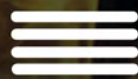
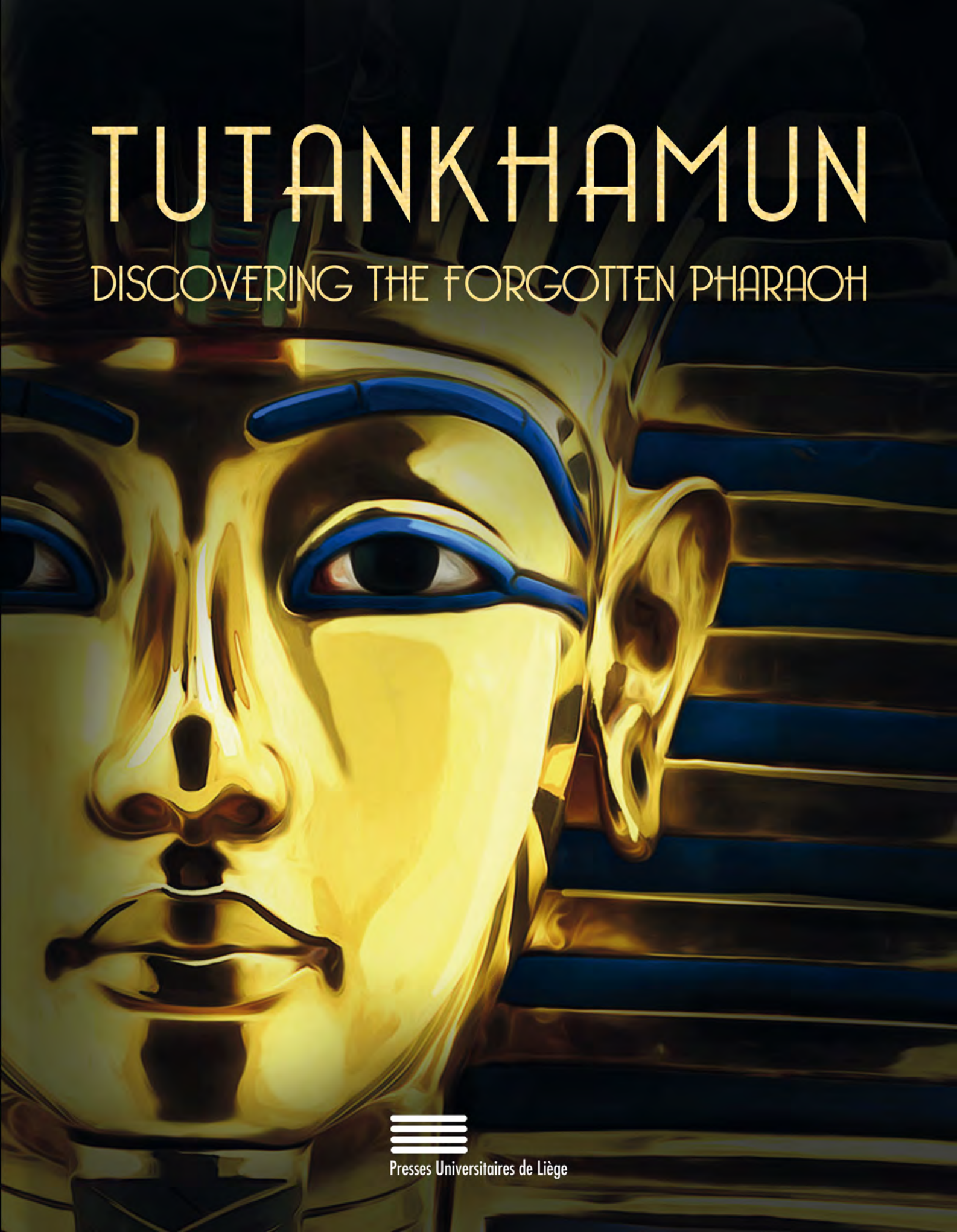


TUTANKHAMUN

DISCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN PHARAOH



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Collection *Aegyptiaca Leodiensia* 12

TUTANKHAMUN
DISCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN PHARAOH

Catalogue edited by

Simon CONNOR and Dimitri LABOURY

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Agostinho da Cunha, untimely seized by the Abductor, as ancient Egyptians called it.

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Living at the Court of Tutankhamun

Claudia VENIER

Life at Pharaoh's Court

In ancient Egypt, the palace was not only the residence of the sovereign and his family; it was also a real political and economic center around which all members of the court gravitated. Various activities related to artisanal production and education also occurred there. In ancient Egyptian, the palace is referred to as *per aa*, which means “Great House,” and in the New Kingdom, this formula also comes to evoke — by metonymy — the king himself.

Urban archaeology, artifacts unearthed in the few preserved palaces, figural representations and texts — which can be supplemented by observing certain behaviors and comparing them with actual objects — allow us to imagine what life must have been like at pharaoh's court. It is, paradoxically,

especially because of burials that we know anything about the daily life of ancient Egyptians. Whether through paintings or reliefs in tombs, which depict idealized moments in the life of the deceased, or through the objects unearthed in them, many clues have reached us in a good state of preservation from the funerary domain. The afterlife was conceived of as an idealized extension of the world here on earth, and it was therefore necessary to take with you all that was needed to continue to lead a pleasant and prosperous life after death.

The end of the Eighteenth Dynasty was a special period of transition between two religious conceptions and two royal residences, Amarna and Thebes. The first, a royal city founded by Akhenaten, had



Fig. 1a-b : candlesticks from Tutankhamun's tomb. Carter 041d. (a) Photograph H. Burton, reproduced courtesy of The Griffith Institute, University of Oxford. (b) Photograph D. Laboury.



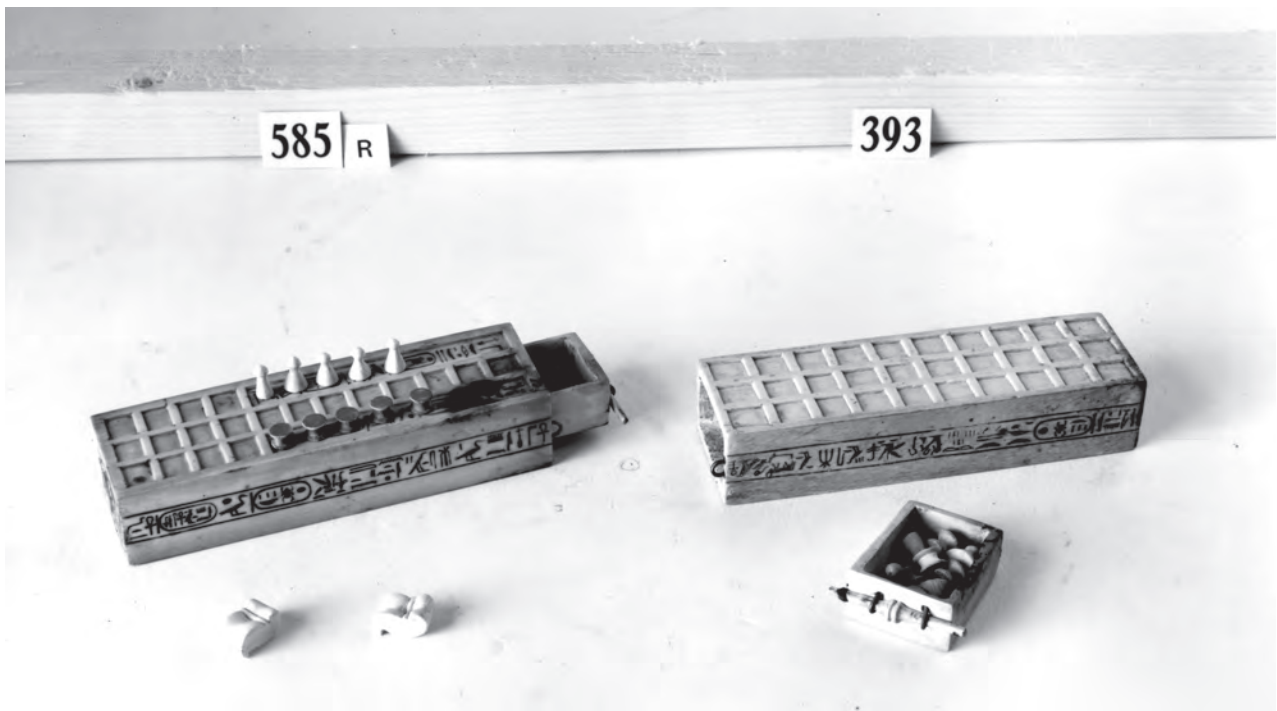
a very short existence. It was abandoned about fifteen years after its construction *ex nihilo* and thus remained forever frozen in the sands of the Egyptian desert. This was an opportunity for archaeologists, who were able to study life at court in an exceptional way, thanks to archaeological sources. For the construction of his temples and residence, Akhenaten used a new method of building using *talatats* (blocks of standardized dimensions designed to be carried by one person). These include representations of palace scenes and everyday life in the particular style of the Amarna period. Several copies, including some from collections in London, are present in the exhibition displaying floral decorations, rooms of the palace, the bringing of victuals in procession and their preparation, etc. It must be kept in mind, however, that this iconography is not realistic and remains unique to this reign: it is idealized to give a glorified image of royalty and power through ritualization.

At a time when lighting was done by oil lamp and torch, it was the sun that gave rhythm to the daily life of the ancient Egyptians. Light was also associated with life: this concept is particularly highlighted in Atonist ideology. The candlesticks of Tutankhamun's treasure even take the form of the *ankh* sign, the symbol of life. Despite these systems of

lighting on exquisite mounts, all Egyptians probably rose at dawn to perform tasks, while avoiding as much as possible the sun's hot rays lest they burned their skin. Houses' building blocks were adapted to this climate: a brick construction of dried mud to limit temperature differences, narrow and high windows to let in light and breezes but not heat, a maximum of shade, a water feature, etc. At nightfall, the freshness of the outdoors was sought, especially on the roofs of dwellings, so as to avoid the risk of snake bites and scorpion stings.

When these lifestyles gave way to leisure, the ancient Egyptians held banquets, which seem to us to have been wonderful, and which provided entertainment in the form of musicians and singers of both sexes, as well as dancers, the latter role apparently reserved for women. Whether percussion, wind or string, the range of instruments was quite diverse, but their form still seems familiar to us today: lute, clappers, trumpet and sistrum, all present in the exhibition, were appreciated at the time. From the New Kingdom, a kneeling harpist, sometimes depicted with his eyes closed, might be illustrated in the iconography. No musical notation has survived, so we can only use the iconography and instruments unearthed among the archaeological remains to study the practices and try to restore the musical

Fig. 2: Tutankhamun's game boxes. Carter 393 and 585r. Photograph H. Burton, reproduced courtesy of The Griffith Institute, University of Oxford.



atmosphere of these festivities. At these banquets, food seems to have been eaten with the fingers — even by royal diners — since no cutlery was found during excavations. Pictorial representations depict princesses crunching a duck with their teeth [see chapter on food]. The dishes were mainly ceramic or, among the most prized examples, stone. Pets were regularly depicted under the chairs of hosts and guests. Although their presence in the idealized scenes of banquets may have taken on a special significance, it is reasonable to assume that these dogs, cats and even monkeys were the most common faithful companions, that they were brought by their masters to many events and made the children of the house happy. Miniature animals and dolls were among the various games available to young people. In addition, families enjoyed board games. Among them, *senet* occupied a prominent place in the New Kingdom. Tutankhamun had several copies of fine workmanship in his tomb. This game had a very strong symbolism: the deceased played out their *post-mortem* destiny there. To ensure rebirth in the afterlife, they had to win the game, which acted out the various trials that awaited them in the *duat*.

The pharaoh must have also enjoyed the great outdoors. According to literary sources, it seems that he went to the marsh (especially in the Fayum region) to practice hunting with a throw stick and

harpoon fishing, two sporting activities of the elite. In the New Kingdom, the site of Medinet el-Gurob, located at the entrance to the fertile area of Fayum, was home to a royal residence where the sovereign was able to relax and rest during such recreational activities — in the first half of the 20th century, the king of Egypt himself had a hunting residence on the shore of Lake Qarun. Three thousand years ago, the sovereign also owned several mansions along the Nile and periodically visited one or the other accompanied by his court and his furniture, like the kings of Renaissance France.

Life at court, for the wealthiest social classes at least, appears to us today as an image of luxury, refinement and an existence of leisure and celebrations in an elegant setting amidst sumptuous furniture. The gardens, which contained a profusion of plants, trees and flowers, were a privileged place of relaxation, and their abundant greenery was thus reproduced in the wall decoration of palaces. Members of court could wear sumptuous adornments, and every object of daily life was delicately crafted to become a true work of art.

FURTHER READING

Andreu 1997; Tallet 2004, 64–69; Emerit 2017, 48–61.



Fig. 3: throw sticks. Carter 370k. Photograph H. Burton, reproduced courtesy of The Griffith Institute, University of Oxford.

Tell-el-Amarna



Part of wing.
probably used in
decoration of walls or floors
laid in plaster.



Same
Kind of
decoration

No. 505

Fig. 4: glazed plaques from the wall decoration of the Amarna palaces presented on a sheet from the excavations of the *Egypt Exploration Society*. Photograph J. James. Private collection, UK.