

CHAPTER

9

A Perspective on the Near  
East: Reports in the  
Portuguese Press about the  
Discovery of the Tomb of  
Tutankhamun

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As part of the research project entitled *Tutankhamun in Portugal. Reports in the Portuguese Press (1922–39)*,<sup>1</sup> this text aims to present, in general terms, the type of discourse about the Middle East that the reports on the discovery of pharaoh Tutankhamun's tomb, intentionally or not, helped to construct.

We will assess how the Portuguese press, with its almost daily spread of news, was a powerful agent in promoting the growth of the mystery and fascination that the ancient Egyptian civilization exercised on Portuguese readers. At the same time, we will evaluate how the press helped transform that East into a more tangible reality for Portuguese readers, even while mythologizing it. To do so, we intend to show through an analysis of selected texts published by the Portuguese press between 1923 and 1924, how Portuguese authors, or the foreign texts in Portuguese translation, brought ancient Egypt to contemporary Portuguese readers.

**Framework**

The main focus of Portuguese scholarship on Orientalism is Asia, specifically on Far Eastern countries and on the physical and moral

traits of the peoples with whom, from the sixteenth century, Portugal engaged and maintained direct, regular and continuous relationships. It was in that Asian context that the intellectual structures of Orientalism took root and expression, supported by the abundant and diverse documentation and information available for scholars' consideration (Barreto 1998: 273–91).<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to this 'visible side' of Orientalism, the Near East, the East where History began, represents the 'hidden side'. Even though it does not stand at the core of Portuguese Orientalism debates, the Near East holds considerable interest for the historical-civilizational confrontation that it also entails, for the search for lost civilizations, cultures, symbols and experiences that it contains, and for the ontological and epistemological difference that it reveals.

A number of historical developments contributed to the study and understanding of the Near East. Biblical narratives, especially those of the Old Testament, which conveyed significant information about the ancient Near East. Over the years, these narratives were scrutinized and commented on in the light of the knowledge of each period by textual and literary critics aiming to separate and/or reconcile the mythical and the historical, the literal and the symbolical (Vaz 1992: 157–93). The Greeks and the Romans showed an interest in Antiquity and also bequeathed to us their reflections on the life, culture and organization of ancient civilizations. Though sometimes subject to a measure of fantasy and distortion, notwithstanding the detailed knowledge that they had acquired of the physical geography of those territories through many voyages and stays. From the Middle Ages on, many educated and curious Europeans – merchants, diplomats and adventurers – visited the Near East, leaving more or less detailed writings about what they heard and saw (Carreira 1992: 10). While focused on the rediscovery of Classical Antiquity, the Renaissance was not totally indifferent to the eminence of the Near Eastern civilization and incorporated into its own artistic expression some of its literary, architectural and sculptural forms. Eighteenth-century explorers from the Danish expedition (1761–66) of Frederick V recovered and published various antiquities from Arabia, Persia, Mesopotamia, Syria and Asia Minor, which made it possible for Rawlinson, Hincks and Oppert to decipher cuneiform writing in the nineteenth century (Carreira 1992: 10, 14, 15). The 167 scholars and scientists – *savants* – who accompanied the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt (1798–1801), all from different scientific disciplines, copied, drew and mapped the Egyptian territory, gathering all available information about Egypt, while simultaneously collecting antiquities that they transported back to Paris (Araújo 1992: 70–4; Carreira 1992: 10, 11, 26; Laurens 1997:

47). The 24 volumes from the first edition of *La Description de l'Égypte* (1809–13), resulting from this French cataloguing and accumulated erudition, contain a treasure trove of knowledge and demonstrate a tremendous fascination with the modern and ancient Near East, in this case focused on Egypt (Said 2003: 42, 43 and 81). However, systematic organizational work and in-depth study of the ancient civilizations of the Near East had to wait until the nineteenth century, namely for the works of the historical, philological and archaeological investigative pioneers to achieve integrity, coherence and the status of a science and, thus, finally assert itself in the European cultural and academic scene (Araújo 1992: 70–4; Sales 1992: 85–101; Sales 2007: 67–104; Santos 1992: 123–36).

Even using questionable and erroneous methods that are now easily recognized and criticized, the discovery of archaeological sites in Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia brought to light thousands of ancient artefacts, monuments and places that drove even more the growing and unstoppable passion for Near East Orientalism,<sup>3</sup> spreading the fame of its beauty and grandeur (Santos 1992: 134).

The deciphering of hieroglyphs was a highly significant focus of the study of the ancient Egyptian civilization. Many attempts at translation were made from the beginning of the sixteenth century, but it was Jean-François Champollion (1790–1832), based on the work of several precursors, who finally succeeded in deciphering the Rosetta Stone (14 September 1822). His contribution to the rebirth of passion – public and scholarly – for ancient Egypt recruited many others to the cause of expanding knowledge about the land of the pharaohs, from philologists to linguists (Carreira 1992: 11–13; Lacouture 1988: 287–302; Sales 2007: 15–36, 37–66).

Scientific exploration of ancient Egypt, including the Napoleonic campaign, the deciphering of hieroglyphic writing and continuous archaeological missions throughout the nineteenth century made Egypt and its ancient civilization familiar to educated and informed Europeans who welcomed with enthusiasm news of “that wonderful land of temples, pyramids, mummies and papyrus”<sup>4</sup> (Carreira 1992: 26). Egyptian sites, once discovered, were restored in some cases but often freely plundered in a hunt for treasure that filled the halls of major European museums (notably the *Musée du Louvre*, the British Museum, the *Museo delle antichità egizie di Torino* and the *Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung*).<sup>5</sup>

Gradually, the Near East gained visibility, space and scientific, literary, artistic, and even communicational status. In this regard, the discovery of the supposedly unviolated tomb of Tutankhamun, on 4 November 1922, by Howard Carter was a remarkable turning point

because of the impact this event had in the international press.<sup>6</sup> The media coverage of this discovery amplified exponentially interest in the ancient Egyptian history and its principal personalities, customs and practices.

Portugal was no exception to this Orientalist movement. For the general public, ancient Egypt was a distant, obscure and silent realm, a complex and plural reality thousands of years old that captured the imagination and sparked curiosity. Now the press caught the attention of the mass public – even those who could not read, listened to the news – who were anxious to know more about the ancient Egyptian civilization and the discovery of the tomb, thousands of years old, in far-away Luxor. Almost daily, the press fed the appetite for Tutankhamun news.

An article published in *A Tribuna*<sup>7</sup> (05/04/1923, p. 1), nearly four months after the discovery of the tomb, begins with a paragraph that is in itself both an extraordinary testimony to the importance of this discovery and its echoes in the newspapers around the world, and it demonstrates the intense detail with which journalists documented it:

Lately, the curiosity and attention of the entire world was triggered by the discoveries made by Lord Carnarvon in the Tomb of Tutankhamun, avidly reading all that referred to them, even the most insignificant details.<sup>8</sup>

Such situation could be attested by the demand for foreign newspapers and magazines, specifically English and French, namely the *London News* and *L'Illustration*, which are mentioned in the next paragraph of the abovementioned quotation. The Portuguese press knows the phenomenon, acknowledges its importance and explores it in newspapers and magazines.

The newspaper *A Vanguarda*<sup>9</sup> (17/02/1923, p. 1), in turn, began one of its articles about Lord Carnarvon's discoveries in Egypt with this remark: "The Pharaoh Tutankhamun, who died more than three thousand years ago, is the sovereign now making most noise around the world."<sup>10</sup> Tutankhamun was already envisaged as an hero of the masses, the archetypal figure of the Egyptian pharaoh, and the opening and exploration of his tomb opened a window on to the distant past in which he lived. The distance between the noise and the fame was compressed by the action of news agencies and journalists that resurrected a dead pharaoh for thousands of people.

The Portuguese press was clearly aware of the "load" of news in hand, with all its appealing exoticism and fascination, and aware of its own role in spreading news and knowledge about the past, the

archaeological excavation and the parties involved. This awareness enabled the national press to become an active participant in the ongoing international media coverage of the discovery.

Our analysis of the news published by the national periodicals has allowed us to identify three main themes which can be organized in three categories: “Know the past”, “Cherish the past” and “Fear the past”. Bearing in mind the attention that was given to these themes, selecting the news items that best illustrate them, we will now discuss each of them individually.

### Know the past

The first category of news is exemplified by a text from *A Capital*<sup>11</sup> (30/01/1923, p. 1) that gives the readers relevant information about the purpose and possibilities of the excavations carried out in Eastern Luxor.<sup>12</sup> “The Excavations of Luxor. The whole history of Egypt will be revealed. The sacred books in the face of reality” is the title of the news item.<sup>13</sup> The text, a complete copy of the original published in the *Excelsior. Journal illustré quotidien*, on 28 January, page 3,<sup>14</sup> speculates about the “rolls of papyrus”<sup>15</sup> that could be in the sealed chamber of the tomb, the deciphering of which would help to “fill some gaps of the history of ancient Egypt”, for example, establishing “the exodus date of the people of Israel” and corroborating “the Pentateuch narratives”.

This kind of news that aims to create some proximity with the cultural universe of the readers relies mainly on identifying similarities between familiar ancient history (of the Hebrews) and the unfamiliar, or less familiar, ancient history (of the Egyptians). In this discourse, the Hebrews occupy prime position, whilst the Egyptians are presented as auxiliaries, whose existence is used to construct or prove the history of the former. At stake is the recognition of the ancient world and its people as a great period of knowledge, wisdom and cultural interactions; thus, this type of news has as its motivation the revelation of secrets or ancient knowledge. “It all points to the fact that Tutankhamun is the pharaoh that the Scripture says ‘didn’t meet Joseph’ and who oppressed the Israelites”<sup>16</sup> is said at one point to make clear that many of the “legendary events” of the Near East’s past could now be revised and considered “according to the new data acquired in Thebes.”

The news alludes to the opinions of the English Egyptologist and journalist Arthur Weigall (1880–1934) expressed in the *Daily Mail*. Having consulted Maneton and Flavius Josephus, Weigall describes

what is known about the pharaohs Amenhotep III, Akhenaten, Tutankhamun, Ay and Horemheb – their movement against polytheism that aimed to introduce an idealistic, monotheistic cult of Aton – and alludes to Moses as a “priest of Heliopolis” who was head of the heretics expelled from Egypt by the Egyptian (namely, the pharaoh Horemheb).<sup>17</sup> The monotheism of the Israelites is combined with the “monotheistic heresy of Aton” and, therefore, it is expected that any reports gathered from the tomb of Tutankhamun could now illustrate the veracity of the sacred books. The article concludes, “[t]he sealed papyri that will be deciphered will perhaps reveal to us if these slaves were the children of Israel and if the pharaoh is the one whose death is reported in the first chapter of Exodus”,<sup>18</sup> therefore whetting readers’ appetite for further information as it emerges from the excavation in Luxor.

Fundamentally, this first category of news explores the contribution that the discovery and scientific investigation of Tutankhamun’s tomb could bring to the sum of human knowledge. The Old Testament is used to connect the public’s existing knowledge with information that, hypothetically, could arise from the new archaeological discovery.

### Cherish the past

The second category of news emphasizes the material riches discovered in the tomb of Tutankhamun, highlighting the artistic significance of this find. The discourse underlying this category of news is not superficial, in the sense that it does not see the Egyptian Near East only through the lens of material goods and their associated luxury; instead, it expresses an appreciation for the elaborate creations made by the ancient Egyptians. As examples of this approach, we have identified five news articles published in four publications: *Diário de Lisboa*<sup>19</sup> (08/02/1923, p. 2), *ABC – Revista Portuguesa*<sup>20</sup> (15/02/1923, pp. 12–13), *A Vanguarda* (17/02/1923, p. 1), and *Ilustração Portuguesa*<sup>21</sup> (10/03/1923, pp. 303–6, and 19/01/1924, pp. 79–80).

The oldest of these texts was written by Gomes Monteiro (1893–1950), a journalist, writer, essayist and editor of newspapers and magazines,<sup>22</sup> whose interest in ancient Egypt is clear in this article, divided into three parts. In the first part, expressing his appreciation for the archaeological findings and for the labour of the English researchers, he writes:

Egypt – the blessed land where Art rehearsed the first dance steps of its adolescence; [...] is still today a sphinx-like sarcophagus of mysteries that, day after day, are being unveiled, thanks to the persistent excavations. Our English allies, who always persevere in their enterprises, continue to tear the bowels of the Egyptian land, with the sole interest of probing the still unknown beauty of Ancient Art, thus giving a great benefit to the constitution of the history of that country whose origin is lost in the night of time. Heading those excavations, which have been going on for seventeen years, is Lord Carnarvon and his associate and friend Mr. Howard Carter, who has spent there a large part of his wealth. It should be noted that no object found there leaves Egypt; they are kept in the Great Museum of Cairo and belong to the country.<sup>23</sup>

If the first part of the text focuses on the beauty of ancient Egyptian Art, the second part aims mainly to enumerate, for the reader's enjoyment, the magnificent objects (furniture, chairs, chariots, beds, bracelets, necklaces, earrings, batons, etc.) found by Carter and Carnarvon in the tomb, in the Valley of the Kings. The third and last part, in which Monteiro emphasizes that the discoveries made up to then had happened "only in the antechamber of the tomb", aims, essentially, to excite the public and hold their attention for the continuation of the excavation works:

What is still there? What new surprises are there for the happy researchers? What new evidence of the ancient spirit of Art, always young and beautiful, will still surface, documenting the already existent, and now almost forgotten, perfection of the work of man?<sup>24</sup>

Gomes Monteiro wrote an informative and appreciative text about the great discovery of November 1922, intended to tantalize his readers with the beautiful objects produced by the ancient Egyptians that Archaeology had now brought to light. The Egyptian artistic riches are more valued for their civilizational dimension rather than for their material worth. The article is illustrated with a photograph (a view of the pyramid of Khafre and the Great Sphinx with only its head above ground level) and an illustration (a representation of the pharaoh Ramses II in his war chariot),<sup>25</sup> without captions and bearing no relation to the text. The *ABC* magazine news item is also accompanied by two photographs that depict the excavation works on the tomb. Besides listing many of the extraordinary pieces already discovered (statues, batons, safes, mantles, beds, thrones, vases, furniture), the article praises the objects' archaeological and artistic value:

The discoveries of Lord Carnarvon, in the southern region of the pharaonic Thebes, have sparked the interest of the educated world like no other archaeological work. They are quite sensational and their archaeological and artistic value surpasses the domain of the real to reach the essence of fabulous things. Relics of ancient art that have slept for an astonishingly long period of four thousand years now unmistakably depict the apogee of remote civilizations in comparison with which our present society has descended into dreadful decadence that the progress of electricity surrounds with fantastic auras. The discoveries of Lord Carnarvon are superior to the famous archaeological works of Champollion, Maspero, Loret, Morgrand and Davis.<sup>26</sup>

One notes a positive discourse in which, by virtue of its art, the Egyptian East and its civilization are highly praised, in contrast with the “dreadful decadence” that characterizes contemporary civilization.

“The discoveries of Lord Carnarvon. The artistic riches of the Egyptian necropolis”<sup>27</sup> – this is the title of the news item in *A Vanguarda* (17/02/1923, p. 1). Mentioning that in ancient Egypt the kings and great dignitaries were buried with their treasures, what is most significant is the last paragraph, namely the enormous value of the archaeological and artistic heritage brought to light by the efforts of Lord Carnarvon: “It is impossible to assess the artistic and archaeological value of the treasures discovered by lord Carnarvon.”<sup>28</sup> From all the selected articles that focus on the Egyptian artistic riches, this is the only one that does not include any illustration.

As might be expected, the two issues of *Ilustração Portuguesa* have various photographs of objects and excavations: in the issue from 1923 there are thirteen photographs of the artefacts piled up in the antechamber; the 1924 issue has fewer photographs, only seven. In respect of the relationship between text and illustration, we can point out that in the 1924 article, the photographs are the main feature, and the actual text “illustrates” those photos. Regarding the treasures that have been found, the article states:

Exceeding the wildest imagination a spectacle was offered to the English archaeologists, as they penetrated the many tomb chambers, reaching [...] the greatest of wonders, the treasures found within the tomb chamber.<sup>29</sup>

The issue of 1923, in its turn, described the “fascination” caused by the discoveries:

Precious gold objects and stones, pottery, fine furniture, in short an immense collection of things, not only of an astounding richness, but also revealing an artistic perfection that was not thought to exist in such remote epochs. And not only in the first room, but also in others, which we anticipate will also reveal new and greater wonders, since the body of Tutankhamun has not yet been found.<sup>30</sup>

In comparison with other stories about the tomb's artistic riches, the great virtue of the two numbers of the *Ilustração Portuguesa* is that they provide an opportunity to observe images of the numerous pieces of Tutankhamun's treasure at first hand, effectively giving Portuguese readers a direct view of the quantity and beauty of those pieces.

### Fear the past

The principal news theme, especially following 5 April 1923, the date of Lord Carnarvon's death, was "the revenge of the mummy" or "the revenge of Tutankhamun"<sup>31</sup> – the third category of news. The 5th Earl of Carnarvon, George Edward Stanhope Molyneux Herbert, the sponsor of the archaeological expedition that led to the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun, was born on 26 June 1866 and died at the age of 56, only 6 weeks after the official opening of the funerary chamber (16–17 February), from septicaemia caused by an infected mosquito bite. The unfortunate demise of George Edward was not rare in Egypt,<sup>32</sup> but the international press, anxious to appeal to the interests of the public, hastened to interpret the Earl's death as proof of the curse of the pharaoh that punishes those who dare to disturb his eternal rest. This topic, a guaranteed success among the public, is equally taken up by the Portuguese press, as we can see in *A Capital* (05/04/1923, p. 1; 10/04/1923, p. 2; and 11/02/1924, p. 1), *A Tarde*<sup>33</sup> (16/02/1924, p. 1), *A Tribuna* (05/04/1923, p. 1, and 04/03/1924, p. 1), *Diário de Lisboa* (09/04/1923, p. 7), *Diário de Notícias*<sup>34</sup> (07/04/1923, p. 1), *O Comércio do Porto* (19/02/1924, p. 1), and *O Comércio do Porto – Edição da tarde*<sup>35</sup> (16/04/1923, p. 1, and 19/02/1924, p. 2).

The chosen titles for this news item are particularly revealing of the Orientalist strategy in question: to fix, in a sensationalist fashion, the attention of the public on the magical powers supposedly associated with the ancient Egyptian religion and its pharaohs. Expressions such as "mystery", "secret", "threat", "magic", "death", "revenge", "violators" are judiciously used under an innocuous and informative appearance, and conveying value judgements and, thus, biasing *ab initio* the reading and perception of the news.

The titles and narrative trajectory of the news stem from a preconceived, imaginary Egyptian Near East which, through journalism, gains even greater traction among the readers. This is an ancient Egypt in which primitive religiosity is infested with cunning malevolence that allows it, through the “mysteries of black magic”, to traverse time and punish inexorably those who dare to interfere with the most profound dimension of the ancient Egyptian religion: the death and eternal repose of the sovereign. It does not matter if we are talking about mere workers, accredited archaeologists or great magnates, the revenge of the pharaoh is ruthless and infallible.

This idea of the infallibility of the mummy’s curse appears in every article in this category. *A Capital* (05/04/1923) reproduces a telegram from Cairo bearing news of the death of Lord Carnarvon,<sup>36</sup> which it ascribes to the supposed curses inscribed in the interior of the tomb. The pride of the “*stubborn and nonbeliever*” “archaeologist” who dared to violate the secrets of the death of the Egyptian pharaoh brought about the fulfilment of the mummy’s threat.

Alluding to the “extraordinary commentaries” about the death of Lord Carnarvon, the article of the first page of *A Tribuna*, also dating from 5 April 1923, admits no doubts: it was the “mysterious revenge of Tutankhamun who profane hands awoke from the sleep in which he had lain for so many centuries.”<sup>37</sup> For *A Tribuna*, the magic formulas of the curse were not inscribed in the interior of the tomb, but on a very old papyrus. The agent of the pharaonic curse would have been a “viper” or, as is suggested further on, “a mosquito”. It is curious that a curse of immeasurable power might employ a tiny insect to consummate Tutankhamun’s vengeance.

This idea of the mosquito that “inoculates the deadly poison” appears again on the first page on 7 April in *Diário de Notícias*. The “dense mystery” of the disease and death of Lord Carnarvon is, ultimately, tremendously simple: the disregard of the pharaoh’s prescription “Do not dare to violate the secret of my death!” inscribed in the funerary chambers of the great Egyptian king. The violator’s destiny was sealed, and the outcome inevitable and infallible:

To disturb the rest of this king who lived between heaven and earth, representing one of the greatest civilizations of the world, and who slept peacefully and ignored in the midst of his treasures for three thousand years . . . was to conjure a death sentence. [. . .] The revenge [. . .] would be terrible! [. . .] It was the fatality pursuing the sacrilege of the Valley of the Kings! [. . .] The prophecy had been materialized. ‘Do not dare to violate the secret of my death!’ The threat will fall inexorably upon the indefatigable explorer. The Black Magic of

ancient Egypt [...] had its effects. The Pharaoh's revenge! The punishment of Amon! . . .<sup>38</sup>

On the first page of *A Capital*, from 11 February 1924 (which reproduces, in Portuguese, an article from the French newspaper *Le Matin*, from the 4th of the same month),<sup>39</sup> the sensationalistic feel remains, even though almost a year had passed since the death of Lord Carnarvon. Many other deaths are listed that have allegedly resulted from the same disregard for the supernatural potency of ancient Egypt: “Woolf Joel, George Jay-Gould, sir Archibald Douglas.”<sup>40</sup> Journalists' regular reports sustained the idea of the magical malevolence of ancient Egypt and spread it among the thousands of readers of the national press. “The revenge of Tutankhamun” continued to pervade the modern sensibilities.

Five days later, on 16 February 1924 in *A Tarde*, and eight days later, on 19 February in *O Comércio do Porto – Edição da tarde*, the “mysteries of Egypt” returned. Now, the closing of the tomb of Tutankhamun, in the Valley of the Kings, “by imposition of the Egyptians”, was perceived as another manifestation of the prophecy, the proof of the revenge of the pharaoh upon all who cross in his path.<sup>41</sup> The closure of the tomb and the end of the excavation works are reported as “the last act” of the pharaonic revenge, foreseen since the end of 1922:

But from the Egyptian soul there already emanated a strong hatred that was growing over the heads of the violators – hatred that was forged telepathically, forming a common desire for revenge against Carter and Carnarvon.

The pharaoh will avenge himself! – said the Egyptian newspapers, the English newspapers, and all the whole Egyptian population.<sup>42</sup>

The diseases, the successive deaths, and the closing of the tomb were events that irrefutably attested the revenge of the pharaoh, as it is shown in this article: “Tutankhamun was avenged. And the Egyptian people satisfied, still worshipped its glorious past [...]”<sup>43</sup>

There seems to be a sense that justice is fulfilled by Tutankhamun's actions, according to *O Comércio do Porto* (19/02/1924). Publishing an adapted news item from *Le Matin*, from 4 and 5 February, with two photographs (“The coronation throne” of Tutankhamun and two statues of the *ka*, close to the opened entrance of the antechamber of the funerary chamber),<sup>44</sup> the Oporto newspaper gives a summary of the “wonderful discoveries in the Valley of the Kings” that caused “the admiration and astonishment of all of those who could contemplate

them”, but then the news focuses on the punishment inflicted upon the violators. This article, and also the one in *A Capital* from 11 February, presents a list of victims:

The first to pay with his own life for the sacrilege was Lord Carnarvon. The list is already very long. Let us just consider the American billionaire George-Gould, the wealthy Londoner Wolf Joel, the great English radiologist Sir Archibald Douglas Reid, the Canadian scholar Lalleur . . .<sup>45</sup>

The pharaoh thus brought down a powerful revenge upon those responsible for the profanation and did so in a justified, comprehensible and fair way. Archaeology, as a scientific task of discovery and understanding of the past, is clearly derided in this interpretation of reality.

Nobody should, then, dispute the righteousness of the pharaonic revenge. On 4 March 1924, the newspaper *A Tribuna* returns to, and feeds, “the belief in the vengeful way of the infamous pharaoh dead three thousand years ago”. Besides Carnarvon, who paid with his own life, Howard Carter also suffers as a result of “his audacity in interfering with Tutankhamun”; he faces the paralyzation of his work and the decision to close the tomb by the Egyptian government. The archaeological press is likewise cursed, as is the ordinary public; even tourists are not safe. To support its claims, the newspaper lists various mysterious maladies that suddenly struck visitors of the tomb (lost limbs and organs, lost fortunes and assets, lost fiancés).

Portuguese newspapers of the era popularized the sensational idea that a curse had struck down Lord Carnarvon along with a plethora of other intellectuals, journalists, and visitors. Curiously, Howard Carter, the finder of the tomb – the person who, more than anybody, dared to disturb and challenge Tutankhamun – lived another seventeen years, ten of which he spent working on the tomb, and died in 1939, at the age of 65.

In April 1923 and February–March 1924, the Portuguese press transmits, mainly, a discourse centred on the mystery and the magic that makes the pharaonic Near East a dangerous, enigmatic and magical place, with curses and enchantments that one must respect and fear, although it is the result of a terrible and atavistic civilizational backwardness. In this representation of the Portuguese press, which is available to numerous readers, the Egypt is, above all, a terrible land of magic and eternal curses.

A curious article published on 9 April 1923 in *Diário de Lisboa* (p. 7), and later on 16 April 1923 in *O Comércio do Porto – Edição da*

*tarde* (p. 1), presents the inexplicable death of Lord Carnarvon as “an interesting struggle between superstition and science”.<sup>46</sup> It initially questions the superstitious perspective associated with the Egyptian ancient East, but ultimately cannot escape the theme of the revenge of the mummy. Taken from two articles published on 6 April by the French newspaper *Le Matin* (pp. 1 and 3),<sup>47</sup> it claims that the ancient Egyptians believed in the action of the “divine fury of the father Amon.” The English novelist Marie Corelli (whose real name was Mary Mackay) and the famous Scottish writer Conan Doyle (the creator of the character Sherlock Holmes in 1887) are quoted as an “argument from authority”, as they also believed and assured that the supernatural forces that existed inside the tombs of the Egyptian kings would always fall terribly upon those who broke the seals of the sarcophagus (Gómez Espelosín and Pérez Largacha 1997: 184–5). Lord Carnarvon defied Tutankhamun’s protective entities and died because of it, not from any disease or natural causes. It was suggested to the public that curse was real, and that Egypt was surely a land of “spiritual things” and powerful superstitions.

The text that perhaps does a better job of challenging, among the mass public, the theory of the curse is the one published on the second page of *A Capital*, on 10 April 1923. This is a text translated from the French newspaper *Le Matin* from two days before, in which the reader is confronted with a series of intertwined arguments, given by famous French occultists, theosophists, spiritualists, and Egyptologists. The title of the article is particularly elucidatory:

THE DEATH OF LORD CARNARVON. Could the Pharaoh have avenged himself?  
 – Certainly, say the occultists;  
 – How can we know that? Theosophists declare;  
 – Impossible, the spiritualists protest;  
 – Infantile, say the Egyptologists.<sup>48</sup>

Ultimately, the text seeks to establish a universal respect for the pharaoh’s curse, in accordance with occultist theories. It challenges the arguments of the eminent French specialists convened, who were certainly unknown to the vast majority of Portuguese readers, to determine the reasons for the death of Lord Carnarvon:

[I]t is not impossible that it [the death] had been determined beyond the centuries by a magical action triggered by the collective will of the sacerdotal college who performed the enchantments for the funerals.<sup>49</sup>

The revenge of the pharaoh was, after all, the revenge of the priests from ancient Egypt. It was they who, with “enchantments practised [...] in the graves, before they were closed for eternity”, set in motion, in the distant past, the death of Lord Carnarvon on 5 April 1923.

Even though other arguments were considered, rejecting the idea that Tutankhamun had avenged himself after his death, the idea of a curse prevailed, insisting upon a fearful interpretation and explanation of the Egyptian past.

### Conclusion

The focus of Portuguese scholarship on Orientalism is mainly on Asia, especially on Far Eastern countries. However, in Portugal, the Near East, for example Egypt and its ancient civilization, captured everyone’s attention because of the otherness it implied. A significant example of that is the attention that the national press gave to the discovery of the tomb of pharaoh Tutankhamun, on 4 November 1922, by Howard Carter and his sponsor Lord Carnarvon, and all the facts that came to light as a result, especially during 1923 and 1924.

With the almost daily publication of news, the Portuguese press was a powerful agent in magnifying the mystery and the fascination that the ancient Egyptian civilization held for Portuguese readers. At the same time, it helped transform the pharaonic Egypt into a closer, more concrete reality, though never losing its subjective and mythical side.

The Orientalist discourse of the 1920s promoted by the Portuguese press, in its own right, copied from or inspired by their European counterparts, depended on what lay directly behind it (the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun) and what it intended to address and highlight (the many topics supposedly associated with the orientalist imaginary centred in ancient Egypt): (i) the Egyptian archaeological discovery’s big contribution to the understanding of the comparative history of the ancient world; (ii) the luxury, beauty, artistic and material wealth in which the Egyptian world was immersed in ancient times, in general, and in the era of Tutankhamun, in particular; and (iii) the curse of the mummy that, by tenebrous magical arts, struck those who profaned the tomb of the valley of the Kings.

By dealing with the ancient Egyptian East, and by trying to understand it through the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun, the Portuguese press constructed and/or reproduced a discourse and a manifold, hybrid and contradictory representation of the East where side-by-side there coexisted a “positive” description and a “negative” view, with specific roles and significances, i.e., a message with traces

of latent and manifest Orientalism, to use Edward Said's terminology (2003: 205–7, 221–2).

In the representation of the texts and images of the Portuguese press from 1923–24, the Egypt of the “curse of the pharaohs” is a Romanesque, fictional universe, of wild, credulous, and superstitious beings, and of extraordinary spiritual experiences. The Egypt of the “artistic treasures”, associated with an historical time of splendour and greatness, and the Egypt of potential contributions to a clearer understanding of ancient history is a map and a chronology of positivity that is notably superior when compared to the contemporaneous view.

The fascination with the pre-classical East, at times excessive and hasty (especially the one that interests us the most, the Egyptian civilization), also expressed in Portuguese journalism at the beginning of the twentieth century, is, in our opinion, a driver for interpretation, and cultural and intellectual production of the East, in which we can see the elements originating from the Judeo-Christian tradition, of an exotic, mysterious, problematic and dangerous perspective associated with ancient cultures but filled with a genuine interest, though sometimes harmful, in knowing thoroughly ancient Egypt.

We are, indeed, in the domain of representations and not the “natural” or “pure” descriptions of the Middle East, in which we are not concerned with the accuracy of the representation or its fidelity (Said 2003: 21). We are more concerned with the fact that the Portuguese press, with greater or lesser drama, made the ancient Egyptian East present.

#### Notes

- 1 Originally in Portuguese: *Tutankhamon em Portugal. Relatos na imprensa portuguesa (1922–39)*. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Portuguese sources are ours.
- 2 As an eloquent testimony to this historiographic preference, see also Ana Maria Rodrigues (coord.). 1999. *O Orientalismo em Portugal: séculos XVI–XX*. Lisbon: INAPA, a work that resulted from the *Ciclo de Exposições “Memórias do Oriente”*, promoted by the Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses [National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries], which has various essays linked to the different centres of the exhibition.
- 3 In this context, what we understand as Orientalism focused on the ancient Middle East is the study of representations, imitations and mystifications, namely those produced in the literary narratives about ancient pre-classical civilizations.

- 4 In Portuguese: “[E]ssa terra maravilhosa de templos, pirâmides, múmias e papiros.”
- 5 At this time, “archaeological” actions varied from antiquarianism and the outright plunder of antiquities to an uncompromising defence of ancient Egyptian patrimony. In this context, it is fair to highlight the incomparable role of François-Auguste-Ferdinand Mariette (1821–81), the founder of the Egyptian Museum in Bulak, Cairo. He is considered by many to have been the first patron of Egyptians’ cultural roots (Carreira 1992: 27, 28; Sales 1992: 88–90, 92–95; Sales 2007: 73–6).
- 6 We say “supposedly” because the tomb had not been entered by modern archaeologists before 1922, but had been violated twice in ancient times – on the first occasion, shortly after the funeral of the king and, very likely, by those who had created or provisioned the tomb. The robberies were discovered, and the entrance hall was filled with debris to prevent future illicit access – but this did not prevent a second raid soon afterwards. This time, the invaders were less fortunate. They were caught during the assault with some of their spoils, which were later found by Carter still wrapped and ready to be transported out of the tomb. The robbers’ fate was terrible: mutilation and impalement upon sharp posts. This brutal punishment worked; there were no more attempts to enter the tomb. As the heretic pharaohs of Amarna passed into oblivion during the Ramesside period and as, years later, workmen’s warehouses and shelters were built atop the site, the tomb of Tutankhamun was completely forgotten (Reeves 1997: 163).
- 7 *A Tribuna*, with the subheading *Diário republicano da manhã* [The Republican Daily Morning Newspaper], was published between 1920 and 1926, in Portugal (Lemos 2006: 594–96).
- 8 In Portuguese: “Nestes últimos tempos a curiosidade e a atenção de todo o mundo foram despertadas pelas descobertas realizadas por Lord Carnarvon no tumulto do faraó Tout-Ankh-Amon, lendo-se com avidez tudo o que a elas se referia, ainda os mais insignificantes pormenores.”
- 9 A newspaper with republican and socialist tendencies, published between 1912 and 1929 (Lemos 2006: 606–10).
- 10 In Portuguese: “O pharaó Tut-Anh-Amen, morto há mais de trez mil anos, é bem o soberano que faz actualmente mais ruído em todo o mundo.”
- 11 *A Capital* was an evening newspaper, republican by nature (its subheading was *Diário republicano da noite* [The Republican Daily Evening Paper]), and it was published between 1910 and 1938. It took pride in being the “Jornal do Povo, pelo Povo e para o Povo” [Newspaper of the People, for the People and to the People] (Lemos 2006: 158, 159).
- 12 Similar news appears in *O Comércio do Porto – Edição da tarde*, on 2 February 1923, page 1, and in *Correio da Manhã*, on 5 February 1923, pages 1 and 2.
- 13 In Portuguese: “As escavações de Langson. Toda a história do Egipto vae ser revelada. Os livros santos perante a realidade.” “Langson” is here a

- misreading of “Luxor”, where the archaeological excavations were taking place.
- 14 The translator/editor acknowledges his sources by saying explicitly: “Parece que o tumulo do pharaó Tut-auh-Ameu, escreve o ‘Excelsior’, descoberto perto de Thébas, reserva sensacionais surpresas aos arqueologos” [It seems that the tomb of pharaoh Tutankhamun, writes the *Excelsior*, discovered near Thebes, holds sensational surprises for the archaeologists].
  - 15 Short news quotes are included throughout the text (in italics and in quotation marks). They have been translated literally into English. These translations respect the characteristics of the original text as regards, for example, the use of uppercase/lowercase letters, or the way in which the name of the pharaoh Tutankhamun was spelled.
  - 16 In Portuguese: “Tudo leva a crêr que Tut-auh-Amon fosse aquele pharaó de que a Escritura diz que ‘não conheceu José’ e que oprimiu os israelitas.” The Bible mentions three pharaohs: the pharaoh who knew Joseph, chapters 41 and 50 of *Genesis*, and for whom Joseph become vizier; the pharaoh that “did not know Joseph”, who had all the new born male Hebrews killed and who oppressed the Israelites and refused to authorize their exit from Egypt (*Exodus* 1, 8–22; 2, 23–5; 7, 15; 8, 11, 28; 9, 12, 35; 10, 20; 11, 10); and the pharaoh of the liberation – the one who interacted with Moses – mentioned, for example, in *Exodus* 4, 19, 21; 13, 17–22 (Sales 2008: 72–6). The Portuguese press, following the French press, suggested that Tutankhamun was the pharaoh of oppression, which, even in the midst of a republican society somewhat distant from the Catholic precepts, can be seen as a negative judgement of the Egyptian pharaoh and a defence of the captive Hebrews.
  - 17 In 1935, Arthur Weigall reiterated these same opinions in his history of ancient Egypt (Weigall 1968: 146, 147). It should be said that Weigall covered the opening of the tomb of Tutankhamun as a correspondent for the *Daily Mail*, in direct opposition to Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon who, with the exclusivity contract signed on 9 January 1923, favoured *The Times* to announce their findings to the entire world (Hankey 2001: 259–74).
  - 18 In Portuguese: “Os papyros selados que vão ser decifrados revelaranos-hão talvez se esses escravos foram os filhos de Israel e o pharaó aquele cuja morte é relatada no primeiro capítulo do Exodo.”
  - 19 *Diário de Lisboa* was an evening newspaper published in Portugal between 1921 and 1990 (Lemos 2006: 256–7).
  - 20 This was a generalist weekly magazine dealing with current topics, abundantly illustrated with photographs, published in Portugal between 1920 and 1932. Among its contributors were many artists that belonged to the first two generations of Portuguese modernists, such as Jorge Barradas, Stuart Carvalhais, Emmerico Nunes, Roberto Nobre, Bernardo Marques and Mily Possoz.
  - 21 Although dating from the period between 1903 and 1990, *Ilustração Portuguesa* published only a few issues after 1931, so it can be consid-

ered a magazine from the 1920s, when it was a weekly magazine. As its title suggests, the image was what prevailed, that is, the use of illustration, drawing and photography to describe every aspect of contemporary Portuguese life, but it also paid attention to current and relevant international topics.

- 22 Joaquim Gomes Monteiro (05/06/1893–08/12/1950), his full name, was born in Boticas, in the North of Portugal. At the age of 19, he left for Oporto to study and started working in journalism. In Lisbon, he worked for newspapers such as *O Século* and *Diário de Notícias*. He wrote many works about history, historical-literary studies, political essays, biographies, and even poetry. Examples of his published works include: *As Mulheres que Amaram Jesus* (1932), *A Freira que Morreu de Amor (Soror Maria da Misericórdia)* (1932), *Vieira de Castro e a sua Tragédia* (1932), *A Inocência de Urbino de Freitas* (1933), *A Dama do Seio Mutilado* (1934), *Bocage esse Desconhecido* (1941), *Anti-Livro de S. Cipriano* (1941), *Vencidos da Vida: relance literário e político da segunda metade do século XIX* (1944), and *Feras no Povoado: memórias dum guerrilheiro cabralista* (1947; revised edition 2007).
- 23 In Portuguese: “O Egipto – a terra abençoada onde a Arte ensaiou os primeiros bailados da sua adelescência; [...] é, ainda hoje, um sarcófago esfingíaco de mistérios que, dia a dia, vão sendo desvendados, graças às escavações persistentes, ali realizadas. Os nossos aliados ingleses, sempre perseverantes nas suas empresas, continuam rasgando as entranhas da terra egípcia, no único interesse de sondar as belezas ainda desconhecidas da Arte Antiga, prestando assim um alto benefício á constituição da historia desse país, cuja origem se perde na noite dos tempos. Á frente dessas escavações, que duram ha dezassete anos, encontram-se Lord Carnarvon e o seu colaborador e amigo Mr. Howard Carter, que ali tem dispendido grande parte da sua fortuna. É bom notar que quaisquer objectos encontrados não saem do Egipto; são guardados no Grande Museu do Cairo e ficam sendo pertença do Estado.”
- 24 In Portuguese: “O que haverá ainda? Que novas surpresas estarão reservadas aos felizes investigadores? Que novas provas do antiquissimo espirito da Arte, sempre moça e sempre bela, surgirão ainda, documentando a já existente e agora quasi desconhecida perfeição da obra humana?”
- 25 This scene of the grand return of Ramses II from the battle of Kadesh is in the first hypostyle room, south wall, inferior registry, of the Great Temple of Abu Simbel.
- 26 In Portuguese: “As descobertas de lord Carnarvon, na extremidade meridional da Thebas pharaonica, estão interessando como nenhum outro trabalho arqueologico, as atenções do mundo culto. Elas são na verdade sensacionais, e o seu valor arqueologico e artistico ultrapassa os dominios do real, para atingir a essencia das coisas fabulosas. Reliquias da arte antiga, adormecidas durante um periodo entontecedor de perto de quatro mil anos patenteiam agora duma forma iniludivel, o apogeu das remotas civilizações as quais, civilização dos nossos dias, é uma pavorosa deca-

- dencia que os progressos da electricidade enchem as auréolas fantasiosas. As descobertas de lord Carnarvon são superiores aos famosos trabalhos arqueologicos de Champollion, Maspéro, Loret, Morgand e Davis.”
- 27 In Portuguese: “As descobertas de Lord Carnarvon. As riquezas artísticas das necrópoles egípcias.”
- 28 In Portuguese: “É impossível avaliar o valor artistico e arqueologico dos tesouros descobertos por lord Carnarvon.”
- 29 In Portuguese: “Excede tudo quanto possa fantasiar-se de mais extraordinário o espetaculo que se foi oferecendo, aos arqueologos ingleses, ao par e passo que iam penetrando nas diversas divisões do hipogeu, attingindo [...] proporções de verdadeira maravilha as preciosidades encontradas na camara tumular propriamente dita.”
- 30 In Portuguese: “Preciosissimos objectos de ouro e pedrarias, faianças, moveis de arte, uma mare magnum, emfim, de coisas, não só de uma riqueza estupefaciente, como reveladoras de uma perfeição artistica que estava longe de se supor em artifices de tão remotas épocas. E não só na primeira sala, como numa outra, prevendo-se que outras ainda revelarão novas e maiores maravilhas, pois propriamente o corpo de Tout-Ankh-Amon, ainda não foi encontrado.”
- 31 On this topic see, for example: Frayling (1992), Day (2006), Lupton (2009), and Luckhurst (2013).
- 32 Francesco Ballerini (1877–1910), for example, the first assistant of the Italian archaeologist and Egyptologist Ernesto Schiaparelli (1856–1928) responsible, among other things, for the discovery of the tomb of the queen Nefertari (QV 66) in 1904, and for the excavation of the also intact tomb of the royal architect Kha (TT8) in Deir el Medina in 1906, died in the same way on 5 May 1910 (Reeves 2000: 165).
- 33 The newspaper *A Tarde* was published between 1923 and 1927 (Lemos 2006: 582–3).
- 34 *Diário de Notícias* is published in Portugal since 1864. From 29 December 1921 onwards, the newspaper started to publish an evening edition and was the first Portuguese newspaper, on 1 January 1925, to open a branch overseas, in this case, in Paris (Lemos 2006: 260–3).
- 35 *O Comércio do Porto* started publishing on 2 June 1854 until 2005 (the last printed edition was on 30 July). Historically, it started as *O Comércio* and it was only on 2 January 1856 that it changed to *O Comércio do Porto* (Lemos 2006: 170–2).
- 36 This telegram was also reproduced by other Portuguese newspapers that same day (*O Dia*), or the day after (*República. I Série* and *A Pátria*).
- 37 In Portuguese: “[V]ingança misteriosa de Tout-Ankh-Amon, que mãos profanas foram despertar do sono em que jazia há tantos séculos.”
- 38 In Portuguese: “Perturbar o repouso desse rei que viveu entre o céu e a terra, representando uma das maiores civilizações do mundo, e que ha três mil anos dormia tranquilo e ignorado no meio dos seus tesouros [...], era lavar uma sentença de morte. [...] A vingança [...] seria terrivel! [...]. Era a fatalidade a perseguir o sacrilégio do Vale dos Reis! [...] Consumara-se a profecia. ‘Não ouse violar o segredo da minha morte!’

A ameaça caíra inexorável sobre o infatigável explorador. A Magia Negra do antigo Egipto [...] surtiu os seus efeitos. A vingança do faraó! O castigo de Amon! . . .”

- 39 This news is similar to the other news published around fifteen days later, on 28 February by the *O Comércio do Porto – Edição da tarde*, p. 1.
- 40 Woolf Joel was an English industrialist who visited the tomb and returned to England by boat. He died on 13 November 1923 of fever fits; George Jay Gould was a visitor of the tomb of Tutankhamun who died in the French Riviera on 16 May 1923, after developing a fever following his visit to the tomb; Sir Archibald Douglas-Reid, the radiologist who x-rayed the mummy of Tutankhamun, died on 15 January 1924 of a mysterious disease.
- 41 According to the Portuguese press (for example, *A Capital* – 19/02/1924), the closing of the tomb by the Egyptian authorities had been a response to Howard Carter’s “property abuses” in the face of the *Times* newspaper’s exclusivity in a genuine news monopoly, which greatly displeased the newly empowered Egyptian government. The closing of the tomb by Saad Zaghloul Pacha’s government would therefore have been a way of preventing Carter from keeping Egyptian journalists away and controlling the spread of news about his investigations. At the same time, the local government was claiming the right to grant journalists and tourists permission to visit the tomb. Carter’s resentment and the corresponding refusal to continue work on the tomb and to accept the conditions of the Egyptian government, having himself closed the grave on his own initiative and threatening to seek damages in court, fostered Egyptian nationalist sentiment and it was a pretext for some demonstrations against England. The political aspect of the dispute is well expressed in a sentence taken from a news item from *A Tribuna* (26/02/1924, p. 1): “Indubitavelmente, o mais forte é o govêrno egipcio, pelo menos desde que as tropas inglesas se retiraram do País dos Faraós” [Undoubtedly, the strongest is the Egyptian government, at least since English troops withdrew from the country of the Pharaoh].
- 42 In Portuguese: “Mas da alma egípcia exilava-se já uma corrente forte de ódio que se ia adensando sobre a cabeça dos profanadores – ódio que se ia tecendo telepaticamente, formando um desejo comum de vingança contra Carter e Carnarvon.//O faraó vingar-se-há! – diziam os jornais egípcios, os proprios jornais ingleses, dizia-o toda a população do Egipto.”
- 43 In Portuguese: “Trut-ank-Amen estava vingado. E o povo egípcio, satisfeito, venerando ainda o seu passado glorioso [...]”
- 44 These artefacts are now in exhibition in the Egyptian Museum of Cairo, with the entry numbers JE 62028, JE 60707 and JE 60708, respectively.
- 45 In Portuguese: “O primeiro que pagou com a vida o sacrilégio foi lord Carnarvon. A lista é já muito extensa. Lembremos sómente o bilionario americano Jorge-Gould, o riquissimo londrino Wolf Joel, o grande radiographo inglez sir Archibald Douglas Reid, o sabio canadense Lalleur . . .”
- 46 In Portuguese: “Uma luta interessante entre a superstição e a sciencia.”

- 47 It is reasonable to assume the following chronological sequence: the original publication in France in *Le Matin* (6 April), composition and translation into Portuguese by *Diário de Lisboa* (9 April 1923), and complete reproduction in Portuguese in *Comércio do Porto – Edição da tarde* (16 April 1923).
- 48 In Portuguese: “A MORTE DE LORD CARNARVON. O PHARAÓ ter-se-hia vingado? – Certamente, dizem os ocultistas//– Como sabe-lo? Declaram os téosofos//– Impossível, protestam os espiritas//– Infantilidade, afirmam os egiptólogos.”
- 49 In Portuguese: “[N]ão é nenhum impossível que ela [a morte] tivesse sido determinada para lá dos séculos por uma acção magica desencadeada pela vontade colectiva do colégio sacerdotal que procedeu aos encantamentos por ocasião dos funerais.”

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