeen-year-old artist's assistant, the Valley of the Kings — a sun-scorched limestone valley on the Nile's west bank near modern Luxor — had already been excavated for decades. Dozens of royal tombs had been found, most stripped of their contents in antiquity. Yet Carter, who would spend the next three decades developing into one of Egypt's most meticulous archaeologists, became convinced that one royal tomb remained undiscovered. The boy pharaoh Tutankhamun, who had ruled briefly in the 14th century BCE before dying young — probably around age nineteen — had left few traces in the historical record. His tomb, Carter believed, was still out there. Tutankhamun had not been a particularly important pharaoh in his own time. He came to power as a child,

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Carter's Obsession and Lord Carnarvon's Patience

Howard Carter's search for Tutankhamun's tomb consumed years and required extraordinary financial backing. That backing came from Lord Carnarvon, a wealthy English aristocrat who had developed a passion for Egyptian archaeology after health problems drove him to winter in Egypt's dry climate. Carnarvon funded Carter's excavations season after season, but by 1922 he had nearly given up. He summoned Carter to his English estate and informed him that this would be the last

season he would finance. Carter persuaded him to fund one final push. On November 1, 1922, Carter's team began excavating a section of the valley floor below the entrance to another tomb, an area that had previously been ignored. On November 4, a water boy on Carter's team noticed a stone step beneath the sand. Carter's workers carefully cleared the debris to reveal a staircase cut into the bedrock, leading down to a plastered doorway bearing the royal seal of the necropolis, the stamp of the priests who guarded the valley's burials. Carter immediately sent a telegram to Carnarvon in England: 'At last have made wonderful discovery in valley; a magnificent tomb with seals intact; re-covered same for your arrival; congratulations.'

The Moment the World Held Its Breath

Lord Carnarvon arrived in Egypt on November 23. On November 26, 1922, with Carnarvon, his daughter Lady Evelyn Herbert, and the Egyptian Antiquities official Pierre Lacau present, Carter made a small hole in the plastered doorway and held a candle inside. The warm air rushing out of the tomb after more than 3,200 years made the candle flame flicker. As his eyes adjusted, Carter saw, in the candlelight, 'everywhere the glint of gold.' Carnarvon, unable to wait, asked: 'Can you see anything?' Carter's reply has become one of the most famous sentences in the history of archaeology: 'Yes, wonderful things.' What Carter could see, packed into the antechamber beyond the doorway, were golden shrines, overturned chariots, wooden statues covered in black resin, alabaster vessels, flowers, and the gilded figure of a guardian statue standing watch. It took Carter's team nearly a decade to fully record and remove the contents of the tomb. The burial chamber itself, containing Tutankhamun's nested coffins and his famous gold death mask, was not opened until February 1923.

What Was Found: A Treasure Beyond Imagination

The tomb of Tutankhamun contained over 5,000 individual objects — more than any other Egyptian royal tomb ever found. Despite the tomb being relatively small (Tutankhamun's early death meant the tomb had not been prepared on a grand scale), its contents were extraordinary. The innermost coffin, containing the king's mummy, was made of 110 kilograms of solid gold. His famous funerary mask — a portrait of the young king in gold and lapis lazuli — has become the most recognizable object from the ancient world. The tomb contained his childhood toys,

hunting equipment, clothing, wine, food offerings, and a lock of his grandmother Queen Tiye's hair. Perhaps most significantly for science, the tomb's intact nature meant that everything could be documented in archaeological context — where each object was, how it was oriented, what it was near. This was unprecedented in Egyptian archaeology. Carter spent ten years meticulously recording each object before removal, creating thousands of photographs and detailed notes. The treasure itself eventually traveled to the Cairo Museum, and a major collection is now housed in the new Grand Egyptian Museum near Giza, which officially opened in November 2025.

The 'Curse' and the Media Circus

The discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb triggered a global media sensation that has never quite died down. Newspapers worldwide competed to cover the story, and Lord Carnarvon signed an exclusive deal with The Times of London for coverage rights — infuriating other journalists. When Carnarvon died in April 1923 — just a few months after the tomb's opening — from an infected mosquito bite, the press invented the 'Curse of the Pharaohs.' The story was irresistible: a warning inscription inside the tomb (which, in fact, does not exist), mysterious deaths, and supernatural vengeance. The curse story has been thoroughly debunked. Studies comparing the lifespans of people who entered the tomb with those who did not found no statistical difference. Carter himself, who spent more time inside the tomb than anyone, lived until 1939 — sixteen years after the opening. The scientific explanation for any illness associated with ancient tombs points to bacteria or mold spores that can accumulate in sealed spaces, not supernatural curses. But 'Egyptomania' — the worldwide fascination with ancient Egypt triggered by the discovery — was real and lasting, influencing fashion, architecture, film, and art throughout the 1920s and beyond.

Key Information: Tutankhamun's Tomb

Detail	Information
Discoverer	Howard Carter, November 4, 1922
Financial Backer	Lord Carnarvon, English aristocrat
Location	Valley of the Kings, near Luxor, Egypt

Detail	Information
Tutankhamun's Reign	c. 1332–1323 BCE; died approximately age 19
Tomb Contents	Over 5,000 individual objects
Innermost Coffin	Solid gold, weighing 110 kilograms
Famous Object	Gold funerary mask inlaid with lapis lazuli
Time to Excavate	Nearly 10 years to fully record and remove contents
'Curse' Origin	Media invention after Lord Carnarvon's death from infected mosquito bite
Current Location	Grand Egyptian Museum near Giza, officially opened November 2025

Case Study: Ahmed Sees the Steps

Ahmed was eleven years old, and it was his job to carry water to the workers. He had been doing it for two weeks — trudging from the water jars near the valley entrance to wherever Carter's team was digging, refilling cups, staying out of the way of the serious men with their brushes and trowels. The work was boring. The Valley of the Kings in early November was hot even after the summer, and the endless digging seemed to produce nothing but sand and disappointment. Then his foot caught on something. He stumbled, looked down, and saw the corner of a step cut into the bedrock. He called out — not to Carter, who was not present that morning, but to the nearest foreman. Within minutes, workers were clearing the sand away carefully, revealing another step, then another. Ahmed stood at the edge of the growing excavation and watched. He did not understand what was happening. He knew only that everyone had stopped what they were doing and that the foreman was sending a runner to fetch Carter immediately. Later, Carter would write in his diary that 'a water boy' had first noticed the step. Ahmed's name was not recorded anywhere. He would grow old and tell the story to his grandchildren, who never quite believed him. 'I was the one who saw it first,' he would say. 'Before Carter, before Carnarvon, before any of them. I was the one.'

1. Ahmed's discovery started one of the most significant archaeological finds in history, yet history recorded only Carter's name. Based on the reading's discussion of how the excavation was organized and documented, why might Ahmed's role have been overlooked, and what does this suggest about whose stories archaeology tends to preserve?

2. The reading describes the 'media circus' around the tomb's discovery and the invention of the 'Curse of the Pharaohs.' How might Ahmed's quiet, unrecorded role in the discovery contrast with the way the press covered the story? What does this tell you about what becomes 'history'?

Multiple Choice

1. Why did Tutankhamun's tomb survive largely intact while other pharaohs' tombs were plundered?

a) Egyptian priests guarded it continuously for 3,000 years

b) Tutankhamun's minor status made his tomb less attractive to robbers

c) It was located in a part of the valley inaccessible to ancient robbers

d) It was hidden by a powerful magical inscription warning away tomb robbers

2. What was the scientific explanation given in the reading for any illnesses associated with ancient tombs?

a) Toxic chemicals used in the mummification process

b) Bacteria or mold spores that can accumulate in sealed spaces

c) Radioactive minerals in the granite burial chambers

d) The supernatural curse placed by Egyptian priests on desecrators

3. What made the archaeological documentation of Tutankhamun's tomb unprecedented in Egyptian archaeology?

a) The intact tomb allowed every object to be documented in its original archaeological context

b) Carter discovered the tomb without any financial backing from European patrons or assistance

c) It was the first time X-ray technology was used to examine a mummy

d) The tomb contained written records describing every object inside it

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Valley of the Kings	A) A portrait covering in gold and lapis lazuli placed over the face of Tutankhamun's mummy
2. ___ Lord Carnarvon	B) The widespread cultural fascination with ancient Egypt that followed Tutankhamun's discovery in the 1920s
3. ___ Egyptomania	C) The royal burial ground on the Nile's west bank near Luxor where Tutankhamun's tomb was found
4. ___ Funerary mask	D) The set of coffins, placed one inside another, that held Tutankhamun's mummy
5. ___ Nested coffins	E) The wealthy English aristocrat who financed Howard Carter's excavations

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Howard Carter's famous reply when asked if he could see anything inside the tomb was 'Yes, _____ things.'

2. The tomb's innermost coffin, containing Tutankhamun's mummy, was made of solid _____ and weighed 110 kilograms.

3. The 'Curse of the Pharaohs' story was invented by the media after Lord _____ died from an infected mosquito bite in April 1923.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Howard Carter spent ten years recording the contents of the tomb before removing objects. Why is this kind of careful documentation so important in archaeology, and what would have been lost if he had simply collected the treasure quickly?

2. The reading describes Tutankhamun as a relatively minor pharaoh in his own time. How does the survival of his intact tomb reveal a kind of irony about fame and historical memory?

3. Lord Carnarvon signed an exclusive deal with The Times of London for coverage of the tomb's discovery, which infuriated other journalists. Do you think archaeological discoveries should be commercially exclusive to one media outlet? What are the arguments on both sides?