

Tomb of Sobekhetep

A Setting for Victorian and Pulp Roleplaying Games

By Peter Schweighofer

“Giza, Egypt. Something wasn’t right about the Old Kingdom noble’s tomb we visited this afternoon. Whatever it was, it was troubling me the rest of the day. I had noticed something subconsciously, something wrong about the tomb, and I had to find out what it was. After dinner and the usual evening pleasantries, when everyone retired for the night, I convinced my compatriots to quietly slip away from the Mena House Hotel and return to the tomb under cover of darkness to look for clues. Together we would solve the mystery of Sobekhetep’s tomb.”

Tomb of Sobekhetep is a location and short encounter for Victorian and pulp roleplaying games set in Cairo, Egypt. The “Set-Up” section below offers some ideas on how to integrate the tomb into various campaigns, “Tomb Layout” describes the setting, and “Complications” and “The Scoop” provide some adventure or encounter ideas incorporating the location. This freeform system allows gamemasters to take the setting and modify it to best suit a campaign’s needs.

Set-Up

West of Cairo across the Nile lies the plateau of Gizeh (spelled Giza in modern times), where the pharaohs of Egypt’s earliest dynasties built fabulous pyramids surrounded by lesser temples and tombs for their relatives, ministers, generals, administrators, and other servitors. During the Victorian and Pulp eras, Cairo provides a contemporary link between the exotic oriental world—Islamic mosques, ornate palaces, bustling bazaars or *souks*, and elegant western hotels and clubs—and the ancient world of Egyptian ruins looming over the city from across the Nile. Characters might visit Cairo and the pyramids at Gizeh for a many reasons under various circumstances.

Victorian Era

For Victorians in historical or fantasy settings, the pyramids were the main sight-seeing attraction. Many spent their entire time in Egypt among Cairo’s bazaars, hotels, clubs, or fine houses along the Ezbekiyeh Gardens, and rarely ventured up the Nile to other archaeological sites. Gizeh offered a pleasant day trip to any of a number of sites: the three pyramids of Cheops, Khafren, and Mycerinus (their Greek names, commonly known today as

and Khufu, Khafre, and Menkhare), smaller “queens” pyramids, the Sphinx, various ruined valley temples serving the pyramids, and vast fields of rocky *mastaba* tombs surrounding the pyramids. The Mena House Hotel, built in the shadow of the Great Pyramid, offered luxury accommodations for those who sought lodgings outside of Cairo but near the government offices and other western amenities.



The ruins at Gizeh offered Cairo’s western elite—tourists, diplomats, army officers, businessmen—a rich playground of ancient monuments. They climbed the Great Pyramid, delved into the subterranean passages of tombs, marveled at the Sphinx, and rooted about for antique trinkets (or more often bought them from hordes of Arabs seeking to make a few pennies). Characters adventuring in Victorian Egypt may belong to a group of tourists visiting the monuments, or might set up an excavation amidst the ruins. Members of the military, government, or diplomatic service might investigate criminals, illegal antiquities dealers, and tomb robbers operating in the area at night.

For the particular set-up regarding Sobekhetep’s tomb, the characters must have previously paid a daytime visit to the specific *mastaba* tomb. As the introductory journal entry indicates, they noticed something out of place that raised their suspicions that something unusual was going on at the tomb. Acting on those feelings, they slip back to the tomb at night to see if darkness provides cover for any untoward undertakings.

Pulp Era

Although archaeological teams and explorers still examined the ruins on the Gizeh plateau, many westerners in Cairo had other things to occupy their time: running the government, planning desert expeditions, administering the military, conducting trade. The pyramids held less of an

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allure beyond a simple sight-seeing excursion amidst more pressing business in Cairo.

Pulp heroes, however, might enter the ruins for a variety of reasons. They might pursue some criminal, smuggler, or arch villain into the maze of *mastaba* tombs, jumbled monoliths, and crumbled temples. Perhaps they seek the secret entrance to a labyrinth of subterranean passages and chambers rumored to honeycomb the rock beneath the ancient cemetery.

To prepare for the action at Sobekhetep's tomb, the heroes had previously visited the site during the day while undertaking one of the missions above (tourism, investigation, pursuit). They leave their hotel under cover of darkness to more closely examine the tomb for evidence of something out of the ordinary and keep the ruins under surveillance.

Tomb Layout

The characters learned of the tomb's design, decoration, and form during an earlier visit, but can recall or review those details upon reaching the ruins again or consulting any notes they took.

As the characters discovered during their earlier excursion here, the tomb of Sobekhetep is of the classical *mastaba* style: a blockhouse-like structure with a chapel entrance in one side and a filled pit leading to the subterranean sepulcher accessible from the roof.

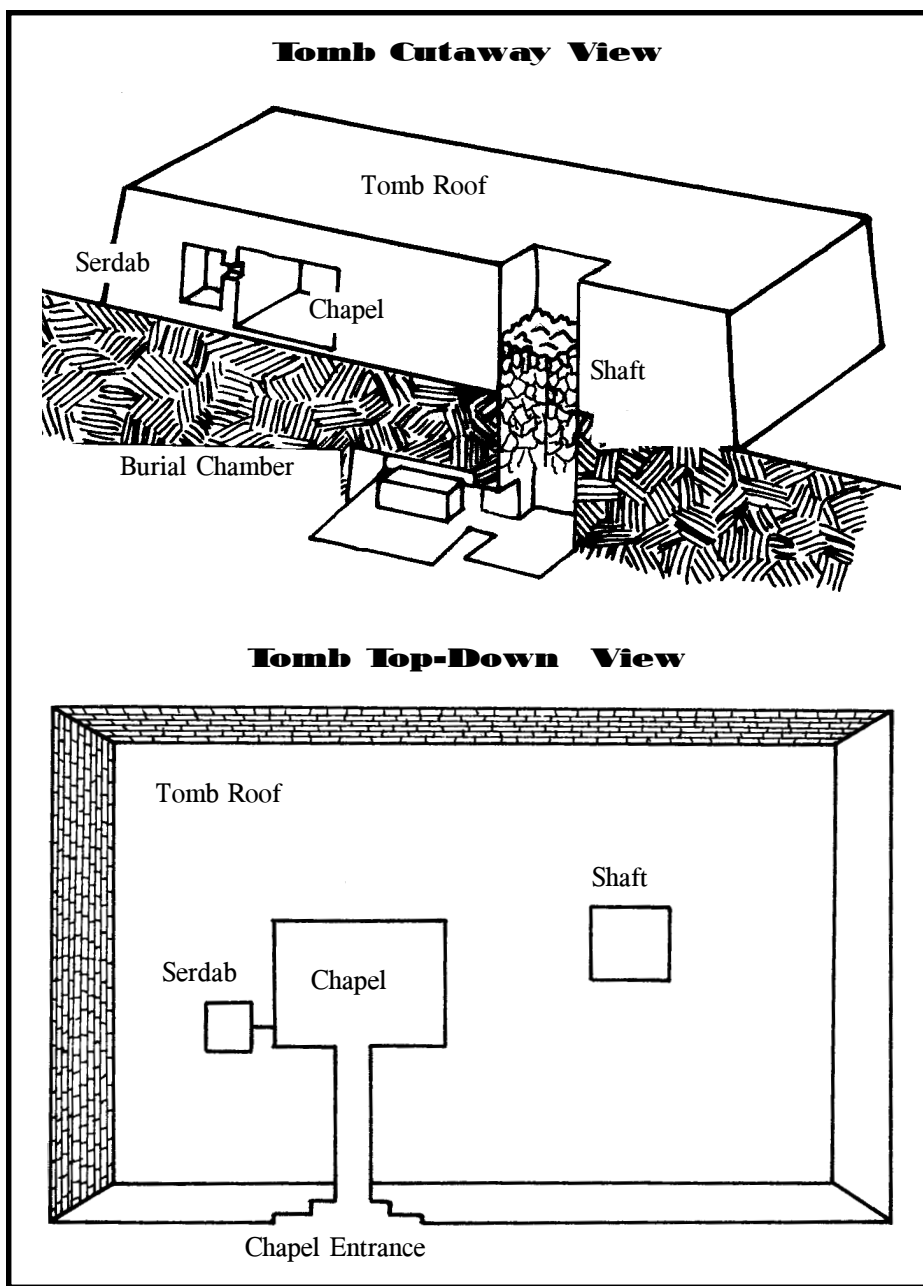
The entrance consists of stone once well-cut but now pitted with age, sand, and the touch of constant tourists. Numerous hands brushing the walls of the short passage inside have worn away the carvings of priests, animals, offering-bearers, and mourners, all annotated by columns of hieroglyphics. Burning torches have covered the ceiling with sooty residue that obscures any decoration that once adorned it.

The entrance penetrates the otherwise solid stone monument for about 10 feet until it reaches a small chapel. Lightly carved reliefs cover the wall surfaces with hieroglyphics and pictorial scenes: family members bringing gifts of food, drink, and incense; priests attending to the funeral services for Sobekhetep; the minister attending to his official

duties counting cattle, baskets of grain, and slaves. A false door carved at the far end of the chamber stands above a low stone slab where priests and visitors once left offerings for the deceased.

A peculiar hole penetrates one of the side walls. The peephole leads a few feet into a small chamber called the *serdab* containing a statue of Sobekhetep. A ventilation hole in the *serdab* ceiling allows a shaft of light to illuminate the figure, where the ancient Egyptians believed his soul resided after death.

The actual tomb chamber sits deep beneath the stone structure, accessible only through a rubble-filled shaft on the roof. Of course, during their previous daytime visit the characters didn't venture onto the roof, as their main area of attraction was the decorated chapel and the *serdab* statue.



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Complications

When the characters return to the tomb at night, give them a chance to observe anything out of the ordinary, particularly when compared to their earlier daytime visit. These clues should lead them to discovering the secret of the tomb, which may vary depending on the genre and campaign.

Bit of Cloth: One character notices an odd bit of cloth near the chapel entrance. It is old and dried, and extremely tattered. Successfully using an appropriate skill (particularly anything based in archaeology) reveals that it is of the type of linen in which the ancient Egyptians mummified their dead. The dun-colored, crusty substance crumbling from it seems consistent with the materials used to bind and seal a wrapped mummy.

Debris: Behind the tomb structure, on the far side from the chapel entrance, one character finds a pile of rubble which appears to have been tossed down from the tomb's roof. The rocks and loose stones form a ramp one can climb to the tomb roof with moderate difficulty, but not without a decent amount of noise.

Sounds from Above: Those outside the tomb have a chance to hear occasional sounds emanating from the roof: a clattering stone, footsteps shuffling on sand and rock, murmuring voices, squeaking. The moment the characters voice any concern or make an effort to investigate, the noises suddenly cease.

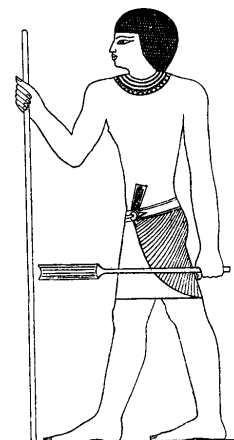
Pile of Rags: A character encounters a pile of moldy rags nestled against the outer tomb wall. Upon closer examination, he suddenly discovers the rags camouflage what appears to be a mummy, one that springs to life and attacks the characters. Alternately, if the characters spend too much time milling about the tomb, the mummy hears them and ambles around the ruins to confront them. This creature may be a human member of the group using the tomb, or might be some lesser undead monstrosity resurrected by unholy means to serve as a sentry (a much more powerful adversary, but appropriate for characters with greater experience and abilities).

The Scoop

Depending on the genre you can choose from a variety of options regarding the tomb's true purpose and the designs of those guarding it:

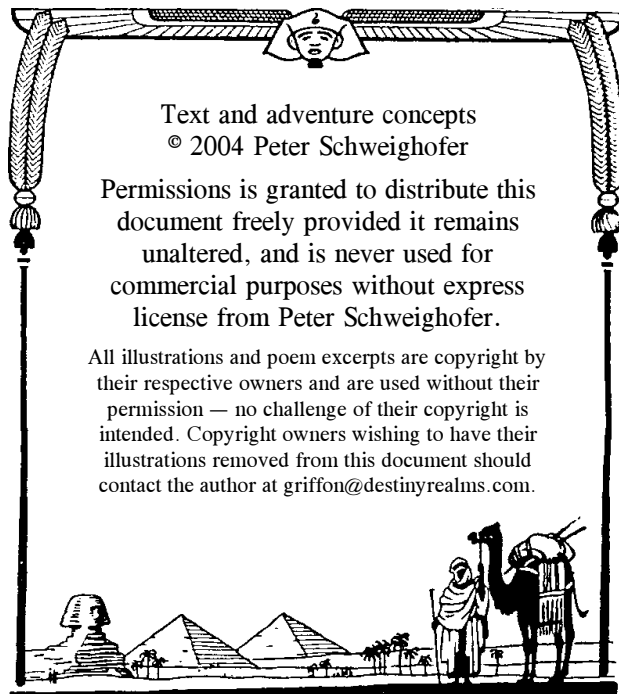
Tomb Robbers: Rival archaeologists, ambitious locals, or criminal treasure hunters seek to dig out the tomb shaft and plunder a heretofore untouched burial. While several work on the roof at night, excavating rocks and tossing them over the side, one other, disguised as the mummy, stands guard on the ground, ready to frighten and possibly assault anyone foolish enough to wander near the tomb after dark. The thieves have at their disposal tools like shovels, picks, and

crowbars (plus plenty of rocks to toss down at characters climbing the tomb walls), but only the most sinister would have swords and sidearms. If the mummy ruse doesn't scare curious characters off, the robbers know they won't leave, and don't risk an open, noisy fight that might bring the authorities. They'd rather come back to retrieve the treasure when things calm down, or allow the characters to continue the excavation and steal any artifacts from them later.



Underground Depository: Criminal elements are using the cleared shaft and subterranean tomb chamber to store goods of their own: contraband, treasure stolen from another tomb or a museum, weapons meant for a local insurrection, kidnapped hostages, stolen goods. A crazed murderer might even use it to store bodies from his hideous slayings in Cairo's seedier districts where unwary people simply disappear in the dead of night. Once again the mummy serves as a sentry, and the characters return to the ruins just as the criminals are depositing or retrieving their goods.

Secret Entrance: A criminal organization, arch-villain, or secret society might use the tomb shaft as the concealed entrance to underground catacombs beneath the Gizeh plateau. Beyond the cleared tomb shaft, where the burial chamber would rest, lies a trap- and sentry-filled labyrinth of stone passages eventually leading to a hide-out, base of operations, cult temple, guarded treasury, or meeting place. The characters pay their nighttime visit to the tomb just as people enter or exit the shaft and possibly betray its existence.



Text and adventure concepts
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