

Once upon a time, in 1820 to be precise, exploration of the Valley of the Kings in Egypt was moving into high gear. This rugged limestone valley, some 480 km south of Cairo on the west bank of the Nile, had been chosen by many pharaohs of the New Kingdom (ca. 1570-ca. 1070 BC) to serve as their final resting places, and, as a result, numerous royal tombs were cut into its rock. The entrance to one of these tombs, which came to be called "KV 5", was noted that year, but exploration of the area was abandoned because of structural damage and heavy flood-water debris at the mouth of the tomb. A century later, in 1920, Howard Carter took another look at KV 5, but decided it was probably of little importance and would require too much clearing; he then turned his attention elsewhere, becoming, in 1922, the man who won great fame for discovering the Tomb of Tutankhamen. As Carter and his team excavated King Tut's magnificent resting place, they piled their unwanted dirt right upon the entrance to KV 5.

KV 5 fared no better as time went on: it eventually became part of the substructure of the tourist bus parking lot at the entrance to the Valley; beside it grew up innumerable vendor's stalls, and even a poorly-drained public restroom. Indeed, by 1988 the tomb was in immediate danger of even greater destruction since the Egyptian authorities had proposed enlarging the tour bus parking area. Thus came about a classic example of "rescue archaeology": Kent R. Weeks of the American University in Cairo decided to take yet another look at this pile of dirt after researching the field notes of Carter. The rest, as they say, is history....

Last May the archaeological community was astounded to learn that Weeks had come upon the largest, most unusual royal tomb yet seen in the Valley of the Kings: a veritable "family mausoleum" built by Ramses II, the powerful pharaoh who not only ruled Egypt for 67 years (from ca. 1279-1212 BC) but also fathered over 100 sons and daughters during his long life (also thanks to the fact that he had a large number of wives). Located just 30 metres from his own now badly damaged tomb (officially labelled KV 7), KV 5 was used by Ramses as a burial place for many (perhaps most) of his children, thought by some historians to have died unexpectedly in a plague (although his thirteenth son, Merenptah, did succeed him as pharaoh).

KV 5 has now been revealed as a unique T-shaped tomb, with an entry that leads to two large rooms that were found to be full of limestone debris that

most likely deterred the earlier explorers. Both rooms had been adorned with carvings in relief and with inscribed texts pertaining to Ramses II. Behind the rear door of the second room runs a corridor with twenty chambers (ten on each side) along it. This corridor ends at an almost life-size statue of Osiris, the Egyptian god of the underworld, carved in high relief; at that point two additional corridors, each with another twenty or so chambers, branch off to the left and right (making the tomb look, as one archaeologist put it, more like a university dormitory than a royal tomb). Weeks and his team have come to the conclusion that these chambers were not used for actual burials, but rather served as chapels in which rites for the dead took place. Indeed, many of the walls bore paintings depicting Ramses in the act of presenting his sons to the gods.

So where, then, are the actual burial chambers? The answer would seem to lie in passageways that lead from these corridors down to a lower level. Here, thinks Weeks, were the actual resting places of Ramses' offspring. This level had not yet been explored when word of this tomb was made public, but this past July Weeks was expected to resume his excavations, and by the time you read this more may be known about the contents of the lower level rooms.

If Weeks is right about the lower level, KV 5 will certainly rank as the largest and most complex ancient Egyptian burial place yet found. The structure as a whole, however, is in very poor condition (thanks to floods and human beings), necessitating a slow and very careful excavation. Unfortunately, there are signs that the tomb complex had been looted in antiquity, so finds like those of King Tut's Tomb are unlikely. Nonetheless, in past seasons, Weeks did discover, in addition to wall-paintings and inscriptions, pieces of jewelry, wooden furniture, clay and stone vessels, fragments of statues, remains of granite and alabaster sarcophagi, and even bits and pieces of mummified male bodies. So, even if looted, KV 5 will undoubtedly add a great deal to our knowledge of Egypt in the time of Ramses II.

(For those of you with access to the World Wide Web, there is a multimedia presentation on KV 5 put together by Time Magazine. Just call: <http://www.timeinc.com/time/timehomepage.html>.)