

CHAPTER
2

Section 2

HISTORYMAKERS Tutankhamen
The Boy King

“At first I could see nothing . . . but presently, as my eyes grew accustomed to the light, details of the room within emerged slowly from the mist, strange animals, statues, and gold—everywhere the glint of gold.”—Howard Carter, recalling the discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb

Thrust into the mantle of power at the age of nine or ten, Tutankhamen reigned as pharaoh, or king, of Egypt for only ten years, before dying at the young age of 18. His most important action was to restore ancient Egyptian religion. He was seldom remembered except by scholars who specialized in Egyptian history—until November 26, 1922. That day, archaeologist Howard Carter and George Herbert, a British nobleman, uncovered the tomb of this boy king and found such vast riches that he became the most famous pharaoh of all.

Tutankhamen came to the throne in a difficult time in Egyptian history. His father had tried to radically change the land’s religion. He moved the capital of the kingdom away from Memphis. He abandoned the sacred city of Thebes. He declared that the god Aten was the only god of Egypt, replacing all others. The pharaoh had even changed his own name to Akhenaten to honor the new god.

The changes plunged Egypt into chaos. The pharaoh paid little heed to running his kingdom, and the people suffered. Later, after his death, he was angrily called the “criminal of Akhetaten,” the name of his new capital city.

Akhenaten died after 17 years of rule. Soon afterward, a new name appeared on the scene: Tutankhaten, the son of Akhenaten. He became king of a land in turmoil.

Records show that under the young king, Egypt launched attacks on Nubia to the south and on Asia to the east. However, the boy ruler probably did not lead these military actions. Two older figures—an official named Ay and the general Horemheb—may have guided the country during the young pharaoh’s reign. Both ruled Egypt after his death.

The young king’s main accomplishment was not military but religious. He put an end to his father’s experiment with the new religion of Aten. He moved the religious center of the kingdom back to Thebes and restored worship of the ancient gods. Tutankhaten also worked to restore the temples

and other sacred buildings that had fallen to decay. He even changed his name to Tutankhamen to show his reverence for the old gods. Tradition and order returned to Egyptian society. Soon after, however, the boy king died.

Though Tutankhamen had an important impact on Egypt, his reign was obscure to most people until Carter and Herbert brought his tomb to light. The rulers of ancient Egypt built elaborate tombs to house their bodies after death. Some were pyramids of stone. Others were cut into rock in the famous Valley of the Kings. These tombs were filled with gold, jewels, and other treasures for the pharaoh to enjoy in the afterlife. Over the years, however, robbers entered these burial places and took most objects of value. Archaeologists had long hoped to find a tomb that was intact.

Carter and Herbert’s find provided that chance. The entrance to Tutankhamen’s tomb had been covered over by workers who built a later tomb. As a result, his burial place had lain forgotten—and full of dazzling riches—for thousands of years. One spectacular treasure was the death mask of the king, a beautiful piece of solid gold. And the tomb revealed a wealth of other objects: “beads, boxes, stools, chariots, bows, arrows, shoes, gloves, underwear, food . . . and much more besides.” Today many of these objects are displayed in museums. They give not just archaeologists, but all people, an opportunity to observe the glory of ancient Egypt.

Questions

- Recognizing Effects** How had Akhenaten’s rule affected Egypt?
- Drawing Conclusions** Why was it significant that Tutankhamen changed his name?
- Making Inferences** Not all the objects in Tutankhamen’s tomb were made of gold or jewels. Why might archaeologists want to study shoes, boxes, or food?