

EGYPT III – LUXOR AND THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS – PART II

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Having taken in the beauty and essence of Egyptian Life in Antiquity, visiting the lovely cities along the Nile from Aswan – Kom Ombo, Edfu and Dendara, and the sophisticated and cultivated East Bank of Luxor, the Karnak Complex, El Luxor Temple, and the Avenue of the Sphinxes, we now travel to the West Bank and the Cities of the Dead for a very different experience.

I would like to make clear that I am not an Egyptologist! These writings are based simply on my own observations and experiences. However it would be good to have some understanding of the chronology of the Pharaohs. The 1st and 2nd Dynasties go back to 3000BC, quickly followed by six Dynasties of the Old Kingdom which lasted until 2100BC and included Sneferu and Cheops who built the mighty Pyramid at Giza. The Middle Kingdom consisted of eight more Dynasties, the 9th - 17th until 1550BC. Possibly the most important period of Antiquity was the New Kingdom, 18th - 20th Dynasties, an incredibly productive 400 years. The 18th Dynasty (1550BC – 1290BC) included amongst its Pharaohs Amenhotep, Tuthmosis I, II, and III, Queen Hatshepsut, Akhenaten and finally Tutankhamun. In the 19th Dynasty (1295BC – 1185BC) the Pharaohs were Rameses I and II and Seti I and II which was when the majority of the great constructions we see today were built. The following 1000 years saw a gradual decline and the coming of the Greeks

and Romans, including Alexander the Great who began the Ptolemaic Dynasty which ended with Cleopatra, the last great Pharaoh Queen in 30BC.

My readers may remember I met a Dutchman, Theo, on board the ship from Aswan to Luxor, who is also staying for a week in Luxor. He has found a guide for the Valley of the Kings and invites me to join them, so one sunlit morning Gadi picks us up at 6am for breakfast on the short boat ride over the river to the West Bank. On landing we pass the Colossi of Memnon, effigies of the Pharaoh Amenhotep marking the entrance to a large Temple now under excavation.

Here on the West Bank the landscape is dry dusty desert with not a leaf growing once past the sharply defined line of vegetation, and with small rocky mountains rising behind, a veritable Land of the Dead. The Tombs are buried deep into the mountainsides to protect them from marauders and pillagers. Our guide Gadi is wonderful. He speaks fast but is a professional Egyptologist and very knowledgeable. He is studying Hieroglyphics at the University and we are lucky to have him, a delightful and enthusiastic young man. Gadi gives us a brief but interesting talk about Hieroglyphics and their Cartouches and Champollion, the Frenchman who after long years managed to decipher them.

The Ancient Egyptians believed deeply in the After Life and wanted to make sure that their loved ones would be suitably honoured and prepared, hence the Mummification, particular to the Egyptians, although other cultures have practised it, especially in South America. The idea was not to allow the separation of the body from the soul, so they worked out what causes the body to decay after death. They developed a system which involved

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Relief inside a tomb

emptying the body of its organs, draining out all fluids thus preserving the outer flesh and skin. The essential organs were stored separately in Amphorae and buried alongside the sarcophagus in the chamber of the Tomb. Depending on the importance of the person, they also buried treasures, gold, jewellery, food, furniture and sometimes carriages, anything that might help ease the passage from Life through to Death.

It is impossible to enter all of the Tombs, but on different trips I have been into many, Rameses IV and IX, and a typical one is that of Rameses I, dating back to 1290BC – down down into the depths it goes before opening out into a vast chamber. The sarcophagus is empty but the walls are covered with marvellous paintings, the colours remarkably vibrant after nearly 3000 years, the ceilings highly decorated with paintings of blind musicians playing harps and wind and string instruments. Most of the Tombs are similarly decorated though always empty.

The tomb of Tutankhamun was opened in 1922, out of 64 tombs the only one to be found perfectly intact, not having been pillaged or robbed. The statuary was solid gold and there were over 5000 objects to carry him on his journey to the next world. The interior is simple as there was not much time to decorate it before his untimely death. The longer a Pharaoh reigned, the more magnificent his tomb, as work started on his Burial Place the day of his accession to the throne. But the artefacts found by Howard Carter within it are extraordinary and have been transported around the world, most of the contents today being in the

Egyptian Museum in Cairo, including the fabulous world-famous blue and gold Death Mask.

The Boy King was almost certainly murdered. Tutankhamun may well have been sickly but 18 of his bones were found to be broken in a ritualistic manner and other signs of foul play have been recorded, including a hole in his skull. He was probably the victim of political ambition and religious beliefs. His father, Akhenaten, had tried to abolish the old Gods and was therefore considered a heretic, and this is likely the reason Tutankhamun was assassinated. He became Pharaoh at just 9 years of age, married at 10, and two foetuses were found buried with him, possibly his unborn children; he died aged 16. After his death the Imperial General took over and founded the dynasty

of Rameses. The Old Order of the Gods was restored by Seti I who ruled some 70 years after Tutankhamun.

The Tomb of Seti I has just been re-opened and I see it on my most recent visit to Luxor. It is spectacular. This Tomb is exceptional because of its 130-metre long gallery of wall paintings and reliefs, telling tales taken from ancient texts such as the Litany of Ra, Horus and Anubis, and the Book of the Dead, with brilliant blue starry ceilings, the glorious colours beautifully preserved. Art during the long reign of Seti I was amongst the finest of all Antiquity. He was the son of Rameses I and father of the Great Rameses II, who ruled for many years, fathering over 200 children and outliving 29 of his 98 sons.

A small train takes us to the Memorial Temple of Hatshepsut, the great Pharaoh Queen. She ruled as a man, having married her brother Tuthmosis II and taking over as Pharaoh when he died. She engendered Tuthmosis III her son / nephew who became the next Pharaoh. He hated her and his father / uncle, and yet also married his own sister – an unhappy family with much incest! Hatshepsut had many lovers including her High Priest and the Architect who designed this magnificent Temple which is grandly set in a natural Ampitheatre of sandstone. There is a feeling of awe as one ascends the imposing Ramp up to the Temple, the majestic hills closing in all around as one climbs. Afterwards we visit the Valley of the Queens, the burial ground of all the Queens, Princes and other dignitaries, High Priests and such, and where Queen Nefertari the favourite wife of Rameses II is buried.

The British Archaeologist Howard Carter set up home in a mud-brick house on the West Bank during the six years he spent looking for the Tomb of Tutankhamun and for some time after, while uncovering its treasures. The eventual discovery is still hailed as one of the most exciting and significant finds in all Egyptology. A small garden surrounds the domed house and going in feels like entering another world. Everything has been restored exactly as it was in the 1920's, the rickety beds, simple furnishings, old linen, a rudimentary stone kitchen, his desk covered with dusty maps, papers and binoculars, with an old standard lamp behind, a topee hanging on the wall. All the tools of his profession are scattered around and many photographs. He might have just stepped out. It seems homely and livable though he could have gone over to the Winter Palace to see his friend and patron Lord Carnavon if he wanted more creature comforts! An exact replica of the Tomb of Tutankhamun has been built nearby including a faithful reproduction of the sarcophagus and the story of the find in words and photographs.

On one of my visits to Luxor I take a hot-air Balloon ride over the Valley of the Kings which turns out to be quite an adventure. We are collected early morning and given breakfast at 5am on board a small boat which takes us to the Balloon airfield. Captain Karim is waiting for us and we climb into the large basket which is divided into sections and holds around twenty people. He seems competent enough as he drills us in the "Landing Position" which requires being braced against the bottom of the basket. The Balloon team on the ground is about twelve-strong, all pulling and heaving at the ropes as the gas lights up and fills the gigantic balloon above us. And then we are away!

A smooth magical lift-off, rising slowly above the Valley, we drift over the sandy mountains, these ancient burial grounds, the various Tombs and the Temple of Hatshepsut seen in great detail from the sky, the demarcation line of vegetation and desert clearly defined. Everything is sharply visible, and sounds too seem amplified, the crowing of a cockrel, the calling of the farmers. We see birds far below, even tiny ones, and great Herons flying across the Nile. The sun rises an enormous red disc behind El Luxor and Karnak and we can see the curve of the earth's surface, the Nile a perfect arc below. After half an hour or so the balloon drifts slowly down towards marshy fields, bumping along the earth until finally landing, much to the fright of several nearby cows. Miraculously the Balloon boys appear and strain to pull on the flying ropes to stop its flight.

Captain Karim barks briskly "Don't get out yet!" or we will take off again ...

As the boys run up we clamber out and they efficiently collapse and fold the balloon away before loading the entire contraption plus basket onto a lorry to go back to the airfield. Then everyone joins hands and sings and dances in a circle perhaps to celebrate having got back to Earth safely!

The next and last piece on Egypt will be about the Red Sea and Sinai and then back to Cairo again. I hope my readers have a little more idea of the intricacies of this extraordinary country and the complexity of its ancient History before travelling forward in time again to Modern Day Egypt ... □