

The Murder of King Tut?

A Case Far From Closed!

By Guest Historian
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So, how did Tut die? He died very young, even by the standards of his time.

Was the young Pharaoh assassinated? It's become fashionable to assume so, particularly

after the success of a 1998 book and TV documentary called *The Murder of Tutankhamun* (both by Egyptologist Bob Brier). Modern law enforcement has even taken an interest: in 2002, two Utah police officers briefly became famous when they applied the most current criminal "profiling" techniques to identify Tut's "murderer." Various theorists disagree on many points regarding Tut's supposed murder, but they all tend to point the finger of blame in one direction: to Ay, Tutankhamun's elderly chief minister who replaced him as king of Egypt.

The case against Ay has been built around four key facts:

1. Tut's mummified corpse shows evidence of a severe blow to the back of the head, which was likely inflicted before his death.
2. Soon after Tut's death, his widow, Queen Ankhesenamun, appealed to the king of the Hittites to send one of his sons to Egypt to become her new husband and pharaoh.
3. The Hittite prince Zidanza, sent in response to Ankhesenamun's request, was murdered by a party of Egyptians before he could complete his journey—probably with Ay's involvement.
4. Ankhesenamun was then forced to wed Ay, making him pharaoh. After this, she mysteriously disappeared from the historical record.

This certainly looks like a sinister sequence of events! It's very tempting to leap to the dark conclusion that Tut was murdered by Ay (or Ay's men). How else to explain the fact that the pharaoh went to his grave so young (barely 18 years old!), or the terrible wound on the back

of his head? What other possible reason could Tut's widow have had for trying such desperate measures to wriggle out of a marriage to Ay? Didn't Ay reveal his true nature with the murderous reception he arranged for

Prince Zidanza? And can it really be a coincidence that Queen Ankhesenamun conveniently disappeared so soon after Ay became king? Surely, some argue, the facts speak for themselves: Ay murdered Tut so that he might himself be king.

Yet incomplete facts never speak for themselves, especially when they're over 3000 years old! When examined more closely, the notion that Tut was murdered—by Ay or anyone else—turns out to rest on very shaky foundations.

The idea that Tut suffered a life-threatening blow to the head rests on a single set of three medical X rays, taken during an examination of his mummy in 1968. Everything that has been said or written about Tut's apparent head-wound in the past 36 years has been based on those three old images! It's claimed (probably correctly) that these images show evidence of a "hematoma" (internal bleeding)

in the skull.

Yes, this could have been the result of a deliberate attack. However, there's nothing about the wound that proves that it was inflicted intentionally. It might just as easily have resulted from an accident—such as a fall from a chariot during a hunting expedition. If images and equipment recovered from Tut's tomb are any indication, he loved to hunt, and accidents do happen.

Besides, the X rays also seem to show an abnormal thickening of the bone beneath the site of the blow to Tut's head. This would be evidence of healing, indicating that he was not killed instantly. Whatever happened, it appears that Tut may have lingered on, perhaps in a coma. He probably held on for months before finally succumbing to his injury.



Ankhesenamun—Tut's wife



If this was an assassination, it must have been a pretty sloppy one, since the victim didn't die until much later. It's hard to imagine someone attacking one of the most powerful men in the known world and not making sure that he was really dead! It would have been extremely risky. After all, people do wake up from comas to identify their attackers. If Ay was responsible, and if he was as ruthless as he seems to have been, it's hard to explain why he would have allowed his victim such an extended death-bed existence.

It's true that the behavior of Tut's young widow, Ankhesenamun, was hardly very flattering to Ay. In appealing to the Hittite king for an alternative husband, she was asking for help from Egypt's greatest enemy! The Hittites had recently seized large parts of the Egyptian empire. The prospect of marrying Ay must have been truly unpleasant if she was willing to go to such lengths to avoid it. Perhaps she suspected that Ay had murdered her husband. And yet, only once in her letters to the Hittite king (and then very briefly) does she express any fear. Instead, her tone is overwhelmingly one of pride in herself and contempt for Ay: "Never," she vows, "shall I pick out a servant of mine and make him my husband!" Only a very brave (or foolhardy!) historian would consider these letters proof that Ankhesenamun believed Ay caused her husband's death.

Is Tut's "murder" the only explanation for her determination to avoid a marriage of convenience to Ay? Of course not. After all, her marriage to Tut was apparently quite a loving one, and he had just died. Also, although Ay was an important official, he was not a member of the royal family by birth. He was a commoner, a mere "servant" compared to Queen Ankhesenamun. Besides, he was old enough to be her grandfather! The truth is, we just don't know what she was really thinking when she wrote to the Hittite king.

There was, however, one truly sinister event following Tut's death: the ambush and murder of the Hittite prince Zidanza on the road to Egypt. This was an organized assassination, approved at the highest levels of Ay's new government, so there's little doubt that Ay was ultimately responsible. His motives are also clear. Traditionally, the next king of Egypt secured his claim to the throne by marrying a senior female member of the royal family (particularly if the old pharaoh had no sons to inherit his throne). In this case, whoever married Queen Ankhesenamun would be pharaoh. When she offered the Hittite king the chance to send her a husband, Ay faced the real danger of losing his grip on power. After a long life

near the top of Egyptian politics, losing power to a foreigner would have been unacceptable to Ay.

And so, Zidanza was eliminated. Queen Ankhesenamun was left with no choice but to become Ay's wife, and Ay became pharaoh.

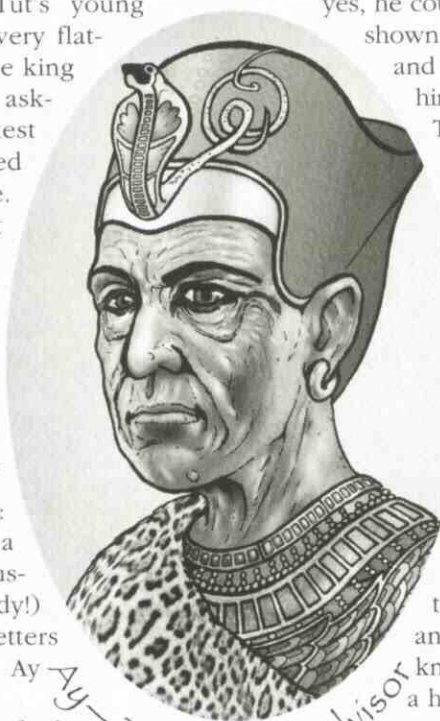
It's a sad fact that from this time forward, Ankhesenamun is heard from no more. Conspiracy theorists, not surprisingly, assume the worst: Ay did away with her, just as he had done away with Tut and Zidanza. Could this be true? Could Ay have had her killed? Well, yes, he could have. The Zidanza assassination had

shown he was capable of ordering murder, and Ankhesenamun had obviously given him good reason to question her loyalty.

There's only one flaw in this tidy theory: a complete lack of information to support it! The simple truth is that we just don't know what became of the queen. From what we know (nothing!), it's just as likely that she died of natural causes. Premature death by illness was an all-too-common fate in the ancient world. Or, she may have lived for many more years. Perhaps Ay, his victory complete, did nothing more unpleasant than send her away from his court into comfortable retirement.

Faced with mysteries, people want to find solid explanations. There are few answers less satisfying than "We just don't know." Unfortunately, this is sometimes all a historian can (or at least should) say. The era of Tutankhamun provides a good example of the frustrations that are so often a part of the quest to understand the past. The surviving information is so limited, and can be so easily interpreted in different ways, that we will probably never know what really happened to Tut. Given the ambiguities in the available medical evidence (not to mention the impossibility of knowing what was really in Ay's mind!) it's irresponsible to leap to wild theories of murder.

Is it possible that Tut was murdered by Ay? Yes, it certainly is. But that doesn't mean it happened. Until new information is discovered, the most likely explanation for Tut's death is still that he died from injuries sustained in an accident.



Ay—Tut's Senior Advisor



Tut—the Victim?



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