as the man who was responsible for the dismantlement of the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings remorseful for or did he take pride in his actions in that regard later in his life? Was Butehamen — chief scribe of Deir el Medina at the very end of the New Kingdom — placed in charge of secretly recovering, rewrapping and reinterring the Royal Mummies, in order to protect them from future tomb robbers? Or, rather, did he lead a politically sanctioned campaign to officially plunder the royal tombs and their occupants of everything valuable, acting on the direct orders and behalf of the High-Priests of Amen? Or both?

Deir el Medina, on the Nile west bank at modern-day Luxor, is well known as the village where the craftsmen and artisans who hewed and decorated the tombs of the Valley of the Kings lived. But at the end of the Twentieth Dynasty royal burials in the Valley ceased. Following the death of Rameses XI, Egypt was divided politically, with Hedjkhepererre-Setepenre Nesubanebdjed (Smendes) ruling the north from Tanis (1070-1044 BC) and High-Priest of Amen Kheperkhare-Setepenamen Pinudjem I exercising kingly powers (1050-1032 BC) over the south at Waset (Thebes). Because of troubles in Nubia, the flow of gold into Egypt from there slowed dramatically and tomb robberies remained a constant threat in the Upper Egyptian royal cemetery. High-Priest Piankh appar-
ently had a solution to both problems. He instructed Scribe of the Necropolis Butehmen, member of a prominent scribal family at Deir el Medina, to locate and open all Valley of the Kings tombs, recover and rewrap the plundered and threatened Royal Mummies with great reverence and re-inter them, grouped together, in secret caches — at the same time removing any remaining valuables, especially all gold or gilttings, the latter for recycling into bullion and subsequent deposit in the treasury of the Amen priesthood.

One way Deir el Medina, or “Set Maat,” the Place of Truth, as it was known to its inhabitants, was unusual was that so many of those who lived there appear to have been literate. Many letters and drawings have been found at the village site, from satirical pictures of cats serving mice to a lengthy correspondence to and from Butehmen and his father, Dhutmose. In one letter (LRL 28, British Museum Papyrus 10375) dated to Year 10 of the Whm-Mswt period of “Renaissance” begun under Rameses XI (around 1071 BC), Butehmen seems to be referring to the reburying project in a reply to Piankh (emphasis mine): “…We have noted everything about which our master has written to us [namely]: ‘Go and perform for me a task on which you have never before embarked and search for it until I come to you’ — so says our lord, ‘What has happened with [the place] you already know about, where you were before? Leave it [alone], do not touch it’ — so says our lord…”

“…Now you have written saying ‘Uncover a tomb among the ancient tombs, and preserve its seal until I return,’ so said he our lord. We are carrying out commissions. We shall enable you to find it fixed up and ready — the place which we know about. But you should send the Necropolis scribe Tjaro2 to have him come so that he may look for a marker for us, since we get going and go astray not knowing where to put our feet.”

The project may have already begun on a less-ambitious scale earlier, as graffiti in KV57, the Tomb of Horemheb, from a Year 4 (likely of the Whm-Mswt) seems to reflect that Butehmen and his father, Dhutmose, were both there.
to carry out an unnamed order in the tomb of the king.

What do we know about the life of Butehamen? He was born during the reign of the last king of the Twentieth Dynasty, Rameses XI, sometime before 1080 BC. He was the son of the well-known scribe of Deir el Medina Dhotmose, a member of a family of scribes going back to at least the early Twentieth Dynasty. Their ancestor, Amennakht, son of the chief workman Ipuy, was promoted from draftsman to scribe in Year 16 of Rameses III, and was the author of the Turin Strike Papyrus, which detailed the first recorded labor-conflict in history, in Rameses III’s Year 16. The office of scribe continued in the family down to Butehamen and on to several of his sons.

The House of Dhotmose at Deir el Medina is mentioned in a register compiled during the reign of Rameses IX. But in a letter (LRL 9), Dhotmose writes to Butehamen about what had apparently been the family’s house in the village, and referring to two of their ancestors, his grandfather Horsher and his great-grandfather Amennakht.

The letter indicates that the family house in Deir el Medina had fallen into ruin and was damaged by rain, and documents that had been stored there were moved to the Tomb of Amennakht. This tomb has never been located, but it may have been the place where many of the LRL were found. The dwelling of Dhotmose’s grandfather, Horsher, has been identified by graffiti and a wooden label bearing his name, one of thirteen residences which have been identified in Deir el Medina.

But, apparently because of concerns over the safety of the area, during Dhotmose’s lifetime the inhabitants of the village were relocated, and the family moved into a fine house at nearby Medinet Habu, site of the memorial temple and administrative center first established by Rameses III. In LRL 12, dated to Year 2 of the Wm-Mswt, Dhotmose writes to Hori, deputy of the Estate of Amen-Re in East Waset (Thebes), asking him to send young workers of the necropolis (“boys of the tomb”) back across the river and to place them under
The stuccoed-sandstone palmiform columns of the Butehamen house at Medinet Habu. These are carved with depictions of the patron deities of Deir el Medina, Amenhotep I & Ahmose-Nefertari. Photo: Forbes/Kmt

The supervision of Butehamen. He also mentions the new house at Medinet Habu.

This would be the same dwelling which Butehamen later took over and rebuilt, located near the Western Fortified Gate of the complex, which was, Jaroslav Černý comments, "as far as remains permit one to judge, the most spacious and decorative of the settlement." The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago carried out excavations at Medinet Habu in the 1930s. In its report the Institute noted that a section by the outer walls had been turned into a private residential quarter, with numerous and fairly extensive estates. The House of Butehamen was described as "a large manorial house." One of the two spaces which have survived was a square living-room with four palm-leaf columns. At the rear wall was an elevated platform for Butehamen's seat.

The stuccoed sandstone columns were decorated with inscriptions and scenes relating to the cult of the necropolis which Butehamen served. This included representations of Amenhotep I and his mother Ahmose-Nefertari, in their role as protective deities of Deir el Medina and the royal necropolis. The owner of the house is described as "the royal scribe and overseer of the royal treasury in the Wasetan (Theben) Necropolis, Butehamun, son of the royal scribe in the Wasetan Necropolis and overseer of works on behalf of the tomb endowment of Dhtmose."

Lintels, apparently from the house, mention Dhtmose, as well as Butehamen, and his wife, "the chantress of Amen-Re, king of the gods, Ikhtay," with representations of a man and woman receiving offerings from another man and woman facing the couple. Door jambs, also apparently from the house, name Dhtmose and Butehamen, and carry invocations of queens Ahhotep and Ahmose-Nefertari and King Amenhotep I.

In the House of Butehamen, the royal patron deities of Deir el Medina seem to have been highly regarded.

Letters describe how Dhtmose took part in an expedition to Nubia led by High-Priest Piankh, with replies from Butehamen expressing concern over his father's health. Dhtmose seems to have died at a comparatively young age, as Butehamen later expresses a wish for the long life his father did not enjoy.

Besides the extensive correspondence and the house in Medinet Habu, Butehamun is also known from more than 100 graffiti scattered around the royal necropolis, apparently left in connection with the Reburial Project. There were also some complications with his life, perhaps not so much as he experienced it, but for scholars. A theory there were multiple Butehamens now seems to have been dismissed. It was partly inspired by confusion over graffiti, as well as by letters which some read as indicating that both Butehamen and his father, Dhtmose, each had two wives. Besides his undoubted wife, Ikhtay, Butehamen is also named in connection with a Lady Shedem-
Butehamen’s son Ankhfenamen bears the title of “royal scribe” in Year 16 of Smendes (around 1050 BC), by which time Butehamen may have died. The last record of Butehamen is in TT291, the Tomb of Nu and Nakhtmin, the latter Butehamun’s relative. While nothing of Butehamen (nor anyone else, except a stela of Nakhtmin) was left to find in this tomb, the wall in a chapel bears the graffiti: “Ankhfenamen, son of Butehamun” and “Thine is the West, ready for thee, all blessed ones are hidden in it, sinners do not enter or any unjust. The scribe Butehamen has landed at it after an old age, his body being sound and intact. Made by the scribe of the Tomb Ankhfenamen.”

This might indicate that Butehamen was buried in what would have been the family tomb, presumably emptied by Bernadino Drovetti or those who worked with him. The Egyptian Museum in Turin lists the provenance of Butehamen’s coffins and other grave goods in their galleries as TT291 and “Drovetti Collection.”

Butehamen’s mummy is unknown, or at least not identified; however, Federico Poole of the Turin museum told me a researcher there believes it may be among the Museum’s extensive archives, and that they hope to undertake a search for it.

Horemheb’s Valley of the Kings royal tomb, KV57, may have been the first of the Royal Mummies caches, probably after the tomb had been plundered. One of the mummies moved there may have been that of Horemheb’s predecessor, Ay, originally buried in the West Valley, where Butehamen and a group of workmen left graffiti. Because KV57 was heavily looted, if Ay’s mummy was there, it can’t be identified among the debris and few human bones left in the tomb. After that the Reburial Project seems to have taken off, perhaps after Piankh’s commission to Butehamun reflected in LRL 28.

Among the main Royal Mummies caches was KV35, the Tomb of Amenhotep II. That king was rewrapped and placed in a crude cartonnage coffin in his own sarcophagus. He was joined in a side room of his burial chamber by Thutmose IV, Amenhotep III, Merenptah, Seti II, Siptah and Rameses IV, V and VI, all carefully labelled. Five other mummies, without docket’s labels — including the “Elder Lady” (believed to be Tiye, the Great Royal Wife of Amenhotep III) and the “Younger Lady” (daughter of Tiye and Amenhotep III and the putative mother of Tutankhamen) — were also found in the tomb. The earliest date for the re-
storations would be “the repetition of the burial” of Amenhotep III, which according to a docket took place within WV22 in Year 12 or 13 of Smendes.

Other tombs where Butehamen seems to have been active include KV14, KV19, KV42 and KV49, as he is named on graffiti in all of these. He may also have been instrumental in creating a cache in the still-unlocated k3y (“high place”) of Inhapi, where a number of Royal Mummies seem to have been placed, before being later moved to the great Royal Cache of Deir el Bahari, TT320.

Butehamen is known to have been involved in the “Osirification,” or
rewrapping, of Rameses III's mummy, under orders from Piankh's son, the High-Priest of Amen Pinudjem I, indicated on a linen docket from Year 13 of Smendes (Year 2 of Pinudjem I). Rameses III seems to have been in KV35 before he and dozens of other Royal Mummies eventually wound up in the Royal Cache TT320.

Also known as DB320, because of its location in Deir el Bahari, this was the tomb of the High Priest of Amen Pinudjem II and his family, before it became a mummies cache sometime after his death around 976 BC. It seems to have been re-discovered sometime before 1881 (AD) by the tomb robber Ahmed Abd er Rasul. When items from the tomb began showing up in the antiquities markets in early 1881, the Antiquities authorities investigated. A hasty excavation discovered some forty mummies, most identifiable as royalty dating from the Seventeenth to the Twenty-first dynasties. Consistent with the reburial project, most were carefully labelled with their identity, but with little regard for the original ownership of the coffins they ended up in. The astonishing discovery included the mummies of the patrons of Deir el Medina, Amenhotep I and Ahmose-Nefertari; as well as Thutmose II and III; Seti I; and Rameses II, III and IX.

More importantly, perhaps, for the story of Butehamen, it also included Amenhotep I's Great Royal Wife (and sister), Ahmose-Meritamen; her sister, Princess Ahmose-Sitamen; and their relative from a previous generation, Prince Ahmose-Sapair. We shall meet them again on Butehamen's coffin.

TT320 was the final stop for the Royal Mummies Butehamen had begun moving a century earlier, and many of those found there would have been included in his earlier reburials. While he could not have been involved directly in the TT320 cache, Butehamen may have scouted the area. The only two dated-graffiti in the wadi leading to the tomb...
Detail & below opposite, Butehamen's anthropoid inner coffin of painted-stucco on wood. It is in the collection of the Museo Egizio, Turin.

Opposite top, Ostracan Louvre 698, Butehamen's letter to the coffin of Ikhaya.

Adapted from Internet photos
carry his name.

Underneath the Louvre in Paris, in the Museum’s cavernous archives, there is a chunk of limestone almost exactly the size of a human hand. Known as Ostracon Louvre 698, it is one of ancient Egypt’s many Letters to the Dead, but it is unusual in two ways. First of all, it is rather spectacularly written in red ink, with annotations in black, the exact opposite of the usual scribal technique. And, uniquely in what has been discovered so far, it is not a letter to a dead person, but rather to the coffin of a dead person, Butehamun’s letter to the coffin of his dead wife, Ikhtay. Sadly, its provenance is unclear. The Louvre’s Catherine Bridondeau, who took me down into the archives under the medieval palace to see it, said it was already in their collection when the first catalogue was compiled in the mid-Nineteenth Century. It was probably obtained from one of the notorious antiquities “collectors” of that time, she said, like Bernardino Drovetti or Henry Salt.

The letter would have been placed close to Ikhtay’s coffin, but her tomb itself has been lost. Commenting on the ostracon, Deir el Medina expert Jaroslav Černý wrote: “Unfortunately many lines are irretrievably damaged by the rubbing to which the stone was exposed after it had been thrown out of the tomb by impious hands into the rubble of the Theban necropolis.”

But if the origin of the letter is unclear, its contents are unusually powerful, with its red ink and a style much more poetic than Butehamen’s bureaucratic letters. Most of what can be read of the letter is typical for the genre, but a number of lines stand out. Most interesting in light of the Reburial Project is the final section of the letter, which reads (emphasis mine): “Statement by the necropolis scribe Butehamen to the chanteuse of Amon Ikhtay: ‘Pre has departed, his Ennead following him, the king as well. All humans in one body following their fellow-beings. There is no one who will stay, We shall all follow you; Can anyone hear me in the place where you are? Tell the lord of eternity, Let my brother arrive. Make [...] their great ones as their small ones. It is you who will tell good tidings in the necropolis, since I committed no abomination against you while you were on earth; so grasp my situation, swear to god in every manner, saying: ‘It is in accordance with what I have said that things shall be done.’ May I not deceive your heart in anything I have said; Until I reach you. [--- ] in every good manner. Can anybody hear at all?’”

This passage seems to indicate that Butehamen is having a crisis of faith, in his belief in the Afterlife or whether the gods listen. Orly Goldwasser says the phrase “does anybody hear?” is “a unique sceptic contemplation, very rare in the Egyptian literature” and John Paul Frandsen writes: “The open skepticism of this passage towards the prevailing view, in the second millennium, of the ‘ultimate reality’ may be seen as a forerunner of the much more pronounced tendency known from documents of a later period.”

Unless further texts turn up, it is impossible to know what led Butehamen to question the Afterlife, if that is what this is. But one important question it does raise is: why was the letter written to a coffin? Does this indicate that the coffin, the vehicle that took a dead person to the Afterlife, was particularly important to Butehamen? If so, does his own coffin reveal anything regarding his feelings about the Afterlife, or about the Reburial Project he led?

Interestingly, Butehamen seems to have rejected one coffin in favor of another. His first, never used, was found by Drovetti and Salt’s contemporary Giovanni Belzoni and is in the Musées royaux d’art et d’histoire in Brussels. The coffins that Butehamen did employ, and some of his grave goods, are on view at the Egyptian Museum in Turin. The outer coffin is displayed upright prominently at the entrance to a main room, and is popular for visitors to stand next to for selfies. An early example of a yellow coffin, what makes it exceptional are two of the registers at the lower right, where Butehamen is shown burning incense before Amenhotep I; his mother, Ahmose-Nefertari; his sisters, Ahmose-Sitamen and Ahmose-Merytamen; and their rela-
tives from earlier generations, Queen Ahhotep and Prince Ahmose-Sapair. All of them were objects of Butenhamen’s Reburial Project, and their mummies (or coffin in the case of Queen Ahhotep) all ultimately ended up in the great Royal Mummies Cache, TT320.

It is highly unusual, if not unique, for Twenty-first Dynasty coffins to portray images of anyone other than deities. While Amenhotep and Ahmose-Nefertari did have that status, as the patron divinities of Deir el Medina (and portrayed as such on the columns of Butenhamen’s house in Medinet Habu), the others did not. But Butenhamen seems to have been involved in the removal, plundering and rewrapping of their mummies.

So what is going on here? Why is Butenhamen portraying these images on his all-important coffin?

Among the grave goods of Butenhamen at the Turin Museum is a small papyrus containing Chapter 10 of the Book of the Dead, a spell to transform the dead person into an “excellent spirit” before entering the boating of Re, which would have been rolled up and used as an amulet.

Did Butenhamen doubt the Afterlife, or at least the interest of the gods in human affairs, as Ostracon 698 seems to indicate? Or, did the images of the patron deities of Deir el Medina on the columns of his house and on his coffin lid, and the amulet, reflect strong belief? Was Butenhamen just playing it safe, in case the gods really were there; or did a more-pious son place the amulet in his coffin?

Any of these might be reflections that the Reburial Project had a profound effect on the man who led it. After all, Butenhamen, with official sanction, broke into many, many royal tombs, defiling and robbing the mummies of dozens of Egyptian kings and other royalty, before he rewrapped them with reverence, labelled them carefully, to indicate exactly who they were, and then dumped them into the secret caches in any coffin at hand. The lack of apparent retribution might be enough to make anyone doubt the gods. Or it might have led to deep concern and fear for his own Afterlife. Unless a new letter from Butenhamen appears detailing his thoughts, we can never know what was going on in his mind during and after the Reburial Project.

Can the unique letter to a coffin and the unprecedented imagery on his own coffin show remorse or anguish for the way Butenhamen had treated the Royal Mummies, perhaps a propriation to the gods and the deceased royals to forestall punishment? Or, was Butenhamen using the coffin imagery to reflect satisfaction with a job well done?

Notes
2. Tjaroy was a nickname for Dhotmose, which can also be written as Dheutyymes.
3. E. Wente and E. Melzer, Letters from Ancient Egypt (Atlanta, 1990), 195.
4. J. Černý, A Community of Workmen at Thebes in the Ramesside Period (Cairo, 2004), 382.
6. B. Porter and R. Moss, Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings, “The Theban Necropolis, Part 2. Royal Tombs and Smaller Cemeteries” (Oxford, 1960), 374. The plan of the tomb is on page 370. Porter and Moss do not mention that anything was found in the tomb, besides the graffiti, wall paintings and a stela of Nakhmin (also in the Turin Museum).
7. Černý, 26 and 373.
8. Ibid., 369.

About the Author After working as a journalist at Radio Sweden for forty years, George Wood retired in 2014 and returned to academia, earning a B.A. in Egyptology from Uppsala University. He is currently creating a website about Butenhamen at butehamun.org, thanks to a grant from the Wångstedt Foundation, which made possible visits to the Louvre and the Museo Egizio in Turin.