Historic Disasters and Mysteries

THE CURSE OF KING TUT

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CHAPTER ONE

Egypt and the Pharaohs

Long before the idea of a pharaoh's curse was born, the pharaohs themselves ruled ancient Egypt. Under their rule, the ancient Egyptian civilization lasted more than three thousand years and was one of the greatest cultures in human history. Understanding this civilization and its belief systems is essential to understanding the importance of the pharaohs—and the potential of a pharaoh's curse.

A Land of Kings and Queens

The pharaohs of Egypt were mighty, powerful rulers. Like kings and queens throughout the centuries and in many different lands, they usually attained this lofty position through birth. They were the oldest children or designated heirs of the current pharaoh. Nearly all were boys, although occasionally a female pharaoh rose to power. Once enthroned, a pharaoh ruled until death.

While the pharaoh lived, he or she had absolute power. This was more than just convention. Upon ascending the throne of Egypt, a pharaoh was thought to become semi-divine. He or she was the living representative on Earth of Horus, the god of the sky and the protector of Egypt. This connection set the pharaoh apart from all other people. One pharaoh, Sesostris I, described his relationship with Horus with these words:

He begat me to do what should be done for him,
to accomplish what he commands to do,
He appointed me shepherd of this land,
knowing him who would herd it for him.[2]

Being the human representative of the gods was a heavy burden. Pharaohs were solely responsible for maintaining *ma'at*, or harmony, throughout the land. They did this by collecting taxes, making and enforcing laws, performing religious rituals, building mighty monuments, and engaging in warfare when necessary. They were also responsible for making sure the Nile River overflowed its banks on schedule each year to ensure a bountiful harvest—a tall order for a regular mortal but completely within the capabilities of a virtual god on Earth.

Ruled by the Gods

While the pharaoh wielded authority over the living, a whole pantheon of gods controlled the divine realm. Ancient Egyptian religion was polytheistic, meaning it recognized many gods—over two thousand of them, although a handful of these gods were much more prominent than the rest. Together, the gods were involved in every aspect of the world's functioning. They controlled the big things—the sun, the moon, the weather, the harvest, running water, animal behavior—and also small things of local concern. Each and every one of these gods had to be coddled to make sure he or she was watching out for Earth's human population. Appeasing the gods was therefore an important part of Egyptian life.

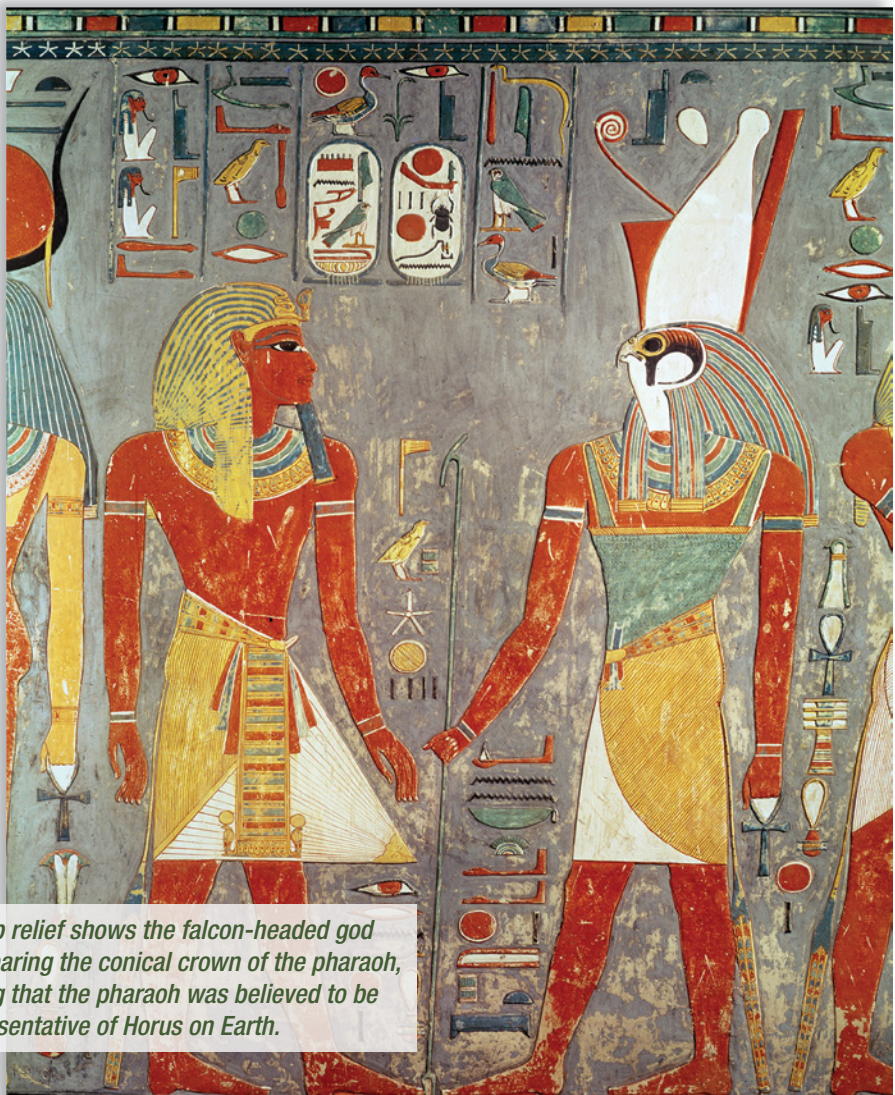
Daily rituals were one way to please the gods. In public temples, religious representatives might bathe and clothe statues of certain gods each day. They would also prepare

Did You Know?

In all, there were about 170 pharaohs of ancient Egypt. Menes was the first, and Cleopatra VII was the last.

meals for the statues. In private homes, small shrines served gods in a similar way. Families usually dedicated their shrines to gods of particular relevance to them. A family hoping to conceive children, for example, might maintain a shrine to a fertility goddess. A family praying for a good harvest might focus its efforts on an agricultural god.

At certain times, religious festivals brought all Egyptians together in communal worship. Statues of the major gods and goddesses were carried through the streets during these events. People gathered at the temples and left offerings of food, drink, and flowers. Afterward they could go home content in the knowledge that the gods were happy.



This tomb relief shows the falcon-headed god Horus wearing the conical crown of the pharaoh, indicating that the pharaoh was believed to be the representative of Horus on Earth.

Although all of these rituals were important, general good behavior was the best way to please the gods. As is true in modern times, ancient Egyptians had ideas about right and wrong ways to live. They believed that their actions were constantly observed by the gods and would eventually be judged. It was vital, therefore, that they try to live exemplary lives according to the standards of their society.

The Afterlife

The reward for these efforts would not come during one's current lifetime. It would arrive after death, when a person's soul had the opportunity to enter the afterlife. Guided by a jackal-headed god named Anubis, the soul would travel to a shadowy realm called Duat, where gods lurked around every corner and the moment of judgment was imminent.

The first stop in Duat was the Hall of Truth. Here, the deceased person's heart was placed on a scale and weighed against a feather from Ma'at, the goddess of truth, balance, justice, and harmony. If the heart was lighter than the feather, that meant it was pure, and the soul was allowed to pass. If the heart was heavier than the feather, that meant it was impure. The soul was devoured by hungry demons and entered eternal oblivion.

Those who survived the Hall of Truth proceeded to an interview with forty-two gods. Each god was charged with looking for a specific sin. The person had to persuade each god individually that he or she was innocent of the sin in question. If all of the gods were convinced, the person would be allowed to pass. He or she would enter the Field of Reeds, a pleasant realm where life was just like it had been on Earth, with one exception: death no longer existed. That transition, having been made once, would never have to be repeated.

Did You Know?

A work called *The Book of the Dead* contains complete instructions for navigating the Egyptian afterlife. It was considered a cheat sheet for the most important test of a person's existence.

Historians have commented that the Egyptian view of the afterlife—what other cultures might call Paradise—is unique in the annals of religion. It is not an idealized realm. Rather, it is just more of the same. As one author points out, "The ability to continue one's existence in essentially the same state as it was in the mortal realm spoke to a deep contentment within the Egyptians. They could not envision any place better than what they already had on Earth."[3]

Royal Treatment

Eternity spent in the Field of Reeds required the same items that had been necessities of daily living on Earth: clothing, toiletries, furniture, kitchen utensils, and other trappings of earthly human life. People therefore buried all sorts of paraphernalia with their dead loved ones. The richer the family, the bigger the stash.

Pharaohs had nearly unlimited wealth at their disposal, so it is no surprise that their burial caches were the biggest of all. Everything that the deceased king might possibly need or want was provided. Items buried alongside ancient Egyptian pharaohs included everything from dishes to jewelry, food to weapons, and board games to wigs. Some pharaohs were even accompanied by the vehicles they were thought to need in the afterlife. A pharaoh named Khufu, for instance, was buried with a 144-foot-long (44 m) wooden boat, for use in navigating otherworldly rivers. Tutankhamun had six chariots: three fancy ones for ceremonial use and three everyday ones for hunting, visiting, and other everyday trips.

The dead ruler was even provided with servants. In the earliest days of ancient Egypt, the pharaoh's actual servants were buried along with their king. In later centuries this was deemed impractical and wasteful, much to the undoubted relief of royal attendants. Clay figurines called *ushabti* were crafted to take the place of real people. Painted to resemble farmers, nobles, cooks, housekeepers, and all other workers, the *ushabti* would come to life in the underworld to serve their master.

Threats from the Afterlife

Pharaohs were understandably worried about tomb robbery. They believed they would need their worldly goods, not to mention their mummified bodies, in the afterlife. The theft or destruction of these items would be a disaster. To deter robbers, therefore, many tombs were inscribed with dire warnings. One inscription, found in the tomb of a man named Petety, reads,

> Oh, all people who enter this tomb,
> Who will make evil against this tomb and destroy it:
> May the crocodile be against them on water,
> And snakes against them on land.
> May the hippopotamus be against them on water,
> The scorpion against them on land.

An inscription on a different tomb takes a more direct and less poetic tack. The owner states simply that if anyone disturbs his rest or his things, "I will wring his neck like a bird."

Warnings like these were not considered to be empty threats. The deceased, after all, were not gone for good; they still existed in the afterlife, and they would know immediately if someone violated their earthly remains. It was plausible that they could take action against such a person. Their curses therefore carried some weight—but not enough, it seems, to have stopped tomb robbers from plundering virtually all of ancient Egypt's tombs.

Quoted in Zahi Hawass, *The Golden King: The World of Tutankhamun*. Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006, p. 148.

Mummification

Although all of these things were considered important, the most essential item in the afterworld was not jewelry, transportation, or servants. It was the deceased person's own corpse. Just as the pharaoh would need his belongings after death, he would also need his body, which was thought to be a vessel for housing the soul. As scientist Stephen Buckley explains, "The afterlife was just a continuation of enjoying life. But they needed the body to be preserved in order for the spirit to have a place to reside."[4]

SOURCE NOTES

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FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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