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Slandering Tutankhamun?

The results of a virtual autopsy on the mummy of the boy king Tutankhamun have triggered the anger of Egyptian Egyptologists, writes Nevine El-Aref



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Some 90 years after the British Egyptologist Howard Carter discovered his intact tomb in the Valley of the Kings on the west bank at Luxor, the ancient Egyptian boy king Tutankhamun continues to hold the world's attention.

This has not only been because of his intact funerary collection, unearthed inside his tomb despite

his early death and short reign, but also because of the mystery that has surrounded his life, death, and lineage.

Archaeologists are still perplexed by questions like who the real Tutankhamun was. Was he the son or the brother of the monotheistic Pharaoh Akhenaten? Why did his tomb contain such treasures, despite his having died so young? How, in any case, did he die? Was he killed at 18 years of age, or did he suffer from some fatal disease?

Whenever Egyptologists succeed in deciphering some of the boy king's mysteries others appear to perplex them.

However, in 2005 some of these mysteries were resolved when Tutankhamun's mummy was subjected to a CT scan, an intense medical check-up and forensic analysis that was the most comprehensive since its discovery. The tests took five years, and in 2010 1,700 high-resolution CT-scan images were published.

At that time the Egyptian scientific team concluded that the boy king had died of natural causes at the age of 19 and had not been killed by a blow to the back of his head as had been traditionally believed. They discovered no indication of violence, discounting theories that he had received such a blow.

Instead, the team theorised that the open fracture at the back of the mummy's head had most likely been used as a second route through which embalming liquid was introduced to the lower cranial cavity and neck via the back of the upper neck.

At the same time, they noted a fracture above the left knee that may have occurred a day or two before the pharaoh's death, suggesting that this could have become fatally infected.

With the help of medical anthropologists from Germany, the Egyptian scientific team said that the real causes of Tutankhamun's death were malaria and other pathogens. The team concluded that a sudden leg fracture might have led to a life-threatening condition when the malaria infection occurred.

DNA tests also showed that Akhenaten was Tutankhamun's father, not his brother as some have claimed.

Palaeogeneticist Carsten Pusch from the University of Tubingen in Germany, who was part of the scientific team, described

Tutankhamun as "not a proud Pharaoh or a strong leader as he was a young boy who was frail and weak."

"He couldn't walk by himself and needed other people or walking sticks because of bone necrosis," Pusch said.

Scientific tests on 11 other mummies carried out at the same time revealed that Tutankhamun's family was plagued by malformations and infections. Several pathologies, including Kohler Disease II, a bone disorder, have been diagnosed in Tutankhamun and four other mummies from his family.

The CT scans, said Cairo-Scan Centre Executive Director Ashraf Selim, revealed that Tutankhamun was also afflicted with vascular bone necrosis, a condition in which diminished blood supply to the bone leads to the serious weakening or destruction of tissue. "This might have rendered Tutankhamun particularly vulnerable to physical injuries and have been the cause of the altered structure of his left foot," Selim said.

"The findings provide an answer to why 130 walking sticks were found inside his tomb and why he is shown in several relief shooting arrows while sitting," added former minister of antiquities Zahi Hawass, who also led the 2005 scientific research on the golden king.

Three attempts made to reconstruct the Pharaoh's facial features using the latest forensic techniques by French, American and Egyptian teams, each working independently, reached surprisingly similar conclusions. The results revealed a face markedly different from the image on the golden mask, as well as from many of his statues in the Egyptian Museum.

But although the results solved some of Tutankhamun's mysteries, they did not suffice for some Egyptologists.

Now a new virtual autopsy carried on the boy king and shown on Sunday in a BBC documentary entitled "Tutankhamun: The Truth Uncovered" has given a new picture of the young king's life, death and physical appearance. Scientists in the documentary claim that they have recreated the first-ever life-size image of the 18th Dynasty king through 2,000 computerised tomography CT scans.

They have constructed a 3D computer model of what he would have looked like during his life. The result is shocking, with the scientists claiming that the boy king had a clubfoot and feminine hips. The research also claims that Tutankhamun's parents were probably brother and sister, which resulted in a son riddled with genetic disorders.

"It was important to look at his ability to ride a chariot, and we concluded it would not have been possible for him, especially with his partially clubbed foot, as he was unable to stand unaided," head of the Italian Institute for Mummies Albert Zink told the British newspaper The Independent.

"We need further genetic analysis because that would give us more insight into his condition," he said, adding that the boy had also suffered from malaria and a fractured leg, which could have had a hand in his early death.

Ashraf Selim, a radiologist at the University of Cairo who was part of the scientific team, told the newspaper that "the scans show evidence to support the theory that Tutankhamun developed Kohler's Disease, or the death of the bones, during adolescence, which would have been incredibly painful."

He added that "popular theories relating to the murder of King Tut have been more or less put to rest in recent years, as a large fracture in his skull was more likely the result of the mummification process than any deliberate blow to the head."

Such claims have triggered the anger of Egyptian Egyptologists, who have described it as "a malicious slander on ancient Egyptian civilisation".

Hawass told the Weekly that such speculations were scientifically unfounded, pure fabrication and the result of a search for fame. "We know that this man had 130 walking sticks and that he used to shoot arrows while he was sitting, but this does not mean that he had a clubfoot," Zawass said.

Egyptologist Ahmed Saleh refused to accept Zink's results. He told the Weekly that Tutankhamun's mother, most probably a woman named Kia, was not Akhenaten's sister and was not even one of his relatives.

Saleh wondered how the research could have come up with the result that Tutankhamun's family had suffered from genetic disorders as not all the mummies had been discovered. "Only his mummy and those of his daughters and the owner of the KV 55 tomb have been discovered," he

said, adding that archaeological and historical studies said only that the young pharaoh had come to the throne at a young age and his reign had lasted for nine years.

"Earlier research did not highlight any information concerning his figure or bodily features," Saleh said, pointing out that Tutankhamun appears on the walls of his tomb as well as in his statues in a classic form like any other ancient Egyptian king using the Amarna arts style, in other words with an elongated skull and large waist.

The 130 sticks found in his tomb could have had many uses, Saleh said, adding that British scientists had examined the spinal cord of Tutankhamun and found that it was a little twisted, which may have led to difficulty in movement. However, they had not mentioned any impairment or that he was suffering from a spinal disease.

Ahmed Said, professor of ancient Egyptian civilisation at the Faculty of Archaeology at Cairo University, said that research carried out from 2005 to 2010 had not mentioned any of the newly claimed results screened in the BBC documentary. He said that brother-sister marriage was not evidence of genetic disorders as it was a trend in the ancient Egyptians royal family and was intended to preserve the purity of royal blood.

"The scientific team is looking for fame as their results are only speculation without any archaeological or historical evidence," Said told the Weekly.

The large hips claimed for Tutankhamun and his supposedly feminine appearance were unfounded, he said, adding that this was an artistic style used to represent the Nile god Hapy.

According to Hawass, the stylised male/female physique characteristic of representations of Akhenaten was an iconographic convention that bore no relation to the pharaoh's actual appearance. "According to Amarna religious belief Aten was both male and female and therefore Akhenaten, as his representative, was depicted as having the form of both a man and a woman," he said.

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