

Source A

Source A is an extract from a book written in 1923 by the British archaeologist, Howard Carter. Here, he describes his discovery of the tomb of the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh, Tutankhamun.

- 1 This was to be our final season looking for tombs in The Valley of the Kings. At last, we made a discovery that far exceeded our wildest dreams. When I arrived on site, I was told that a step had been discovered, and a short amount of extra clearing revealed the entrance of a stairway cut into the rock. We all worked feverishly throughout the day to finish clearing away masses of
5 rubbish on the stairway until it was beyond any question that, at last, we had before us the entrance to a tomb – but worries persisted in creeping in. There was always the horrible
7 possibility that it had been completely plundered in ancient or recent times.

Just such a robbery had happened in the previous year. News had come in that a party of tomb-robbers had armed themselves and made their way to a lonely region on the other side of
10 the mountain. The local village leaders came to me and asked me to take action. I hastily collected a few of my workmen and set out. It was midnight when we arrived, and the guide pointed out to me the end of a rope which dangled sheer down the face of a cliff. Listening, we could hear the robbers at work, so I first severed their rope, cutting off their means of escape, and then, making secure a good stout rope of my own, I lowered myself down the cliff.

15 Climbing down a rope at midnight into a nestful of industrious tomb-robbers is a pastime which does not lack excitement. There were eight at work, and when I reached the bottom there was an awkward moment or two. I gave them the alternative of clearing out by means of my rope, or else of staying where they were without a rope at all, and eventually they saw reason and departed.

20 It was, therefore, with nervousness that I now watched the steps of the staircase we had discovered as one by one they came to light – then there was disclosed a sealed doorway! The decisive moment had arrived.

23 I found myself, with excitement burning like the heat of a fever, on the threshold of what might prove to be a magnificent discovery. With trembling hands, I made a tiny breach in the door, lit
25 a candle and peered in. At first I could see nothing, but presently, as my eyes grew accustomed to the light, details of the room within emerged slowly from the mist, strange animals, statues, and gold – everywhere the glint of gold. For the moment – an eternity – I was struck dumb with amazement, then widening the hole a little further, I inserted a torch. Surely never in the whole history of excavation had such an amazing sight been seen as the light of
30 the torch revealed to us. Let the reader imagine how it appeared from our spy-hole, casting the beam of light from our torch – the first light that had pierced the darkness of the chamber for three thousand years – as we looked down on one group of objects then another, in a vain attempt to interpret the treasure that lay before us. The effect was bewildering, overwhelming. We had never dreamed of anything like this, a roomful – a whole museumful – of objects piled
35 one upon another in seemingly endless profusion.

I suppose most archaeologists would confess to a feeling of awe when they break into a chamber closed and sealed by pious hands so many centuries ago. For the moment, time has lost its meaning. Three thousand years have passed since human feet last trod the floor on which you stand, although you feel it might have been but yesterday. The very air you breathe,
40 unchanged throughout the centuries, you share with those who laid the mummy to its rest. Time is annihilated and you feel like an intruder. That is the first and dominant sensation, but others follow thick and fast – the exhilaration of discovery, the fever of suspense, the thought – pure joy to the investigator – that you are about to add a page to history, the strained expectancy – why not confess it? – of the treasure-seeker.

Source B

Source B is an extract from a letter written in 1844 by Sophia Lane Poole. Here she describes a visit to the pyramids of Egypt with her brother, Edward Lane, a famous British archaeologist.

My Dear Friend

So many have written of the pyramids, the great tombs of Egyptian Pharaohs. I find much that I must say respecting these stupendous monuments. The pleasure which is felt by the modern traveller in seeing the pyramids is increased by the consideration of their antiquity, and the reflection that many philosophers and heroes of ancient times have in like manner stood before them in admiration and amazement. Although, from the brightness of their colour, apparently little changed by the thousands of years that have passed since they were built, the pyramids do not appear ancient: there is an appearance of freshness about them which amazed me.

- With regard to their wonderful magnitude, when I was within a few yards of the base of the Great Pyramid, I was enabled to the full to comprehend their vastness. The perpendicular height of the Great Pyramid is four hundred and fifty-six feet, according to my brother Edward's measurement. I had fully determined to attempt an ascent; but the wind was so high during the period of our visit, that I dared not do so. Edward did climb to the top; he had done so many times before.
- This time, he ascended the Great Pyramid alone, but not unarmed as he knew that robbers were active in the area. While on the summit, he saw a suspicious figure, making towards the pyramid, from the west. The man began to ascend; when he arrived about halfway up, little thinking that Edward's telescope was directed towards him, he stopped, and took out a pistol from a case which was slung by his side, looked at it, and then continued the ascent. As it was evident that the fellow had no good intentions and intended robbery, Edward called to him, and asked him to descend; but he either did not hear him, or would not obey. My brother then fired a pistol, to show him that he was not without the means of defence. Upon this, the man immediately began to climb down, and, having reached the base, walked slowly away into the desert.
- Although I did not climb to the summit, I did go inside the Great Pyramid. It is no trifle, I assure you, for a woman to explore its interior. My mind continued so impressed with the difficulties of this undertaking that I could not forget them, even in my dreams. The heat of the interior is oppressive and the passage by which we entered the pyramid is only four feet high and we were consequently obliged to descend in a crouching position.
- The size of the Great Chamber is especially worthy of remark: the length is thirty-four feet four inches and a half. It is entirely constructed of red granite. Near the western end is the sarcophagus*. No hieroglyphics nor sculptures of any kind adorn it; its sides are perfectly plain and polished, and its form is simply that of an oblong chest, in every way rectangular. Its lid has been carried away, as well as its original contents; and we find in it nothing but dust and small fragments of stone. This enormous pyramid seems to have been raised merely to contain one single mummy, not a particle of which now remains in the place in which it was deposited with so much precaution. Historians assert that the building of the Great Pyramid occupied about twenty years, and three hundred and sixty thousand men were employed in its construction.
- I did not think to have written to you so much on the pyramids; but having entered upon the subject, I have found it difficult to stop. So wonderful in themselves are the principal pyramids, and so impressive by reason of their remote antiquity, that all other existing works of man must, I think, in comparison with them, sink into insignificance.

Glossary

*sarcophagus – a stone coffin