



Curse of the (Polish) Mummy



In 1973, a group of research scientists entered the tomb of King Casimir IV, a member of the Jagiellon dynasty that once ruled throughout central Europe. Within weeks of entering the tomb, only two scientists remained alive.

The Jagiellon Curse

Indiana Jones didn't have it easy, but as archaeologist work hazards go, there are worse fates than snake pits and big rolling boulders. For example, there are strains of mold fungi that eat your body from the inside out. This was the inauspicious fate of several scientists who opened a tomb that had been shut for centuries, thereby unleashing a powerful mummy's curse—or, more realistically and less fantastically—powerful microorganisms.

The tomb of King Casimir IV of Poland and his wife, Elizabeth of Habsburg, is located in the chapel of Wawel Castle in Krakow, Poland. Casimir served as king for more than 40 years in the 13th century. He left behind 13 children, many of whom went on to positions of great power. In 1973, Cardinal Wojtyla (who later went on to become Pope John Paul II) gave a group of scientists permission to open King Casimir's tomb and examine its contents. Within the tomb, the unlucky group found a heavily rotted wooden coffin—not so surprising, given the box had been decaying for nearly 500 years. However, within a few days, four of the twelve researchers were dead; six more died soon after.

Killer Fungi

While sensationalists blamed the tragedy on a mummy's curse, the scientific-minded questioned whether the sudden deaths were related to the icky molds, fungi, and parasites that would linger in a room that had been sealed off for centuries. This was precisely the suspicion of Dr. Boleslaw Smyk, one of the two surviving scientists. He set out to discover what exactly had killed his colleagues, and he came up with three species of fungi mold that had lingered in King



Casimir's tomb: *Aspergillus flavus*, *Penicillim rubrum*, and *Penicillim rugulosum*.

Not a Mummy, But No Less Scary

These are not the kindest of specimens. *Aspergillus flavus* is toxic to the liver, while *Penicillim rubrum* causes, among a host of other afflictions, pulmonary emphysema. These toxins grow on decaying wood and lime mortar, both of which were in Casimir's tomb. The toxins remained in the tomb in the form of mold spores, which can survive for thousands of years in closed environments. It is likely the researchers breathed in the spores immediately upon entering the coffin, since the sudden flow of fresh air into a closed tomb would blow the spores about. Toxic spores that are inhaled in this fashion can lead to organ failure and death in a very short time.

It's therefore unsurprising that whisperings of a "mummy's curse" abound. The more famous legend came from the 1922 Egyptian excavation of Pharaoh Tutankhamun's tomb. Lord Carnarvon, one of the main financiers of the King Tut excavation, died a few months after he entered the fungi-laden tomb—the same fungi spores that were identified in King Casimir's tomb were also present in King Tut's. Stories of a mummy's curse followed, although it's unclear whether Carnarvon's death actually was related to his archaeological pursuits: Carnarvon had a cut on his cheek that became infected weeks after the excavation. He fell ill and eventually died of pneumonia and septicemia from the cut.

Whether or not Carnarvon died of natural causes, rumors of the supernatural took on a life of their own. After news of his death spread, fantastical stories grew regarding the grisly deaths of anyone who had entered King Tut's tomb. Today, even modern archaeologists are warned of their potential exposure to the dreaded Mummy's Curse.

