

Egyptology with Dr. Kara Cooney

Ologies Podcast

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Oh, Haaaaay! It's your camp counselor who's only two years older than you but seems *just* ancient: Alie Ward, back with another episode of Ologies.

This episode has been roughly eleven years in the making. Well, I guess, five thousand years in the making. Now listen, if you're already into Egyptology, this episode offers kind of a different look at Egyptian history and its parallels our culture now. If you have no knowledge of Egyptology at all, don't worry, we're gonna talk about cats, and tombs, and hieroglyphs. And ancient aliens, that's gonna happen also.

But first, a quick thanks to the Patrons and Patreon.com/Ologies who donate a dollar or more a month just to keep the podcast going. You're doing it! This podcast - which this week was in the top ten science podcasts on iTunes, thank you as always for that - it's made totally independently. Patrons fund it so I can hire an editor and get these out on time every Tuesday.

Thank you to everyone who supports the show also by putting OlogiesMerch.com items onto your body. The link is in the show notes. We have a bunch of fall "collegies" new stuff up that's just excellent. It's very scholastic looking.

You can also support for zero dollars just by tweeting, or 'gramming, or telling a friend, say, "Hey, listen to this" if you want. You can rate, and review, and subscribe, that also helps.

You know Ol' Ward here reads all your reviews because I find them quite touching. And to prove it, I'm going to read one by Jvc55, who said:

"If you like learning things from people who are so genuinely excited that sometimes they have to swear, then this is the podcast for you. Five million stars."

I heckin' agree, man!

Okay Egyptology. Let's get into it.

Obviously, it is the study of Egypt, c'mon! Where does the word Egypt come from? It comes from a word meaning 'the Temple of Ptah at Karnak.' This is in Luxor, which is apparently not just a moderately-priced theme hotel in Nevada. In fact it's near a place called Memphis.

Did you know there was a Memphis in Egypt? It's on the Nile River and Memphis, Tennessee is on the Mississippi River. That's why they named it that. Did you know that? I did not know that. So, I already went down an hour-long rabbit hole researching this episode and we're still in the intro. So, let's get on to it. On to the Ologist.

Eleven years ago I was watching some late-night TV and saw an Egyptologist as a guest on Craig Ferguson and was like WHAT? Egyptologists can be on late night talk shows just chattin' about tombs, and monuments, and female rulers alongside people like Cedric the Entertainer who was also on that episode promoting his slapstick film about a corpse in a hotel room?

Anyway, I'm like, "this Egyptologist rules," and I started looking into her work, and whenever her name would come up in the news with a new book or new show on Discovery I would be like, "Yes woman! Get it!"

So, cut to me starting Ologies thinking, "Dude, what if I did Egyptology and I got to interview her? Would I die on the spot? Only one way to find out." So, I emailed her and we set a date. She was like, "Sure." So, I drove an hour to her house, so excited, so nervous, I started setting up my mics and realized with some horror that my Zoom recorder was not in my equipment bag. My face became very hot and red and sitting at her kitchen table I almost just died of sheer mortification. Like, "Mummy me up! I'm done!" But she was so understanding, and I slinked off to my car, just defeated by my own idiocy.

We set another date, I showed up again. This time, with a bottle of Japanese whiskey as an 'I'm Sorry' token - it was 10am, so we did not drink it while recording - but we were off to the races. I had my equipment, we did the interview, and I wish this episode was six hours long because there were so many things I wanted to ask her. There's so much to know about Ancient Egypt, but we focused a lot on her really astonishing work writing about female kings and the sociology of ancient and modern patriarchies, and also her work as an expert in coffins, and if there's a mummy's curse, and dongs of antiquity. And if you don't have a favorite Egyptologist, well hot damn, you're about to. She's a professor of Egyptian Art and Architecture at UCLA, and she's been on archaeological digs, curated museum exhibits, traveled the world inspecting Egyptian coffins, has appeared on multiple Discovery Channel and History Channel archaeology shows. She wrote *The Woman Who Would Be King: Hatshepsut's Rise to Power in Ancient Egypt*, and has another book due out in November called *When Women Ruled the World: Six Queens of Egypt*.

So, straight out of the gate we started talking about my forgetting equipment the first time and the *cuuuuurse* of multitasking, and coffins, and her double identities. And she's just amazing and I am so honored to *dig in* to this chat with Egyptologist, Dr. Kathlyn aka Kara Cooney.

Alie: I have a recorder this time. Very exciting.

Kara: You realize when you're doing too many things when you forget stuff, like when I showed up in Egypt without any flashlights at all to look at the coffins, and I realized... and I had to go to the store and buy some things, and I didn't have a UV light, but I realized I was just doing too many things.

Alie: Too many things!

Do you need a UV light to look at coffins?

Kara: It's very helpful because the UV, you can see... you get an idea of whether the varnish is modern or ancient, because in museums they've messed up these coffins so much by overpainting them overvarnishing them, restoring them, and so then you have to figure out first what's ancient and what's modern.

And this happens more in European museums than in Egyptian museums. It happens more in Protestant places than in Catholic places. *[laughs]*

Alie: Really! Why do you think that is?

Kara: Because there's this Protestant work ethic, and people feel they should be doing something, and so they mess up their own pieces. The coffins north of the Protestant-Catholic divide in Europe are more fake than they are real, and the amount of time it would take to take all of that new paint and new varnish off is pretty extensive and nobody does it.

I saw one coffin in Leiden, in the Netherlands, and I was standing with the curator and we took out the old publication and we realized the entire thing was repainted with new paint.

Alie: Idle hands are the devil's work, what is it?

Kara: I guess! In places where you take more coffee breaks, and where work is not as much of a driver of human identity, there the coffins are less messed up. So, it's funny.

Alie: Oh my God. Oh, that's just an epiphany. Waiting to happen. Do less.

Kara: Yeah. Do less! Do less. Don't mess with your objects. You don't need to.

Alie: So, I have a bazillion questions. I'll blitz through them as fast as I can.

Kara: Yeah! Go for it.

Alie: In addressing you: Kara Cooney, Kathlyn Cooney or Dr Kathlyn Cooney?

Kara: Yes, it's a problem on many levels. It's a problem that my mother started by naming me Kathlyn, which is my grandmother's name on my father's Irish side. And yet she didn't like the name Kathy, so she nicknamed me Kara in advance, and Kara obviously fits my personality better. No one can pronounce Kathlyn: Kathleen? Catherine? And I say, "No, it's Kathlyn." [phonetically Kath-lin] And they look at me like I'm crazy. And so, that's my real name on every document that's official. And Kara appears nowhere that's official. So, I use it to create, kind of, a double personality where Kathlyn M. Cooney is my academic name, and Kara Cooney is my popular name.

I don't put the 'Dr.' in front of my name because I'm also... I think I have other things that give me that authority. I'm chair of my Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at UCLA. I've been a professor there since 2009. I have about ten graduate students, many of whom have finished with their own PhDs and call me "Doktormutter." So, I'm cool with just Kara Cooney.

Alie: Women in power is something that definitely you are an authority on, especially looking at it through the lens of Egyptology. So your forthcoming book, which is so exciting, *When Women Ruled the World: Six Queens of Egypt*, coming out on election day. Was that an accident?

Kara: It wasn't an accident for the editors at NatGeo, but I didn't tell them to do that!

You know, these women, they keep following me, and haunting me, and lurking behind me, and filling my footprints as I walk, because I didn't want to be known as the 'Chick lit' nonfiction girl.

Aside: Before she became an author and a UCLA professor, Kara got her BA in Humanities and German in Austin, Texas, and her PhD in Egyptian Art and Archaeology at Johns Hopkins University.

She didn't intend to focus on female rulers for her literary career but they kept coming up in the classes she was teaching.

She says by writing the books, she's seen new patterns in history she hadn't even seen in the classroom before.

Before we get to that, let's start at the very very beginning. Let's go way back.

Alie: Let's start at the beginning now. Let's start about why you're an Egyptologist, and I know that this question comes up daily for you and the answer is always like, "I don't know," kind of. You saw some books when you were a kid, your parents brought back some books from the London Museum?

Kara: From the British Museum in London, yes. And I remember when my mom brought those books home. She brought a book home on mummies and she brought these... you know the publisher Usborne? It's a wonderful publisher. They do children's books that have all kinds of drawings about daily life, or little detailed... very detailed tiny drawings of people tanning hides, or washing clothes, or what it's like to take a bath or whatever in all little animated figures, and then little captions connected to all of these pictures.

Aside: I just looked these books by the publisher Usborne and I can confirm they are [*echoing*] cute as hell.

Kara: And I had one for Rome, one for the medieval world, medieval Europe, one for Egypt, and the last one I can't remember right now. But Egypt was the one that just struck me as the most interesting. It bit me and it never let go.

And yes, you're right. This is the question that I'm asked the most of any other. Why are you in Egyptologist? And I always give a two-pronged answer. Number one: I have no freakin' idea. It's the one question that an Egyptologist would never ask another Egyptologist, or a specialist of ancient Rome would never ask another Romanist, because it's a ridiculously stupid thing to do. You have to spend eight years longer, eight to ten years longer in school than everybody else. You live a life of poverty in comparison to other people who have the same education level. It's not a clever thing to do. It is a calling. It's something you do because you love it or you just... you have to solve these problems. And so we don't ask each other that, but other people ask us that all the time. And so my answer is: I don't know why.

It's something that is, that I'm curious about myself, why I see the world better through the lens of an ancient authoritarian regime than I do just by looking at my own world around me, but it's the truth.

And then number two: the real answer to your question is I'm an upper middle class white chick, which means that while my brother was encouraged to become a lawyer, and he did even though he would have been a great academic, I was allowed to follow my heart as a woman. And there was still, when I was growing up in the '70s and

'80s, this idea that I was not necessarily meant to be the breadwinner in my family, and I was allowed to be more impractical, imprudent, and I was allowed to do that.

Aside: Take note: the following should be considered a tutorial by Kara Cooney on acknowledging privilege. She just nails it.

Kara: And of course the upper middle-class part is pretty clear. I had the education level and access to these more difficult-to-acquire academic cultures, spaces. And so, it was something that I was able to move into quite easily that other people have a much harder time finding their way into.

Or, if you grow up African-American in this country and you're constantly assaulted with white privilege all around you, if you have a chance to study the ancient world, you might do it through a different political lens, through a lens of Afro-Centrism, rather than the lens of the classical white world, or what is perceived as the classical white world. And most people who study Ancient Egypt in the United States, and in Britain, and in Europe are white people. It's a very colonial science and it's off putting for people of color.

Alie: And do you come up against any resistance or friction with that, and how do you grapple with that?

Kara: It's a very interesting subject to me, how the ancient world is politicized, claimed, and used to bolster certain kinds of identities. It's something that we need to pay attention to.

There are reasons that when the LACMA exhibition for King Tut came out in 2005 and he was depicted as a white Barbra Streisand in the reconstruction that some French team made and National Geographic put on their cover... there's a reason that we had people picketing out front of the museum saying, "King Tut is back and he's black," because there are claims about his racial and ethnic identity that are done in a way that is serving certain populations. And if we're not aware of that and why those things are happening, then we need to step back and think about it.

So race and identity, these are things that I apply to my classes, and Ancient Egypt is very helpful because it provides a means of talking about these things, but a thousand years removed.

Aside: Kara also explained that even some well-known Egyptian-born Egyptologists have been known to whitewash ancient Egyptians because of long-entrenched colonialism and racism that identifies power with European colonists. That misrepresentation of Egyptians is tragic and she says, pretty frankly, not accurate.

Kara: As I always say, if any of the Egyptians that I know lived in Alabama in the '50s, they would have sat at the back of the bus or have reached a lot of... or created a lot of problems for themselves.

Alie: How much of your work, your career as an Egyptologist is spent in Egypt, and how much is spent in museums around the world, and in classrooms here in LA?

Kara: Oh, most of it is here. So, I have been to, in Europe and the United States, probably twenty-five different museums. It's a lot of museum work. You go in, you figure out with the curators what your plan of attack is. You go into storage, you open up for vitrines if possible. You pull things out if possible.

Alie: What's a vitrine?

Kara: A vitrine is a case in the museum viewing space.

Alie: Oh! I didn't know that!

Kara: So, it's generally the word that Egyptologists use. It's a very old-fashioned word.

Alie: I thought it meant like a ceramic bucket of guts or a mummy case.

Kara: No, no. Vitrine is essentially just a container, I think. Probably a good Latin word. We could look it up,

Aside: Okay so NEWS to ME: a vitrine is a glass display case! Did you know that? Like, if you tried to steal something from a museum you would have to bust a vitrine (and also don't do that).

The etymology for 'vitrine' is Latin, it means 'glass.' It has nothing to do with a latrine. And then I was like: I wonder if there are vitrine latrines? So with much hesitation I googled "glass toilets?" And happened upon a public bathroom in London - just in the middle of busy city foot traffic - that's made of one-way glass, so no one can see in but when you're inside [*scream!*] you can still see out. Like, everyone's just walking around as if the walls were clear, and it is a deeply anxiety-provoking object, and is rightfully listed as one of the six most terrifying restrooms in the world by Cracked.com.

Okay, back to it. Before I ask Kara about Egyptian matriarchs, let's get to coffins.

Kara: But I'm not an Egyptologist who's doing dirt archaeology, who's opening up tombs, who's excavating in any way, and I wouldn't know how to do it even if I was given the opportunity. So, leave that to the archaeologists.

Alie: And, would you say that a lot of your work deals with coffins? With paperwork,? I mean, when you are looking at artifacts, what's your bread and butter artifact-wise?

Kara: Oh my bread and butter artifact is a coffin, which is weird.

Alie: Right!

Kara: I have a public lecture that I've been doing around the country, a variety of them, but one is why women don't rule the world and why they should. I start with me looking at a coffin and I say that I'm a coffin expert, and it always gets a laugh because it's the weirdest thing that you can possibly imagine to tell people. "Oh yeah. I'm an expert on coffins. You put any Egyptian coffin in front of me and I'll know: early Eighteenth Dynasty, late Eighteenth Dynasty, when in the Nineteenth, if it's Twentieth or Twenty-First." And I can talk all about the details of these coffins. It's strange and weird. And you're thinking to yourself, "why ever would someone devote their life to that?" But if you... what was the last wedding you went to?

Alie: Oh God. I feel like I go to, like, six a year, but I went to one, like, three weeks ago.

Kara: And when the bride hits the aisle, you turn and you see her dress and you can make snap judgments about everything; about her socioeconomic level, her education level, her ethnicity, her religion, her political perspectives.

You can make snap judgments about all kinds of things; age, the age is staring you in the face, but maybe she's had a really good plastic surgery and so you could make some other conclusions about age.

Alie: It was in LA so... yeah.

Kara: Yeah. Location, right? Geographic, regional identity. We could throw that in as well. A Hawaiian wedding is going to be very different from a wedding at The Pierre in New York. This is how I view coffins.

So, the coffins, for me, are not, [*foreboding, spooky voice*] *'oh, the land of the dead, and some sort of ritual, and all of this religion, and the god Thoth, and Anubis, and mummification...* All of that is interesting, but it's been done to death and it's what Egyptologists have focused on the most. So, I look at these coffins as social documents as ways of understanding how the Egyptians themselves competed with the Joneses or the Panebs, [*laughs*] how they displayed their place in the world and maintained their social power thereby.

Aside: So, they didn't have BMWs, or Suzuki Samurais, or Bentleys back then so it was like, "that's cool we'll just wait until you're dead and then we'll scrutinize your coffin, buddy."

Kara: And so I look at coffins to see if a person... Well, let me put it this way, when you're hanging out with really rich people and they have conversations that go over your head because the details of what the really rich know about clothing, or fabrics, or real estate, or hedge funds, it goes over my head and I have no idea what the hell they're talking about. Rich people are going to have a different cultural milieu, and you can see the same thing in a coffin.

Amongst the very rich, the very wealthy, there are details of separation that only the knowledgeable would have been able to pick apart, critique, comment upon, and everyone else would have been like, "Ooh! Blue! Ooh! Gold! Ooh, whatever." And I like to see who's having a conversation with whom, and who were they displaying to.

I've applied this to mummies as well. There's a particular time period in ancient Egypt, the Twenty-First dynasty, when the elites of Egypt tricked out their mummies like you cannot believe.

Alie: Really!

Kara: They stuffed underneath the facial tissue. They would separate the skin from the muscle, make incisions (like we would in... almost in the same places that we make plastic surgery incisions) and stuff their faces full of this fatty sawdust material to give them a lifelike sort of look. They put in glass eyes. They attached false hair, sometimes real human, sometimes yarn. They would plaster the face and then paint it a nice skin

color, giving it a kind of rouge if it was a female. They put peppercorns in the nose so it wouldn't collapse. They even stuffed arms and chest when it got really, really extravagant.

And I looked at this and I'm like, "that's the strangest thing because a mummy is meant to be hidden, bound in these bandages, and not meant to be seen by prying eyes and yet they're pulling all of their wealth and putting it into their bodies and making their bodies into, kind of, standalone coffins". And I was able to conclude that we're talking about a society of very wealthy, elite, and exclusive people who are showing ten other people, a dozen other people, the bodies of their dead family members, and they're able to compete that way, keeping all of the unclean masses out of the conversation entirely.

And it's a competition that didn't last very long. As soon as society changed a little bit, then this over-the-top mummification stopped and people again started putting all of their wealth into the coffins that contained the corpse on the outside rather than the inside, which is a very human thing to do. It's not a normal human thing to buy an amazingly beautiful diamond ring and then never wear it, never show it.

Aside: Or maybe it's like... MTV's Cribs?

Kara: I would compare it more to having a really nice bedroom that very few people are able to see, but it's a tricked out and amazing bedroom that you invite a few people to see and then word of mouth spreads and people talk about it. Or, there's some sort of feature done in a magazine, but it's many steps removed and there's a way of gaining prestige that way.

Aside: [clip of Joey McIntyre in his bedroom on Cribs: "This is where it all goes down, folks, this is where the magic happens"]

Kara: Essentially, when gender is not involved, all of my work involves social competition, and I think that's very much because of the way I grew up in Houston, Texas, in a very competitive environment

Alie: Big hair... cars...

Kara: Oh, big hair, big cars, big everything. I found it very tedious and annoying, and so I'm interested in how people do it and why they do it.

Aside: Kara says that as a graduate student she was reading about contracts and protocol of ancient artists, and her advisor, a very badass Egyptologist named Dr. Betsy Brian suggested:

Kara: "Well, why don't you look into coffins and look into this book by Jac Janssen called (and, wait for it, this is crazy. This gives you an idea of how academics were) *Commodity Prices from the Ramessid Period*.

Alie: [laughs]

Kara: Doesn't that sound like you want to kill yourself?

Alie: Yes!

Kara: And I went through *Commodity Prices from the Ramessid Period*, which is like a 700-page tome, and I found a section on coffins, and I never looked back. I've been working on this stuff since, oh my God, 1998.

Alie: Do you care about modern-day American coffins or just Egyptian? Do you find yourself looking... when you go to funerals now, are you like "Hmm, it's a pretty good coffin"?

Kara: Well, luckily I haven't been going to as many funerals as I've been going to weddings. But funerals, we don't usually think of them as display opportunities. We put our display in other places, and so the funeral here is not quite as interesting. But in our culture, I see us avoiding the conversation until the very last possible moment and keeping it very quiet. We don't like to talk about these things or show it off.

Aside: For more about how Americans die, listen to the Thanatology episode with Cole Imperi. She's an expert on death and dying. I promise it's shockingly uplifting. She's amazing. Okay, onward.

Alie: I do want to go back, and just for a primer on Egyptology, where do you begin to understand it? Because number one, there's fifty thousand dynasties. Is a dynasty just a generation? We call them dynasties?

Kara: Oh my goodness. Well first of all, let me go back to the first part of your question, which is what is Egyptology?

Essentially, it's a complicated thing because you're taking a place and then you're applying all of these different academic pursuits to it. So you can be an art-historical Egyptologist, you can be an archaeologist who's an Egyptologist, you can be a philologist, language specialist, who is an Egyptologist. You can be a historian. You can apply all of these different perspectives to this one place.

And the reason that Egyptology separates itself out - which isn't necessarily good for it, but there's reasons - is that we have for 3,000 years; the same culture, the same religion, the same governmental structure, almost in an unbroken line. Yes, with ups and downs of prosperity and then collapse, but this same, rather inward-looking, rather protected place that maintains its cultural separateness even to this very day.

Aside: And what is up with Egyptian dynasties? What exactly are they? Let's break this down.

Kara: So you start out with Dynasty One, and then when that family changes, you move onto Dynasty Two, and Three, and Four in succession, right? Sometimes dynasties can rule concurrently with one another. So, in time periods of great collapse and social problems, you can have dynasties like Seven and Eight, Nine and Ten ruling concurrently with one another, and a great deal of overlap, and a great deal of regional contestations so that there would be Dynasty Seven in one place and Eight in another place, but at the same time. Some dynasties get more of our attention as Egyptologists, like I would say Dynasties Four, Five and Six of the Old Kingdom when the pyramids were created at Giza.

Aside: This era is known as Old Kingdom, around 4-5,000 years ago. Also known as the Age of the Pyramids, because they built a lot of pyramids, which served as tombs to kings.

An important person during this era was Imhotep, credited as being a chief architect of the step pyramids and also just a general cool smart dude. During the Old Kingdom, they built a bunch of stuff, and kings were thought to be god-like and were buried in these huge well-known tombs.

Kara: And then the Middle Kingdom Dynasties Eleven and Twelve.

Aside: Known as the Golden Age, this Middle Kingdom was 3,500 to 4,500 years ago, and was known as a time of prosperity, and stability, possibly due to high river waters which made the land more fertile.

Pharaohs were seen more as leaders of the people, and they were buried in secret tombs so that folks couldn't come and steal their stuff. They're like "Get bent grave-robbers! Get outta here! Go on... git!"

Kara: ... and then Dynasties Eighteen and Nineteen.

Aside: So, 3,000 to 3,500 years ago saw the New Kingdom or the Imperial Age, this was the peak of Egyptian power and military conquests.

You got some famous-ass pharaohs during this time, like Hatshepsut, a lady king; Akhenaten and his wife Nefertiti; King Tut. So that's the briefest of rundowns, because, trust me, Egypt has more *hot goss* than a million Southern hair salons. Let's continue:

Kara: These are the big dynasties that people like to focus all of their attention on. Because you're dealing with the centralized government, you get more production, you get grand temples being created, you get artwork of the finest quality. And you have more history being written down because people write down more history when they're winning rather than when they're losing. When you're dealing with civil war, it's not a time to sit down and write thoughtfully about what's going on. You're just trying to live. And so you have a dearth of documentation for those time periods.

Alie: It sounds like social media.

Kara: Yes! Yes! [*laughs*] Social media, when people are going through really hard times they, kind of, disappear from Facebook.

Alie: Yeah, they're like, "not going to post about *this* breakup."

Kara: You kind of disappear and then when things are happy again the pictures show up.

Alie: Right.

Kara: I hadn't thought about it that way.

Alie: Know what I mean?

Kara: That's nice. I do know what you mean. That's great. We'll compare Egypt to Facebook. I think that works pretty well, [*scream!*] but it's so much to get a handle on.

And the other problem with Egyptology is that because it is so protected geographically, it's less invadable and there's less competition going on.

Even today, think of the Arab Spring and what happened in Libya and Syria versus what happened in Egypt. In Egypt, people held hands and protected the Egyptian Museum in Cairo from being burned by Molotov cocktails flung in the revolution (by whom we don't know...and people will discuss it forever). In Syria, you know, millions of people have had to leave. It will never be the same. The place is utterly destroyed.

These are geographic realities. But Egypt, this protected place, means that more stuff will be preserved. So you have a preservation that you don't have in other places, which means for the Egyptologist you have an embarrassment of riches to commit to memory, to figure out where these things are, where they might've come from. Millions of objects are swirling around in a given Egyptologist's head and it can be quite overwhelming,

And I haven't talked about the language! So, to be an Egyptologist who knows *anything* about anything, you have to spend a year doing your Middle Egyptian grammar introduction, and learning your signs, and figuring out how to look words up in the goddamn dictionary, which takes forever, and then you have to figure out how to read hieratic, which is the handwriting that the ancient Egyptians used is a shorthand for the hieroglyphic symbols.

Alie: When you start learning hieroglyphics, do you just have a bunch of flashcards?

Kara: You do!

Alie: Really?

Kara: Yes. We all make a bunch of flashcards and you start out trying to figure out the signs, because these signs are these abstracted real things and there's, like... well here, hold on just a second. I'll put my microphone down and we'll get a book out and you can see what we start with.

Alie: [*chanting singsong*] Bring on the hieroglyphs. Bring-bring on the hieroglyphs! Bring-bring on the hieroglyphs....

Aside: So, at this point, Kara shot up from the kitchen table and rushed off to another room and - like she was about to bust out some old glamour shots or a really great snack - she excitedly came back with a hardbound reference tome. She cracked it open and it was a compendium of precise perfect hieroglyphic diagrams with little English translation captions underneath. These symbols have a thrilling aesthetic, kind of like really elegant Clip Art of the ancient world meets hipster stick-and-poke tattoo flash. But, obviously, cooler.

Kara: But when you start learning how to find signs...

Alie: Oh my God, so many emojis!

Kara: They're organized according to... so let's start at the beginning, right? Because people like to put themselves first.

So, the human goes first and look at all the different signs you have for the humans doing different things. You have a human who's getting hit with a stick, a human who's hitting somebody with a stick, a human who's got his arms up and praise.

Alie: Honestly, these are just like emojis.

Kara: It's crazy. It's true.

So then we go to the parts of the person. You'll have the hand, a phallus, a phallus emitting liquid.

Alie: I just looked down and saw a phallus with liquid issuing from it.

Kara: There's so many penises in Egyptian language and iconography and art and they're always erect. [*slide whistle sound*] It's crazy.

Alie: Dickapalooza here.

Kara: Yeah, it's true. And then you get to the animals and then, God help you, you get to the birds.

Now when you're first starting out, these birds all look the same. I don't know anything about birds; flying bird, nestling bird, crocodiles.

Alie: So how long do you study all these symbols?

Kara: These symbols to commit to memory? That's why this sign list exists. You're never going to be able to commit everything to memory. Not all of this stuff is going to be in your head at any one time. I do know people who have this in their head. I am not one of them.

Alie: Was there any point in learning all of this that you were like, "You know what? I'm just going to work in insurance."?

Kara: There were nights when I would spend 12 hours on my Middle Egyptian homework. And I remember them. I remember having a hard time looking things up. I remember how time consuming it was for me, and I remember some days I would give up a little bit, but the interest in my bigger questions always continued to draw me.

So, even though the language is something I *can* do and I *can* teach, it's not what drew me into Egyptology. What drew me into Egyptology was all of the statues, and the beautiful things, and the way the kings are displayed, and the way people show themselves, the art history of it. That's really what pulled me in and now it's the social history that that keeps me there.

Alie: And getting to your book coming out, which I'm very excited about: I know that there's six women who world a world. *Six Queens of Egypt*.

Kara: Yes.

Alie: Now, female rulers were called kings. Queens were just the wife. That's like saying the First Lady isn't the same as saying the president.

Kara: Yes.

Alie: Can you give me a quick bio of each of the six? If you had to be like... Let's say this were a cast of *Real World* and you had to be, this is the troublemaker, this is the one who's always making sure everyone drinks enough water.

Kara: I think I can do that.

Let's see, so just the title of the book where we have *Six Queens of Ancient Egypt: When Women Ruled the World*, and I kept thinking, should it be female kings? No, because the first one was just a queen, so they were all queens at one point and some of them were able to catapult into this position of female king.

And you're right, the distinction is very clear. A queen in Ancient Egyptian language is just the vessel of the king, a helper, a womb, if you like. But a king, for a male or a female, that's the leader of state. And so the Egyptians, when that woman became leader of state, they gave her the word and moniker 'King.' That was what she deserved.

Aside: Okay, alright, buckle up. You're about to get a quick tour of six very remarkable figures in Ancient Egypt, and their stories, (Oh! These stories!) they're more dramatic and triumphant and tragic than any *E! True Hollywood Story*. Like, deaths, and usurping, and gluing beards on lady-faces and sibling romance. Just... get ready. There's cobras! There's stabbing! Oh! Kara's about to spill some tea, and by tea I mean red sarcophagus juice. [squelch sound] [telephone voice] Alright, let's go.

Kara: Now, the first is Merneith of Dynasty One. And she maintains her queenship. She never becomes king, but she's buried like a king amongst kings with forty sacrificial victims around her; men and women who were murdered or encouraged to commit suicide (we don't know) to accompany her into death.

Forty is nothing. Her husband before her had hundreds upon hundreds and her son after her had hundreds as well.

Alie: Oh my God!

Kara: So, it's a very interesting part of the book. It starts out with a bloody bang, if you like.

Killing their wives, brothers, sons, husbands, right in front of their eyes is probably one of the most powerful things that you can do. And that keening, that mourning, that would have been created in those moments, is very powerful indeed.

And Merneith was in charge of deciding who was sacrificed for her dead husband. She's the one that's holding the bag, so to speak, that has the reins of power in her hand when her husband dies and her son is too young to rule. So, she rules on his behalf as a queen-regent, if you like. But then when she dies and she's placed the ground, she's buried in this line of kings just like all the rest.

Aside: In the immortal words of Sean Carter [snippet from *Jay-Z's Dirt Off Your Shoulder*: "ladies is pimps too, go on brush your shoulders off"]

Kara: So she flies below the radar and yet wields power that packs a visceral punch.

The next woman, for whom we actually have evidence, is named Neferusobek of Dynasty Twelve. She rules because there's no-one else left. She's the last gasp of her

dynasty. Her father was a great king, Amenemhat The Third, and he seems to have borne a son, Amenemhat The Fourth whom Neferusobek married, probably her brother or half-brother. And it may have been incest that that made it so there was nobody left to rule.

Alie: Oops!

Kara: It's a good exclusionary tactic of keeping everybody out of rule, but it's not a very good tactic for keeping a very healthy genetic line. So, there's a good way to end a dynasty, to come back to that dynastic question.

Alie: Just bone your brother!

Kara: Yeah. Seriously!

Alie: End of the line! This is the end of the train! [*London Underground train announcement: "This train will terminate here, all change. Please ensure that you take all your belongings with you."*]

Kara: There was nobody left to rule but her and that was how they ended it.

Then we get to Dynasty Eighteen. In Dynasty Eighteen, we have two female kings and the first one is Hatshepsut.

Aside: Ooooh, Hatshepsut! Okay, so this is a name we should all know, but we don't. She disappeared from records after her death.

She started to rule on behalf of her nephew who couldn't rule because was very busy being 2. "Auntie, take care of this for a bit." She's like, "I got you."

Kara: And she ended up being crowned as king alongside this boy, whom she could never eliminate. And there was this co-kingship that stretched on until her death.

Alie: Even though he was a *bebe*?

Kara: Well, she took the kingship when he was maybe 9 years old. And then it may be because he was 9 years old, she realized she better do it now.

Alie: Well, yeah!

Kara: You know, she was able to rule with impunity without him interfering because what's an 8-year-old going to do? I have an 8-year-old. He's starting to get difficult. [*laughs*]

Alie: I mean, I don't have kids, but I don't even know if, like, 9-year-olds can make their own macaroni.

Kara: No.

She is the female king who did everything right, who is the most traditional, who ended up even showing herself in depictions as a man, not necessarily because she wanted to, but because it was what was expected. And of course she's ruling next to this young and vibrant young man. She has to compete with him in a sense.

And she's the one whose name we don't remember. She's the one whose name we can't pronounce. She's the one who hasn't made it into our cultural memory. Who's in our

cultural memory? Women who were thrown out of the window and eaten by dogs like Jezebel, or Semiramis, who slept with a different man every night in Assyria and had him murdered, according to the texts. Or Cleopatra, who, of course, used her sexual wiles to get to Julius Caesar and Mark Antony and ended up having to commit suicide, according to the text.

So, one of my points in the book is that we remember the failures, the cautionary tales, and trust me, historians make it very clear that we should remember them so that we *don't go down that dark path again*.

Aside: Okay, back to Hatshepsut, and it's okay if you don't know how to say this yet. Pretty much everyone's like, "HotshepWHUT?"

Kara: But the woman who did it all right, who ruled when Egypt was most prosperous, who put Egypt with its best foot forward and left Egypt better than she found it, Hatshepsut, we don't really remember her. So she's the one that needs to be resuscitated.

And, it reminds me how, for us, women in the workplace, when you do something really well, then it's easy to take credit for it. It's a very abstract thing. It's a very fungible thing. Whereas if you do something really badly, everyone's going to remember you having messed that up and nobody's going to want to take credit for it. So success, as many women listening to this will know, is pretty dangerous. You have to do success, but you have to do it by putting your own spin on it if you want to keep it.

Aside: Along those lines, it was Hatshepsut who just went for it, genderbending fashion ideals by wearing a short wig, and the headdresses of the kings, and a crown of ram's horns. Sometimes even sometimes depicted bare-chested and with a false beard, making Pantsuit Feminism seem very tame by comparison.

She might be the icon we all needed but never knew about, and I'll admit that as I drove to Kara's I was repeating Hatshepsut's name like some sort of ancient incantation so I wouldn't say it wrong, and I had done some research so I wouldn't sound like a total ignoramus.

I already forgot half my equipment, so the deck was already stacked against me. I had to compensate.

Alie: And now, her nephew pretty much had her erased from memory once she died, right?

Kara: He did, but he waited a good 20-something years before he did it. And it was when he put his son on the throne, and claimed which son he was going to have as king after him, he decided he needed to remove her.

He knew that he wouldn't have been king at all if it weren't for her, that somebody else would have ruled as king, somebody else would have moved him aside, but she protected him. And then he goes and erases her 20 years in? It's problematic, but that's what patriarchies do. They have to create this perfected and uncontested line and a woman is messy and difficult. They had to get rid of her. Depressing.

And then next is Nefertiti. And I hope you notice a trend that all of these women are here protecting men. If a 3-year-old comes to the throne, what's going to happen? Some

strong warlord's gonna come in, murder the kid, hold the bloody knife and go, "Look! I killed him!" and then he gets to be king.

In Egypt, with divine kingship, it's a different issue. You can't do that. It's a god that standing in front of you, so you invite a woman to come in and rule on his behalf.

Nefertiti is a little different. She's ruling as a co-king alongside her husband Akhenaten, who's created this really weird and wacky new religion of Atenism, worshiping this one solar divinity in the sky, changing Egyptians temples, means of worship, funding the temples, really pushing Egypt into great upheaval. And during that time he decides, for whatever reason, that the only person he can trust is his wife, his greatest... his highest-placed wife. He had many wives. We can be sure that every king had a harem full of wives.

And Nefertiti's story is the one that's really being uncovered now because when you think of Nefertiti, what do you think of?

Alie: Oh, I think of that bust, that, like, very tall hat. High cheekbones. Yeah. I think of her as being, like, a regal sort of figure.

Kara: The paragon of beauty, this beautiful thing. We don't think of her as being a power broker, as being somebody who puts Egypt back to rights again. And that's really her story, that she needs to be resuscitated for moving Egypt back in the direction of the old religious ways and, kind of, a truth and reconciliation king.

Aside: Also, Nefertiti had six daughters and everyone was like, "Awww! Congratulations! That sucks! No sons?" So her husband was like, "Well shoot, okay I'll just also marry my sister." And together they had a boy baby named... King Tutankhamun!

King Tut, as he is often called, maybe a little too casually, I'm not sure, took the throne at 9, ruled for ten years until his untimely death around the age of 19. Experts suspect it was an infected leg fracture that took him down but he was also had several strains of malaria. His mummy is the oldest known case of malaria on record. Which is, like, pretty cool. That's another little feather in his cap.

He is said to have a bit of a youthful temper, but he married, he had two children who did not survive infancy, perhaps because his wife was also his half sister. Just normal political stuff. So speaking of male vs. female rulers...

Kara: Which brings up the question of, do females rule differently than men? In Egypt? Today? Anytime, do they? When?

Well, I mean, if you're Sarah Huckabee Sanders and you're working on behalf of the patriarchy [*clip of Sarah Huckabee Sanders at a White House Press Briefing: "Everybody wants to make this an attack on a woman, but what about the constant attacks that he receives? Or the rest of us?"*] the answer is no. But if you're a woman who has a different perspective not to protect a patriarch, then I think the answer is yes, and you might be more interested in cutting deals, and thinking with nuance, and making decisions that please more rather than one faction.

I think that question needs still to be answered and we haven't allowed it to be answered because we don't let women into power. That's a different question, isn't it?

Aside: Did I mention that her new book comes out on November 6, which is also voting day for the midterms in the US? Just saying. Just circle that day, make a plan for it. [*telephone voice*] A lot of good things happening.

Kara: Our next queen to become king is a woman named Twosret of Dynasty Nineteen, and she's really a badass because she comes in as a queen to a king who dies precipitously, and then acts as regent for a boy who's too young to rule who's not her own son. Then when he dies, she rules as sole king on her own just for a couple of years.

Aside: So, this queen's husband dies. She also helps out a baby king, he dies (maaaybe by her own hand?), and she becomes king. Then she dies somewhat mysteriously.

So if you've ever been nervous about getting a promotion at work or asking for a raise, just go for it. Nothing can beat the workplace anxiety of ancient bloodline monarchies, amirite?

Kara: She's involved in a civil war as a prime operator on her own, like no other woman, and it seemed she was punished for it. It's always very vague, but it seems that if she's the one that was murdered, it makes sense that she's the one that's not acting on behalf of a patriarch and we get a bit of a cautionary tale of what it means to be the woman who's ambitious for her own self. It's not a good place to be. She'll be punished for it.

And then of course, the last one is the most well-known and that would be Cleopatra of the Ptolemaic Dynasty. She's also punished for what she does, but Cleopatra is more canny than Twosret, in that she knows she can never rule alone. She ruled first alongside her father, Ptolemy the Twelfth, and then she ruled alongside two brother-husbands in succession: Ptolemy the Thirteenth and Ptolemy the Fourteenth.

Ptolemy the Thirteenth died in battle against her. Ptolemy the Fourteenth was poisoned by her. And then she had Ptolemy the Fifteenth, who is Caesarion, whom she bore after a great romance with Julius Caesar. And she's not shy about saying that this is Caesar's son and her heir.

And she realizes that if she's going to keep her son on the throne, or keep herself on the throne, that in the absence of any patriarchs around her (and she's done with all of those men who are trying to murder her, anyway), she's going to move on to the most powerful men in the world and those are the Roman warlords.

And she picks well. She picks Julius Caesar, who is growing in his authoritarian power too quickly, too much, and his links to Egypt is probably one of the many reasons that he was killed on the steps of the Senate on the Ides of March. [*clip from the movie Julius Caesar: "Et tu, Brute?"*]

And then she moves on to Mark Antony, but he's perhaps not as strategic a choice, because if he hadn't made some of those bone-headed decisions in the battle of Actium, perhaps we would talk about Cleopatra and Mark Antony in a different way.

Aside: Mark Antony, quick primer, around 30-40 years BCE, (before the common era, which is a more factually accurate and less religious way to say “BC” or “before Christ”), Mark Antony was a buddy of the assassinated Julius Caesar. Mark Antony - not to be confused with J-Lo's ex-husband Mark Anthony [*clip from Marc Anthony's I Need to Know: “I need to know, I need to know”*] - was part of a Roman triumvirate with Octavian. Octavian was an adopted son of Caesar.

Everyone in this little power triangle they had started getting bitchy and power hungry with each other. So Antony was like, “You know what? I'm going to marry Octavian’s sister just to smooth things over,” but then he cheated on her and had three kids with Cleopatra, who already had a kid with the dead Caesar! Things started getting a little stormy. Octavian ended up going to war with Antony and Cleopatra and Egypt and he creamed them in this naval battle at Actium.

Things get even wilder after that. Man, if you like soap operas you’ll love Wikipedia! But before we go there, what was Cleopatra’s deal in life?

Kara: But she came the closest out of any of these women into setting up her own dynasty from her own womb, which is an extraordinary thing to do, because if you think about divine kingship and why it works so well, it's because you have one man who can produce, theoretically, 365 babies outside of himself in a given year without any hormonal problems, without any danger of dying in childbirth.

Aside: See hieroglyph from earlier [*clip from earlier in the show: “a phallus, a phallus emitting liquid”*]

Kara: It's a very practical thing to give birth outside of your body. Yeah?

Alie: Yeah.

Kara: A woman, and I have done this and it's not an easy thing though... the childbirth is no fun. It's no fun. And I did it naturally, so I can actually talk about what it might have been for an ancient person.

Alie: Oh... God.

Kara: It was okay. That's a different... that's a different interview. [*laughs*] And so, Cleopatra, she produces one child with Julius Caesar and then three children with Marc Antony. She has twins with him and survives that ordeal. It's amazing.

Alie: Oh my God! Not IVF.

Kara: And she sets each one up to be a king or queen of one of the parts of her growing empire in the east. If they hadn't lost in the battle of Actium, they would have been a competing dynasty to the Roman warlords who were trying to take over the world.

But in the end, Cleopatra does not leave Egypt better than she finds it. She loses. Egypt becomes nothing more than a province of the Roman empire, loses much of its... Well, Egypt is never going to be under native control again after Cleopatra, until 1950.

Alie: Wow!

Now, a bit of a Romeo and Juliet situation there where she faked her suicide to devastate Marc Anthony. And then he killed himself and then she killed herself. Maybe with a needle, maybe with a snake. What happened?

Kara: No one knows what happened and the only people that are telling us what happened are the Romans.

What better way, I argue in the book, than for Octavian to claim that Cleopatra had committed suicide, abandoning Egypt, abandoning her children, locking herself up in her tomb, trying to destroy all of her treasure so that he couldn't have them. She's obsessed with her own fame and glory. She's selfish to the end. She tries out poisons on slaves so that she can see which one is less painful (according to the texts).

There's all kinds of rumors being created around Cleopatra's death. The only one who knows how Cleopatra died is Cleopatra and she can't talk anymore.

I think Cleopatra was murdered. I have no way of proving this. I'll never know how she did it, but a story is certainly woven to make her look self-serving, manipulative, and mentally unstable.

And what do we use today to keep women out of power, but the idea that they are hormonally unstable, that they're not somebody that we can have in charge of our army and our military men, that we can't have them in combat situations?

Their hormones, their emotionality, I think, is what will always be used to take women out of the halls of power, rather than seeing that emotionality as the reason they should be there. [applause]

Alie: And also it's just discounting the emotionality of men in power. I mean, all one needs to do is open Twitter to see that on full display.

Kara: Well, I end my public lectures with... you were talking about emojis, with a series of emojis and it's a panel that shows a man's day and it shows these faces. And it starts out with this happy face and then this bland half smile and then it's sleeping. And then it says 'a woman's day,' and you can imagine the emojis start out with a happy face, and then she's mad, and then she's crying, and then she's happy again, and it just goes up and down and all around. And it's just this emotionality beyond anything in it. It's exhausting.

And I just put that slide up there and everyone, you know, they feel embarrassed that they're laughing. They feel embarrassed that there's truth in that slide, that women do, according to scientists, have more connection with not only their own emotions but other people's emotions. They're better at reading emotions on people's faces. They're better at connecting with people, and negotiating, and figuring out how somebody is feeling, and what they might need to do at a given moment. But these abilities are turned against them as something that is a liability.

But as I pointed out in my lecture, I say it's the man's *lack* of connection to his emotionality, to what he's feeling and his lack of ability to try out emotions without going all the way to the end, that makes men throttle, and rape, and commit mass

suicide with their children and their wife, and press the red button, and create wars, and do all of these things that women, with their emotional connections and with their ability to try things out, talk it through, "What might that be like?" These are reasons why I think women need to be in power, particularly at this day and age when we're really looking down the edge of a precipice of social and civilized collapse.

Aside: So men, non-men, everyone: Just feel your feelings. It's healthy to feel your feelings and identify them so that you can address them.

Also, of those queens and lady-kings, I do have opinions on who's a Miranda, who's a Carrie, who's a Samantha. But listen, I feel it's somewhat insulting, but also I think you should think of that on your own and then you can just tweet me with your opinions.

Anyway, with Kara's book coming out on election day, the discussion kinda drifted toward how the fall of ancient civilizations is mirrored in modern politics! Shirley Bassey's like: *[clip_of Shirley Bassey's History Repeating: "it's all just a little bit of history repeating"]*

Alie: You study autocratic rule. How do you liken that to what we are experiencing now and is there any hope at all?

Kara: You know, it's an interesting thing. I didn't realize that I was studying an authoritarian regime until after I'd gotten my PhD. I remember standing with my graduate students in front of Abu Simbel and these massive statues of Ramses the Second and going, "Oh my God. Of course. It's like Stalin." And it's a silly thing, and I'm almost embarrassed to admit it, but I daresay that most people who are attracted to Egypt and go to King Tut exhibitions don't think that they're lauding an authoritarian regime that understood how to package power so that it's safe and, like, puppies and rainbows.

They packaged it so that they weren't showing the bloodshed. They packaged it to show the divine protection and we're drawn to that. We want somebody to take care of us. We want our divine father to come in and say, "It's going to be okay, you don't have to worry about anything." This is very alluring and seductive for us.

And so, it's an interesting thing now to have this 20 years of experience with this particular authoritarian regime, and see my own country go down the same path of authoritarianism, and do it in a way so that people don't even know it's happening.

To package that authoritarianism so that it seems like it's decisive. It's keeping you safe. It's keeping the immigrants out. It's keeping the woman in her place. They may not say it directly, but it's still the "father" and very much with evangelical Christianity thrown into this or Zionist Judaism. The divine father coming in to protect us and keep us safe.

And the ideology behind what is happening today in the United States is so cleverly done and so on a par with what the ancient Egyptians did when they presented themselves that it's scary.

No, we don't see Donald Trump statues in giant granite relief and nor should we expect it because we're too clever for that, but we have figured out to create the State TV in a privatized context.

Alie: And we do have golden towers in the major cities bearing the name. So, I mean, it's not that far off.

Kara: We do. And we do have the same... Now here, this is going to seem a little provocative, and I talk about this in the book, but Donald Trump also understands that his wife, on par with him as a peer in terms... well, not in terms of age, but in terms of hierarchy, she has to keep within her place. She has to keep quiet, she has to worry about clothes. She's supposed to just worry about those womanly domestic things, whereas he allows his *daughter* to go out there and be much more of a power broker. And the way he talks about his daughter, sexualizes his daughter in Howard Stern interviews, is very much akin to the ancient Egyptian king, marrying his daughters and elevating them to great royal wife. And Ivanka Trump does play the role of the great royal wife in the Ancient Egyptian authoritarian regime, that way of viewing things.

So, the parallels to Ancient Egyptian authoritarianism and what we see in the modern day are pretty damn striking. This idea of us-versus-them, exclusionary, xenophobic sorts of tropes. It's all there.

Alie: Oh, do we have time for a few rapid fire questions?

Kara: Yeah!

Alie: Okay. A few quick rapid fire. I got this question a lot.

Emily Jackson, Aerial Belk [phonetic], iolanthe, and Mara Spensieri all asked: Cats. Why did ancient Egyptians worship cats?

Kara: Well, wouldn't you worship a cat?

Alie: I don't know. I like dogs personally.

Kara: I mean, I don't like either. I was a vegetarian for 20 years and I'm not anymore, so I'm not an animal hater, but I'm definitely not an animal lover.

Some people just aren't animal people and I'm one of them. Animals come up to me and I go, "What do you want? What's going on?"

Aside: Well, okay hear me out, I looked it up and 68% of Egyptian land is desert [*high-pitched voice*] *soooooo maaaybe*:

Alie: I guess it's kind of like a big sandbox.

Kara: Yes. A cat can be this sweet, calm thing and then when she's pissed off that cat can destroy you. Even a housecat could destroy your face if she wanted to.

Alie: Oh, yeah. It could kill me. But did the Egyptians identify that?

Kara: Oh my God, they loved that.

So the thing about the cat, they thought of the cat mainly as a female entity. That's where they really put their attention. They put their attention into this idea that the female cat can be this cuddly sweet thing, or she will destroy. This vehicle of keeping the patriarchs safe, this vehicle of making sure that the rebels will not come towards the king.

In many ways. the cat is Sarah Huckabee Sanders [*laughs*], the cat cult. She's the one that that makes sure that the barriers are put up to keep the king at the center safe and to keep the Ma'at, to keep the truth and justice of the authoritarian regime.

Alie: Well, she does have cat eyeliner too. Cat eye. Smokey cat eye.

Kara: Yeah. She kind of does. She kind of does. [*clip of Michelle Wolf at 2018 White House Correspondents' Dinner: "and then she uses that ash to create a perfect smokey eye."*]

Alie: A bunch of people asked me this and I don't even know how you're going to answer this, but simple question: How were the pyramids built?

Kara: Oh No. We don't know and that's really cool that we don't know.

Alie: Was it ancient aliens?

Kara: It was not ancient aliens, but that's what the Egyptian kings want you to believe.

Alie: Oh!

Kara: What better thing than for you to stand in front of those pyramids? Have you ever done it? Have you been to Giza?

Alie: No, I've never been!

Kara: You stand there and you look up and you just go, "Holy God! how is this possible?" And boom! They've got you.

It's propaganda that never stops giving because you look at it and you think that other-worldly powers built those pyramids. Then there you are. Other-worldly powers did build those pyramids and it's called the Egyptian king.

When people think that ancient aliens built them, or just aliens, you're buying into the propaganda of the authoritarian regime hook, line, and sinker. So please don't do it.

Alie: Okay.

Kara: Just because we don't know how it was done doesn't mean that...

Alie: Doesn't mean aliens?

Kara: ...that you didn't have a hundred thousand poor schmucks dragging and pushing stones. I mean, really: draft labor of your own people is the best explanation. The details of how, until we take that thing apart, we're not gonna really know.

Alie: I hear that's going to be difficult.

Kara: Yeah. [*laughs*] It's gonna be difficult to take one of the eight Wonders of the World apart. The only last standing one.

Alie: It's going to be a really big renovation job.

Kara: Err, seven. There's seven Wonders and people add the eighth. Sorry, that was embarrassing.

Alie: No, I didn't even... I couldn't have even fact check you because I didn't know.

Kara: Seven Wonders, yeah.

Aside: I felt like a real bozo that I couldn't remember all seven and then I looked them up and they're; Colossus of Rhodes, Great Pyramid of Giza, Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Lighthouse of Alexandria, Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, Statue of Zeus at Olympia, Temple of Artemis at Ephesus.

Confession, y'all. I hadn't heard of five of those. Had you? Okay, let me know how many you'd heard of because it's possible that the tourism boards or the Seven Wonders' PR team is just snoozin' on the job. Like, come on! Get an Instagram account! Tag things "Wonders-ful." A little brand-awareness for the Seven Wonders could go a long way.

Alie: Jessica Tubesing asks: Do you have any belief in King Tut's curse or any other Pharaoh's curse?

Come on, get real with me. Curses: Yay or nay?

Kara: No, I don't believe in curses, but I believe in a lot more than you would think. I mean, I may be an academic who's interested in science and data-driven arguments, and I am, but you know, as I said, I don't know why I'm interested in ancient Egypt. I don't have any good explanation for that.

Alie: I was going to ask if ever you thought maybe you were just being inhabited by an Egyptian ghost?

Kara: Who knows? I have no understanding of what happens to me after I die, if I was someplace before. These things are interesting to me. But wait, what was the question again? Oh, King Tut's curse.

There were lots of ways to die in the '20s before antibiotics came around. So I wouldn't... and Carnarvon was already of frail health and that's why he went to Egypt in the first place. So, if that's the way you're going to prove your curse, it's not gonna work.

Aside: So, four months after his presence at the opening of King Tut's tomb, one Lord Carnarvon got a mosquito bite, which he cut shaving. Then he died.

Alie: That was probably nothing Purell couldn't have stopped.

Kara: Maybe. Yeah, because it was that nicked infection on his cheek from shaving. Right? So they say.

And we don't even know how and why he died. Blood infection possibly. But there was probably other stuff going on with that poor guy. And the stress of finding that too. Oh my God. So maybe just the stress of a big discovery. That could do it. I've seen Egyptologists who found amazing discoveries and it can be very, very hard on the body, psyche, and soul.

Alie: Really?

Kara: All of that attention, all of the competition. I'll just put it down to that. The media destroyed Carnarvon. *[laughs]* You don't need a curse when you have the interest of all of the people around you.

Aside: So you don't need a curse. But in case you want more background on this, many tombs of the pharaohs were discovered in the Valley of the Kings, on the west bank of

the Nile across from modern Luxor. Many Egyptian tombs in general bore clear warnings, like one which read very straightforwardly, "Cursed be those who disturb the rest of a Pharaoh. They that shall break the seal of this tomb shall meet death by a disease that no doctor can diagnose."

Like, what? Okay! Duly noted! I'm outta here!

But in 1922, Egyptologist Howard Carter was hired by George Herbert the Fifth, Earl of Carnarvon (aka Lord Carnarvon) to do some digging. Like, does it get any more [*old-time snobbery voice*] "Hello then. We're here to pillage your treasures"?

It looked like a bust. They weren't finding anything, then a water-boy tripped on a stone and revealed a hidden flight of steps leading to a chamber. A few weeks later, Lord Carnarvon arrived in Egypt and, going through these tunnels by candlelight he's, like, backseat excavating over Carter's shoulder and he asks "Can you see anything?" and Carter sticks a candle through a small hole into an undiscovered chamber, glimmering with golden burial objects, and just says, "Yes, wonderful things!" and King Tut's tomb was discovered.

Roughly 5,400 items were found in the tomb, including; a solid gold coffin, face mask, thrones, archery bows, trumpets, a chalice, food, wine, sandals, fresh linen underwear, and a dagger with an iron blade made from possibly a meteorite.

It's like a very intense and be-cursed episode of *Storage Wars*. Remember: Four months later Lord Carnarvon died of, to borrow from Egyptian tomb warnings, 'death by a disease that no doctor can diagnose.' A little on the nose, ghost kings, but I see why.

What about that sarcophagus found this summer in Alexandria and filled with three skeletons and a bunch of magic red liquid? Well, I did a dive on Kara's Facebook to see if she had any thoughts on the matter, and in response to the question, "should we drink it?" She just commented "Ummmmmmmm. No" (And there were eight 'm's in her "um").

Does she think it's cursed? No, they think it's sewer water. When asked by NPR, she said, "Sewage is enough of a curse, really."

So, onward.

Alie: Danielle Dankenbring asks: "What's the strangest thing you've seen on or in a coffin?" So many dicks. Are there dicks on coffins?

Kara: There are dicks, as you say. Egyptologists like to say 'phalli'. You'll see phalluses, erect phalluses, all over the place and you will see divinity standing there with their erect phallus all out and lovely. And you might see some masturbatory images, because the beginning of the world is from a masturbatory moment, and Osiris remakes himself after his death by masturbating himself, jacking himself off to new life. So, you actually see dicks all over coffins.

But, she asks about inside a coffin. You might see an erect phallus figure depicted on the inside of a coffin. And Tutankhamun was buried mummified with an erect phallus.

Alie: What?!

Kara: Yeah. Yes! Buried in with a mummified phallus in the erect position.

Alie: No!

Kara: He's the only one known to have had that treatment, from the examination of the other mummies. And you wonder how they did that, you know. They stand the thing up and let it dry. And it's a tiny little phallus because, you know, it's just... it's all dried. And it reminds me of George Costanza [*laughs*] in *Seinfeld*. [*shouts*] "I was in the pool!" [*clip from Seinfeld episode "The Hamptons": Jerry: "you mean... shrinkage?" George: "yes!"*] And apparently the penis was knocked off of the mummy. Google it, you guys. It's fun. Then they had to find it and I don't think they reattached it. He's just in there with the body.

Alie: Oh no! Just like a baby carrot. Like a dried-up baby carrot.

Kara: Kind of. Dried up baby carrot would work, yeah. And if you want, you can go to... The Griffith Institute at Oxford has put all of the Harry Burton photos up live for you to see. It's called Anatomy of an Excavation. So put in 'Griffith Institute' and 'Anatomy of an excavation Tutankhamun' and you will be able to find it. You could probably even do a text search for penis and you might be able to find it.

Aside: So, I did. I looked this up and, I mean, listen: Have you ever made beef jerky? 'Cause it loses a lot of volume. Dehydration is a real bitch, but I did read that whoever embalmed him may have positioned him in such an 'alert' way as a little F.U. to his dad, a Pharaoh who was more religious and conservative, and I think that's both hilarious and very cool.

But, lamentably, the member in question went missing in 1968 for almost forty years until someone found it in 2006 in the sand next to his body. It was buried like a cat turd! It's painful to even think about that level of disruption. I would like to extend my sincere cosmic apologies to King Tutankhamun that this happened, just on behalf of all living humans and creatures left on earth.

Like, curses are put there for a reason, and I get it. This was not okay. But Kara shares her own experience in this realm:

Alie: So coffins, the craziest thing you've ever seen?

Kara: That I've ever seen inside of a coffin... I guess would be a dead body. And you know, that's pretty amazing. Especially when they're one of those stuffed Twenty-First Dynasty varieties, those are pretty intense.

Alie: Are they still wrapped with makeup on underneath?

Kara: They're supposed to be wrapped, but most of the bodies that I've seen have been unwrapped by people wanting to see what those mummies look like, usually at a time period when they didn't do it very carefully and they were just cutting through the bandages.

Alie: Oh noooo!

Kara: So, most of them are just displayed, vulnerably exposed. And should we wrap them again? I don't know.

Alie: When I see a body in a coffin, I always say hello and I say, "I'm only here to look at your stuff. I won't disturb you for very long and I'm so sorry to disturb you. But how are you today?" And just in my head, I have a little conversation with the dead person right there.

It doesn't happen as often as you would think, even though I'm a coffin expert. Most of the bodies have been removed from the coffins, which is sad. I wish they were all kept together. But, when a piece goes into an art museum, they say, "we are an art museum and this is not art!" And they send the body off to some anthropological museum where it usually disappears or something bad happens.

It's very sad. That's why the Twenty-First Dynasty individuals did that, why they tricked out their bodies so much though. Because coffin reuse... 'cause I didn't tell you that's the other thing I do with coffins, is I look particularly for how these coffins were reused at this time period of economic crisis, how often they were reused. They were reused so often that these Twenty-First Dynasty individuals made sure that their bodies could work as a transformational device, as a kind of coffin without being *in* the coffin because they knew that they probably were going to have their coffins taken from them because they were taking their ancestors' coffins and reusing them.

Alie: Oh, that's crazy. I'm sure that you can probably look for signs of varnish... plaster...

Kara: Yeah, you can see multiple layers, kind of like an archaeological excavation where you're looking for stratigraphy.

Aside: I looked it up. That just means: looking at multiple layers of an artifact.

Kara: I can sometimes see multiple decorative layers on a given coffin. By the time the Twenty-First Dynasty came to a close, they were *really* good at reusing these coffins without people noticing and taking off all the old previous decoration. But there's still clues here and there that are useful for me.

Alie: You're going to need a new flashlight though.

Kara: I know.

Alie: With a UV light.

Kara: Yeah, because I'm heading back to Egypt this September.

Alie: You are? Oh my God!

Kara: For three weeks. Cairo Museum is the gift that keeps giving. Wonderful things in there.

Alie: And now what do you, what do you hate about your job? What *suuucks*?

Kara: Email.

Alie: It went off, like, six times.

Kara: I know. and I don't have the notifications going on because every day I get a good hundred emails. And I'm chair of the department and I have to deal with, you know, grading problems, or disruptive students, or lecturers who have problems. Yeah, the

service of the job can be a little overwhelming and daunting and I just try to keep up with that as I can.

And that's why summer is my favorite. I get to read, and think, and write, and I don't get to do that that much during the year. But I'm using September, instead of reading more, to go out into the field and collect more data.

Alie: On coffins?

Kara: On coffins, which is great. And I'm looking at coffins that are so fugly, as I like to say, that everyone's ignored them. And I'm really excited to look at these pieces.

They're coffins that, when the high priesthood of Amen in Dynasties Twenty and Twenty-One went through the Valley of the Kings and used it as their own personal bank vault, and took all of the golden and silver and precious objects out of the tombs of Ramses the Second, Amenhotep the Third, Ramses the Third, all of those kings, and recycled them for their own use to fund their own regime. They took those kings' bodies out, stripped them of all of their valuables, re-wrapped them, and then put them in these fugly coffins. Reused, ugly, ugly coffins. And I'm very excited to look at these pieces because it's rare when ugliness enters a museum.

But because Ramses the Third is buried in one of these fugly coffins... That coffin is kept in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

Alie: How ugly are they though? Are they like Crocs? Are they like one big Croc with a body in it?

Kara: Well, the faces are a little off. They're obviously not made for kings, they're made for other people. And their surfaces, if they were nice pieces, are often chiseled down because they were covered with gold. So, a lot of that ugliness is because of theft, so their faces have been marred.

But a couple of them are in coffins that were not made by very good coffin makers. And they just look a little... they're just a little off. Like, imagine that, you know, when you're looking at your Facebook or your social media and someone makes a cake and they go "nailed it!" It's like some of those coffins are like this, their faces are just off, and weird, and you know, they didn't have the best coffin maker for some of these. And it's interesting that they're going to be like, "[*very regal and official announcing*] Yeah, we have the most royal and divine Ramses the Third! [*now dismissively*] We have this coffin, so yeah, whatever, put him in there."

There's some ugly art out there in the world.

Alie: Oh, that's just delightful though.

Kara: Yeah!

Aside: Her son's babysitter was due home any minute - also thank you so much Kara for making time for this - so we wrapped it up with one last question:

Alie: Now what is your favorite thing about Egyptology or your job? Like, the thing that just gives you butterflies that you're like, "Ah! I love this so much!"

Kara: Ohhhh, that's hard, but I think I know how to answer that. I do.

It's a sword that cuts both ways. It's my greatest weakness as well as my greatest strength. And that would be my ability to communicate to people who don't do Egyptology, and my interest in talking to normal people who don't devote their lives to these 30 dynasties with all of their intricacies, and all of their language, and material complexities.

And I like telling a story. I like connecting with an audience and I like making the ancient world come alive again. And when I say that's my greatest weakness, it's because, academics, they like to make sure you're moving the field forward. And so I have to constantly ask myself, am I moving the field forward by doing this kind of work? And so, thus, I have Kathlyn M. Cooney and Kara Cooney and I have to negotiate both sides of my Egyptological being, if you will, to try to move the field forward with my coffins work, social history work, and then to also communicate with the public and tell people why the ancient world is relevant at all.

So, whether that gender studies work, my book *When Women Ruled the World* or *The Woman Who Would Be King*, moved the field forward or not might be debatable. Yeah, the humanities are not building factories, and the humanities are perhaps not employing hundreds of thousands of factory workers, but they're helping us to understand where we've come from, where we are, where we're going. And it is as relevant as anything I can possibly imagine.

Alie: And where can people gently stalk you? Where can they find you?

Kara: Oh, you can stalk me in so many places. I have a Facebook page which is still my biggest.

It's my favorite medium because I can post articles and get more academic with what I'm saying. And, you'll find me on Facebook under Kara Cooney Egyptologist. You'll find that I am an anthropologist at heart, and I'm interested in all kinds of stuff, and I just post things that are of interest to me.

And then I have an Instagram page, @karacooney, and I don't post on that quite as much, but I do. It's more personal too. So if you're interested in my private life, you could go there.

I hate LinkedIn.

Alie: Oh God. I don't do it.

Kara: I hate it.. I get messages. If you ever tried to write me on LinkedIn, forget it. I don't look at it. I forgot my password on purpose. I don't want to know anything that happens on LinkedIn.

Alie: No one will ping you there and then circle back, as they do.

Kara: Okay, good.

Alie: And the book comes out on November 6th.

Kara: It does. It's going to be an interesting November for everybody.

Alie: What are you going to be doing on November 6th?

Kara: Oh, I'll be watching the polls like everybody else. I don't know how much TV I can handle. I haven't been able to watch too much TV lately. I like to consume my end-of-the-world apocalyptic narrative through print [*laughs*] rather than picture.

Babysitter's here. Here's my women in power.

Alie: There we go!

So, you can pick up her 2014 book *The Woman who would be King* or pre-order her new one, *When Women Ruled the World: Six Queens of Egypt*, which is out very soon. You can also find her show *Out of Egypt* or *The Secrets of History's Lost Queen* on Discovery Channel. Heads up, I believe that is available on Amazon and Netflix. She's also a recurring expert on the History Channel's *Digging for Truth*. So, find her shows streaming. Just, in general, enjoy her presence on planet Earth.

To find more of Ologies, we're @ologies on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#), I'm [Alie Ward](#) on [both](#). There's a [Facebook Ologies Podcast Group](#) and you have to answer a few secret questions to be admitted into our *underground chamber*. Thank you Erin Talbert and Hannah Lipow for adminning.

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For merch, head to [ologiesmerch.com](#). You can pick up some of the brand new fall stuff in mustards, and maroons, and collegiate-crested shirts and such. They're so delightful. Thank you Boni Dutch and Shannon Feltus for designing and handling merch.

And thank you to all four sister-uncles for the wonderful time in Portland this past weekend at the first ever Camp Ologies meetup group, which was just a treasure trove of nice, curious people looking at bees and trees. Thank you melittologist Mandy Shaw and dendrologist Casey Clapp for coming out and hanging out and teaching us so many good things.

Thank you to Steven Ray Morris - himself very much a cat person - who makes each episode so much better. Check out his kitty-themed podcast *The Purrrcast* if you don't believe me. Dude knows his cats. It's an exceptional podcast.

Nick Thorburn wrote the theme song.

And now if you stick around to the very end you know I tell a secret. This one is super, super embarrassing. But that's the nature of getting you to listen through the credits.

Okay, so the first time I went to record with Kara and my Zoom wasn't in my little vintage recording purse I was mortified. I was, like, "How could this happen? How did I leave the house without this?" So, we rescheduled. I left defeated. I smothered my sorrows with a pastry at a café, and I went to get my wallet out of my backpack, and I found my Zoom recorder in there. So I had it with me! The whole time! It was just in the backpack and not in the vintage equipment bag where it should have been. I could have recorded this the first time. I didn't actually leave it at home. It was right there. So that's even more mortifying, I think, than just plain forgetting it: Thinking you forgot it but really it was next to you the whole time in a different bag.

So, Kara, I am so sorry. I hope that you stopped listening at the credits. Anyone else, if you're out there beating yourself up for making a mistake, just know it happens to all of us - even world-renowned Egyptologists arrive without flashlights. Let's all forgive ourselves. Onward! Upward!

Alright, keep asking smart people stupid questions. I swear they love it. I think they love it. I'm pretty sure they're okay with it. I think they love it. Okay.

Berbye.

Transcribed by Jude Kenny the Second.

Some additional links which you may find helpful:

[Waaaay back machine: Old Kingdom](#)

[Comfytimes: Middle Kingdom](#)

[Power and drama: New Kingdom](#)

[Egyptian coffins: Where the magic happens](#)

[Sean Carter: Supportive of Egyptian Lady Kings](#)

[Kara Cooney killing it on on Craig Ferguson](#)

[Usborne books are even cuter than you except](#)

[Let's talk about transparent toilets](#)

[Getting to know your Nefertiti](#)

[Also they gave her a facelift which is very annoying](#)

[Egypt is a huge pretty sandbox](#)

[What are the 7 wonders again?](#)

[Boning up the Battle of Actium](#)

[Curses on whomever did this to King Tut's wang](#)

[A full archive of Burton's tomb photos](#)

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