

# 90th anniversary of the curse of Tutankhamen: How a modern myth was born

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Friday April 5 2013 marks the 90th anniversary of the death of the Egyptologist Lord Carnarvon and the start of the mysterious curse of Tutankhamen.

But as the author and University of Manchester Egyptologist Dr Joyce Tyldesley points out the real story of Lord Carnarvon's death is far from sinister. She argues that an exclusive media deal coupled with the subsequent reliance on non-expert comment helped fuel rumours of a curse. Although she also notes that the curse of Tutankhamen is now far more famous than both the original Egyptian king and the men who first unearthed his treasure laden tomb.

It was in November 1922 when the Egyptologist Howard Carter and his team, including Lord Carnarvon, first entered the tomb of Tutankhamen. Their discovery received worldwide media attention, but an exclusive deal with The Times left scores of journalists sitting in the dust outside with nothing to see and no one to interview.

Consequently newspapers turned to all sorts of "experts" to comment on the tomb, including popular fiction authors like Arthur Conan Doyle. Most prominent of all was the popular novelist Marie Corelli, whose comments regarding the health of Lord Carnarvon helped to ignite rumours of a curse.

In a report in The Express on 24 March 1923 about Lord Carnarvon's health Marie Corelli wrote: "I cannot but think that some risks are run by

breaking into the last rest of a king of Egypt whose tomb is specially and solemnly guarded, and robbing him of [possessions](#). This is why I ask: "was it a mosquito bite that has so seriously infected Lord Carnarvon?"

When, just a few days later Lord Carnarvon succumbed to his illness, Marie Corelli was hailed as a clairvoyant and a legend was born.

Dr Tyldesley remarks: "Finally the world's press had a story they could publish without deferring to The Times; a human tragedy far more compelling than the disappointingly slow-moving events at the tomb. As with all celebrity deaths, the story rapidly gathered its own momentum and soon there were reports of sinister goings on. At the very moment of Carnarvon's death all the lights in Cairo had been mysteriously extinguished and at his English home Carnarvon's dog, Susie, let out a great howl and died."

However, as Dr Tyldesley makes clear in her book, 'Tutankhamen's Curse: The Developing History of an Egyptian king', a power cut in Cairo is far from unusual and given the time differences rather than dying simultaneously, Susie actually died four hours after her master.

But never letting the facts get in the way of a good story the press continued with the line that Carnarvon had succumbed to an ancient curse. It was Marie Corelli again who brought this to life with her phrase "death comes on wings to he who enters the tomb of a pharaoh" and it was soon accepted that this or a slight variation was carved either over the entrance to Tutankhamen's tomb or somewhere inside it.

However no evidence of this inscription has ever been found and Dr Tyldesley says it's highly unlikely Tutankhamen would have felt the need to have one inscribed on his tomb. "In a land where only about 5% of the population was literate it seems unlikely that those tempted to rob could actually read any warning. Instead it was widely accepted that the dead

had the power to interfere with the living."

But the absence of any concrete proof did nothing to quell the rumours. As the years went on more deaths were attributed to the curse including Prince Ali Kemal Fahmy Bey who had visited the tomb – he was shot by his wife in 1923, Georges Bénédite the Head of the Department of Antiquities at the Louvre Museum who died in 1926 after seeing the tomb and in 1934 Albert Lythgoe the [Egyptologist](#) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York who had seen the open sarcophagus of Tutankhamen a decade before.

Right up until the 1970s deaths were being ascribed to the curse including among the flight crew that brought Tutankhamen's 1972 exhibition to London.

However, Howard Carter himself found it necessary time and time again to report that Tutankhamen's tomb contained no biological booby traps, poisons or curse. In fact, of those who had first crept into the Burial Chamber, only Lord Canarvon had died prematurely.

So what of the death that sparked a legend?

It's widely believed that Lord Canarvon died from blood poisoning after accidentally cutting a mosquito bite whilst shaving. He was after all 57 years old at a time when the average male life expectancy at birth in the UK was just that. His health had also been severely weakened by a near-fatal car crash in Germany in 1901.

Other popular theories include the suggestion that Carnarvon might have been infected by a bite from a mosquito which had itself been contaminated by drinking Tutankhamen's embalming fluids. This was first put forward by the Daily Mail and gained in popularity when the mummy's autopsy revealed the scar on Tutankhamen's face which was

widely accepted as a [mosquito bite](#) linking Tutankhamen to Carnarvon. Unfortunately this theory doesn't stand up as there were no mosquitoes in the dry Valley of the Kings before the Aswan dam was built in the 1960s.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was the first to suggest that poisonous spores may have been included in the tomb. But this seems extremely unlikely given that ancient Egyptian medicine did not understand the causes of illnesses and sicknesses were attributed to malevolent spirits.

A suggestion he could have been poisoned by inhaling ancient and toxic bat guano that was heaped on the tomb floor can be ruled out as no bats had penetrated the sealed tomb.

And finally, the idea that Carnarvon might have been killed by radiation within the [tombs](#) has become increasingly popular. However, there is no evidence to support this theory.

So why has the concept of Tutankhamen's curse persisted? Dr Tyldesley concludes:

"It's a testament to the popularity of the occult that the modern legend of Tutankhamen's curse continues to be believed even today. However, it's not really surprising that this aspect of the story has lasted. Given the choice between focussing on the pretty average life of King Tut, a tomb they weren't allowed to see and a relatively uneventful death, journalists can't be blamed for wanting to write about a mysterious ancient curse; no matter how unlikely its existence really is."

Provided by University of Manchester

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