

**Report of August Meeting
Royal Society
Southern Highlands Branch**

Speaker: Dr Michael Birrell

Topic: Tutankhamun: The Dead Do Tell Tales.

The Southern Highlands Branch meeting of 19 August 2010 was held at 6.30pm in the Drama Theatre, Frensham School, Mittagong. A 60-strong audience started arriving at 6pm on a crisp winter's evening.

Michael Birrell gave a fascinating presentation on the life and times of Tutankhamun, who ruled Egypt during the 18th Dynasty (around 1330-20 BC), coming to the throne as a child and famously dying young at the age of about 19. It was Howard Carter who discovered Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922, an event which received worldwide coverage. It awakened a renewed level of public interest in the boy-king, and in particular, in the nature and cause of his early death which has often been attributed to murder.

The king's death more than 3000 years ago has remained the subject of dispute among historians up to the present day. Theories that he was assassinated stemmed from the fact that he was the last ruler of his dynasty. It was not until February 2010 that compelling evidence based on DNA studies became available. Michael Birrell's presentation was largely based on these studies, on X-ray data and on CT scan results. The conclusions to be drawn from this data give compelling insights into this period of early Egypt.

When British archaeologist Howard Carter and his team examined Tutankhamun's mummified remains in the early 1920s, they found that the jewelry and adornments on the body had been stuck fast by the hardened embalming fluids used. The arms and legs were detached, the torso was cut in half and the head was severed. Hot knives enabled the head to be removed from the solid gold death mask. Intriguingly, Tutankhamun's tomb also contained two tiny fetuses, the identification of which has only now been made possible by the recent DNA testing.

Analysis of all available data now seems to point to the fact that Tutankhamun was not assassinated. Although scientists discovered a small, loose sliver of bone within the upper cranial cavity, it appears likely its presence was due, not to a blow to the head as many have surmised, but rather to the mummification process itself, when sticks were used to macerate the brain before its removal through the nose. The finding of a fractured leg is now considered very significant as a contributing cause of death. It is thought not to

have resulted from the mummification process, but rather from a fall from some height, such as a fall from a chariot. DNA tests have revealed that the king was also infected with Plasmodium Falciparum, a form of malaria, and that he suffered from numerous congenital conditions. It seems likely that the combination of the fall from a chariot and the onset of malaria brought about the death of the king.

As for the identification of the fetuses found in the tomb, it is clear that they were the offspring of Tutankhamun. The finding that these fetuses spontaneously aborted due to genetic factors seems quite consistent with the data.

This lecture was clearly appreciated by the audience, who put a wide array of questions to Dr Birrell. The vote of thanks was given by Anne Wood.

Anne Wood