

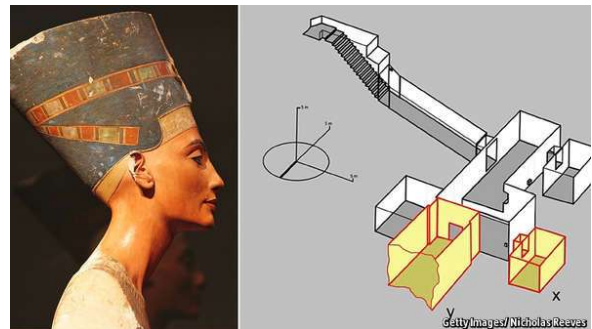
Archaeology in Egypt

What lies beneath?

A tantalising clue to the location of a long-sought pharaonic tomb

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NOTHING has inspired generations of archaeologists like the discovery in 1922 of the treasure-packed tomb of Tutankhamun. What if another untouched Egyptian trove lies buried, not in a distant patch of desert, nor even nearby amid the overlapping tomb-shafts of Luxor's Valley of the Kings, but instead just a millimetre's distance from plain view?



This is the dramatic hypothesis of a just-published paper by Nicholas Reeves, a British Egyptologist who co-discovered an undisturbed Egyptian tomb in 2000, and who is at the University of Arizona. His key evidence is disarmingly simple, and in fact free to see on the internet in the form of photographs published by Factum Arte, a Madrid- and Bologna-based specialist in art replication that recently created a spectacular, life-sized facsimile of Tutankhamun's tomb, intended for tourists to visit without endangering the original.

What Mr Reeves found in these ultra-high-resolution images, which reveal the texture of walls beneath layers of paint in the original tomb, was a number of fissures and cracks that suggest the presence of two passages that were blocked and plastered to conceal their existence. (See image, with proposed new areas in yellow.) One of these would probably lead to a storeroom; its position and small size mirror that of an already-uncovered storeroom inside the multi-chambered tomb. The other, bigger possible doorway in the north wall of Tutankhamun's burial chamber suggests something much more exciting.

There are several oddities about Tutankhamun's tomb. It is small compared with others in the valley. The objects found in it, while magnificent, seemed hurriedly placed and were found to be largely second-hand; even the boy-king's famous gilded funerary mask sports the strangely unmanly feature of pierced ears. The tomb's main axis is angled to the right of the entrance shaft, an arrangement typical of Egyptian queens rather than kings.

Noting that the bigger of the two doorways he may have located aligns perfectly with both sides of the tomb's entrance chamber, Mr Reeves thinks it could conceal a corridor continuing along the same axis, in the scale and shape of other nearby royal tombs. All this, as well as evidence

that the tomb's decoration and construction were executed at different stages, leads him to conclude that this corridor would lead to the burial chamber of a queen, or perhaps several princesses.

Among the tombs and royal mummies that archaeologists have identified from Tutankhamun's dynasty, Ancient Egypt's 18th, there remains one gaping absence. Nefertiti, the wife of Tutankhamun's father Akhenaten, was not only a famed beauty, as the world knows from her famous bust in Berlin. Her titles indicate that she served as co-regent and possibly also as a pharaoh in her own right after Akhenaten's death, meaning Nefertiti's tomb and its contents would be every bit as magnificent as her stepson's. Indeed, if Mr Reeves is right, what Tutankhamun got was her leftovers; even his face mask might originally have been intended for the queen.

Egyptologists are habitually reticent about each other's work, and will no doubt wait to embrace this especially bold claim, but Mr Reeves's paper has already aroused keen interest. "It's a fascinating argument and an impressive first step," says Kent Weeks, an American archaeologist who has minutely mapped the Valley of the Kings and in 1995 discovered the extent of its biggest known tomb. Mr Reeves's theory would be simple to test using non-invasive techniques, says Mr Weeks. A radar scan, for a start, would quickly reveal any hollows.

Impatient as he is to find out, Mr Reeves understands the difficulties. He credits Egypt's antiquities authorities for commissioning the detailed photography that bolsters his theory, and is confident they will take a careful, consultative approach to test it. If the doorways do exist, modern archaeology will require a team of experts to work out how to enter them, and more delicate tools than the picks and shovels used by Howard Carter when he discovered Tutankhamun's tomb.

"Each piece of evidence on its own is not conclusive, but put it all together and it's hard to avoid my conclusion." So says Mr Reeves before adding reflectively, "If I'm wrong I'm wrong, but if I'm right this is potentially the biggest archaeological discovery ever made."

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