

CyberScribe 174 – February 2010

Let's start this month off with a bombshell...a bombshell that has lain there ticking and smoldering for about ninety years now. The CyberScribe is speaking about the supposed thefts by Howard Carter from the tomb of Tutankhamun...items stolen as he cleared that famous tomb. There were several stories on the net, stories that brought up what Egyptologists have known for a very long time: Carter certainly did indeed possess some items from that tomb, and he did not have legal rights to them.

Several museums have held these objects, unable to properly display them or even to admit that they had them, and the Egyptology community sat there, unable and unwilling to raise the issue. Now it is out and the thefts are being spoken of loudly by several Egyptologists. The best discussion is from the German news source, 'Der Spiegel' who published a story by Matthias Schulz (Translated from the German by Ella Ornstein). The CyberScribe wishes to give Thierry Benderitter clb83130@yahoo.fr and his excellent site credit for the English translation (edited for space below). You are very much urged to go the website (<http://alturl.com/swvw>) and read the entire article. It is most fascinating!

The Falcon is out of the bag now. What will Zahi do?

"Carter obtained about 5,000 objects from the four burial chambers, including furniture, jars of perfume, flyswatters, and ostrich feathers -- the whole place was a dream of jasper, lapis lazuli, and turquoise. He even discovered a ceremonial staff adorned with beetles' wings. When Carter first opened the cavern, it still smelled of embalming oil. Lotus flowers and nightshade berries still rested on the coffins.

"The grandeur of the find rubbed off on its discoverer. Carter was awarded an honorary doctorate and US President Calvin Coolidge invited him to tea. Horst Beinlich, Egyptologist at Würzburg University, calls him a "thoroughly honest man full of idealism." It appears, however, that this isn't quite true. Documents show that the hero of the tombs cheated on many counts, manipulating photographs, forging documentation on the discovery and deceiving the Egyptian Antiquities Service.

"The discoveries in that tomb set in motion a power struggle that has been only partially uncovered. Carter wanted to send as much of the treasure as possible to England and the United States. This plan quickly met with resistance. Egypt had been a British protectorate since 1914, but the

administration of antiques lay in the hands of a particularly intractable Frenchman. In the end, Carter's entire scheme went awry and the pharaoh's golden treasures remained in Cairo, marking the end of an era of ruthless appropriation of cultural assets. Carter and his team went away empty-handed.

“Or at least, that was the official word. Secretly, however, the Carter team helped themselves, despite lacking authorization. Objects in several museums have now been revealed to belong to Tutankhamun's treasures.

“The most recent example is a small ushabti, or servant for the dead, made of white faience and standing in the Louvre. Forbidden treasures in the form of two golden hawk's heads were also found in Kansas City. Examination revealed them to be part of a collar that had lain directly on the mummy's skin, which was coated with 20 liters (5 gallons) of embalming oil. The jewelry broke when it was pulled away, and Carter collected the pieces to give as a present to his dentist. A museum director in the state of Saxony, who wishes to remain anonymous, confessed to SPIEGEL that he is in possession of several blue faience beads. "Carter pocketed them as the tomb chambers were being cleaned and later gave them to his secretary," he says. The museum director came across these dubious items through an auction house.

“Such handling of foreign property only serves to strengthen a suspicion Thomas Hoving, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, raised in the 1970s. Based on internal file notes, he documented cases in which Carter and his partner, the English Earl of Carnarvon, allowed their fingers to wander. They gave a clasp that showed the pharaoh on a war chariot as a present to Egyptian King Fouad I, for example. American oil baron Edward Harkness received a gold ring.

“Carnarvon himself was looking for a fresh supply of such treasures. He wanted "unstamped things," he wrote from Highclere Castle to Thebes on December 22, 1922, meaning pieces without a cartouche containing a name, so that they would be difficult to identify.

“Carter was only caught in the act once. He'd slipped a painted bust of the young pharaoh into a side chamber, without a registration number. Inspectors discovered the bust, a "masterpiece of antique sculpture" in Hoving's words, in a wine crate. The archaeologist talked his way out of the situation, and the scandal was never made public. Most of the time, Carter's subterfuge worked. A series of mostly small objects disappeared. Who stole

what when -- and where the pieces ended up -- remains one of Egyptology's greatest mysteries.

What's known for sure is that the Metropolitan Museum of Art alone contains around 20 objects presumed to have originated from Tutankhamun's tomb. These include a small dog made of ivory, a gazelle, rings, a splendid painter's palette, and even two silver coffin nails. The Brooklyn Museum has in its possession, among other things, a statue of a girl, an ointment spoon, and a blue glass vase. A cat carved from black hematite turned up in Cleveland.

“Carter described the robbers' destruction in vivid detail. Chests had been rifled through and stoppers pulled from alabaster vases and thrown to the ground, he said. The robbers had torn ornamentation made of precious metals from the furniture and chariots, as well as stealing a 30-centimeter (12-inch) solid gold statue. British Egyptologist Nicholas Reeves accepts the figure that 60 percent of the tomb's small ornaments and jewelry were lost. But is it true? No independent witnesses were present when Carter first entered the tomb.

“Feeding these suspicions are articles 9 and 10 of the excavation license, which allowed goods from a tomb to be contractually divided up only if it had been previously robbed. If a pharaoh's tomb was found intact, all its contents would go to Egypt.

““Under these conditions, it's clear the discoverers must have tried construe the state of their find in their favor,” is Krauss' analysis. This casts a dubious light on the man considered a leader in his field.

“After four years (of excavation), the group was only a few centimeters from the discovery site. Suddenly, though, the boss withdrew his workers and continued the dig elsewhere. There is a strong case for the theory that Carter had tracked down the entrance to the tomb at this point, but kept silent for tactical reasons, keeping a trump card up his sleeve. It can be said, at the very least, that when Carnarvon wanted to cut off funds in the summer of 1922, things moved surprisingly fast. Carter returned to Britain and begged for financial backing for one last campaign.

“Hardly had he arrived back in Thebes, or so runs the legend, when an assistant dashed into the excavation tent and reported a sensational find -- a buried set of stairs leading down to a sealed door. Was there intrigue behind this announcement? A half brother of Lord Carnarvon thought so. He claimed Carter had crept secretly into the underground chambers three months before.

"The official story is that Carter, by his own account, felt "almost overwhelmed" by the urge to break open the irksome door, but resisted, and buried the stairs once again. The next day, November 6, 1922, he cabled Lord Carnarvon, "At last have made wonderful discovery in the Valley. A magnificent tomb with seals intact. Recovered same for your arrival. Congratulations."

"All that is a lie. What really took place can be gathered from a report -- to this day never published, but studied in detail by Hoving -- that Lord Carnarvon wrote shortly before his death. Instead of waiting dutifully as regulations required, the party forced its way through the narrow opening right away.

"Using tallow candles and a weak electrical lamp, the interlopers first entered the antechamber. Golden beds and beautifully carved chairs were piled up in the narrow room, as well as gaming tables and precious vases. Oval basins held food for the dead pharaoh.

"But the most important question remained: Where was the mummy? At last the intruders discovered another bricked-in entranceway, framed by two life-sized black sentinels. Although being found out would have cost them their license, the group broke blocks of stone away from the door. And everyone pushed their way through.

"The conspirators left the underground tomb chambers hours later. Overwhelmed and blissful, they rode home by donkey in the wan moonlight, agreeing to keep silent about their activities. Only Lady Evelyn hinted at the events of that night in a letter, thanking Carter for taking her into that "most holy place."

"The negative scientific consequences of those nighttime misdoings are still felt to this day. No one knows how the tomb really looked in its untouched state. Carter always attributed this to the barbarism of ancient thieves -- but the chaos in the tomb could just as well have been caused by Carter himself.

"Thus the suspicion remains that the tomb's discoverer systematically lied and misled. He wanted to present Tutankhamun's tomb as already defiled, hoping in this way to obtain permission to remove half of the finds from the country, in accordance with the license agreement.

"That the British explorer left empty-handed after all had to do with Carnarvon's untimely death in April 1923. With Carnarvon went the

excavation license, and the cards were reshuffled. Even the US State Department intervened -- on Carter's side -- in the political and legal tug-of-war that ensued. In the end, Egypt won. Carnarvon's heirs received £36,000 (about \$137,000 at the time) in compensation for costs incurred by the excavation.

“It can hardly be denied any longer that antique dealer Howard Carter grabbed Tutankhamun's valuables and helped himself to artifacts from the 3,300-year-old tomb. The details of the swindle, however, have only come to light in bits and pieces.

“Carter's theory of grave robbery in ancient times has also lost most of its clout. It has become increasingly clear that his arguments are often based on exaggerations -- or are simply nonsense.”

In another article, Dr. Christian Loeben (a speaker at North Texas ARCE a few years back) stated (<http://tiny.cc/hNJI3>):

““The artifacts would only have become really valuable if he had admitted they came from Tutankhamen’s tomb, and he couldn’t say that. I would say he took a few things for himself and members of his team and Lord Carnarvon as souvenirs,” Dr Loeben said.

“A little-known document written by a member of Carter’s team, Alfred Lucas, in 1947 claimed that Carter knocked a hole into the doorway linking the antechamber to the actual burial chamber, and illegally entered it without waiting for Egyptian officials, Der Spiegel wrote. He then concealed the hole with a wicker basket and brushwood before closing it with an ancient Egyptian seal to hide his transgression.

“Despite his supposed cheating, Carter does not appear to have been punished by the legendary Curse of Tutankhamen. While Lord Carnarvon died four months after the tomb was opened, from an infected mosquito bite, Carter lived another 17 years and reached the age of 64.”

A very different tomb discovery was announced a few days ago (<http://tiny.cc/ID4VY>)...a huge tomb complex at Saqqara. Of course, anything big at Saqqara has to involve the famous Imhotep...but the story is

nonetheless interesting. The CyberScribe seriously doubts that there were mummified eagles, however. Read on:



Dr Zahi Hawass examining finds at the newly discovered tombs in Saqqara.

“Two large tombs have been discovered at the ancient Egyptian necropolis of Saqqara - one of which is the largest ever found at the site. The 26th Dynasty tombs, likely robbed during the Roman era, are nonetheless filled with important artifacts including coffins, skeletons, pottery and mummified eagles.

“The tombs, discovered by an Egyptian archaeological mission from the Supreme Council of Antiquities, are at the Ras El Gisir area of Saqqara, near the landmark's entrance.



“The larger tomb is comprised of a rock-hewn hallway followed by several small chambers and corridors. During excavation the team discovered two rooms decked with skeletons, coffins and pots. A further corridor ran down to a seven meter-deep burial shaft. A sealed room in the second tomb contained Saite pots and coffins.



“Saqqara is home to a great number of mastabas, rock-cut tombs and pyramids. Its most famous landmark is the Step Pyramid of Djoser, Egypt's oldest pyramid. Recent SCA projects at the pyramid have led SCA chief Zahi Hawass to speculate that legendary architect and polymath Imhotep is buried inside.”

Jumping far forward in time, to the discovery of a Ptolemaic temple dedicated to the goddess Bastet and her cats, and to Queen Berenike, wife of Ptolemy III. The details are limited, but interesting. Here is the story (<http://tiny.cc/tuu0Z>):



IMAGE CREDIT SCA HERITAGE-KEY.COM
A limestone statue of the Goddess Bastet - goddess of the goddess of protection and motherhood - discovered at Kom el Dikka.



A colored statue of the goddess Bastet holding a pottery bird.

“Remains of a temple of Queen Berenike - wife of King Ptolemy III - have been discovered by archaeologists in Alexandria, Egypt. The remains are 60 meters by 15 meters, and extend under Ismail Fahmy street. About 600 Ptolemaic statues - amongst which are beautiful depictions of the cat goddess Bastet - were unearthed. The large collection of Bastet statues indicates that the temple was dedicated to her.



Statue of a young girl, carrying the name of Bastet.

“Bastet statues were unearthed in three different areas of the site, alongside other limestone statues of unidentified women and children. Clay pots and bronze and faience statues of different ancient Egyptian deities have also been uncovered, as have terracotta statues of the gods Harpocrates and Ptah.



Head of a statue from the Ptolemaic era, one of more than 600 statues discovered at the excavation site in Alexandria.

“Early studies on site revealed that this is the first Ptolemaic temple discovered in Alexandria to be dedicated to Bastet. It also indicates that her worship continued in Egypt after the decline of the ancient Egyptian era. Bastet originally took the form of a lion and protected the king during battle. However the Greek rulers of the Ptolemaic Dynasty associated her instead with their own Artemis, changing her appearance to that of a cat and calling her Ailuros, a lunar goddess.”

After many decades of total ban on the sale of Egyptian antiquities, a new bill introduced into Parliament in Egypt sought to change that...somewhat. The new bill would have allowed the buying and selling of Egyptian antiquities within Egypt. It will not be news to state that Zahi Hawass and his ministry found this unacceptable. The short item below relates how Hawass and Farouk Hosni, his boss, are fighting this measure (<http://tiny.cc/ZvvnG>):

“At a parliamentary session Tuesday, Culture Minister Farouk Hosni and Zahi Hawass, secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), urged opposition and independent MPs to vote down a bill permitting the buying and selling of antiquities inside Egypt. Both men warned of the dangers of unlicensed excavations if the bill is passed, recommending that the law be applied to fixed antiquities only--such as ancient buildings or walls--rather than transportable ones.

“Hawass went on to refer to Article 8 of the existing antiquities law, which stipulates that all archaeological discoveries be reported to the SCA within a two-year period. He went on to request that this period be reduced to six months only.

“Ahmed Ezz, ruling party stalwart and head of parliament's budget and planning committee, had earlier submitted a translated copy of Italy's antiquities law to Parliamentary Speaker Fathi Sorour, suggesting that the same regulations be applied in Egypt.

“Sorour, for his part, overruled a proposal to form a committee mandated with defining the term "antiquity." "The definition of antiquity has been known since 1912. It includes everything found in Egypt that is linked to the country's history," he said, noting that the draft law would likely be passed next week.

“Hawass and Hosni both threatened to resign if the bill was passed into law.”

Hawass also got some new mileage from the tombs of the pyramid workers at Giza, a discovery that he and Mark Lehner have worked on for many years now. There is not all that much new in the report, but its implications have stirred interest in Israel. The first report (<http://alturl.com/dmbp>) states:

“The location of tombs discovered in Egypt helps prove the men who built the great pyramids were not slaves after all, say archeologists. A set of tombs belonging to the workers who built them has been discovered which sheds light on how they lived and ate more than 4,000 years ago. The thousands of men who built the last remaining wonder of the ancient world regularly ate meat and worked three-month rotating shifts.

“They were so well regarded they were also given the honor of being buried in mud brick tombs within the shadow of the sacred pyramids they worked on if they died during construction.



Burial: Dr Zahi Hawass in the tomb of the workers who built Khufu's pyramid

“Graves belonging to workers who helped build the pyramids were first discovered in the area in 1990 but further discoveries such as this show the workers were paid laborers rather than slaves.



Bones belonging to a worker who built Khufu's pyramid discovered in a tomb

“Mr. Hawass said: 'These tombs were built beside the King's pyramid, which indicates that these people were not by any means slaves. 'If they were slaves they would not have been able to build their tombs beside their king's.'

“He added that archeological evidence at the site indicated that the 10,000-strong army of workers ate 21 cattle and 23 sheep a day, sent to them from farms in northern and southern Egypt. The workers were rotated every three months.



Pottery was discovered in this tomb where Egyptian archaeologists have unearthed ancient artifacts

Newly-discovered tombs of workers



Privileged: The tombs were discovered on a hillside overlooking an Egyptian town

“The discovery also helps experts study the social classes that made up Egyptian society.”

The Israeli interest came to light in the next article. Published by the ‘Jewish News Weekly of Northern California’ (<http://tiny.cc/nT2Ow>), it jumped all over the perceived notion that Jewish slaves built the pyramids...and denied it clearly. The story (edited for space) says:

“The discovery further erodes the myth that Jewish slaves built the pyramids, officials in Egypt said. The mud-brick tombs were uncovered last week in the backyard of the Giza pyramids, stretching beyond a burial site first discovered in the 1990s and dating to the Fourth Dynasty (2575 B.C. to 2467 B.C.), when the great pyramids were built on the fringes of present-day Cairo. The series of modest 9-foot-deep shafts held a dozen skeletons of pyramid builders, perfectly preserved by dry desert sand, along with jars that once contained beer and bread meant for the workers’ afterlife.

“Egypt’s archaeology chief Zahi Hawass said that discovery and the latest finds show that the workers were paid laborers, rather than the slaves of popular imagination.

“One popular myth holds that ancient Israelite slaves — ancestors of the Jewish people — built the pyramids. Amihai Mazar, professor at the Institute of Archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, says that assertion stemmed from an erroneous claim by former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, on a visit to Egypt in 1977, that Jews built the pyramids.

““No Jews built the pyramids because Jews didn’t exist at the period when the pyramids were built,” Mazar said.

“Dorothy Resig, an editor of Biblical Archaeology Review in Washington, D.C., said the idea probably arose from the Old Testament Book of Exodus, which says that “the Egyptians enslaved the children of Israel with backbreaking labor” and that Pharaoh put them to work constructing buildings.

““If the Hebrews built anything, then it was the city of Ramses as mentioned in Exodus,” said Mazar.

“Hawass said the builders came from poor Egyptian families and were respected for their work — so much so that those who died during construction were given the honor of being buried in the tombs near the sacred pyramids of their pharaohs.

““No way would they have been buried so honorably if they were slaves,” he said.”

In search for silly end for this month’s column, the CyberScribe found two articles that seem to qualify. The first involves a foolish woman who thinks she looks like Queen Nefertiti, although she underwent about fifty cosmetic surgeries in order to improve the resemblance. What do you think...did she get her money’s worth? The CyberScribe has his doubts.

The report was in French, but the translation is also provided (<http://tiny.cc/Jh2Qu>

“Nileen Namita, une Britannique de 49 ans, a décidé qu'elle était la réincarnation de la reine égyptienne Néfertiti. Afin de mieux lui ressembler, elle a eu recours à 51 opérations de chirurgie esthétique. Mme Namita a commencé sa transformation en 1987, après avoir décidé qu'elle avait été, dans une précédente vie, la célèbre reine d'Égypte Néfertiti. Elle déclare avoir eu des visions.”

(TRANSLATION): “Nileen Namita, a 49 year old British woman, decided she was the reincarnation of the Egyptian queen Nefertiti. In order to resemble her better, she had 51 plastic surgery operations. Mrs. Namita began her transformation in 1987. She states that she has had visions.”



Photo before...after...in costume...and her idol.

And lastly, a chance for some lucky...er...unlucky...reader to become immortalized. The ‘New Zealand Herald’ (<http://tiny.cc/A3G43>) ran this headline ‘Wanted: volunteer to become mummy on TV’. The CyberScribe had heard hints of this last year, but now the project seems to be underway. Read on:

“The latest wheeze to challenge the British public's attitudes to dying comes from Channel 4, which is appealing to the terminally ill to find someone to

donate their body to be mummified for a reality television show - then displayed in a museum for two years.

“Among all the sobering possibilities of how to spend your last days is one offered by a film production company on behalf of Channel 4. It is advertising in spirit magazines for volunteers in search of celluloid immortality.

“The ad reads: "We are currently keen to talk to someone who, faced with the knowledge of their own terminal illness and all that it entails, would nonetheless consider undergoing the process of ancient Egyptian embalming."

“The proposal from production firm Fulcrum TV has received development funds from Channel 4. Documentary-makers are working with a scientist who claims to have unlocked the secrets of the mummification process, which was employed for 3000 years, reaching a peak during the New Kingdom between 1500 and 1000BC.

“Fulcrum executive producer Richard Belfield spoke at length to an undercover reporter posing as a possible volunteer. "We would like to film with you over the next few months to understand who you are and what sort of person you are so the viewers get to know you and have a proper emotional response to you," he said, "it may sound macabre but we have mummified a large number of pigs to check the process worked and it does.

“"Afterwards, one thought was - though this is not obligatory - to put the body in an exhibition in a proper museum so people can properly understand the mummification process. That is something we would be flexible about. But we'd like to keep the body for two or three years to see that the mummification process worked. Then the normal funeral arrangements could be made."

“Mr. Belfield said no payment could be made: "No, not as such. Of course we would cover all costs. But the advice from our compliance lawyers is that it would be wrong to offer payment."

“Channel 4 has confirmed that it has contributed funds to Fulcrum to help with development. A spokesman said the channel supported the project: "If the scientists are able to find a willing donor, we'd be interested in following the process."

And that is quite enough for this time.