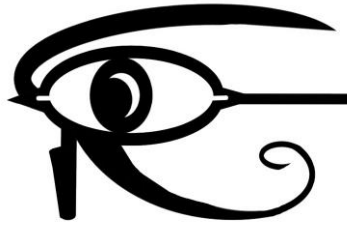


The Black Archive #12

PYRAMIDS OF MARS



By Kate Orman

AN EXCELLENT YEAR. ONE OF MY FAVOURITES.'

Why is *Pyramids of Mars* (1975) set in 1911? Lewis Greifer's original story outline was set in the near future of UNIT¹, but script editor Robert Holmes² pointed out a problem in that the Egyptian government no longer permitted the export of antiquities³. But why not place *Pyramids* in the Victorian era, when Britain's Egyptomania was at its height – the setting of two of the Hammer horror movies which inspired it? Alternatively, why not locate the story in the early 1920s, when the discovery of King Tutankhamun's 'absolutely untouched' tomb⁴ triggered a new wave of obsession with mummies and curses?

In a way, *Pyramids* isn't set in 1911 at all; there are no references to historical events of the time. It was a comparatively quiet year in the history of Britain and the world. Perhaps this is not a fixed point in time, so Earth's history is vulnerable to Sutekh's vengeance⁵. An early 20th-century setting helps make Laurence Scarman's precocious invention of radio astronomy more plausible, lending the story an extra scientific element. (Sarah describes the repeated message from Mars as being '[I]ike an SOS'⁶ – a shipping distress signal which had only recently come into international use, in 1908.)

The Talons of Weng-Chiang (1977) is *Pyramids*' fraternal twin – even closer than its other sibling story, *The Tomb of the Cybermen* (1967). As well as having the fourth Doctor, Robert Holmes, period settings, and false gods in common, both *Pyramids* and *Talons* are based on recent movie versions of period fiction about the mysterious, deadly East. Is there some connection between the Edwardian setting of *Pyramids* and the Victorian setting of *Talons*? The latter draws heavily on the Hallam Productions / Constantin Film **Fu Manchu** movies of the 1960s, but Fu is not a Victorian villain; he made his first appearance in a 1913 novel⁷, most of the books were published in the 30s, and the 60s flicks were all set in the early 20th century. Perhaps Robert Holmes was saving the period for a full pastiche of 'the popular concept of Victoriana' – 'fog, gas lamps, hansom cabs, music halls'⁸ – which couldn't have been fitted into *Pyramids*' small-scale, claustrophobic country-house setting.

My guess is that the year is a compromise between the 1890s and the 1920s, giving the story a look which, from the distant vantage point of the 1970s, loosely suggests both. Conveniently – so conveniently that it intrudes – Sarah is wearing a period-appropriate frock, described in the script as 'a faintly Edwardian dress'⁹. Stargrove, the manor house in Hampshire whose exterior and grounds were used for location filming, was built in 1848¹⁰, so it would suit any period setting after that¹¹.

¹ Pixley, Andrew, 'Archive: Pyramids of Mars'. *Doctor Who Magazine* (DWM) #300, p33.

² When Greifer's scripts proved unusable, Holmes rewrote the story from scratch, retaining only some elements from Greifer's original outline (Pixley, 'Archive', p29).

³ Pixley, 'Archive', p28.

⁴ Marcus Scarman, *Pyramids of Mars* episode 1.

⁵ This distinction was established in *The Waters of Mars* (2009). Or perhaps this is a fixed point, in some way only a Time Lord can see? After all, the Doctor says that what's taking place is 'contrary to the laws of the universe' (*Pyramids of Mars* episode 1).

⁶ Episode 1.

⁷ In Rohmer, Sax, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*.

⁸ Russell, Gary, 'Interview: Robert Holmes'. DWM #100.

⁹ Pixley, 'Archive', p30.

¹⁰ Hampshire Gardens Trust. 'Stargrove'.

¹¹ Including the contemporary setting of *Image of the Fendahl* (1977), also shot there. Barnes, Alan. 'The Fact of Fiction: Image of the Fendahl'. DWM #379, p43.)

By this point, you may be wondering why I have opened an essay on *Pyramids of Mars* with the minor issue of its period setting. That question has allowed me to introduce most of the subjects I'm going to discuss: the Hammer movies which the story pastiches; archaeology and the Egyptomania of the Victorian era and the 1920s; and the imperial fear of 'reverse colonisation'.

I'll return to each of these, but for now, it's time to move on to another subject: Ancient Egypt and its mythology.