

World Leaders: King Tutankhamun

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The golden funerary mask of King Tutankhamun in the Egyptian Museum. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Synopsis: Born circa 1341 B.C., King Tut was the 12th king of the 18th Egyptian dynasty, in power from approximately 1332 to 1323 B.C. During his reign, powerful advisers restored the traditional Egyptian religion, which had been set aside by his father, Akhenaten, who had led the "Amarna Revolution." After his death at age 19, he disappeared from history until the discovery of his tomb in 1922. Since then, studies of his tomb and remains have revealed much information about his life and times.

Background

Probably one of the best known pharaohs of ancient Egypt, Tutankhamun was a minor figure in ancient Egyptian history. The boy king of the 18th Egyptian dynasty was the son of the powerful Akhenaten (also known as Amenhotep IV) and most likely one of Akhenaten's

sisters. His short reign of eight to nine years accomplished little, but the discovery of his nearly intact tomb in 1922 has led many to attempt to unravel the mysteries of his life and death.

Early Life

Tutankhamun was born circa 1341 B.C. and was given the name Tutankhaten, meaning "the living image of Aten." At this time, ancient Egypt was going through great social and political upheaval. Tutankhaten's father had forbidden the worship of many gods in favor of worshipping one, Aten, the sun disk. For this, he is known as the "heretic king." Historians differ on how extensive the change from polytheism to monotheism was, or whether Akhenaten was only attempting to elevate Aten above the other gods. It does seem, however, that his intent was to reduce the power of the priests and shift the traditional temple-based economy to a new regime run by local government administrators and military commanders.

As the populace was forced to honor Aten, the religious conversion threw society into chaos. The capital was changed from Thebes to Amarna, and Akhenaten put all of his efforts into the religious transition, neglecting domestic and foreign affairs. As the power struggle between old and new intensified, Akhenaten became more autocratic and his regime more corrupt. Following a 17-year reign, he was gone, probably forced to abdicate, and he died soon after. His 9-year-old son, Tutankhaten, took over around 1332 B.C.

Boy King In Power

The same year that Tutankhaten took power, he married Ankhesenamun, his half sister and the daughter of Akhenaten and Nefertiti. It is known that the young couple had two daughters, both likely to have been stillborn. Due to Tutankhaten's young age when he assumed power, the first years of his reign were probably controlled by an elder known as Ay, who bore the title of Vizier. Ay was assisted by Horemheb, Egypt's top military commander at the time. Both men reversed Akhenaten's decree to worship Aten, in favor of the traditional polytheistic beliefs. Tutankhaten changed his name to Tutankhamun, which means "the living image of Amun," and had the royal court moved back to Thebes.

Foreign policy had also been neglected during Akhenaten's reign, and Tutankhamun sought to restore better relations with ancient Egypt's neighbors. While there is some evidence to suggest that Tutankhamun's diplomacy was successful, during his reign, battles took place between Egypt and the Nubians and Asiatics over territory and control of trade routes. Tutankhamun was trained in the military, and there is some evidence that he was good at archery. However, it is unlikely that he saw any military action.

Internally, Tutankhamun sought to restore the old order in the hope that the gods would once again look favorably on Egypt. He ordered the repair of the holy sites and continued construction at the temple of Karnak. He also oversaw the completion of the red granite lions at Soleb.

Death And Burial

Because Tutankhamun and his wife had no surviving children, his death at age 19, circa 1323 B.C., brought further turmoil to the court. Evidence indicates that upon his death, Ankhesenamun contacted the king of the Hittites, asking for one of his sons as a husband. The Hittite king sent a candidate, but he died during the journey, most likely assassinated before he got to the royal palace. This attempt to forge an alliance with a foreign power was most likely prevented by Ay and Horemheb, who were still in control behind the scenes. Evidence shows that Ankhesenamun later married Ay before disappearing from history.

Tutankhamun was buried in a tomb in the Valley of the Kings. It is believed that his early death necessitated a hasty burial in a smaller tomb most likely built for a lesser noble. The body was preserved in the traditional fashion of mummification. Seventy days after his death, Tutankhamun's body was laid to rest and the tomb was sealed. There are no known records of Tutankhamun after his death, and, as a result, he remained virtually unknown until the 1920s. Even the location of his tomb was lost, as its entrance had been covered by the debris from a tomb structure built later.

King Tut's Tomb Discovered

Much of what is known about Tutankhamun, better known today as King Tut, derives from the discovery of his tomb in 1922. British archaeologist Howard Carter had begun excavating in Egypt in 1891, and after World War I he began an intensive search for Tutankhamun's tomb in the Valley of the Kings. On November 26, 1922, Carter and fellow archaeologist George Herbert, the Earl of Carnarvon, entered the interior chambers of the tomb. To their amazement, they found much of its contents and structure miraculously intact. Inside one of the chambers, murals were painted on the walls that told the story of Tutankhamun's funeral and his journey to the afterworld. Also in the room were various artifacts for his journey—oils, perfumes, toys from his childhood, precious jewelry and statues of gold and ebony.

The most fascinating item found was the stone sarcophagus containing three coffins, one inside the other, with a final coffin made of gold. When the lid of the third coffin was raised, King Tut's royal mummy was revealed, preserved for more than 3,000 years. As archaeologists examined the mummy, they found other artifacts, including bracelets, rings and collars. Over the next 17 years, Carter and his associates carefully excavated the four-room tomb, uncovering an incredible collection of thousands of priceless objects.

Quiz

- 1 Based on the article, each of the following contributed to Tutankhamun being a forgotten king EXCEPT:
- (A) his early death without heirs
 - (B) the lack of records about him
 - (C) the unknown location of his tomb
 - (D) the work of Howard Carter
- 2 Based on the article, which sentence BEST summarizes the how religion affected Tutankhamun's reign?
- (A) From the time he became king, Tut's decisions revolved around his belief in one god and the advice of priests.
 - (B) Tut spent his reign trying to continue the work his father had begun and even changed his name to honor his father's favorite god.
 - (C) Tut's reign was ended when his advisers assassinated him because of a disagreement about religion.
 - (D) His father's unpopular beliefs led to Tut's reign at an early age and to his decisions to restore holy sites and construct monuments.
- 3 Read the sentence from the section "Death And Burial."

It is believed that his early death necessitated a hasty burial in a smaller tomb most likely built for a lesser noble.

What does the adjective "hasty" convey in the sentence?

- (A) a sense that great time and honor went into planning Tutankhamun's burial
- (B) a sense that the usual amount of time and care were not given to Tutankhamun's burial
- (C) a sense that a great many people traveled to Tutankhamun's tomb to honor him
- (D) a sense that after he was buried many people wanted to unseal Tutankhamun's tomb

4 Read the following sentence from the section "Early Life."

Following a 17-year reign, he was gone, probably forced to abdicate, and he died soon after.

The author uses the word "abdicate" to mean:

- (A) give up his power
- (B) change the way he ruled
- (C) worship other gods
- (D) marry a new queen

Answer Key

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