

Tut's ills won't kill fascination, historians say

February 17 2010, By LINDSEY TANNER , AP Medical Writer



In this Feb. 15, 2010 photo, tourists crowd around the golden mask of Egypt's famous king Tutankhamun at the Egyptian museum in Cairo, Egypt. Egypt's famed King Tutankhamun suffered from a cleft palate and club foot, likely forcing him to walk with a cane, and died from complications from a broken leg exacerbated by malaria, according to the most extensive study ever of his mummy. (AP Photo/Amr Nabil)

(AP) -- [It turns out](#) Egypt's beloved boy-king wasn't so golden after all - or much of a wild and crazy guy, for that matter. But will research showing King Tut was actually a hobbled, weak teen with a cleft palate and club foot kill enthusiasm for a mummy that has fascinated the world for nearly a century?

Not likely, historians say, even though the revelations hardly fit the popular culture depiction of a robust, exotically handsome young pharaoh, or a dancing "how'd-you-get-so-funky" phenom a la Steve Martin. The comedian parodied Tut on "Saturday Night Live" during a

blockbuster King Tut traveling exhibit in the late 1970s, which packed U.S. museums and spawned a mini-industry in Tut tchotchkes.

"This is one sick kid," Egyptologist Emily Teeter, assistant curator at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, said after learning of the research. It shows that, based on DNA tests and CT scans, Tut had a genetic bone disease and malaria, which combined with a severe broken leg could have been what killed him about 3,300 years ago at age 19.

The results appear in Wednesday's [Journal of the American Medical Association](#). They cast doubt on popular theories about what did him in, even though falling off a chariot or being murdered by a sneaky palace foe fit the royal image better than a raging infection.

The findings stem from the most rigorous research yet on a mummy that has fascinated the world ever since his largely intact, treasure-filled tomb was found nearly 90 years ago.

But historians say the new evidence will likely only intensify public interest in King Tut because it brings the boy ruler down to Earth.

"It makes him all the more human and all the more fascinating," said Dr. Howard Markel, a medical [historian](#) at the University of Michigan.

Tut has long been big business. The 1970s Tut exhibit drew millions of visitors to U.S. museums, and a popular revival including artifacts from his tomb and others' has been traveling around the United States for the past several years and is currently at San Francisco's DeYoung Museum.

Egypt's economy depends a great deal on tourism, which brings in around \$10 billion a year in revenues. The King Tut exhibit at Cairo's Egyptian Museum is one of the crown jewels of the country's ancient past and features a stunning array of treasures including Tut's most

iconic relic - the golden funeral mask.

Another tourist destination is Tut's tomb tucked into the desert hills of Luxor's Valley of the Kings. In 1922, British archaeologist Howard Carter discovered it and the trove of fabulous gold and precious stones inside, propelling the once-forgotten pharaoh into global stardom. Hundreds of tourists come daily to the tomb to see Tut's mummy, which has been on display there since 2007.

Though historically Tut was a minor king, the grander image "is embedded in our psyche" and the new revelations won't change that, said James Phillips, a curator at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History.

"Reality is reality, but it's not going to change his place in the folk heroism of popular culture," Phillips said. "The way he was found, what was found in his grave - even though he was a minor king, it has excited the imagination of people since 1922."

The new research led by Egypt's top archaeologist, Zahi Hawass, bolsters previous theories that Tut's father was likely the Pharaoh Akhenaten, and that Tut's mother was Akhenaten's sister.

That incestuous lineage would explain some of his ailments, including the [bone disease](#) that runs in families and is more likely to be passed down if two first-degree relatives marry and have children. But it also only bolsters the intrigue.

In ancient Egypt, it wasn't really considered incest.

Pharaohs were thought of as deities, so it makes sense that the only prospective mates who'd pass muster would be other deities, Markel said.

While the research might dent the myth, it won't change the most tangible part of Tut's image - all the intact relics that were found in his tomb.

"He's far more famous for what he owned and what he wore than what he actually did," Markel said.

More information: JAMA: <http://jama.ama-assn.org>

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Citation: Tut's ills won't kill fascination, historians say (2010, February 17) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-02-tut-ills-wont-fascination-historians.html>

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