

# Beware the Mummy

by **Robert Gear** (August 2017)



Boris Karloff and Zita Johann in *The Mummy*, Universal Pictures, 1932



I have not seen the latest Hollywood offering of ‘The Mummy’ starring Tom Cruise, but did recently catch a screening of the 1932 version featuring Boris Karloff in the lead role. Whatever emotion the creators of the original movie wanted to evince, a modern audience, with the advantage of its comparative sophistication, is likely to chuckle and snigger rather than shriek in trepidation. But what came to my mind as the black and white early horror movie flickered was an [observation of historian](#) Tom Holland.

There are things in the past that are like unexploded bombs that just lie in wait in the rubble, and then something

happens to trigger them. And there are clearly verses in the Koran and stories that are told about Mohammed that are very like mines waiting to go off—Improvised Explosive Devices. And they can lie there maybe for centuries and then something happens to trigger them . . .

The plot of 'the Mummy' in a curious way appears to me as an unintended foreshadowing of the resurgence of Islam, which has '[lain] in wait in the rubble . . . waiting to go off.' Not, of course, that the creators of the movie could have had such prophetic wisdom. Islam was not on the mental horizon of most Westerners in 1932. And it was released before that other atavistic creed, Nazism, came to dominate Germany and then overrun most of continental Europe. Nevertheless, as you read the following brief outline of the movie see if you can spot parallels between it and the reburgeoning 'religion of peace.'

In 1921, a team of archaeologists working in the lone sands of Egypt unearth a startling find. It is a mummy still containing its internal organs. This suggests to the scientists that the mummified individual, Imhotep, was buried alive millennia ago. Along with the mummy was found a box containing the legendary Scroll of Thoth. Hieroglyphs stamped on the outside decree anathema on anyone who dares open it. Dr. Whemple, the team leader, scoffs at the idea of ancient curses and wishes to open the box and read the scroll. His friend, Dr. Muller, who has a healthy respect for such maledictions, cautions him against such tampering. As fate would have it, an archaeological assistant, left alone for a short time, opens the box and starts to decipher the hieroglyphs, mumbling the words out loud. This action somehow revivifies the creature, dormant in a casket behind the assistant's back. The mummy, its hour come round after 3700 years, shuffles across the room and makes off with the scroll. The assistant witnessing the

awakened creature becomes hysterical, and we learn later, dies in a straightjacket.

Can we say that Islam became dormant, like the mummy 3700 years ago, after the defeat of the Ottomans at the Gates of Vienna in 1683? At least as an existential threat to Europe, Islam appeared to lapse into relative quiescence, despite the horrors enacted on the fringes of Europe by the Barbary corsairs.

Of course, percipient individuals, like Dr. Muller in the film, were aware of the danger posed by ancient writings and their more fanatical followers. William Gladstone, for example, argued that 'So long as there is this book (the Koran) there will be no peace in the world.' Others who gave voice to similar warnings include Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain and Winston Churchill. But the average European or American was blithely unaware of the sleeping monster. Until 9/11, I dare wager that the majority of Americans and even sizable numbers of Europeans were no more than dimly aware of the existence of this faith. As Tennyson put it, "Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea, . . . The Kraken sleepeth."

Worse still, were and *are* those who have lived in a bubble of intellectual somnolence and shabby complacency. But like the mummy, Islam has come alive with its resentments and arrogant assumptions of superiority. The apparent hibernation in the years after Vienna and then retreat from the Balkans has ended, and it now slouches about trying to reclaim its supposed birthright, a worldwide caliphate.

In 'The Mummy' the now-living creature, with its sneer of cold command, disguised as a modern Egyptian under the pseudonym of Ardath Bey, is intent on uniting with a modern English speaking woman, Helen Grosvenor. He believes she is the reincarnated Egyptian princess whom he loved in ancient times. To compress the plot somewhat, the mummy telepathically controls Helen and persuades her to come to the Cairo Museum where he plans to kill and mummify her so that they can live together everlastingly. He stares hypnotically and mumbles some ancient Egyptian incantation—phoney or not, I do not know—but which to my ears, at least, sounded not completely unlike the two-word Arabic phrase that we have come to associate with certain people from antique lands. Okay, well, maybe I misheard. Anyway, Helen, awaking from a trance suddenly comprehends the danger as Ardath Bey lifts a dagger to dispatch her. She somehow recalls her past life (or lives) and then prays to a conveniently located statue of Isis which lifts its arm and points at the Scroll of Thoth. An Egyptian ankh (a symbol of life) attached to Isis' arm emits a beam of light at the scroll, which is promptly incinerated. Truly, a very *deus ex machina*. At this, the mummy relapses into dormancy, and then crumbles into dust, as convincingly as 1930s special effects could manage to suggest. And the young woman is saved.

Without pressing the analogy too far, the Scroll of Thoth struck me as not completely dissimilar to a well-known book whose devotees in recent times have given people a lot of trouble with their multi-faceted depredations. The prowling mummy seems to embody the reinvigorated nastier side of their very troublesome ideology. At the end of the movie, the young woman is saved and the scroll and mummy are no more; a fictional happy ending, then. The real world, of course, is more problematical. The Kraken has awoken and is still prowling.



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