

COPING THROUGH CURSE:  
CONFRONTING BRITISH METROPOLITAN IDENTITY  
THROUGH THE  
“CURSE OF TUTANKHAMEN”  
(1923-1933)

by

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## Abstract

This thesis seeks to understand the origins of the curse of Tutankhamen within interwar British society and to explain why the British were willing to believe in the “curse of Tutankhamen” between 1923 and 1933. It argues that the curse served as a method of coping as the British reformed their rational, Enlightened ways with irrational imaginings to deflect feelings of trauma after the First World War and of vulnerability with the loss of Egypt as a protectorate in 1922. Just as the British newspapers evaded discussing the true story of the archaeological dig of the tomb of Tutankhamen, so too did the British use their own imperial ideas of Egyptian Romantic allure to circumvent the reality of Egyptians through the curse of Tutankhamen.

I argue that the curse of Tutankhamen was a British-created myth with necessary Egyptian influences that served to preserve British imperial views of the “other” in the wake of World War One (1914-1918) and the British Unilateral Declaration of Egyptian Independence on February 28, 1922. Importantly, this thesis maintains that the veracity of the curse itself is secondary to the cultural effects of the purported curse in the British metropole. The curse of Tutankhamen was a myth born out of the British metropole-favored imagination and threatening comparison with the Empire inherent in Orientalism. By analyzing coverage in British newspapers such as *The Times* and *The Daily Mail* and the accounts of later historians such as Allegra Fryxell and Roger Luckhurst, this thesis argues that the British authored and perpetuated the “curse of Tutankhamen,” by basing the curse within British perceptions of modern and ancient Egypt. The curse symbolized the mythological arrival of the periphery of the British Empire within British metropolitan identity.

## Introduction

The sunspots from the desert sun still dotting his vision, archaeologist Howard Carter gazed down the flight of steps leading to the tomb of the pharaoh Tutankhamen on November 29, 1922. Tutankhamen, publicly nicknamed “King Tut,” was an eighteenth dynasty ruler of Egypt who reigned from 1332 to 1323 B.C.<sup>1</sup> It was on this day in 1922 that Tutankhamen’s wealth was unearthed, having been sealed away for over 3,200 years in the Valley of the Kings. Carter, the main archaeologist on site, could finally bring his discovery to the public, and, especially, to the dig’s financier, George Edward Stanhope Molyneux Herbert, 5th Earl of Carnarvon, who, after seeing no progress on the site, had threatened to cut his financial support only one year prior. If the tomb were intact, as both men hoped, it would be the archaeological find of the century, bringing wealth, global fame, and national pride for Britain and the two men.

Carter boldly stepped first down the stone-cut steps. Lord Carnarvon followed, roaring with laughter as he descended into the darkness below. Meanwhile, Mr. Arthur Weigall watched the jovial Lord Carnarvon descend into the tomb.<sup>2</sup> As a *Daily Mail*, London, correspondent with experience as the former Egyptian Director of Antiquities who specialized in the study of Tutankhamen’s father, Akhenaten, Weigall was envious of the new find and, desirous for attention to further his own personal career, turned to a fellow reporter and declared that Lord Carnarvon would only have six weeks to live for entering the tomb in such an irreverent and disrespectful manner.<sup>3</sup> With Weigall and other reporters gazing on, Carter opened the tomb,

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<sup>1</sup> Donald M. Reid, *Contesting Antiquity in Egypt: Archaeologies, Museums & the Struggle for Identities from World War I to Nasser*, (Cairo; New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2015,) 51.

<sup>2</sup> Julie Hankey, *A Passion for Egypt: Arthur Weigall, Tutankhamun, and the “Curse of the Pharaohs.”* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris; In the United States distributed by St. Martin’s Press, 2001.)

<sup>3</sup> Hankey, *A Passion for Egypt: Arthur Weigall, Tutankhamun, and the “Curse of the Pharaohs.”*

peered inside, and immediately succumbed in awe to the magnificence within, knowing the finding was a success. The men had found a priceless pharaonic tomb containing “the most complete set of burial objects known to this day” with 5,398 well-preserved artifacts.<sup>4</sup> Yet, unbeknownst to them, this glory would be short-lived for one in the company. Just over four months later, on April 5, 1923, as Weigall had foretold, Lord Carnarvon passed away in Cairo due to an infected mosquito bite that he had cut open while shaving.<sup>5</sup>

Immediately, the frenzied media reported the death of Carnarvon, but rather than write on the life of the gentleman, the press focused more on an ominous culprit for his demise—the “curse of Tutankhamen.” Though the curse itself changed wording many times across newspaper reports, the most common and widely-accepted variation was published in London’s *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Gloucester Citizen*, and the *Daily Mail Atlantic Edition*, stating that “Death shall come on swift wings to him that toucheth the tomb of a Pharaoh,” although this wording cannot be corroborated with any physical source within the tomb.<sup>6</sup> The press linked other mysterious circumstances to Lord Carnarvon’s death, including a power outage throughout the city of Cairo and the death of his beloved pet terrier, Susan, both of which were rumored to have occurred at the exact moment of Carnarvon’s death.<sup>7</sup> Stranger still, weeks before the tomb’s opening, a large cobra, an Egyptian symbol for the pharaoh, slithered into the cage of

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Collins, and Liam McNamara, *Discovering Tutankhamun*, (Ashmolean Museum, 2014,) 37.; Desroches-Noblecourt, *Life and Death of a Pharaoh: Tutankhamen*, (New York, NY: New York Graphic Society, 1963), 18.

<sup>5</sup> “L.D. Carnarvon’s Death, 16 Years’ Work in Egypt, The Luxor Tomb,” (*The Times*, April 5, 1923, The Times Digital Archive.)

<sup>6</sup> “Peer’s Tragic Death,” (*Daily Mail Atlantic Edition*, February 22, 1930, Daily Mail Historical Archive, 1896-2004.); “These Men Defied the Death Curse of the Pharaohs...” (*Gloucester Citizen*, March 30, 1937, The British Newspaper Archive.)

<sup>7</sup> Philipp Vandenberg, *The Forgotten Pharaoh: The Discovery of Tutankhamun*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980,) 156-162.

Howard Carter's pet parrot and killed the bird, leading both British readers and Egyptian workers to believe this event foreshadowed impending doom.<sup>8</sup> In the court of media opinion, it seemed the dig was ill-fated from the outset. Though Carter did not die or suffer any physical issues due to the "curse of Tutankhamen," he grew bitter with the overactive media and would periodically shut down the dig site in protest of the media's perpetual demand for supernatural or archaeological news from the tomb.

The frenzied media was not an unexpected development, for Carter and Carnarvon had seen the media excitement at the onset of the discovery. Before Lord Carnarvon's death, the two men had agreed to sell exclusive rights to the story of the dig to *The Times* of London, which offered the widest audience base and promised to pay the men £5,000 and seventy-five percent of all royalties made selling their articles to other newspaper outlets.<sup>9</sup> Seeking to avoid payment to *The Times*, English and Egyptian newspapers seized Arthur Weigall's prophecy of Lord Carnarvon's death and the curse of Tutankhamen as a means to circumvent *The Times'* exclusive rights, using the curse as a means of plausible deniability to cover the archaeological dig of Tutankhamen's tomb. Feeding into the public's "Egyptomania," newspapers fed British enchantment with the tomb and the notoriety of the "curse of Tutankhamen" grew, made even more intense with the deaths of several other British men connected to the dig over the next ten years, including Lieutenant Colonel Aubrey Herbert, Lord Carnarvon's half-brother;<sup>10</sup> and the

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<sup>8</sup> Vandenberg, *The Forgotten Pharaoh: The Discovery of Tutankhamun*, 158-159.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hoving, *Tutankhamun, the Untold Story*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978,) 228.; Reid, *Contesting Antiquity in Egypt: Archaeologies, Museums & the Struggle for Identities from World War I to Nasser*, 63.

<sup>10</sup> British newspapers between 1920 and 1940 and historian Paul Harrison include the following to also have died from the curse of Tutankhamen: George Jay Gould, Hugh Evelyn-White, Dr. Aaron Ember, Sir Archibald Douglas-Reid, James Henry Breasted, Richard Adamson, Prince Ali Kamel Fahmy Bey of Egypt, Governor of the Sudan Sir Lee Stack, A.C. Mace (Howard Carter's main co-author and secretary after Richard Bethell), The Honorable Mervyn Herbert, Richard

Honourable Richard Bethell, Carter's preliminary secretary.<sup>11</sup> Reports about the curse of Tutankhamen circulated so widely that eventually Weigall himself, "scornful of spiritualists and mysticism," refused to discuss the curse, recognizing that his prophecy had spun into a larger issue where news reports blurred the lines between entertainment and factual reporting.<sup>12</sup> The archaeological pursuits of Carter proved secondary to the allure of a romanticized curse.

At first glance, the curse of Tutankhamen served simply to entertain the public, but this fascination itself revealed a British craving to escape outward to the Empire to heal internal scars following the First World War. The deconstruction of typical news reporting to a storytelling of myth provided an avenue for the British metropole to express the oriental allure of Empire. It was at the start of the First World War that the British government fully embraced the media as a tool to further "the dissemination of imperial sentiments," encouraging Oriental escapism to promote the integrity and pride of the metropole.<sup>13</sup> Following the war, attention moved from the number of casualties, broken families, and struggling economy and was placed firmly on the irrational and uncivilized East as seen in cigarette advertisements shifting from the 1916 advertisement for "Wills's 'Gold Flake' Cigarettes" depicting a British officer to the 1919 "Egyptian Deities" cigarette depicting ancient Egyptian women with the slogan "I have emphysema just like Osiris and Thoth."<sup>14</sup> Through the distribution and readership of the curse of

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Bethell's father Richard Luttrell Pilkington Bethell, Lieutenant Rick Laurie, Kenneth Parkinson, Jim Webb, Brian Roustall, Cairo Museum Curator Mohammad Ibrahim, Aaron Bénédite, and Joseph Grear.

<sup>11</sup> "Curse of the Pharaohs: Tenth Discoverer of Tomb Stricken Down," (*Dundee Courier*, December 31, 1929, The British Newspaper Archive.)

<sup>12</sup> Hankey, *A Passion for Egypt: Arthur Weigall, Tutankhamun, and the "Curse of the Pharaohs,"* 136.

<sup>13</sup> Kennedy, *Britain and Empire, 1880-1945*, 61.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

Tutankhamen, the British displaced their post-war anxieties through the mingled fascination and fear of the “other,” those of non-white, non-Western heritage. The British created a metropolitan crisis in escaping outside the metropole rather than confronting their pain and wavering stability at home, similar to how the media deflected the true story of Tutankhamen’s archaeological dig by inventing the curse.<sup>15</sup> Imperial escapism gave the British a method of coping with fragility; the British were scarred, but at least, in their perception, they were not as scarred as those “others” across the Mediterranean.

This thesis seeks to understand how the curse of Tutankhamen functioned within the British cultural imagination and to understand why the British were willing to believe in a curse that directly threatened the lives of citizens and challenged English imperial authority. I argue that though the curse of Tutankhamen demonstrates the power of Egyptian allure, the curse is truly a metropolitan invention of the British desired to justify their dominance over an “uncivilized” empire that had expanded by an “additional million square miles and 13 million inhabitants” after World War I.<sup>16</sup> As many among British readership romanticized Egypt through the curse of Tutankhamen, they combined their wonderment and understanding of rationality to reassure themselves of their own power and prestige as modern Egypt slipped from their grasp. The “curse of Tutankhamen” prevailed within the British imagination because it was a British creation rooted in the orientalist projection of Egypt. The curse allowed for escapism

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“Vintage WWI Wills’s Gold Flake Cigarettes British Officer Smoking Advert (1916),” *Period Paper*, (Accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.periodpaper.com/products/1916-ad-vintage-wwi-willss-gold-flake-cigarettes-british-officer-smoking-advert-241428-yph2-074>.)

“Egyptian Deity Cigarettes (1919),” *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, (Accessed April 4, 2019, <http://afflictor.com/2010/02/24/old-print-ad-egyptian-deity-cigarettes-1919/>.)

<sup>15</sup> Sabine Milz, “Said, Edward W,” (*The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*, 2005, [litguide.press-jhu.edu.www2.lib.ku.edu/cgi-bin/view.cgi?eid=229](http://litguide.press-jhu.edu.www2.lib.ku.edu/cgi-bin/view.cgi?eid=229).); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (1st ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978,) 34-35.

<sup>16</sup> Kennedy, *Britain and Empire, 1880-1945*, 43.; Said, *Orientalism*, 32.

into lands outside the metropole through a myth that was both familiar and controllable by the British.

To better understand how the British perceived the curse of Tutankhamen, this paper builds upon the existing historiography which argues that the curse of Tutankhamen has varying degrees of British and Egyptian influences; that colonies and protectorates, such as Egypt, directly influenced the British metropole; and that myths and curses reveal larger cultural meanings.<sup>17</sup> These precedents, combined with the framework of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, help expand upon the curse's role within the British imagination and provide a means of discussing how the British viewed Egypt and themselves through the curse.<sup>18</sup> This thesis especially echoes Stephanie Barczewski, Frederick Cooper, and Ann Laura Stoler in arguing that "both colonies and metropolises shared in dialects of inclusion and exclusion" and are integral to the understanding of each other.<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that this thesis does not evaluate the veracity of the curse, as historian Julie Hankey does, but instead studies the curse's genesis and cultural power.<sup>20</sup>

After researching at the British Library, Griffith Institute, and British Newspaper Archive, and examining primary source letters, journals, fan mail, and newspapers connected

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<sup>17</sup> Stephanie L. Barczewski, *Heroic Failure and the British*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016,) ix.; Frederick Cooper, and Ann Laura Stoler, "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda," *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, (Berkeley, United States: University of California Press, 1997,) 4.; Fryxell, "Tutankhamen, Egyptomania, and Temporal Enchantment in Interwar Britain," 516–542.; Kennedy, *Britain and Empire, 1880-1945*, 43.; Luckhurst, "The Mummy's Curse: A Study in Rumour," 6–22.; Reid, *Contesting Antiquity in Egypt: Archaeologies, Museums & the Struggle for Identities from World War I to Nasser*, 61.

<sup>18</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 32.

<sup>19</sup> Barczewski, *Heroic Failure and the British*, 14-15.; Cooper, and Stoler, "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda," 4.

<sup>20</sup> Hankey, *A Passion for Egypt: Arthur Weigall, Tutankhamun, and the "Curse of the Pharaohs,"* 135.



with the archeological dig and curse of Tutankhamen, my argument complicates the historical opinions of Luckhurst, Reid, and Fryxell.<sup>21</sup> I argue that the curse of Tutankhamen is not an equal hybrid of both British and Egyptian identities and I clarify the weight of each culture's influence within the curse. This is not to detract from Egyptian involvement in the curse nor to deny power to Egyptian myth, since overlooking Egyptian involvement would be to minimize the core of the curse's Oriental allure, and to ignore the impact of the newly formed Egyptian state within the slipping grasp of the British Empire. This thesis argues that the curse of Tutankhamen was a British created myth with Egyptian influences highlighting that the curse was not merely an appropriation of Egyptian culture. Instead, by arguing the curse of Tutankhamen is inherently British in conception, I demonstrate that the curse was a product of the British-imagined Egypt, preserving Egyptian influence over the metropole in the interwar period. With this clarifying perspective, this thesis solidly places itself within the cultural history of scholars on this topic yet remains unique in positioning the "curse of Tutankhamen" as a British-embellished myth with Egyptian influences.

In order to better understand how the British metropole understood the periphery, this paper draws upon Edward Said's postcolonial theory of Orientalism. In this theory, Said states that the false "Orient" is viewed as "irrational, strange, weak, and feminized" as opposed to the "Occident," which in this case, is the West represented by the British metropole.<sup>22</sup> In this theory,

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<sup>21</sup> "Curse of the Pharaohs: Tenth Discovered of Tomb Stricken Down," (*Dundee Courier*, December 31, 1929, The British Newspaper Archive.); H.J. Bunker, M.A, "The Curse of Tutankhamen," (*Daily Mail*, May 27, 1927, Gale News Vault.); "London Letter." (*Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, April 6, 1923, The British Newspaper Archive.); "No 'Curse' of Pharaohs," (*The Daily Telegraph*, February 26, 1930, The Telegraph Historical Archive, 1855-2000.); "Two Little Curses," (*Bexhill-on-Sea Observer*, December 6, 1924, The British Newspaper Archive.)

<sup>22</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 6-7; Sabine Milz, "Said, Edward W.," (*The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*, 2005, litguide-press-jhu-edu.www2.lib.ku.edu/cgi-

those who are “other,” meaning non-white and non-Western, are inherently compared by those of the Occident to the Occidental way of life. Orientalism calls attention to how non-European, non-white individuals were portrayed as a “primitive, uncivilized ‘other,’” in an attempt to contrast the idea and physical space with “the advanced and civilized West.”<sup>23</sup> With this perspective, in the eyes of the British, the Orient is an inherently undermining local and idea, obscured by Western preconceived notions and abstracting connections between morality and race. Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism perfectly captures the British desire to compare, and therefore prove their ethnic superiority, against those of non-white, British heritage within their Empire. By turning to the margins of their Empire, and therefore to the “other,” the British sought the familiar comparison in hopes of bolstering morale and reorienting themselves with their push outward.

This thesis is organized thematically to understand the complex layering of viewpoints taken by the British through the curse of Tutankhamen. Rather than work chronologically, which would obscure this unique British perspective through the internalization of the curse, this paper is divided into three sections that break down each aspect of the curse. First, this thesis unearths how the “curse of Tutankhamen” reckoned with weakening imperial power after the First World War and Egyptian Revolution of 1919. It demonstrates how both movements challenged the ethnic divides between the metropole and outside territories within the Empire and the traditional Western assumption of superiority. Second, this thesis explores how the

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bin/view.cgi?eid=229.); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (1st ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978,) 34-35.

<sup>23</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 32.; Lufti Hamadi, “Edward Said: The Postcolonial Theory and the Literature of Decolonization,” *European Scientific Journal*, (vol. 2 SE, 2014, Academic OneFile, [http://link.galegroup.com.www2.lib.ku.edu/apps/doc/A378557412/AONE?u=ksstate\\_ukans&sid=AONE&xid=1deb3af1](http://link.galegroup.com.www2.lib.ku.edu/apps/doc/A378557412/AONE?u=ksstate_ukans&sid=AONE&xid=1deb3af1)).

British perceived themselves and what cultural values they held that rendered them susceptible to the curse between 1923 and 1933. This section closely focuses on the history of British involvement with Egypt leading up to 1923, the British fixation on Egyptian paranormal phenomena, and British vulnerability to a curse due to movements such as spiritualism and Romanticism. Finally, this thesis delves into the British understanding and viewing of Egypt, looking into the appropriation of Egyptian artifacts and the attempted appropriation and subversion of Egyptian cultural myth through media that created a false view of Egypt. It discusses how the British attempted to mythologize the “other” of non-white, non-Western background to reassure their assumed cultural dominance to provide a semblance of stability amidst a changing world.

### **Viewing Oneself: The First World War and the Egyptian Independence of 1922**

Emerging from the First World War, the British experienced two forms of threat: metropolitan and imperial. The British were physically and psychologically recovering threat from within due to vast casualties, experiencing nearly 950,000 combined military and civilian death out of a total of 6,704,000 men in uniform, with 2.19 percent of their population confirmed as dead and many more wounded and pronounced missing in 1918.<sup>24</sup> Though gaining territorial holdings such as Cyprus and the Persian oil fields through the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, Britain itself had experienced massive psychological trauma, as soldiers returning home coped with the “randomness and horrific nature” of trench warfare and the “feeling of a lack of

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<sup>24</sup> “World War I Casualties,” *REPERES*, (Accessed February 25, 2019); “Casualties of World War I,” *Facing History and Ourselves*, (Accessed February 25, 2019).

individual control over their own destiny.”<sup>25</sup> Though many of the conscripted men at first shared the national belief that this war was for “a just and noble cause,” and were willing to fight, their colonial counterparts did not share this sentiment.<sup>26</sup> However, following the end of the war and return home, the notion of a just and necessary war waned, as the veterans’ faith in their country soured; the war became viewed as “pointless, bloody, and badly led.”<sup>27</sup> Even those who had remained at home likewise felt a societal fracturing and wrestled with an increasing debt after the British government had borrowed from international governments and private creditors to finance the war effort, accumulating to roughly £7.4 billion in debt as of 1919.<sup>28</sup> Weighed under debt and the psychological trauma of soldiers returning home, the British metropole began to feel a greater national sense of helplessness only compounded as those at home began to realize the permanent gaps left in their society when loved ones did not return home.

The First World War emphasized an even greater threat to the heart of metropolitan identity: ethnic equality. First, this assertion began in 1916 when the British government declared it would now compel its male citizens to serve in the armed forces, resulting in twenty-two percent of the total male population in uniform.<sup>29</sup> Reckoning with a newly-imposed military conscription, British male bodies became of the same value as those conscripted from outside territories and protectorates. The British government’s message was clear: it had the right to ask the lives of *all* male citizens, regardless of race or place of origin. Men throughout the Empire of different heritage and color together experienced the trenches, “broken and soaked in mud and

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<sup>25</sup> Helen B. McCartney, “The First World War Soldier and His Contemporary Image in Britain,” (*International Affairs* 90, no. 2, March 2014,) 301-302.

<sup>26</sup> McCartney, “The First World War Soldier and His Contemporary Image in Britain,” 303.

<sup>27</sup> McCartney, “The First World War Soldier and His Contemporary Image in Britain,” 303.

<sup>28</sup> Kennedy, *Britain and Empire, 1880-1945*, 41.

<sup>29</sup> Kennedy, *Britain and Empire, 1880-1945*, 45-47.; “Great Britain and Egypt, 1914-1951,” *Research Library: Questia*, 3.

gore.”<sup>30</sup> Though all suffered and bled together on the battlefield, the mere notion of ethnic equality directly challenged the Western belief in “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”<sup>31</sup> The British impressed imperial soldiers into the First World War believing it would help justify their own inherent superiority. Yet, rather than bolstering national greatness, war increased British vulnerability as their imagined perception of themselves as rational, civilized, and not “other,” crumbled, for in war, the British, like the rest of Europe, had proven to be irrational, uncivilized, and conscripted for physical slaughter.<sup>32</sup>

Just as demonstrated in Said’s theory of Orientalism, the British argued that “European culture gained strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self,” demonstrating the danger in a metropole and colony who pained and served together.<sup>33</sup> In combat, those of non-Western background, including members of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (E.E.F.), proved themselves both just as capable and civilized as their British counterparts, with roughly 1,226,000 imperial soldiers giving their lives for a metropolitan cause.<sup>34</sup> Britain began to feel the “us” and “them” binary begin to erode, and with it, their means of metropolitan identity.<sup>35</sup> With their understanding of Orientalism under threat, the British turned back to the only source from which they knew they could redefine themselves: the “other” protectorates and territories of Empire.

The British sought to heal a wounded national ego through the reassertion of imperial

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<sup>30</sup> Emily Mayhew, *Wounded: A New History of the Western Front in World War I*, (Oxford University Press, 2013,) 10.; McCartney, “The First World War Soldier and His Contemporary Image in Britain,” 303-304.

<sup>31</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 43.; Barczewski, *Heroic Failure and the British*, ix.

<sup>32</sup> Mayhew, *Wounded: A New History of the Western Front in World War I*, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 2-3, 6-7.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 42-43.

dominance, unknowingly gazing at itself whenever it looked at the borders of their Empire. Britain sought to both reclassify the East and define itself against a feminized, non-Western, occult, and irrational “other.” Britain’s notion of nationalism depended upon defining territories outside the metropole as the “Orient” while in turn using this definition “Orient” to craft their own national self-perceptions. By turning outward for healing, self-redemption, and reassertion of imperial dominance, Britain unknowingly gazed at itself whenever it looked at outside the metropole. Just as Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler write, Britain had not realized that their metropole and colonies could never be fully “binary opposites,” but existed within an identity and history “infinitely more complicated, more fragmented and more blurred.”<sup>36</sup> A new Egypt needed to be imagined, one of exoticism and supernatural power, a mythos of the occult to strike a barrier once again.

In its quest for self-definition, Britain manufactured Egyptomania, Tutmania, and their imaginary idea of Egypt to reclaim their prewar identity. The British invented an Egypt expressed through the “curse of Tutankhamen,” when the real Egypt prevented them from creating the British identity they desired. In obscuring the boundaries between Orient, the East, and Occident, the West, and redirecting the imperial imagined gaze from “them” to “us,” the British blurred the reality and imperial imagination of Egypt and provided the curse of Tutankhamen its power as a British-made myth.<sup>37</sup> The British population were unaware how poignantly their own cultural susceptibilities were encapsulated in the curse, so caught in the perceived power and allure of a curse with tangible consequences. The creation and perpetuation of the curse of Tutankhamen were subconsciously purposed as a coping mechanism as the

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<sup>36</sup> Cooper and Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda,” 9.

<sup>37</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 43.

British reckoned with a new post-war identity.

This “us” and “them” dichotomy is best seen in the British-Egyptian relations leading up to Tutankhamen’s tomb opening in 1923. From 1882 to 1914, Egypt existed nominally as an autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire as the British began to assume a de facto rule over the state.<sup>38</sup> However, in 1914, with the onset of the First World War, Britain formally declared Egypt as a protectorate and instituted martial law to protect British access to the Suez Canal, Egyptian waterways, and the Persian oil fields.<sup>39</sup> Under this martial law, Egypt briefly experienced a boost in trade due to the First World War, growing wealthier due to the larger quantities of raw materials, such as cotton, Britain purchased from them during the war.<sup>40</sup> However, the loss of men and calls for liberation and enfranchisement far outweighed the financial gains. Egypt, had been scarred and grown to resent the British who forcefully impressed Egyptian *fellahin*, peasants, into military service while overburdening the nation with requests for labor and resources.<sup>41</sup> After the end of the First World War in 1918, Egyptian nationalism surged as President Wilson asked the Allies to allow the former Ottoman nations, including Egypt, national self-determination.<sup>42</sup> Inspired by Wilson’s words and angered by British , a group of seven elite members of the Egyptian government led by Sa’d Zaghlul formed the *Wafd* party, seeking for Egypt to be represented independently at the Paris Peace Conference

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<sup>38</sup> Kennedy, *Britain and Empire, 1880-1945*, 49.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

“Great Britain and Egypt, 1914-1951,” *Research Library: Questia*, (Accessed January 22, 2019), 2.

<sup>40</sup> Kennedy, *Britain and Empire, 1880-1945*, 45-47.; McCartney, “The First World War Soldier and His Contemporary Image in Britain,” 302.

<sup>41</sup> “Great Britain and Egypt, 1914-1951,” 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

of 1919 while pushing for greater Egyptian independence.<sup>43</sup>

The Egyptian Revolution of 1919 exploded after the exile of Zaghlul and two other Wafd party members.<sup>44</sup> Egyptians sought to reclaim their national honor in remaining a separate cultural race and civilization under the three pillars of “faith, honor, and the homeland,” especially since the British continued to blur the boundaries between colony and protectorate.<sup>45</sup> Egyptians began to release the tensions begun under British rule, rioting in protest and going on strike for the return of Zaghlul and for their independence.<sup>46</sup> In response, Britain allowed Egypt to represent itself separately at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 in hopes it would quell their national protests while also establishing the Milner Report in 1920 to assess the status of the protectorate and to attempt to come to an agreement with Egyptian nationalists to determine the future of Egypt.<sup>47</sup> Yet Egyptian frustrations continued to mount: *fellahin* destroyed railroads in the countryside, and Egyptian attorneys, judges, and even tram workers went on strike. The nation ground to a standstill. The British, growing in frustration, met Egyptian opposition with force, and by the end of 1919, more than 800 Egyptians had been killed and 1,400 wounded.<sup>48</sup>

On February 28, 1922, after two years of failed negotiations with the Wafd party, a frustrated parliament and King George V issued the “Declaration To Egypt By His Majesty’s

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<sup>43</sup> William Cleveland, “The Arab Struggle for Independence: Egypt, Iraq, Transjordan from the Interwar Era to 1945,” *A History of the Modern Middle East*, (5th ed. Westview Press, 2013,) 179.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 180.

<sup>45</sup> Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005,) 42.

<sup>46</sup> Reid, *Contesting Antiquity in Egypt: Archaeologies, Museums & the Struggle for Identities from World War I to Nasser*, 53.

<sup>47</sup> “Great Britain and Egypt, 1914-1951,” 6.; Cleveland, “The Arab Struggle for Independence: Egypt, Iraq, Transjordan from the Interwar Era to 1945,” 181.

<sup>48</sup> Cleveland, “The Arab Struggle for Independence: Egypt, Iraq, Transjordan from the Interwar Era to 1945,” 181.



Government” that unilaterally declared Egypt an independent nation-state and a constitutional monarchy with the exception of four principles, namely that the British Empire could still control the “security of the communications,” the “defense of Egypt against all foreign aggression,” the “protection of foreign interests in Egypt and minorities,” and the protection and ownership of the Sudan.<sup>49</sup> Egypt had gained nominal rule and a semblance of self-governance, signifying a major international shift in national self-determination. By 1923, the newly established Kingdom of Egypt was dealing with issues of constitutionality, conflicting political parties in power, and of British interference as it related to the four principles and the Suez Canal, leading to continued issues under the new King Fuad I.<sup>50</sup> Egypt was fighting for her rights; Britain was questioning itself within Empire.<sup>51</sup>

Egypt had barely settled into her independence before her new-found national honor would be tested with the discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb on November 4, 1922. Despite Britain’s exasperation with the 1919 Revolution and its slipping grasp on the Middle East, Britain itself remained captivated by the allure of Egypt, layering British fears of the supernatural over the identity of ancient Egypt to avoid confronting the reality of Empire. A British-made myth mingled with an imagined occult darkness served as a coping mechanism for the interwar British metropole by allowing the British to continue in their disillusioned understanding Empire while providing proof to the British of their own superiority.<sup>52</sup> The curse

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<sup>49</sup> Albert Paul Blaustein, Jay Adrian Sigler, and Benjamin R. Beede, “Declaration To Egypt By His Majesty’s Government,” *Independence Documents of the World*, (Brill Archive, 1977,) 204.; “Great Britain and Egypt, 1914-1951,” *Research Library: Questia*, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, 55.

<sup>51</sup> Following the Egyptian Revolution, Egyptians sought a feminine portrayal of their nation, and therefore I chose to refer to the state with feminine pronouns to better reflect their emerging identity.

<sup>52</sup> Luckhurst, “The Mummy’s Curse: A Study in Rumour,” 16.

of Tutankhamen served as a cultural reckoning as the British Empire ceased to be the comforting and stable home and margins of which the British were accustomed. The curse was created as a British cultural myth used to ease postwar trauma and to indirectly define Britain's stance on states who resisted conforming to their "Oriental" identity. Out of the threat of ethnic equality and instability, the curse of Tutankhamen began.

### **Viewing Values: Egyptian Curses and the Irrational**

Believing loss and death to be part of a larger unnatural malevolent force, the British treated curses with reverence and indulgence. By creating curses after significant collective loss, the British connected tragedies to physical objects, blaming citizens' deaths on forces beyond human intuition as notions of Romanticism and rationality began to intersect.<sup>53</sup> Inventing curses gave the British a means of control over the uncontrollable and a means of reckoning with catastrophic events by blaming the pre-existing threat of the "Orient." As the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* reported, "undoubtedly very many strange and eerie things have happened in the occult and inscrutable East" and it was those Eastern artifacts that were to blame for British citizens' deaths "in mysterious fashion after contact with relics of the Oriental past."<sup>54</sup> The British felt themselves mighty enough to indulge in Egyptian curses yet blamed these same curses for resulting tragedies. In curses, the Orient proved both attractive and repulsive. Egyptian curses provided this delicate balance, feeding British self-perceptions of the margins of their Empire as a nexus of power seeking to rival mystic authorities of an ancient past while also permitting

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<sup>53</sup> Saler, "Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review," *The American Historical Review* 111, (no. 3 June 1, 2006,) 692–716. <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.111.3.692>.; T. C. W. Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution: A History*, (Random House, 2011,) x.

<sup>54</sup> "Lord Carnarvon's Death—And The Occult," *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, (April 6, 1923, The British Newspaper Archive.)

British citizens to revel in the majesty of an “Oriental” power. As Paul Harrison notes, the curse of Tutankhamen “was able to circulate so fast because it repeated at least two previous curse stories that had been circulating in London.”<sup>55</sup> Curses allowed the British to turn to the periphery to discuss what they feared and revered most about death without conceding their imperial power. Disaster ceased to be of British provenance; it was Egyptian.

The first historical Egyptian-based and British-created curse surrounds that of Cleopatra’s Needle, a roughly sixty-nine-foot-tall obelisk originally used to cover an ancient tomb in Heliopolis during the reign of Thutmose III, though it was later taken to Alexandria upon Roman conquest and renamed in Cleopatra’s honor.<sup>56</sup> However, following Lord Nelson’s victory against the French at Battle of Alexandria in 1819, the British claimed the obelisk as their prize for the victory against the desires of Egyptians. Though not able to finance the transportation until 1877, the British eventually were able to claim the obelisk and celebrate the rule of their own female ruler, Queen Victoria.<sup>57</sup> Sending the ship the *Cleopatra* to carry the obelisk back, the crew experienced extreme difficulty on their return trip. With Cleopatra’s Needle in tow, the ship encountered harsh weather, to the point where the *Cleopatra* “began to roll wildly, to such an extent that its safety and security became a real concern” with the crew fighting “desperately against the wind and waves in an attempt to maintain course and control.”<sup>58</sup> The turbulent sea was so extreme that the crew almost lost the obelisk among the waves, and, when they finally did make it home, the *Cleopatra* was immediately dispatched for scrap, damaged beyond repair.

Yet, even after Cleopatra’s Needle was erected in Westminster, the curse continued. No

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<sup>55</sup> Luckhurst, “The Mummy’s Curse: A Study in Rumour,” 9.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Harrison, *The Curse of the Pharaohs’ Tombs: Tales of the Unexpected since the Days of Tutankhamun*, (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2017), 53.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

longer taking the form of a roaring surf, the curse instead took the shape of a dog-headed man resembling Anubis who guarded the obelisk at dusk.<sup>59</sup> Reported by many passersby, the arrival of this creature also coincided with a perceived rise in suicides and murders within the vicinity. Reports increased and speculation became even more exaggerated, some saying the “Thames Torso Killer,” a serial killer known for the dismemberment of his victims, ended his life within the Needle’s shadow, other speculating it was the first object to be bombed in by the Germans in World War One.<sup>60</sup> It seemed the longer Cleopatra’s needle stood tall, the more mysterious occurrences were associated with the artifact as British cultural myth interlaced with fears surrounding the imposing foreign object dotting the London skyline. Though Cleopatra’s Needle became integrated in British culture, the obelisk was blamed for the negative occurrences surrounding it. The Needle became a scapegoat for larger British fears of an undetermined and powerful non-Western threat within the metropole.

Similarly, the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the *Titanic* were supposedly caused by the curse of the mummy board of Amen-Ra. Though the *Lusitania* was sunk in the German submarine blockade off the British mainland in 1915, the Gloucester Chronicle blamed this sinking on a curse by the “mummy board of Amen Ra,” a wooden sarcophagus lid that once rested over the mummy of the priestess of Amen-Ra after being acquired by the British Museum in 1890.<sup>61</sup> Commonly referred to in the media as the “Unlucky Mummy,” this mummy board was reported by newspapers such as the *Gloucestershire Chronicle* to have cursed the *Lusitania*,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>61</sup> ““Lord Carnarvon Dead, Discoverer of Luxor Tomb, Famous Egyptologist’s Tragic Fate,”” *Gloucestershire Chronicle*, (April 7, 1923, The British Newspaper Archive.)

resulting in the loss of 1,198 lives.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, the disaster of the *Titanic*, a tragedy that claimed up to 1,635 lives was rumored to have been caused by this same mummy board, after a wealthy New Yorker desired it to be transported to his home in the United States from the British Museum and had the precious cargo loaded onto the *Titanic*.<sup>63</sup> However, though both shipwrecks were blamed on the mummy board of the princess of Amen-Ra, the mummy board itself was never on board either of the ships, nor was the mummy itself. In fact, the board had not left the British Museum since 1890 and the princess' mummy itself had been lost hundreds of years prior.<sup>64</sup> There was no entry for the artifacts on either of the ships' logs, and neither ship left port with preexisting rumors of a curse. It was only after both vessels sank that the curse of the "Unlucky Mummy" began, demonstrating how curses could be created by the British even after the traumatizing event as a method coping after loss and trauma.

These curses, including the curse of Tutankhamen, did partially exist out of pure media and public fascination with the occult in a search for sensation after traumatic events, yet there was more than just this sensationalism. The blame placed on the physical artifacts themselves with no direct connection whatsoever to disasters and near deaths demonstrates a greater British preoccupation with the supernatural.<sup>65</sup> The British themselves became active storytellers and participants in cursing through their news reports that expanded upon the myths of Cleopatra's Needle and the mummy board of Amen-Ra. Though nominally Egyptian due to the artifacts

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<sup>62</sup> Harrison, *The Curse of the Pharaohs' Tombs: Tales of the Unexpected since the Days of Tutankhamun*, 5.; Luckhurst, "The Mummy's Curse: A Study in Rumour," 9.

<sup>63</sup> "Mummies At The Museum, Egyptian Gallery Changes." (*The Times*. March 28, 1921, The Times Digital Archive.); Paul Harrison, *The Curse of the Pharaohs' Tombs: Tales of the Unexpected since the Days of Tutankhamun*, 44.

<sup>64</sup> Harrison, *The Curse of the Pharaohs' Tombs: Tales of the Unexpected since the Days of Tutankhamun*, 42.

<sup>65</sup> Luckhurst, "The Mummy's Curse: A Study in Rumour," 10.

connected with them, these curses were British-appropriated, British-created, and then British-blamed; nowhere did they exist independently as Egyptian-made nor Egyptian-embellished. The British had complete narrative control, and these curses directly reflect British escapism into an imaginary Empire outside the metropole based on British notions of the East.

The British occult imagination thrived on mysticism because these tantalizing powers existed outside the realm of imperial control and the imagined “Orient,” as expressed in the idea of Romanticism. As a movement that came after the Enlightenment, Romanticism emphasized the “individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental,” while providing an anthesis to the rational empiricism of the time.<sup>66</sup> By placing emotion over reason, Romanticism emphasized sensuality, imagination as “part of the contemporary belief in the self,” and that truth could be found in the “inspired soul which in its full nature transcends both mind and emotions.”<sup>67</sup> For the British, there was beauty in forces could not be fully harnessed by man, and Egyptian curses and prophecies combined the mystic power of ancient gods with tangible artifacts. By finding meaning in that which could not be fully fathomed or understood, there was a natural attraction to myths that influenced the tangible world yet were not capable of being understood. With these overwhelming forces, there was danger in the Romantic, since in Western perception the Oriental East was justified as weaker due to this same emotion and irrationality.<sup>68</sup> Imagination itself, especially a Romantic imagination was “the imagination continued to be cast as inferior to reason, and a potentially dangerous instigator of desire.”<sup>69</sup> With this history of Romantic

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<sup>66</sup> J. M. S. Tompkins, and C. M. Bowra, “The Romantic Imagination,” *The Modern Language Review* 47, (no. 2, 1952,) 227.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 1 and 22.

<sup>68</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 6-7.

<sup>69</sup> Saler, “Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review,” 692-716.

perception, the British were captivated by the ethereal in opposition to their Enlightened rationality that furthered their vulnerability to the curse of Tutankhamen.

Desiring vulnerability to justify their supremacy, Britain embraced other movements as Romanticism waned in popularity: Spiritualism and Occultism.<sup>70</sup> Spiritualism, a movement based on the belief “that departed souls can interact with the living” and Occultism, the idea that “belief in and knowledge or use of supernatural forces or beings” empowered individuals to believe that natural laws as established by the Enlightenment could be combined with the supernatural and irrationality within the unknown.<sup>71</sup> It was this paranormal power that added inherent value and danger to the ownership of Egyptian artifacts in Spiritualism that served to “make one conscious of one's own comparative weakness in the face of natural might” to produce “a sense of the strength of one's own faculties.”<sup>72</sup> The importance of empire ceased to be solely for resources or power, but a privileged experience to remind one of personal insignificance in the face of vast natural beauty and supernatural presence as perceived to exist within Egypt itself. Most notably, all three movements inspired the ability to look beyond the tangible world for a truth or sentiment beyond and forced individuals to consider the beauty in being vulnerable to a world outside that of rationality.

The acceptance of vulnerability to forces outside the rational, scientific world, especially regarding the curse of Tutankhamen, did not go unchallenged. The rational and irrational imaginations collided over the curse of Tutankhamen, prompting a greater internal social threat.

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<sup>70</sup> In a similar vein, the sublime acted within the bounds of the Romantic during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and added to the perception of the curse of Tutankhamen. In the idea of the sublime, there existed unstoppable, supernatural forces governed by irresistible forces that produced overwhelming sensations in the natural world.

<sup>71</sup> Saler, “Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review,” 692-716.

<sup>72</sup> Gerald, “Sublime.”

The British populace battled between sentiment and reason, suffering from what Grafton Elliot Smith, a historian from the era called “inflaming feeling.”<sup>73</sup> Leading Spiritualists, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Dr. Petrie, engaged in debates surrounding the curse of Tutankhamen. Seeking not to prove the validity of the curse, Spiritualists sought instead to combat rational explanations for all observable phenomena, as Dr. Petrie stated, “We still know so little about the world surrounding us that it is not quite logical to assert an occurrence to be impossible simply because it will not readily fit with the present range of our observations.”<sup>74</sup> The “Orient,” which had long had been associated with the irrational, was now at home.<sup>75</sup> The curse of Tutankhamen fused with existing British internal debates, and it was in this grasp that naysayers and curse believers added to the mythical power of the curse, both authoring and falling victim to its supposed power.

Though British felt some semblance of control over their Empire and grew fascinated with its occult and spiritual nature, British citizens still genuinely feared Egyptian curses, especially the curse of Tutankhamen. In her letter to Howard Carter, Stella Maris of Dublin wrote warning Carter of his genuine danger, and frantically writing that “It is still possible to avert the danger” by having a ceremony to appease the Egyptian priests’ spirits she called “Kas.”<sup>76</sup> Maris implored Carter to seek the assistance of someone “in Egypt” who could “reach the vital forces of the Earth” to revert the curse,” desperate that Carter too preserve his life.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Howard Carter and A.C. Mace, *Howard Carter: The Tomb of Tutankhamun; Volume 1: Search, Discovery, and the Clearance of the Antechamber*, (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1923), 35.

<sup>74</sup> “Egyptian Curses,” (Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer, September 13, 1924,) The British Newspaper Archive.

<sup>75</sup> Sabine, “Said, Edward W,” 229.

<sup>76</sup> Stella Maris, “Letter from Stella Maris to Howard Carter,” (April 8, 1923, The Griffith Institute.)

<sup>77</sup> Maris, “Letter from Stella Maris to Howard Carter.”



The curse reached such heights that when Queen Elizabeth of Belgium caught a minor illness after visiting the tomb of Tutankhamen shortly after its opening, a reader of the *Daily Mail Atlantic Edition* wrote into the newspaper in fear, declaring they hoped Queen Elizabeth would not become a “victim of the curse which has followed those who have visited the tomb of Tutankhamen.”<sup>78</sup> The curse, though unscientific, was a genuine fear for British citizens. It expanded the definition of a British citizen away from the rational disenchantment towards a newfound “passion for wonder, and the ways in which modern developments in science and technology might incite rather than dampen,” promoting the possibility of rationality in wonderment.<sup>79</sup> Yes, to some extent this horror was the consumption of the non-white, non-British cultures within empire through spread of news propaganda to blame the East for British troubles. But as “modern enchantment” began to challenge traditional notions of Enlightenment, British citizens could express their beliefs in a vengeful, supernatural curse; a new “Romanticism” was underway.<sup>80</sup> The occult and the “romantic revolution” combined in the curse of Tutankhamen and provided an avenue for the emotional crisis and changing Empire that made the curse of Tutankhamen so inherently frightening.<sup>81</sup>

Like Romanticism and the Spiritualist movement, Ancient Egypt represented to the British an otherworldly, alluring power of disarray and tragedy serving as a constant reminder of

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<sup>78</sup> “The Curse of Tutankhamen,” *Daily Mail Atlantic Edition*, (May 29, 1923, Daily Mail Historical Archive, 1896-2004.)

<sup>79</sup> It should be noted that letters from as far as Paris and Kansas City have been discovered warning Howard Carter about the dangers of the curse of Tutankhamen, see: Michael Saler, “Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review,” *The American Historical Review* 111, (no. 3 June 1, 2006,) 692–716. <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.111.3.692>. K. L. Nizam, “Letter from Nizam El-Mouk to Howard Carter,” (November 20, 1923, The Griffith Institute.)

<sup>80</sup> Saler, “Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review,” 692–716.

<sup>81</sup> Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution: A History*, x.

the fleeting nature of a tangible empire. Just as the British feared the impending change of their Empire following the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 and Egypt's subsequent independence, so too did the British come to fear yet respect the unknown. The veracity of the curse did not matter to the British, but the discussion of rationality mingled with imagination took precedence, as demonstrated in the intentionally vague statement by the Sixth Earl of Carnarvon, Lord Carnarvon's son, that, "I believe in the curse, and I don't believe in the curse; but there are the facts."<sup>82</sup> The curse of Tutankhamen became an indirect discussion of imperial crisis in the wake of the First World War and Egyptian independence by placing blame for a changing Empire on an outside supernatural power that combined both Enlightened rationality and irrational wonderment. Curses communicated larger British imperial anxieties because they represented intangible changes to British values and a loss of physical control over death of British citizens within their global empire.

### **Viewing Egypt: Physical Appropriation and Creating Curse**

Retelling and creating stories of ancient Egyptian gods and terrors full of fantastical dog-headed men, England was engrossed with Egyptian culture. "Egyptomania," preoccupation with the supernatural, allowed Britons to imagine themselves as heirs to ancient Egypt as a sense of justification for their own empire.<sup>83</sup> With one foot in the modern world of 1923 A.D. and another in 1323 B.C., the British created a mythologized Egypt, appropriating Egyptian artifacts from Tutankhamen's tomb for British use and reframing Egyptian mythology as entertainment. "Tutmania" had taken root in British society and focused on the mythos of Egypt "in fields as

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<sup>82</sup> Vandenberg, *The Forgotten Pharaoh: The Discovery of Tutankhamun*, 167.

<sup>83</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 35.

diverse as architecture, literature, painting, women's fashion, music, and mummy movies.”<sup>84</sup> In Tutmania and Egyptomania alike, the culture of those “non-European” or “other” became just as digestible as it was perceived to be backward and inferior as described in Orientalism.<sup>85</sup> Making up in enchantment what they lacked in empathy, the British created the curse of Tutankhamen out of the appropriated Egyptian culture to unify their visions of Egypt. Three Egypts existed in the British mind—ancient Egypt, the newly independent Egypt, and the Egypt of British imagination—and it was the threatening coexistence of these three Egypts from which the curse of Tutankhamen drew its power.

Meticulously catalogued, ancient Egyptian artifacts came to symbolize Western scientific prestige, especially since Europe defined itself by its “technological advance” and “growing capacity and rationality.”<sup>86</sup> Europeans prided themselves upon their discoveries to demonstrate rational and Enlightened civilization in conjunction with the might and mystery of ancient Egypt. The categorization and preservation of ancient Egypt served as a method to “rationalize commitment to science, nationalism, and imperialism all at once,” using museology and archaeology as tools to justify this end.<sup>87</sup> Yet, in discovering the allure of ancient Egyptians' artifacts, the British dismissed the power of contemporary Egypt, even after the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 and independence in 1922. Egyptomania, and inherently Tutmania, became defense mechanisms of the British as they receded into the Egypt of their imagination rather than embracing the Egypt of their time. Cyclically, England obtained Egyptian artifacts to praise

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<sup>84</sup> Reid, *Contesting Antiquity in Egypt: Archaeologies, Museums & the Struggle for Identities from World War I to Nasser*, 61.

<sup>85</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 6-7.

<sup>86</sup> Cooper, and Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda,” 3.

<sup>87</sup> Reid, *Contesting Antiquity in Egypt: Archaeologies, Museums & the Struggle for Identities from World War I to Nasser*, 1.

themselves and to marvel at their own scientific prestige and superiority, rather than examining how this ancient Egyptian culture influenced the Egyptian nationalism of the twentieth century.<sup>88</sup> The British sought to distract themselves from the destabilization of the home front by viewing Egyptian artifacts, interested in Egyptian objects themselves for their cultural weight and Oriental allure.

A crucial aspect of Egyptomania and Tutmania is the connection of these ideas to the physical artifacts themselves. Tangible objects shaped the British self-perception by quantifying the power of the British Empire. As Roger Luckhurst argues, the physical mummies and artifacts themselves are “ambiguous, alluringly veiled, disciplinarily subversive, magical and monstrous objects,” allowing them to be incorporated into different values systems.<sup>89</sup> Not only did the British and other Western powers scientifically classify Egyptian artifacts, but they also layered their imagined Egypt over that of ancient and modern Egypt. The realities of ancient and modern Egypt were obscured in the performance of empire through scientific categorization, mass media, and fashion. As Allegra Fryxell writes, imperial myths enveloped Egyptian reality to the extent that “contemporary standards of beauty paralleled those of ancient Egypt.”<sup>90</sup> Just as scientists claimed the West as the cultural inheritors of ancient Egypt, so did British women who claim to be suddenly pleased that their “low-necked dresses cut just like the present-day frocks were in fashion in ancient Egypt about 5,000 years ago” and even their “gloves, slippers, jewelry, cosmetics, and even bedsteads” were already just like that of the Egyptians, having “altered little in 5,000 years save in magnificence.”<sup>91</sup> Rather than adapting their own fashion

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<sup>88</sup> Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, 57.

<sup>89</sup> Luckhurst, “The Mummy’s Curse: A Study in Rumour,” 14.

<sup>90</sup> Fryxell, “Tutankhamen, Egyptomania, and Temporal Enchantment in Interwar Britain.” (*Twentieth Century British History* 28, no. 4, 2017), 516–542.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 516.

trends to mirror that of ancient Egypt, women instead used their imagination of ancient Egypt to justify their current fashion decisions, similar to how the British imagined themselves inheritors of an ancient Egyptian civilization. Egyptian styles became justification for the present imperial ideology, prompting the British to thirst for a new discovery to augment their imperial claims and to feed their own cultural myth making layered over appropriated Egyptian culture.

As demonstrated in the coverage of the curse of Tutankhamen, the tangible performance of empire easily lent itself to the appropriation of the curse as a media sensation since the everyday English citizens could claim physical connection to ancient Egypt through reading the myth. Newspapers fed the ravenous public's consumption of Egyptian culture by highlighting the supposed mystery and occult nature of the culture and curse. Just like physical objects themselves, which were taken from the real ancient Egypt and fashioned into British perceptions of Egypt, so too was the curse of Tutankhamen created in this same British imagination. The curse was not scrutinized in isolation but woven in the fabric of British culture with imperial denial of reality and a deep imperial vulnerability following the First World War and Egyptian nationalism.

Physical objects are especially critical in the power of the curse of Tutankhamen because the physical origins of the curse bear directly on whether the curse was consciously appropriated or created by the British. Though there are several conflicting accounts of the physical origins of the curse of Tutankhamen, the foremost historical precedent is that there was not physical inscription of the curse of Tutankhamen. Howard Carter himself, a man steeped in the categorical and scientific rationale of his time, adamantly denied the curse in public, stating that "It is rather too much to ask me to believe that some spook is keeping watch and ward over the

dead Pharaoh, ready to wreck vengeance on anyone who goes too near.”<sup>92</sup> Even the newspapers themselves are unclear about the origin of the curse of Tutankhamen, often reporting misinformation in the frenzy to publish a story on the dig. Though the *Dundee Courier*, *The Register*, *Adelaide*, *Daily Mail Atlantic Edition*, and *Gloucester Citizen* all state the “death shall come on swift wings” curse as mentioned earlier, hardly any of these same papers agree where the curse was physically written, reporting the curse to have been written on either the body of Tutankhamen, around the neck of an alabaster bowl, or even on the walls of the tomb.<sup>93</sup> One of the more infamous accounts stated that the curse was written on a talisman stolen from the tomb taken into the possession of Lord Westbury<sup>94</sup> and his son Richard Bethell, both of whom died under mysterious circumstances.<sup>95</sup> In addition to accounts of physical objects, some newspapers cited that the curse existed as a bacteria in the mold spores in the tomb or on the pharaoh himself, though this was disproven<sup>96</sup> by the medical community.<sup>97</sup> There may have been an inscribed

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<sup>92</sup> O’Farrell, *The Tutankhamun Deception: The True Story of the Mummy’s Curse*, 88.

<sup>93</sup> Daily Mail Reporter, “He Defied Pharaoh’s Curse, Lived to 80,” *Daily Mail*, (August 8, 1949, Daily Mail Historical Archive, 1896-2004.); “The Curse of the Pharaohs,” *Dundee Courier*, (December 31, 1929, The British Newspaper Archive.); “Curse of Egypt,” *The Register*, *Adelaide*, November 5, 1924, The British Newspaper Archive.); “Peer’s Tragic Death,” *Daily Mail Atlantic Edition*, (February 22, 1930, Daily Mail Historical Archive, 1896-2004.); “These Men Defied the Death Curse of the Pharaohs...” *Gloucester Citizen*, (March 30, 1937, The British Newspaper Archive.)

<sup>94</sup> Richard Bethell was reported as having mysteriously collapsed and died in a London bathhouse. Lord Westbury, aged 78 years old, committed suicide by jumping out of a one-hundred-foot bathroom window from flat on 7th floor of St. James’ Court, London. Neither had autopsies performed nor were further investigations made into their deaths.

<sup>95</sup> “These Men Defied the Death Curse of the Pharaohs...” *Gloucester Citizen*, (March 30, 1937, The British Newspaper Archive.)

<sup>96</sup> This theory was disproven both in 1922 after swabs were taken of the walls and floor in Tutankhamen’s tomb that only contained “organisms that had probably been wafted into the tomb with the circulation of outside air,” and in 1998 after discovering that it was neither the deadly *Aspergillus Niger* nor *Aspergillus Flavus*.

<sup>97</sup> S. Gandon, “The Curse of the Pharaoh Hypothesis,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society Biological Sciences* (1998), 265.

curse at some point within the tomb of Tutankhamen that was indeed appropriated by the British as stated by the Egyptians themselves. Yet, to this day, there is no documented physical evidence of the curse of Tutankhamen, pointing to the curse existing solely as a creation of British Egyptomania rather than an appropriated Egypt-created myth descended from ancient Egyptian culture.

Egyptians themselves also had several imagined versions of their own country. Even their own nationalist movement was an active “myth-making” drawn from their “imagined community” by connecting to their ancient roots to create a “shared understanding of the past.”<sup>98</sup> As seen in the Egyptian nationalists’ statue *Nahdat Misr*, meaning “The Awakening Egypt,” Egyptians themselves desired to justify their own national redefinition by connecting it to the physical ancient landscape.<sup>99</sup> Erected in 1928, this statue depicts Egypt as a peasant woman with one hand symbolically removing her veil and the other resting firmly on the ancient Sphynx.<sup>100</sup> In one image, the rural peasant, the liberation of Egypt, and the harking back to ancient Egyptian roots are all represented, epitomizing the pillars of the Egyptian Revolution of 1919. Egypt asserts her right as the cultural inheritor of the ancient past, simultaneously staking Egyptian jurisdiction over the physical artifacts themselves and eagerly looking toward the future to gain full national liberation. The “modern” nation of Egypt had awoken, directly connecting physical artifacts and their appropriation to the disrespect and injustice of continued British influence in the area following the Unilateral Declaration of Independence.

This connection between the physical ancient Egyptian artifacts and the people

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Brackman, Arnold C. *The Search for the Gold of Tutankhamen*. New York: Mason/Charter, 1976.

<sup>98</sup> Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics*, 2 and 57.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 68-69.

themselves is best recorded in Paul Harrison's book, *The Curse of the Pharaohs' Tombs: Tales of the Unexpected since the Days of Tutankhamun*, in which he includes a typed letter from an anonymous grandchild of an Egyptian worker, Asim. Asim's grandson, writing to Harrison to finally tell someone outside of his family his grandfather's story, directly links the ravaging of Egyptian workers' bodies to the archaeological dig within Tutankhamen's tomb. As one of the sole existing accounts of an Egyptian worker present at the dig available in English, this letter, though anonymous, should be taken seriously.

In the letter itself, Asim's grandson recounts the "extremely hard work in difficult conditions" Asim and his fellow workers endured, laboring under high heat, with limited food, and subject to the whims of their British supervisors.<sup>101</sup> Most importantly, the grandson details how after Carter found the first step leading down to the tomb of Tutankhamen, many of the workers urged Carter not to enter, for "fear of the vengeance of the gods for entering this sacred place" and were "openly sobbing and praying for their own safety."<sup>102</sup> A few days after the tomb's opening, Asim's grandson also recounts how another worker "screamed out that the face of a black jackal or desert dog stared at him in the gloom" before deliriously screaming and collapsing, later dying in the hospital.<sup>103</sup> The physical bodies of the Egyptians themselves became victims of an increasing violence connected with the appropriation of physical artifacts, and the British were fully aware of their condition. It seemed the Egyptians themselves began to voice concerns on the behalf of the ancient artifacts, motivated by fear of a more powerful entity than themselves, further uniting ancient and modern Egypt. With the artifacts also linked to the

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<sup>101</sup> Harrison, *The Curse of the Pharaohs' Tombs: Tales of the Unexpected since the Days of Tutankhamun*, 3.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 7.



Egyptian notions of nationalism, the physical removal of these artifacts served to negate the Egyptian's claim to their ancient past. The appropriation of artifacts became a threefold attack on the Egyptian workers' bodies, nationalist values, and their historical identity.

The occurrence of a physical dog spirit or of a dog-headed man attacking workers, most likely representing the ancient Egyptian god of the dead, Anubis, repeats throughout the grandson's story. He alarmingly recounts one man who was mauled by a black desert dog whose body was found "in a disgusting state" with his heart removed, internal organs ravaged, yet "his face seemed untouched."<sup>104</sup> As the violence toward the workers escalated, supervisors "treated the workers with no respect," treating "animals with more kindness than Egyptian people." And insisting the workers were "expendable."<sup>105</sup> With Carter believing the deaths were "nothing supernatural but of the more physical kind," the dig progressed as Egyptians were forced to disturb the tomb of one of their own pharaohs.<sup>106</sup> Though Asim's grandson does mention effigies of Tutankhamen and of Osiris, the Egyptian god of life, death and the afterlife, who kept watch over the tomb, the curse is more commonly linked to the ominous dog-headed Anubis bodies seen around and within the tomb. By invalidating the Egyptians' experiences and values, the British directly imposed their will onto the bodies and desires of the "other" parallel to the four provisions remaining in their unilateral declaration of Egyptian independence in that Britain retained military control.<sup>107</sup> The physical and collective Egyptian body became a symbol for the land of Egypt itself, pillaged physically in colonialism. Though the Egyptians had nominal control over their nation and the dig site, they still suffered under the influences of a curse due to

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<sup>104</sup> Paul Harrison, *The Curse of the Pharaohs' Tombs: Tales of the Unexpected since the Days of Tutankhamun*, 15.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 9 and 11.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

<sup>107</sup> Blaustein, Sigler, and Beede, "Declaration To Egypt By His Majesty's Government."

their complicity in not preventing the appropriation of their artifacts and thereby their identity. British scientific discovery and self-definition after the First World War came at the expense of underpaid Egyptian peasants.

Both the British media and Asim's account are crucial to understanding the motivations in creating the curse by demonstrating the necessity for connecting the curse of Tutankhamen to the physical experiences of both the British and Egyptians alike. By making the curse tangible, the curse becomes more visceral and powerful, heightening the danger and allure of having such objects or experiences by making the curse just as tangible of a threat for Egyptians as it is for the British. In the appropriation of Egyptian artifacts, Egypt suffered from a fragmented identity between past and present whereas Britain attempted to justify their own imagined Egypt. However, the most important difference between Asim's account and that of the British newspapers is how each refers to "curse of Tutankhamen." All British sources refer to a "curse" of some sort and emphasize its Oriental nature and properties for revenge. Even more interesting, even the idea itself of a "curse" as an infliction of supernatural punishment in the mortal world is British in conception, for in ancient Egypt, most tombs contained only funerary rituals.<sup>108</sup> If tombs did contain warnings to intruders or potential tomb-robbers, they served as "a system of order and justice," intended as threats in the afterlife, rather than the present life.<sup>109</sup> What became known as "curses" were originally statements written on the behalf of the tomb owner "invoking judgment in the underworld on any would-be tomb violator."<sup>110</sup>

In Asim's case, his grandson never refers a "curse," but instead to "sacrilege," stating that

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<sup>108</sup> Paul Harrison, *The Curse of the Pharaohs' Tombs: Tales of the Unexpected since the Days of Tutankhamun*, 81-82.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

Asim felt “sadness in [his] heart” that he had “betrayed Tutankhamen himself.”<sup>111</sup> He and his fellow Egyptian workers approached the curse as a betrayal of reverence for one of their own with whom they deeply sympathized and felt dully exploited. Their sacrilege, in both the ancient and modern Egyptian senses, resulted in a worthy punishment, whereas the British believed they were unfairly attacked in their noble, rational pursuits. For the Egyptians, their irreverence for Tutankhamen symbolized their forced betrayal of their unified past and present, a violation of their personal values and imagined national identity bearing spiritual consequences. Egypt may have been granted nominal nationalism, but underneath, the British still wielded the power in determining Egypt’s national alliances, physical geography, and inherent nationalist claims. In the physical control of goods and the curse of Tutankhamen, the British clung to what the Egyptians desired most: national power.

For the British, the curse united their justification for their empire—ancient Egypt—and their failings of this empire—modern Egypt—by feeding their imagined Oriental perceptions. In this way, the “curse of Tutankhamen” is solely British in its name as a “curse” and in its usage in a non-religious sense in which the “curse” directly impacted the mortal world. The “curse of Tutankhamen” embodied every aspect of Egyptomania, from the physical appropriation of artifacts to the invented idea of Egypt as an alluring and occult inferior nation who failed to preserve its empire. “The curse” served as a method of coping as the British reformed their rational, Enlightened ways with irrational imaginings to deflect feelings of trauma after the First World War and the loss of Egypt as a protectorate in 1922. The British attempted to coopt the experiences of the Egyptians through appropriating the culture behind the curse, yet it was in the rewriting of the curse that the British unknowingly confronted their own fears knowing that like

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 10.

the ancient Egyptians, their expanding empire may too crumble.

### **Conclusion**

Though the curse of Tutankhamen was a British creation with Egyptian influences, the curse was no less influential to understanding both British and Egyptian culture. Rather than representing a harmonious cultural hybrid, the curse instead represented the conflict-riddled relationships between two states as they each sought to culturally redefine themselves. Both states marveled at the magnificence and the legacy of Egyptian antiquity and hoped their state may too uphold and inherit that heritage, albeit Britain used this same legacy against the Egyptians through their imagined “other” Egypt. Were it not for the inherent curse of Britain needing to diminish the “Orient” to define itself as seen in Orientalism, Britain’s outward gaze may have proven fruitful beyond attempting to justify their own superiority. Britain, in seeking to diminish the power of Egypt, unknowingly created and perpetuated a myth that both appropriated Egyptian culture and demonstrated their own imperial uncertainties. The British created a curse that subconsciously allowed British newspapers and new-readers to confront the inevitable change occurring within the metropole. The British were willing to believe in a curse that constructed an irrational, occult Egypt to justify their archaeological, rational pursuits whether in archaeology or the “civilizing mission.” Instead, they believed in a curse that revealed their own irrationality and ineptitude to understand another people outside the metropole. The British sought out the “other” to bolster their national pride and blame for their national trauma; instead they found a greater human equality, one that left them more vulnerable to their post-war psychological crisis than before.

The curse of Tutankhamen went beyond avenging the ancient Egyptian King

Tutankhamen. It signified that the British metropole itself was subject to “otherizing” just as the periphery and “Orient” were “otherized” by this same metropole. The curse’s power lay in its ability to deconstruct boundaries between modern and ancient Egypt, Enlightened rational and Romantic irrational thinking, and the divide between the margins of empire and metropole. As suggested by Reid, the curse ensured that none could “rescue [the] history” of a nation from empire, nor the history of empire from the nation, but that “each are forever entwined,” one seeking healing after war, and the other seeking self-definition despite the ongoing interference of their European oppressor.<sup>112</sup> The curse of Tutankhamen was a curse created and perpetuated by the British Empire at home, serving as a coping mechanism to deal with the changing metropole and the British Empire as a whole. The curse of Tutankhamen was reminder that the British did not just fear the mystical powers of ancient or modern Egyptians, but a loss of their metropolitan identity.

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<sup>112</sup> Reid, *Contesting Antiquity in Egypt: Archaeologies, Museums & the Struggle for Identities from World War I to Nasser*, 14.

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