King Tut may be the most famous Egyptian pharaoh, but the cause of his death is not as well known. Despite multiple researchers conducting numerous tests on the boy-king’s body, the cause of his death still remains one of the largest mysteries within Egypt. King Tut died in 1324 B.C. at the age of 19, which was quite young for a pharaoh as they were the best fed and cared for in all of Egypt. There are no records indicating how he died, and the small, quickly finished burial site indicates that his death was an untimely accident.

So what caused King Tut’s final demise?

While multiple theories have been put forth, two remain the most hotly debated: murder or illness. The murder theory is supported by a crack on the bottom portion of King Tut’s skull, whereas illness is argued due to a broken leg that could have become seriously infected.

The theory that King Tut was murdered has been put forth and supported by multiple researchers. It’s commonly believed that the culprits, who could have conspired together or individually, were trusted advisors to the boy-king.

The first suspect, Ay, was an advisor who greatly disliked King Tut’s father, Amenhotep V, and believed that Tut was going to lead Egypt down the same negative path. It’s argued that Ay could have committed murder out of greed and a sense of power. This is backed by the fact that Ay became the next pharaoh of Egypt, and also married King Tut’s widow, Ankhesenamun.

The second suspect, Hormheb, was deputy to King Tut, and provided advice to the boy-king during the first few years of his reign. As the pharaoh grew and eventually began making his own decisions, he no longer needed counsel from Hormheb. This could have caused emotions of jealously and anger, which would have driven him to kill Tut.
Further arguments that support Hormheb as King Tut’s killer include the fact that he was the second pharaoh after the boy-king’s demise. He took the throne immediately after Ay. During his reign, he also reversed many changes that King Tut had made, such as moving the capital of Egypt from Thebes back to Memphis. The practice of polytheism was also widely expanded, and equal worship was granted to all gods and goddesses. These changes show that Hormheb was dissatisfied with King Tut’s decisions, which could have driven him to dispose of the young pharaoh.

The theory that King Tut died as a result of injury and illness is supported by the analysis of his mummy after a scan conducted in 2005. After multiple tests, it was determined that his left leg had been broken a few days before his death. Research done in Britain used car crash simulations to determine how King Tut’s leg was broken. The study determined that the injury could have easily occurred as the result of a chariot accident: he could have been in the chariot when it crashed, or hit by one while on the roadside. Other theories suggest that his leg was broken by a kicking horse, or during a hunting trip.

Regardless of how his leg was broken, it’s believed that this injury could have caused his death. His leg could have very easily become infected, and with no proper medical care, caused his death only a few days later. Recent tests on his mummy have also revealed that he had malaria, which, coupled with an infected and broken leg, and given no treatment, would have easily killed him. Even today, contracting malaria without seeking immediate medical attention can easily cause death.

Other injuries, including various broken bones, have been discovered on King Tut’s mummy. However, the majority of them have been attributed to Howard Carter’s poor handling of the body upon its discovery. Carter, who had no formal education or training in archaeology, did not know proper procedures for handling or preserving a mummy at the time of King Tut’s discovery. As a result, it has become difficult to determine what injuries were caused before and after death, but it’s commonly believed that only the broken leg was obtained while the boy-king was alive.

While both theories regarding King Tut’s death have plenty of support, the truth may never be revealed. There is too much speculation and not enough hard evidence to come to a definite conclusion regarding his death. This mystery may never be officially unwrapped!