

The Dead Hand in Egypt

By Dr. George A. Reisner

The Pharaohs were put to the sack from the cataracts to the sea. . . . — Gaston Maspero.

FOR several thousand years, the ancient Egyptians plundered and replundered the tombs of their ancestors seeking only gold, breaking and casting aside the other contents of the burial chambers as of no account. The massive masonry and the passages cut in solid rock were of no more avail in keeping out thieves than the great stoppers of stone and the cunningly hidden entrances. The papyri of the New Kingdom contain reports of the criminal proceedings against the robbers of the royal tombs and mention, incidentally, that as for the tombs of the nobles they had all been violated. In the great cemetery of western Thebes, the ground was strewn with broken furniture and the bones of the aristocracy of the Egyptian empire. Sooner or later, the laborers and the watchmen employed in the necropolis looked on the dead faces of the entombed kings and nobles and stripped their bodies of gold and jewels. By chance, a few tombs have escaped, but only a very few.

Early in the last century, Mohammed Ali Pasha made himself master of Egypt, and, wishing to increase the productivity of his pashalic, opened the Valley of the Nile to Europeans. The hieroglyphic writing, always an object of curiosity to scholars, had just been deciphered by Champollion, Young, and others. The interest of educated men turned naturally to Egypt, and the collecting of Egyptian curiosities became fashionable in all countries. Every traveler brought away from his Eastern tour some antiquities, and every prince of Europe felt it incumbent on him to get together enough to fill a room or two in his royal museum. The foreign consuls began gathering antiquities, and a horde of adventurers sprang into activity as agents for the consuls and other collectors. From about 1815 nearly to 1880, this second great period of plundering continued — a mad search for salable curiosities. Some of these looters made a pretense of interest in historical research; but the naked truth was that they knew nothing of scientific methods and cared nothing for any object whose market value was beyond their recognition. Maspero tells us in his preface to the "Guide to the Cairo Museum" that in his day (1880-1914) he had often found in the discarded rubbish heaps of the curiosity hunters fragments of

The patient twenty years of labor by the Boston-Harvard Expedition in Egypt, headed by Dr. Reisner, have been recently rewarded with the discovery of a tomb of the Fourth Dynasty, whose importance completely overshadows the Eighteenth Dynasty tomb of Tutankhamen. In this article, Dr. Reisner tells something of the history of archæological investigation in Egypt and describes the patient labors of diggers for lost tombs.

objects, some of them of great artistic merit and others of decisive historical importance which had been cast away because at that time they were not of recognized market value.

The gold had long before been exhausted except for chance fragments, but time had brought about that the neglected furniture of the tombs could be exchanged for gold, and even the bodies of the dead.

It is the habit of most of us to condemn the public for its great interest in "mummies." To the experienced eye, a mummy is only a bundle of human bones and skin trussed up as a sorry remnant of a living man. But to the layman who imagines that he is gazing on the lineaments of a person who lived thousands of years ago, preserved by some miraculous secret, not dead in the common sense, but in some way still existing — to him the mummy makes an appeal which is obviously not one of mere morbid curiosity.

TO me a mummy is a loathsome thing, but I feel that to others it is a gathering point for dreams. In like manner, the task of excavating ancient tombs appears to the layman as fraught with thrilling and romantic moments — the descent through passages and stairways which no foot has trod for thousands of years, the first glance into a chamber just as it was when the last priest passed out and his assistants blocked the doorway with masonry, or the opening of the sarcophagus of a king, undisturbed through the passing of dynasties and empires. The recent great publicity campaign concerning the tomb of Tutankhamen was based largely on this appeal to the imagination of the layman. The excavation of that tomb is one of the most romantic stories in the annals of archæology and the public interest was justly attracted, although the public seems to be misinformed as to some of the particulars, as to the historical importance of the discovery, and as to the circumstances under which Mr. Carter closed the door and forfeited his control of the keys to the Government of Egypt by whose generosity he had been permitted to excavate in the Valley of the Kings.

Intimately bound up with the story of treasure hunting in Egypt is the history of the Egyptian

Department of Antiquities. The first suggestion of such an administration was made by the great Champollion to Mohammed Ali Pasha, and the purpose of the Department was to control the wanton destruction of the Egyptian monuments. In 1835, the Pasha established a department which failed, however, in its main purpose and came to an end when the Pasha presented the contents of the small museum to the Archduke Maximilian (1855) on the occasion of his visit to Egypt. The present Department was created in 1858 by the appointment of a French scholar, Mariette, as director of antiquities. Mariette, who knew the details of the disgraceful looting better than anyone else, made no vain attempts to stop it by police action, but contented himself with reserving certain great sites and with forestalling the looters by government excavations. His policy was directed to saving all the antiquities possible for his patron and creating a great national collection in Cairo. The result was the nucleus of the present Cairo Museum including many of the masterpieces of Egyptian sculpture, the "Sheikh-el-Beled," the Chephren statue, and the Squatting Scribe.

IN 1880-1881, Maspero succeeded Mariette, introducing the era of scientific excavations. At first his policy was merely to *control all excavations* and consisted in granting permits to anyone on condition that the excavator report all his finds and yield up half of them to the Cairo Museum. It was this liberal policy which brought the great modern archaeological expeditions into the field, led by Professor Petrie (now Sir Flinders Petrie), who began his work in Maspero's first year, and was followed by a long list of French, German, English, and American scholars, representing universities, learned societies, and museums, their joint activity resulting in the development of strictly scientific methods of excavation, of recording, and of historical deduction. Maspero himself developed his ideas, and in his second administration (1899-1914), he adopted the policy of using the "division law," that is, allowing the excavator to take half of what he finds, giving the remainder to the Cairo Museum, to favor the more scientific expeditions. But he was always loath to refuse concessions even to dealers in antiquities, believing that to grant them concessions, worked under government supervision, was the only way to check looting. As early as 1903, I began to urge on him that concessions should be granted only to representatives of reputable institutions of learning or of recognized public museums. The principle may be stated as follows:

All excavations destroy historical material, and should only be permitted to trained archaeologists competent to observe and record this material. The historical material of Egypt is legally the national property of Egypt, but morally a legitimate concern of the civilized world. Its exploitation by a dealer in

antiquities, a great nobleman, or a millionaire for private profit or personal amusement is contrary to the interests of historical research and should be strictly forbidden.

In 1914, M. Pierre Lacau was appointed to succeed Maspero, but it was not until after the war that he took up his duties in Egypt. He immediately indicated his intention of adopting the general principle stated above. Naturally, there was opposition, but now, after the recent difficulties over the tomb of Tutankhamen, it is probable that concessions will be limited to expeditions led by representatives of public institutions and societies. M. Lacau has gone further and has altered the old division law so that he may be able to take for the Egyptian National Museum "finds" of unique importance and to give to the excavator all the rest. He has put in writing his intention of encouraging scientific research as in the past and of giving to the excavator even pieces of capital importance when the equivalent is already well represented in the Cairo Museum. The few divisions made under the new law confirm his words and give assurance of the continued generosity of the Egyptian Government toward historical research.

SO, in the midst of the search for gold, the scramble for marketable curiosities, and the romantic exploration of antiquity for thrilling sensations, the French scholars (Mariette, Maspero, Grebaut, De Morgan, Loret, Maspero in his second term, and Lacau) who have organized and directed the Egyptian Department of Antiquities have built up in Cairo the greatest museum of its own antiquities which any nation of the world possesses. Steadfast in the policies they as Egyptian officials have adopted, these French scholars have had the courage to resist all outside influence. Mariette refused the request of the Emperor of France for the presentation to the Louvre of some of the great masterpieces of the Cairo Museum and angered the Viceroy of Egypt by that refusal; Maspero resisted even so great a British proconsul as Lord Kitchener when his requests conflicted with the policy of the Department; and M. Lacau has pressed through a new policy in the face of the opposition of the foreign representatives in Egypt and of most of the expeditions. We who call ourselves archaeologists are under a great obligation to the Egyptian Government for the protection and help which it has generously given us since 1880.

It might appear that a great government department with an organized police force of its own would be able to prevent illicit excavations. But the treasure hunter is still to be found among the *fellabin* and even among the city folk. Now, as in the past, when a peasant is afflicted by hard times, his thoughts naturally turn to buried treasures and to tales heard from the old men. Once in his life, almost every destitute peasant has had a try for hidden gold in

the nearest cemetery. He may dig around for a few days or a few weeks and give it up, but his son and his grandson when their day comes will have their imagination stirred by the same tales and will repeat the experience of the ancestor. There are several manuscript collections of these treasure tables, one of which was published some years ago by Ahmed Pasha Kamal, and these collections have become the textbooks of the city men who find themselves in need of money. Every year, I am visited by two or three delegations which think they have identified a place reported in some tale and wish my coöperation in the exploitation of their information. Two years ago came two Armenians with a story I had already heard twice, and finding me, as always, obdurate, they urged that their object was not private gain, but acquisition of a great treasure with which to redeem Armenia and make it a free and great nation.

A YEAR ago, a well-known sheik, a strict Moslem and a member of Parliament, met with a Maghraby magician who inflamed the sheik's imagination with a story of an intact tomb of a Christian king which he *divined* to be at a place in the Western Desert not far from Minieh. The sheik's application was of course refused by the Department of Antiquities as contrary to their policy, but, having political influence, he secured an order from the responsible minister that the Department of Antiquities should carry out the excavations at its own expense and give the sheik one third of the great treasure. An inspector of the Department accompanied by the sheik and the Maghraby proceeded to the enchanted spot and began excavations. The Arabic newspapers reported the affair at this point and my information is taken from their reports. "There was a granite portal and a doorway closed by a huge slab of similar granite, so huge that it could be moved only by dynamite or machinery. The excavations have reached a point about a metre from the doorway, and soon they hope to reach the great treasure worth many ten thousands of pounds." The Maghraby was to have one third of the sheik's share, or one ninth of the whole. The Egyptian inspector immediately reported the hopelessness of the proceedings, and when an English inspector visited the scene at the sheik's request, he recommended that the operations be transferred to the Mines Department. No damage was done, except the wasting of a few hundred dollars. The magician was the usual Maghraby confidence man who wanders about Egypt living by his wits and often using buried treasure as a bait. He got a few months' free board out of the sheik and likely a few pounds in advances on the "treasure."

The *anticas* which are passed off on tourists are mostly forgeries made in Egypt. The genuine antiquities which are sold to tourists, to the private collectors, and to the agents of museums, come from the exploitation of ancient sites for nitrogenous

fertilizer, from illicit excavations, or from thefts. I believe that ninety per cent of them reckoned by value have been illegally acquired and are sold in violation of the terms of the dealer's license. From a strictly moral standpoint, the purchasers are little better than receivers of stolen goods. The dealings of the ordinary tourist do no great harm and give considerable pleasure to a large number of innocent travelers. But the large sums expended in purchases by private collectors and museums constitute, in fact, a continual incitement to infractions of the law of Egypt, to thefts from the Cairo Museum, as well as from scientific excavations, and to the irreparable destruction of historical material.

THE modern excavator no longer digs holes over an ancient site trusting to flair or chance to lead him to a rich tomb or a cache of valuable antiquities. With a knowledge of the works of others and of the outstanding historical questions on which information is desired, with an experienced facility in reading the signs on the surface, he selects a field of excavation and proceeds to sweep it clear of all accumulations of sand and débris. He removes deposit by deposit; he exposes the floors of one period after another and determines the association of each object with the period to which it belongs; he reads his facts as he goes and records them step by step. He deals with masses of facts and marshals them in classes as the basis for his historical deductions. Weeks or even months may go by in patient labor; the records pile up — the diary, the photographs, the drawings of buildings, tombs, and objects; the history of the site gradually emerges from a mass of broken walls and fragments of objects; and yet there may have been not a single thrill for the layman nor a single object worthy of a place in a public museum. He feels all that a layman would, but there are other sensations. There is the satisfaction which comes from reading the evidence correctly and writing in the records a new page in the history of ancient man. It is this which supports the courage of the excavator and enables him to hold fast to his scientific methods through months of apparently unproductive labor. After years of experience he gains confidence; he knows that he is working in the right way, that he is finding all there is in the site, that sooner or later the great discovery will come which even the laymen will understand. Looking back on twenty-five years of field work, I see that the great sensations were few and far between, that most of these years have been devoted to the administration of the expedition and to grinding office work. The compensations have been those of the historian, but also the pride of craft of the excavator, and a great satisfaction in the masterpieces placed by the expedition in the Egyptian collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts — by-products of historical research.

TALES FROM TOMBS OF OLD EGYPT



Remarkable results have been achieved by the Boston-Harvard Expedition to Egypt under Dr. George A. Reisner which has been working for several years in the vicinity of the Gizeh pyramids, three miles from Cairo. This year the operations were concentrated on the limestone plateau east of the pyramid of Cheops, disclosing part of the royal cemetery of the Fourth Dynasty, and two small tombs of the Sixth Dynasty, of great importance from the archæological point of view.

Above is the cemetery of Cheops taken from the pyramid of that King looking down toward the southeast, on November 1, the day excavations were begun during the Nile inundation. It

shows the pyramids of the three Queens of Cheops with the cemetery of his sons and daughters in front of it.

Below is a view of the same area, taken from the same pyramid, but from a point of view higher up, looking directly east. This shows the progress of the excavation by January 18, when the five streets of the cemetery were exposed. Since this picture was taken the remarkable discovery has been made of a tomb of the Fourth Dynasty, brought to light by excavations made where the arrow is shown in this picture. This tomb may be that of a daughter of Sneferuw, and is of the greatest archæological significance, owing to its early date and peculiar construction.





Rock-cut grave built to hold the sun ship of the chief Queen of Cheops. The bottom was dressed to fit the wooden boat, which was placed in it and covered over with stone slabs. In this ship the spirit of the Queen as a deified being was supposed to sail with the sun god across the firmament from east to west.

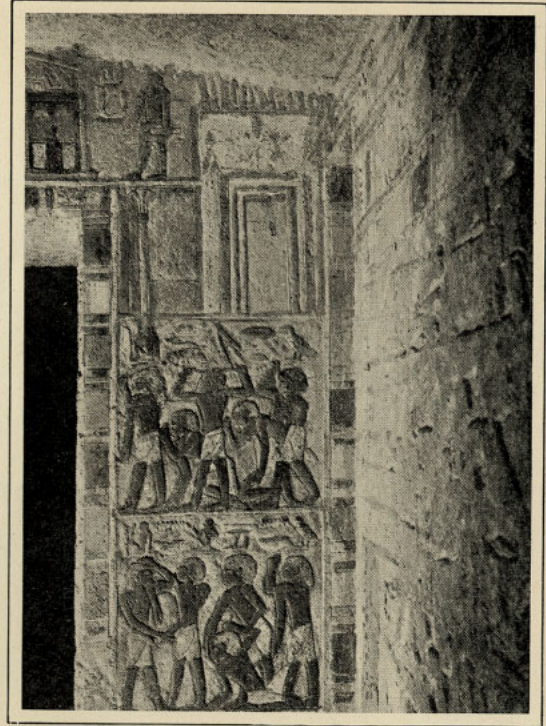
With this discovery, the archæologists recognized that the three excavations in front of the Cheops pyramid, which have for a long time been a puzzle to them, were similar boat graves with three ships of the sun provided for the use of King Cheops.

(Below) The street in front of the Queens' pyramid after excavation, taken December 20, showing the first step in the construction of a pyramid (immediate foreground). A preliminary cutting was evidently made here with the intention of building a pyramid, but it was afterwards moved some fifty or sixty feet nearer to the temple of Cheops.

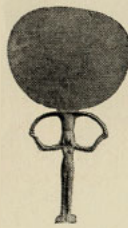




A view looking over the first street of tombs. The big structure on the right in the background is the tomb of Prince Ka Wa'ab, son of Cheops; and on the left, that of another prince whose name was destroyed by his enemies in the offering chamber in order that the soul might suffer hunger and thirst through eternity. In the foreground is the offering chamber of the King's letter scribe, Iduw, a priest of the pyramids during the Sixth Dynasty.

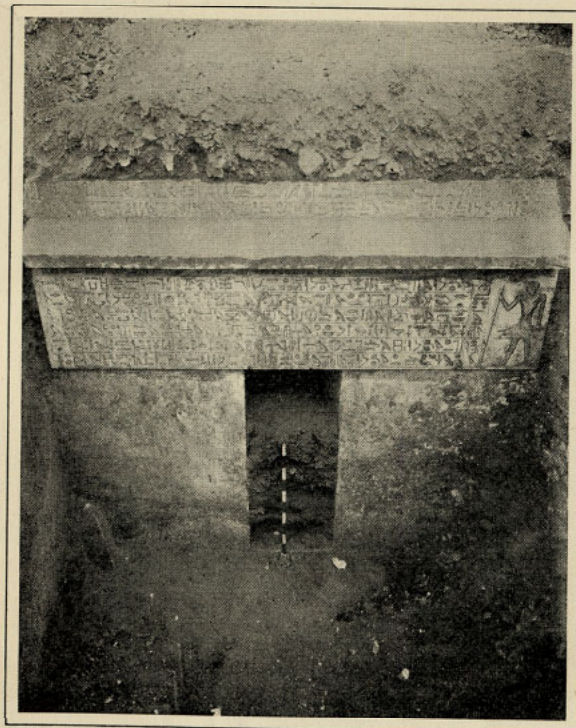


Inside of the doorway of the well-preserved tomb of Iduw. Two mourning scenes are depicted here, showing two groups of men tearing their hair and fainting with grief. These scenes are extremely rare previous to the New Empire, and are evidence of the spirit of freedom shown by the designer of the tomb, and his readiness to depart from the convention of his time. Some of the colors painted on the walls have withstood the stress of time.



The façade of the tomb of Iduw. The inscription above reads in part:

"I say: I have come forth from my city; I have come down from my province. I have done the true thing for its lord. I have satisfied the god with that which he desired. I have spoken good; I have repeated good; I have said the truth; I have done the truth. I have given bread to the hungry and clothing to the naked. I have served my father and acted pleasantly to my mother as much as was in my power . . . I have not designed any evil thing against any man. I am honored before the

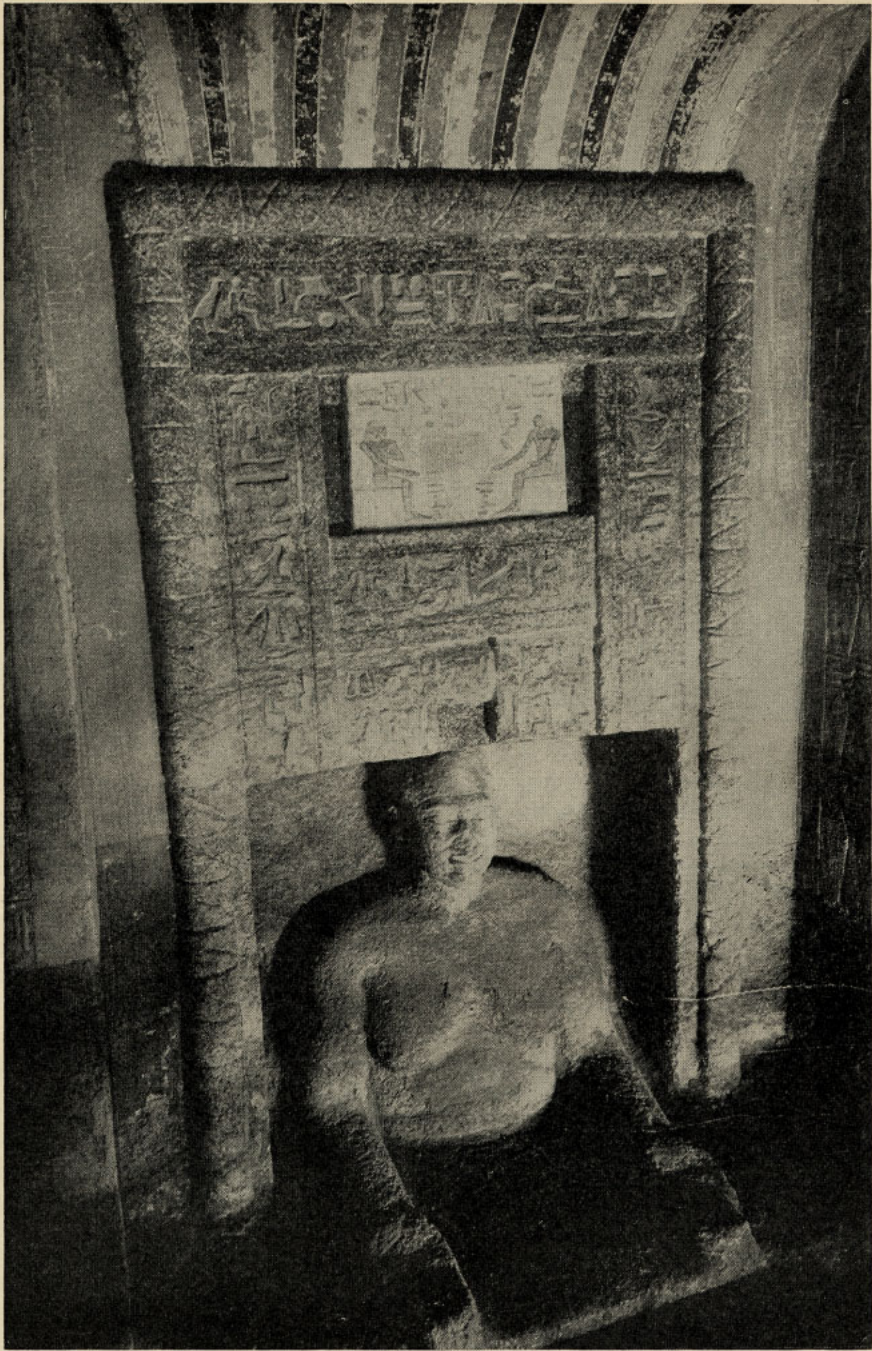


great god and before all people forever."

The lower inscription reads in part:

"May he be accompanied by his Ka. May he be received by the great god. May he be taken upon the beautiful roads upon which the revered ones wander."

Iduw is also represented by a small statuette in the portico of the tomb of his father, Qa'ar, which is situated immediately west of this tomb. Qa'ar, like his son, was the personal letter scribe of the King, and held many other important positions, among them that of Mayor of the Pyramid City of Cheops.



This picture shows the most valuable and exceptional discovery of the whole winter's work. On the right-hand wall above the offering stone in the tomb of Iduw is a stele cut off in a curious fashion halfway down. The rock beneath the lower edge has been hollowed out in the form of a niche, in which the upper part of Iduw's body is carved life-size, as if coming from the tomb, with hands outstretched before him, palms upward, to receive offerings. Breaking away from the traditional expression, the face wears a look of happy expectation. The conception harmonizes with Egyptian beliefs, but its representation in this form is a new and astonishing departure from the formalism of Egyptian art of the Old Empire.

