

# Media sensationalism and the development of the mo essay



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Modern Cult of Tutankhamun Media sensationalism and media hypes are things that are painfully obvious in all of our lives. Every person of this generation can remember the hype of Y2K, the insanity of the 2000 Presidential Election, the exaggerated numbers associated with Hurricane Katrina, the panic of SARS and the currently claimed explosion of the avian flu across the world. Our parents remember that the only real way to protect oneself from an atomic blast is to duck and cover. The insanity even travels to foreign countries, with Britain's media hype regarding flesh-eating bugs and South Korea with its infamous fan death stories. With advancements in communication, all we have been able to do is spread lies faster. Everyone jumps to be the first to report something so that they can claim to have the exclusive news that no one else has; they want to be first instead of right.

When Howard Carter discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun, he knew that he had found something that was going to make him famous. The public loves stories of intrigue and royalty, whether that royalty is the Queen of England or the latest Hollywood starlet, so a mysterious foreign monarch from centuries earlier was the perfect object for the media limelight. There was a general lack of information about the pharaoh, who had obviously died very young, so the media was able to fill in the blanks. What happened to Tutankhamun? He was somehow related to the famous Heretic King, who had been in all of the London papers previously, and it was generally known that the change to the new religion was resisted and mostly despised by the king's subjects. Of course then, Tutankhamun must have been murdered by angry people in his court who looked to remove all proof that the Atenist era had ever taken place!

It is the romantic view of the young pharaoh: a teenager devoted to his wife and the greatness of the Egyptian kingdom was knocked off by angry elders who wanted to take his place. Given a hasty burial in a simple nobleman's tomb, he was left to the ages and never expected to be found. Mix into this the influence of movies like *Freuds The Mummy* and sensational findings by x-ray of the real cause of Tutankhamun's death and we have a great story.

Howard Carter discovered the famous tomb in 1922 after seasons of work under the financing of the British Lord Carnarvon, whom he had met socially in Sheikh. Nearly two decades earlier, Theodore Davies, an American lawyer-turned-archaeologist, had discovered a blue cup in the Valley of the Kings that hinted at the existence of King Tutankhamun, but not much else was discovered until January 1907 when a cache tomb, known as KV 54, was unearthed. Davies thought that he had discovered the actual tomb of Tutankhamun and by the time the discovery of KV 55 was made, most people believed that there was nothing else to be found in the Valley of the Kings until Carter's monumental discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun. Once it was discovered, the press was awesome, and Carter went so far as to discuss a plan of campaign for the presentation of the tomb to the public.

Initial reports in the *New York Times* carefully noted the beauty and grandeur of Tutankhamun's tomb before the inner seals were breached, but little time was given to the pharaoh himself. The focus was on the gold, alabaster and ebony contained within the tomb. The final section of the article claimed that the discovery was going to clear up many points in history and that the final chamber of the tomb was expected to contain the remains of Tutankhamun and a number of heretics buried with him. By the end of the month, the <https://assignbuster.com/media-sensationalism-and-the-development-of-the-mo-essay/>

media reported prematurely on the findings of one researcher who claimed that the Hittites came into power following the death of Tutankhamun, having married the kings widow Ankhesenamun in response to her desperate plea for a husband:

“ Had I a son, would I have written about my own and my countrys shame to a foreign land? You did not believe me, and you even spoke thus to me! He who was my husband is dead. I have no son! Never shall I take a servant of mine and make him my husband! I have written to no other country. Only to you I have written. They say you have many sons; so give me one son of yours. To me he will be husband. In Egypt he will be king!”

To protect the treasures of the kingdom from these outsiders, the Egyptians piled as many treasures as possible into the tomb, creating a hiding place: all of the royal treasures were piled into Tutankhamens tomb, so that they might not fall in their entirety into the hands of the stranger. As Carter began to bring objects out of the tomb and categorise them, the media reported on every possibly unusual finding. One such finding was that of a box of human hair that the media claimed belonged to the queen of Tutankhamun despite the fact that the hair was grey. By March, Tutankhamuns name had become a household word all over the civilised world. He was somehow related to the pharaoh Akhenaten, according to the London Times, and Akhenaten was a gentle and kind ruler who tried to steer Egypt the right way towards monotheism, an action that Tutankhamun tried to undo once he came to power.

It was only nearly a month later that the New York Times reported that Tutankhamun was, in fact, a teenager at the time of his death according to likenesses and clothing found in the antechamber by that point in time, the final chamber of the tomb had not been open. Articles swirled around for two years before Carter was able to access Tutankhamun's body and due to extensive coverage in the media, half-baked stories and theories were thrown at readers to extend the life of the cult of Tutankhamun. One of the biggest media hypes was the creation of the mummy's curse, said to have been the cause of death for Lord Carnarvon and his dog Susie, who mysteriously cried out at the exact moment of her master's death thousands of miles away. This curse, it is said, was the creation of a Scottish author named Marie Corelli who wrote that anyone involved in the excavation of Tutankhamun's tomb would die horribly. This fabrication was supported by both the mass media and the popular Sir Conan Doyle, author of the famous Sherlock Holmes stories. Most of their evidence for the existence of the curse came from the death of the already ill Lord Carnarvon, but today we know for a fact that he died from blood poisoning because he nicked a mosquito bite that was infected with the bacterial streptococcus Erysipelas.

In 1931, Carter gave a speech at the University College that was reported on in the Times. It was in this speech that the possibility of political intrigue was first published, not in the terms of Tutankhamun, but rather in reference to his two deceased children. Carter mentioned that the two girls might have been the victims of murder. The initial examination of Tutankhamun's body was very shoddily done because there was little technology that could be employed to make it more thorough, and because of this, there was little

inquiry into the cause of the young pharaoh's death. Although there was always the thought that the youth was murdered, there was no good way to check for the possibility until almost forty years later.

In the 1960s, the x-ray was developed and used to scan the skull of Tutankhamun, beginning the theory that he was murdered and reinvigorating the cult of Tutankhamun. By that time, there were many different explanations for Tutankhamun: he was the brother of Akhenaten, the son of Akhenaten, the brother of Smenkhkare or even a commoner brought into the family to marry the rightful heir, Ankhesenamun. He had been popularised as the boy pharaoh and King Tut, becoming more famous than any other Egyptian monarch. In 1968, Professor R. G. Harrison from Liverpool University was sent to examine the remains of the king. From his examination, it was found that a piece of bone was floating around in the resin in the king's skull (fig. 1). This, combined with other evidence in the examination, culminated into the theory that the king had been murdered by a blow to the back of the head. It was also discovered in the examination that Tutankhamun's breastbone and ribs are missing, but it is unknown to this day whether that was damage inflicted by the embalmers or by the desecration of the body by Carter and his team.

Books, articles and journals were written about the possibility of murder, and in 1975, an exhibit of Tutankhamun artefacts came to America; it was the first time that Americans were able to view the fabulous treasures. As his popularity grew in the United States, more and more people began to believe in the media-threaded story of his murder by angry or envious courtiers.

Interest in ancient Egypt skyrocketed and people, crazed by this new and  
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foreign topic, made outlandish claims about being the reincarnations of Amarna-era figures including Tutankhamun's young widow, some even coinciding with the stories of his death. These claims of reincarnation tie in very heavily with those seen in both versions of the movie *The Mummy*, where the main female characters turn out to be reincarnations of Nefertiti and Ankhesenamun.

It was not until 1978 that another x-ray was performed on the pharaoh. At that time, it was determined, but not widely reported, that the idea of Tutankhamun dying by a blow to the head was almost impossible. According to pathological evidence, the area where a haematoma had formed had also had time to heal, meaning that if he had, in fact, been targeted for murder, the murderer would have failed marvellously. Additionally, the position of the wound was at the bottom of his skull, meaning that if someone had managed to murder him, the murderer would have had to somehow hit him up from the bottom, which is a very difficult shot to make with a lot of force; if he had been murdered by a blow to the head, the wound would have most likely been on the crest of his skull.

Despite the facts, many people continued to believe that King Tut was murdered, most likely by his successor (and possible step-grandfather) Ay. The rumours and myths sprung up during this time are the most tenacious ones. Many people, when asked about Tutankhamun's death, believe that he was murdered. The deaths that are associated with the curse of the mummy are believed to actually have something to do with a curse laid upon Tutankhamun by the priests of Amun rather than infections from nasty

mosquito bites or deaths of old age years and years after the opening of the tomb.

By this point in time, nearly all Egyptologists believe that Tutankhamun died from natural causes or a terrific accident like falling from a chariot. As the story progresses, however, less and less attention is paid to the story by the media. Very rarely does a story about developments in the case of Tutankhamun make it to mainstream media such as national newspapers more often than not, developments are relegated to periodicals such as National Geographic and academic journals.

One possibility for natural death ties into the thinning bone in Tutankhamun's head. If the king developed a haematoma, the increased pressure in his arteries that pressed against the skull would have thinned the bone. This pressure could have led to pressure against his brain, which would have led to a loss of consciousness. This would also explain the shaving of the king's head, which does not match other royal mummies found in the Valley of the Kings unless, of course, you count Joann Fletchers supposed Nefertiti mummy, but her story is one of the most terrifically sensationalised stories in Egyptian history. Tutankhamun's doctors would have shaved his head to examine the area, and once determining that there was no open wound, they would have been at a loss as to what to do because of the lack of neurological examination, so Tutankhamun would have never regained consciousness and would have died of natural causes.

Along with this theory also goes a series of events to possibly explain the small size and relative quickness apparent in his tomb. In an attempt to



avoid passing the throne to Horemheb after Tutankhamun's death, Ay decided to keep the pharaoh's death a secret for as long as possible. Because of this, everything had to be rushed and many of the artefacts found in the tomb were actually things that would not have been missed by possible spies within the household. The cache of KV 54 was believed to have been the place where Tutankhamun's funeral took place because funerary floral necklaces and meals were discovered there. After the funeral, Tutankhamun was covertly moved to the tomb created for Ay himself as his own tomb continued to be finished. Perhaps the most telling symbol of this fast death and equally hasty burial is the painting found in the burial chamber: it shows the dead king having his mouth opened by Ay, who wears the headdress of the pharaoh (fig. 2). According to tradition, however, the new pharaoh was not crowned until after the previous pharaoh was buried; did this mean that the mural was originally going to depict Tutankhamun opening the mouth of Ay? Most Egyptians were painted to look very similar, so it would not be surprising if the identities of the figures were changed in their painted-on cartouches.

Other theories against murder have been proposed: plague, a hunting accident and falling out of a chariot, to name a few. The first of these, the plague, highly appeals to the general public. The bubonic plague is something that everyone knows about and is one of the top topics in history with Tutankhamun, Cleopatra, World War II and the dropping of the atomic bomb. Everyone believes that they know everything about it, so by creating the sensational story that Tutankhamun was killed by the earliest version of the plague that decimated Europe nearly three thousand years later, one can

create massive interest. Although it is true that scientists now believe Egypt, specifically the workers villages in the Valley of the Kings, to be the source of the horrible disease rather than the tundra of Siberia, it is highly unlikely that Tutankhamun succumbed to the disease because of the evidence we have from his body had he died of the plague, there would have been evidence of buboes on his mummified skin like the one that was found on the mummy of Ramesses V.

The hunting accident and chariot fall relate to two injuries found on the young pharaohs body: a broken leg and the missing rib cage. A study of the leg of Tutankhamun found evidence of infection in the soft tissue in the area; the injury could have been caused by falling from a chariot or, if caused by a deep cut, a hunting accident. There is question, however, as to whether Howard Carters autopsy of the body is the result of this break the pharaohs body, as mentioned before, was very badly mangled during its removal from the sarcophagus. This dismissal also ties back into evidence from the haemorrhaging around the skull if the infection had been so terrible, the related haematoma would have shown up on the CT scans of the body, as the tissue around the broken leg displayed signs of such. Another possibility relates to the missing breastbone of the mummy. Although the embalmers typically kept the body intact during mummification, if his breastbone was destroyed enough by an accident, they might have removed it during the process. Again, there is dispute over this because of the damage by Carter.

Despite all of the new evidence against murder, the popularity of the murder theory still abounds because it is simply the best story. There is no intrigue in falling out of a chariot or suffering from an intracranial haematoma, but <https://assignbuster.com/media-sensationalism-and-the-development-of-the-mo-essay/>

there is certainly interest in a bloody murder or a terrifying plague death.

Most of the intrigue around Tutankhamun was spun up by Howard Carter and the media to create public interest in the mummy. Despite claims of murder and desecration of rituals, it appears at this time that the Boy Pharaoh lived a normal life and died of an unfortunate accident or natural causes at a young age. Although his wife was desperate and devastated after his death, it does not point to any foul play by the court, a claim that has sensationalised the entire Tutankhamun story.

As we in America prepare for a new exhibition of Tutankhamun items, the question stands will the media make mention of the new developments in the Tutankhamun case? Will the cities that have paid for the honour of having the exhibition encourage a campaign of advertisements supporting the murder theory to increase interest in the tour? Will this tour bring about another leap in interest in Egypt or another group of crazies who believe in their previous lives they were Amarna figures? Do people even care to know about the new developments by Zahi Hawass and his medical team, or would they rather prefer to believe that there is a dark side to the Tutankhamun tale? Considering the current state of the media, the new discoveries will probably be resigned to a colourless back page of the newspaper or announced on the news with the newscaster introducing the story at the begin of the telecast with some faux lead-in that makes the viewer believe that something truly fabulous happened to the young pharaoh.

All we can hope is that after people see the exhibition, they will become interested in the subject and do some deeper research than what is offered on their television.

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