

Primary Sources: Carter's Discovery of King Tutankhamun's Tomb

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King Tutankhamun's golden sarcophagus is displayed at his tomb in a glass case at the Valley of the Kings in Luxor, Egypt. Photo: AP Photo/Amr Nabil

Editor's Note: For years, English archaeologist Howard Carter had scoured Egypt for the lost burial site of the boy-king Tutankhamun. Many of the known ancient Egyptian tombs, once full of treasures, had been looted by grave robbers. But when Carter and Lord George Carnarvon, who paid for the dig, finally found King Tut's tomb in 1922, they were shocked to find it nearly untouched for thousands of years. The find was a sensation around the world. Carter's elation at his discovery carries through in his diary entries, excerpted below. A year later, in 1923, Carter's team entered the burial chamber of Tutankhamun to find gold-covered shrines and jewel-studded chests. They raised the lid of Tutankhamun's sarcophagus to discover a pure gold coffin that held the mummified remains of King Tut.

Saturday, November 4

First steps of tomb found in the Valley of the Kings.

At about 10 a.m. I discovered the first traces of the entrance of the tomb of Tutankhamun. It was a sunken staircase to a tomb of the type of the 18th Dynasty, when Tutankhamun ruled, but farther than that nothing could be seen until the heavy rubbish above was cleared away.

Sunday, November 5

Discovered tomb. Investigated and found the seals on the door intact.

It took the whole of the preceding day and most of this day to dig through the rubble before the upper part of the staircase could be seen on all four sides.

Toward sunset we had cleared down to the level of the 12th step, which exposed a large part of the upper portion of a plastered and sealed doorway. Here before us was sufficient evidence to show that it really was an entrance to a tomb,

The seal impressions suggested that it belonged to somebody of high standing but at that time I had not found any indications who that was.

It was a thrilling moment for an archaeologist, to suddenly find himself, after so many years of toilsome work, on the verge of what looked like a magnificent discovery — an untouched tomb.

Saturday, November 25

Opened the first doorway. It was comprised of rough stones built up from the threshold, plastered over on the outside face, and covered with numerous impressions from various seals of Tutankhamun and the Royal Necropolis.

As we cleared the passage we found, mixed with the rubble, broken potsherds, jar seals and numerous fragments of small objects; water skins lying on the floor together with alabaster jars, whole and broken, and colored pottery vases. All of them belonged to a tomb that had been disturbed, but told us nothing about to whom they belonged. These were disturbing signs as they pointed toward someone entering the tomb and plundering it.

Sunday, November 26

Opened second doorway about 2 p.m.

In about the middle of the afternoon, we came upon a second sealed doorway, which was almost the exact replica of the first. It bore similar seal impressions and had similar signs that it had been reopened and reclosed.

Feverishly we cleared away the remaining scraps of rubbish on the floor until we had only the sealed doorway before us. After making notes, we made a tiny breach in the top left hand corner to see what was beyond. Darkness told us that there was empty space, and I widened the breach and by means of the candle looked in,

It was sometime before one could see. The hot air escaping caused the candle to flicker. But as soon as one's eyes became accustomed to the glimmer of light, the interior of the chamber gradually loomed before us with its strange and wonderful medley of extraordinary and beautiful objects heaped upon one another.

Lord Carnarvon said to me, "Can you see anything?" I replied to him, "Yes, it is wonderful." I then made the hole sufficiently large for both of us to see. Our sensations and astonishment are difficult to describe as the hole revealed to us the marvelous collection of treasures: two strange ebony-black statues of a king and gilded couches in strange forms; exquisitely painted, inlaid ornamental caskets; flowers, alabaster vases and strange black shrines with a gilded monster snake appearing from within; quite ordinary looking white chests; finely carved chairs; a golden inlaid throne; stools of all shapes and design; and, lastly, a confused heap of chariot pieces glinting with gold. We felt bewildered and full of strange emotions. A sealed doorway between the two statues proved there was more beyond, and there was little doubt that it was the grave of that pharaoh.

Monday, November 27

It soon became obvious that we were but on the threshold of the discovery. The sight that met us was beyond anything one could conceive. The mass of material crowded into the chamber was without particular order, so that we had to move cautiously, and we were very bewildered. Everywhere we found traces of disorder caused by some early intruder. Overturned objects and broken fragments lying upon the floor all added to the confusion, and it was impossible to take it all in because there were so many things. Beneath one of the couches, we perceived another sealed doorway which had been broken open. With care, Lord Carnarvon and I crept under this strange gilded couch and we peered into the opening. There we saw that it led into a chamber of smaller dimensions and at a lower level. Even greater confusion prevailed here, because the stones that had blocked the entrance were lying helter-skelter upon the objects on the floor, which had been crushed by their weight. It was a mass of furniture, an utter confusion of beds, chairs, boxes, vases, statuettes and every sort of thing overturned and searched for valuables.

In neither of these two chambers could we see any traces of a mummy or mummies. Behind that next sealed doorway was the tomb chamber, and we knew that Tutankhamun probably lay there, and that we had found that monarch's burial place intact.

It was a sight surpassing all precedent, and one we never dreamed of seeing. We were astonished by the beauty and refinement of the objects, and the impression was overwhelming.