

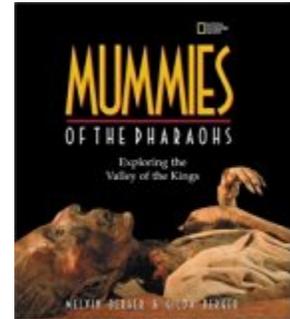
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Melvin Berger, Gilda Berger. *Mummies of the Pharaohs: Exploring the Valley of the Kings*. Washington: National Geographic Society, 2001. 64 pp. Ages 9-12. \$17.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7922-7223-6.

Reviewed by Ronald J. Leprohon (Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto)

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Mummies, buried treasures, lost tombs, this book has it all. Who could go wrong? And get it right, the authors certainly did. An astonishingly prolific writing team, Melvin and Gilda Berger have produced books for young readers (ages 9-12 is the recommended readership for this particular volume) on just about every subject possible, from whales and dolphins to rain forests, and from bats, alligators, and crocodiles to stars and the weather. With their varied experience—he is an accomplished musicologist, among other things, and she has a background as an elementary school teacher—they have managed to capture the excitement of their subjects and to answer the right questions about them. In this book they are continuing their fine tradition.

After a brief introduction that details the book's contents, the authors take us to 1917, with two Englishmen riding donkeys in a sun-baked valley on the west bank of modern-day Luxor in Egypt. Howard Carter and George Herbert, the Fifth Earl of Carnarvon, are looking for the tomb of King Tutankhamun, a monarch who reigned at the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty, in the late fourteenth century B.C.E. Although known from a few inscriptions which reveal a smattering of information about him, the king is little known and his tomb is still undiscovered at the time, and Carter is convinced that if he just keeps looking, he is bound to find the tomb. But where does one dig in this vast valley where so many of Tutankhamun's forebears were buried? Carter narrows down the places to investigate and starts digging here, then there, then a little bit further out there, and then closer to here again. All to no avail. Five long years he and Lord Carnarvon toil in the Valley, turning up sand and rocks, more sand and rocks, but finding only scraps.

By 1922, Lord Carnarvon has had enough and decides to call the whole thing off. Carter pleads with him to give him one more chance, one more season to prove that he—they!—have been right to look for Tutankhamun's tomb. One can well imagine how Carter felt that day in Highclere Castle in England, Lord Carnarvon's ancestral home, when he was told "Alright, one more season it is, but only one more! This is your last chance."

With a sense of desperation, Carter returns to Egypt, alone this time, and resumes his work in the Valley of the Kings. And then, with a sense of timing that a Hollywood writer would envy, one of Carter's workers stumbles on to what looks like a step cut into the rock. Carter and his men start working furiously, uncovering another step, then another, until a full stone staircase is revealed, leading down to ... what? At the bottom of the staircase is a plastered door, upon which Carter deciphers the official ancient Egyptian seal for the royal necropolis. Could this be an intact royal tomb? Could it be ...? Yes. One of the stamped seals bore the name "Tutankhamun."

And now we have to try to put ourselves in Howard Carter's shoes. Here is a man who has been waiting for this occasion for over five years, with nothing but dust and a tired back to show for it. And here he is at the bottom of a stone staircase, staring at an intact doorway with the official seal of the royal necropolis and the name of a king "HIS king!" stamped on the plaster of the door. What does he do? Does he barrel ahead and break through the door to realize his dream? No. He remembers his friend and mentor, Lord Carnarvon, who is in England at the moment, and he decides to do the right thing. He covers up the staircase again, and cables Lord

Carnarvon, telling him to come to Egypt as fast as he can. in the presence of the gods.

Remember, these are the days before air travel was as accessible as it is today, so Carter has to wait two full weeks before Lord Carnarvon arrives in Egypt. One can well imagine the hundreds of scenarios Carter plays and replays in his mind during those two weeks. Is it, in fact, the tomb of Tutankhamun? Is it intact, or is it, like every other royal tomb discovered so far in the Valley of the Kings, looted, an empty shell containing magnificent wall paintings but no objects within it? But no, the door looks intact. And why the royal seal on the door if the tomb had been looted? And that's Tutankhamun's name on that door for sure. Could he let himself believe that he had discovered an unrobbed tomb?

When Lord Carnarvon finally arrives, along with his daughter Lady Evelyn, the three rush out to the Valley of the Kings, uncover the stone staircase once again, and break through the sealed door, finding a long sloping passageway filled with rubble. At the end of this is another plaster-covered door, again stamped with the seal of the royal necropolis. Feverishly, Carter pokes a hole in the door, lights a candle and thrusts it through the hole. And here, I'll let Howard Carter tell us about this magical moment in his own words: "At first I could see nothing, the hot air escaping from the chamber causing the candle flame to flicker, but presently, as my eyes grew accustomed to the light, details of the room within emerged slowly from the mist, strange animals, statues and gold "everywhere the glint of gold." This was a life-defining moment, about which Carter would later write that it was "the day of days ... the most wonderful that I have ever lived through, and certainly one whose like I can never hope to see again."

But wait. What about Lord Carnarvon? The one who's been footing the bill for this adventure all along, whose patience had run out, nearly scuttling the whole project just months earlier. Imagine him and his daughter standing behind Carter in front of the door at the bottom of that staircase, desperately trying to see through Carter to get a glimpse of what Carter is looking at. Finally, after what must have seemed like an eternity, Lord Carnarvon asks, "Well, can you see anything?" At which point Carter answers his famous words: "Yes, wonderful things!"

And those treasures are "wonderful things" indeed, products of the highest craftsmanship, made by men with infinite patience and skill, who labored long and hard for their king, in the belief that they were helping him make his way through the underworld and earning eternal rest

If I have spent some time on this part of the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun (in fact, more than in the book under review), it is precisely because the Bergers' book does such a good job of leading up to that famous episode. Their telling of the tale is wonderfully atmospheric, but I thought I would add to this for readers who may wish to know more of the story. Even in an age as cynical as ours, it is easy to get caught up in the excitement of those heady days in the 1920s, when the world discovered the "boy king" and his magnificent treasures.

What comes next is a description of the incredibly hard and meticulous work that follows such a discovery. Wisely eschewing any part of the "Curse of King Tut" silliness, the authors go on to describe the work done inside the tomb, as one room after the other filled to the brim with magnificent ancient treasures is examined, every object properly catalogued, drawn, photographed, conserved on the spot, stored safely, and eventually shipped down river to the Cairo Museum, where the material still lays today for all to see. Here, my only quibble with the chapter is the authors' paying heed to one of the latest popular theories on Tutankhamun: his supposed murder. Proposed in a 1998 book by the otherwise reliable Bob Brier, the theory rests on very flimsy evidence. Let's just say that, based on the documentation presented by Dr. Brier, no lawyer could convince a jury that a murder had been committed "beyond reasonable doubt" in a contemporary court of law. It also seems to the present reviewer that bringing this topic up in a book intended for young readers will only cause grief to teachers trying to extricate themselves from their students' penetrating questions.

The second chapter deals with various royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. It begins with an accurate description of the intricate story of the burial of King Thutmosis I, its later re-use by his daughter Hatshepsut, and the subsequent digging of a new tomb by Thutmosis III for his illustrious grandfather. Here, the authors have done their homework well, presumably using the latest information offered in Nicholas Reeves' and Richard Wilkinson's *The Complete Valley of the Kings* (1996), since it appears in the bibliography at the end of the book. After a digression dealing with the reign of Tutankhamun's father, King Akhenaten, who was not buried in the Valley of the Kings, the chapter goes on to examine the tomb of King Ramses II. This leads them to one of the most startling discoveries of the last fifteen years in Egypt, that of KV 5 (KV stands for "King's Valley"), a tomb made for

the children of Ramses II. Originally discovered in 1820, the site of the tomb was subsequently lost, and it was not until 1989 that Professpr Kent R. Weeks of The American University in Cairo re-discovered it. The astonishing fact about this particular tomb is that the excavator has found over 110 rooms in it so far, and he is still digging!

The last chapter investigates the tomb of Sety I, Ramses II's father. One of the most grandiose in the Valley of the Kings, it is the longest and deepest in the Valley as well as the most ornately decorated. This fact gives the authors an opportunity to give us a glimpse of the logistics of digging such a tomb out of the living rock, and subsequently carving, then painting the magnificent reliefs that adorn the tomb. This leads them to examine the workmen's community of Deir el-Medina, where the craftsmen who worked on the tomb lived, just south of the Valley of the Kings. The authors are again at their best here, bringing this community, with its entire families, to life. The chapter ends with a description of the mummification process and a royal funeral, although perforce (there are no contemporary illustrations of an actual royal funeral) they had to use non-royal material "both paintings and three-dimensional objects" to illustrate their various points. Here, one wishes the authors had been more precise in differentiating between royal and non-royal illustrative material (e.g., the funeral shown on pages 58-59 as well as the Opening of the Mouth ritual shown on pages 60-61 are both from private sources) but perhaps they felt that such details were unnecessary. The book ends with a short bibliography and an index.

Herewith are additional remarks on some of the facts presented in the book: the tomb dug above Tutankhamun's is that of Ramses VI, not V (p. 8). Tutankhamun's beds were not really shaped like "lions, cows, and crocodiles" (p. 11). The first two are accurate, but a third couch was in the shape of the demon named Ammut, which was part hippopotamus (head), part lion (body), and part crocodile (the tail). Perhaps it is this last element upon which the authors based their description.

On page 14 are two pictures of the famous gold throne, where the king is shown reclining on a chair, being anointed by his queen Ankhesenamun. The artistic style of the piece reminds us not of traditional ancient Egyptian art but of the so-called "Amarna style," the artistic products of the reign of Tutankhamun's father Akhenaten. Although this is not mentioned in the book—and this is not meant as a criticism but only for interest's sake—the piece was in point of fact made be-

fore the "counter-reformation" that occurred during Tutankhamun's reign, when he still followed his father's precepts. This is demonstrated by the fact that the cartouche on the side of the throne does not name the king as Tut-ankh-AMUN ("The living image of Amun"), but rather as Tut-ankh-ATEN ("The living image of Aten"). Only after this counter-reformation did Tutankhaten change his name to the more famous Tutankhamun.

The authors state that the Egyptian word for "to die" means "to go west," because of the association of the west as the place where the sun set and hence the place to which the souls of the dead journeyed (p. 28). While this is accurate, I would simply add that "to go west" is only one of the many expressions, euphemisms really, that the ancient Egyptians used to indicate the act of dying. Apart from an actual verb "to die," they used other phrases such as "to place (one's) head in the ground," "to rest in life," "to proceed (to another life)," "to go up to heaven," "to depart," "go to (one's) soul," and "to join with the one who made (him)," to name just a few. The many references to journeying in these phrases remind us of contemporary English "to pass on." It also possibly indicates that the ancient Egyptians were just as squeamish of saying that someone had "died" as we are today.

The relief of King Akhenaten and Queen Nefertiti worshiping the god Aten does (p. 35) not come from the king's tomb at Tell el-Amarna, as stated, but was excavated (by W.M.F. Petrie in 1891) in the area of the Royal Palace.

On page 50, three men are seen carrying a snake from which protrude human heads. The caption identifies the men as "warriors carrying the heads of their captives." I wonder whether the authors thought the snake's body was a long table. What is actually shown is a vignette from the sixth hour of the Book of Gates, one of the twelve hours of the night during which the sun god journeyed through the underworld, encountering gates at the beginning of every hour. The serpent illustrated is the evil Apophis from whose body rises the heads of people he has swallowed and is now obliged to set free again. The snake, who constantly tries to devour the sun god during the night, is being held by twelve men (only three of whom are shown in the book) so that he can be kept at bay from the sun traveling through the night.[1]

On p. 60, there is a mention of "lines of masked and costumed priests" as part of the funerary procession. My quibble here is with the allusion to the masked men. While there is some evidence, from the very late period of Egyptian history, for men wearing masks dur-

ing some ceremonies, we should not jump to conclusion too quickly about this phenomenon. Given the highly symbolic nature of ancient Egyptian representations, it is very difficult to ascertain whether a figure in an Egyptian scene is meant to be a masked priest or simply the usual representation of an animal-headed god. For example, the sphinx is a human-headed lion, but no one would try to interpret this image literally. And the analogy further breaks down when we see ram-headed sphinxes, a representation of the god Amun. Surely no one would suggest that what we have here is a lion masked as a ram.[2]

Given that the book is published by the National Geographic Society, readers who subscribe to the magazine or who possess the Society's wonderful *Ancient Egypt: Discovering its Splendors* (1978) will have already seen most of the illustrations found in the present book. These are of the highest quality, as we have come to expect from the National Geographic Society, and are highly evocative. The text is concise and informative, as well as extremely readable. For this, the authors must be thanked, as they obviously took great care to present their material

in an engaging fashion, using some of the latest information on their subject. I highly recommend the book. Its nice atmospheric descriptions of the Tutankhamun discovery and the making of a royal tomb in the Valley of the Kings are worth the price alone.

#### Notes

[1]. For a full, and easily accessible, description of all twelve hours in this particular funerary composition, see E. Hornung, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 55-77, and especially p. 62 for our vignette.

[2]. For two different views on the subject, see A. Wolinski, "The Case for Ceremonial Masking in Ancient Egypt," in T. Celenko, ed., *Egypt in Africa* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 71-74; and, R.S. Bianchi, "The Case Against Extensive Masking in Ancient Egypt," *ibid.*, pp. 75-77. See also L. Corcoran, "Masks," in D.B. Redford, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 345-48.

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