

“Who Killed Tutankhamun?”

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Narrator: John Hurt

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Two portly American cops traipse around the tourist locales of Egypt and, employing the latterday witch science of “offender profiling”, purport to investigate the “suspicious” circumstances surrounding the young pharaoh’s death three and a half thousand years ago.

Who killed Tutankhamun? Well, **nobody** did, if we’re to apply the test of modern courtroom evidence. But that hasn’t prevented someone eking a tenuous whodunnit from the very little that is known of his short reign. This is another in the vein of crass documentaries which seek to popularise ancient history for the television audience by filling the gaps in what is actually known with wild speculation, bogus inference and tabloid sensationalism. You have to hold your nose through most of it to glean some morsels of genuine historical information. Since Tutankhamun (the programme insists on calling him “Tut” – which is some indication of the level of scholarship involved) was just nine when he succeeded his father, the heretical monotheist Akenaten, and his grave relics sparked a twentieth century craze for Egyptology and mysticism, any documentary on his life will be of interest to this archive. He’s probably the first boy king in recorded history.

What are the “suspicious” circumstances surrounding his death? Firstly, his youth (19). Secondly, there seem some genuine indications of irreverent haste or shoddiness in the preparation of his tomb (paint splashes on the wall and sarcophagus, autopsy indications that the body was damp, possibly putrefying, when embalmed. Thirdly, and most tellingly for the programme, the presence of a tiny fragment of loose bone in an X-ray of his skull. The most obvious explanation – that this was dislodged during removal of the brain through the nose during the mummification process (especially if this was done in unseemly haste) is quickly dismissed by the programme. The presence of a dark clot at the base of the skull is taken to be indication of a blow or heavy impact, and the loose fragment of bone reinforces that conclusion. Ergo: he died by violence. Ergo: foul play is the most probable cause.

More interestingly, modern analysis of the mummy’s X-rays reveal that he suffered from a congenital deformity of the spine which meant that in life he would have been unable to turn his head without rotating his whole upper body. Two mummified fetuses were found in his tomb, and naturally supposed to be his wife’s, one of which reveals the same genetic deformity. Both fetuses were female, one a premature birth, the other stillborn. The programme seizes on this as a motive for his assassination, perhaps even by his wife. Since, as with most pharaohs, his wife was also his younger sister, there’s no reason to suppose she did not also carry the same genetic defect. It’s suggested that two miscarriages would have cast doubt on his ability to sire a healthy male heir, but arguably, in the ancient world child mortality was so high that the loss of two female offspring would hardly have been serious grounds for regicide. Do we know that the pharaoh wouldn’t have had numerous concubines and secondary wives, who might already have born him male offspring? Were the pharaohs of that period strictly monogamous? I doubt it.

His young widow is dispensed with as a suspect – on the grounds of a single tomb painting which shows her reaching out to touch the king. Obviously then this was a genuine love match, and we can move on to more likely candidates, his three chief ministers: the head of his armies, the keeper of his treasury and the high priest (whom the programme insists on calling his Prime Minister). The case against the general is that (from another tomb painting) he was obviously foremost a patriot and would have despised a physically feeble ruler. The case against the treasurer is that he would have grown rich from administering the nation's taxes, and could have feared Tutankhamun would become as profligate a spender as his father. And the case against the high priest of Amon is that he would have been effective regent while the boy pharaoh had not yet attained his majority, and would have feared loss of power and status as the boy became a man.

The historical record does tell us, intriguingly, that the high priest did assume the throne on the young pharaoh's death, by the expedient of marrying his widow (much against her will, as a surviving letter from her to the Hittites suggests), and that his reign lasted only a few short years before Tutankhamun's general assumed the throne. Tutankhamun's widow vanishes from history shortly after his death. In other words, these piquant facts about the succession fare the real *prima facie* case for suspecting his death was conveniently organised, and it's hardly surprising that these characters were lined up, on no other supporting evidence, as candidates for the deed. Of course it's equally possible, given his handicap, that he died from a simple fall (the programme makes him out to be an avid charioteer – also on no evidence other than a few tomb artefacts) which would have precipitated the same scramble for power among his surviving ministers. But that makes a less sensational tale to tell, let's ignore it.

One factor the programme omits to mention was that Tutankhamun's father Akenaten also died prematurely, and in swift succession to his wife Nefertiti, and there would have been very good grounds for suspecting the priesthood in that case, since he'd set about dismantling their entire power base. Unpopular kings are liable to be removed.

But as always with such programmes, a whole slew of untested assumptions are used to stitch the case together. At what age would Tutankhamun have become absolute ruler in his own right? The programme suggests this was just about to happen to him at 19, but based upon what evidence? It's assumed that powerful ministers would effectively have run the state in his name. At the age of nine perhaps, but at nineteen? His deformity is taken to be a prime motive for assassination, but again, do we have a scrap of evidence that pharaohs habitually led their armies into war (Rameses II later did), or that curvature of the spine would have greatly impaired his ritual functions as pharaoh? A number of canes or walking sticks were found among his tomb goods, showing signs of use in life, but does that mean they would have served the same function 3,500 years ago as they do today? Or carried the same stigma?

I don't like my history diluted with three parts guesswork, and while it's valid to speculate on circumstantial evidence – the high priest was apparently buried in the tomb initially built for Tutankhamun himself – it's the mark of the greasy tabloid editor to present speculation as fact, and rush to conclusions based on those same "facts". As for "offender profiling", the expert in that field begins by comparing Akenaten to Stalin and Hitler, so we see just how detached and scientific that particular brand of research is.

Hollywood never made a historical epic about this most famous of all dead Egyptians, despite the fact the historical record is so scant they'd have had a free hand. Now there's a mystery fit for a pair of cops who couldn't between them manage to pronounce his name correctly. (It's "Tut-**ank**-ah-**moon**" guys, not "Tutten-Karmen")

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