

Akhenaten and the Amarna Period

By Dr Kate Spence

Akhenaten is a source of endless fascination and speculation - this often masks the fact that we actually know very little about him. Dr Kate Spence explores the enigmatic story of Egypt's 'heretic' king.



Akhenaten from one of his colossi at Karnak

The appeal of the Amarna period

Some people are drawn by interest in Akhenaten himself or his religion, others by a fascination with the unusual art which appeals strongly to the tastes of modern viewers and provides a sense of immediacy rarely felt with traditional Egyptian representation. The radical changes Akhenaten made have led to his characterisation as the 'first individual in human history' and this in turn has led to endless speculation about his background and motivation; he is cast as hero or villain according to the viewpoint of the commentator.

Akhenaten came to the throne of Egypt around 1353 BC. The reign of his father, Amenhotep III, had been long and prosperous with international diplomacy largely replacing the relentless military campaigning of his predecessors. The reign culminated in a series of magnificent jubilee pageants celebrated in Thebes (modern Luxor), the religious capital of Egypt at the time and home to the state god Amun-Re. The new king was crowned as Amenhotep IV (meaning 'Amun is content') and temple construction and decoration projects began immediately in the name of the new king. The earliest work of his reign is stylistically similar to the art of his predecessors, but within a year or two he was building temples to the Aten or divinised sun-disk at Karnak in a very different artistic style and had changed his name to Akhenaten in honour of this god.

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Akhenaten's 'great king's wife' was Nefertiti and they had six daughters. There were also other wives, including the enigmatic Kiya who may have been the mother of Tutankhamun. Royal women play an unusually prominent role in the art of the period and this is particularly true of Nefertiti who is frequently depicted alongside her husband. Nefertiti disappears from the archaeological record around year 12 and some have argued that she reappears as the enigmatic co-regent Smenkhkare towards the end of Akhenaten's reign.

Religious reforms

The Egyptians had traditionally worshipped a whole pantheon of gods who were represented in human or animal form or as animal-headed humans. Some gods were specific to particular towns or places; others had broader appeal. From early periods solar gods such as Re had played an important role in Egyptian state religion because the distant but universal power of the sun fitted well with prevailing ideas of the supreme power of the king both within Egypt and beyond its borders.

'Akhenaten raised the Aten to the position of 'sole god'...'

In the New Kingdom, solar gods again became prominent, among them the Aten, the visible sun-disk which can be seen traversing the sky each day. Akhenaten raised the Aten to the position of 'sole god', represented as a disk with rays of light terminating in hands which reach out to the royal family, sometimes offering the hieroglyphic sign for life. Akhenaten and his family are frequently shown worshipping the Aten or simply indulging in everyday activities beneath the disk. Everywhere the close ties between the king and god are stressed through art and text. The king forms the link between the god and ordinary people whose supposed focus of worship seems to have been Akhenaten and the royal family rather than the Aten itself.



Relief showing Akhenaten and his wife Nefertiti worshipping the Aten. Tel el Amarna, Aten Temple

Akhenaten's religion is probably not strictly speaking monotheistic, although only the Aten is actually worshipped and provided with temples. Other gods still existed and are mentioned in inscriptions although these tend to be other solar gods or personifications of abstract concepts; even the names of the Aten, which are written in cartouches like king's names, consist of a theological statement describing the Aten in terms of other gods. The majority of traditional gods were not tolerated, however, and teams of workmen were sent around the temples of Egypt where they chiselled out the names and images of these gods wherever they occurred.

A number of hymns to the Aten were composed during Akhenaten's reign and these provide a glimpse of what James Allen has described as the 'natural philosophy' of Akhenaten's religion. The wonders of the natural world are described to extol the universal power of the sun; all creatures rejoice when the sun rises and nasty things come out at night when the sun is not present.

The art of the Amarna period

Early in his reign Akhenaten used art as a way of emphasising his intention of doing things very differently. Colossi and wall-reliefs from the Karnak Aten Temple are highly exaggerated and almost grotesque when viewed in the context of the formality and restraint which had characterised Egyptian royal and elite art for

the millennium preceding Akhenaten's birth. Although these seem striking and strangely beautiful today, it is hard for us to appreciate the profoundly shocking effect that such representations must have had on the senses of those who first viewed them and who would never have been exposed to anything other than traditional Egyptian art.

'The royal family are shown with elongated skulls and pear-shaped bodies...'

With the move to Amarna the art becomes less exaggerated, but while it is often described as 'naturalistic' it remains highly stylised in its portrayal of the human figure. The royal family are shown with elongated skulls and pear-shaped bodies with skinny torsos and arms but fuller hips, stomachs and thighs. The subject matter of royal art also changes. Although formal scenes of the king worshipping remain important there is an increasing emphasis on ordinary, day-to-day activities which include intimate portrayals of Akhenaten and Nefertiti playing with their daughters beneath the rays of the Aten. Animals and birds are shown frolicking beneath the rays of the rising sun in the decoration of the royal tomb. While traditional Egyptian art tends to emphasise the eternal, Amarna art focuses on the minutiae of life which only occur because of the light - and life-giving power of the sun.



Akhenaten and Nefertiti play with their daughters beneath the Aten (sun disk)

In addition to the changes he made to religious practices and art, Akhenaten also instigated changes in temple architecture and building methods: stone structures were now built from much smaller blocks of stone set in a strong mortar. Even official inscriptions changed, moving away from the old-fashioned language traditional to monumental texts to reflect the spoken language of the time.

Horizon of the Aten

'In the cliffs around the boundaries of the city the king left a series of monumental inscriptions...'

Akhenaten decided that the worship of the Aten required a location uncontaminated by the cults of traditional gods and to this end chose a site in Middle Egypt for a new capital city which he called Akhetaten, 'Horizon of the Aten'. It is a desert site surrounded on three sides by cliffs and to the west by the Nile and is known today as el-Amarna. In the cliffs around the boundaries of the city the king left a series of monumental inscriptions in which he outlined his reasons for the move and his architectural intentions for the city in the form of lists of buildings.

To the east of the city is a valley leading into the desert in which the king began excavating tombs for the royal family. On the plain near the river massive temples to the Aten were constructed: these were open to the sky and the rays of the sun and were probably influenced by the design of much earlier solar temples dedicated to the cult of Re. Other sites of religious importance are located on the edges of the desert plain. There were also at least four palaces in the city which vary considerably in form, plus all the administrative facilities, storage and workshops necessary to support the royal family, court and the temple cults.



The ruins of Amarna

Akhetaten is sometimes described as if it were some sort of broad Utopian project. However, while temple and palace areas of the city are clearly planned, there is actually no evidence that Akhenaten showed any interest in the living arrangements of his people and residential areas suggest organic urban development. The wealthy seem to have enclosed an area of land with a high wall and built their spacious houses and ancillary structures within, while the houses and shacks of those that followed the court are crammed in between these luxurious walled estates. The city was probably less dense than other urban centres of the day but this was only because it was inhabited for such a short time and processes of infilling were in their infancy. Amarna is one of the few sites where we have a significant amount of archaeological information about how people actually lived in ancient Egypt.

The aftermath

Akhenaten died in his seventeenth year on the throne and his reforms did not survive for long in his absence. His co-regent Smenkhkare, about whom we know virtually nothing, appears not to have remained in power for long after Akhenaten's death. The throne passed to a child, Tutankhamun (originally Tutankhaten) who was probably the son of Akhenaten and Kiya. The regents administering the country on behalf of the child soon abandoned the city of Akhetaten and the worship of the Aten and returned to Egypt's traditional gods and religious centres. The temples and cults of the gods were restored and people shut up their houses and returned to the old capitals at Thebes and Memphis.

'His image and names were removed from monuments.'

Over time, the process of restoration of traditional cults turned to whole-scale obliteration of all things associated with Akhenaten. His image and names were removed from monuments. His temples were dismantled and the stone reused in the foundations of other more orthodox royal building projects. The city of Akhetaten gradually crumbled back into the desert. His name and those of his immediate successors were omitted from official king-lists so that they remained virtually unknown until the archaeological discoveries at Akhetaten and in the tomb of Tutankhamun made these kings amongst the most famous of all rulers of ancient Egypt.

Find out more

Read on

Akhenaten King of Egypt by Cyril Aldred (Thames and Hudson, 1988)

The Royal Women of Amarna: Images of Beauty from Ancient Egypt by Dorothea Arnold (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996)

Pharaohs of the Sun: Akhenaten, Nefertiti, Tutankhamun by Rita Freed, Yvonne Markowitz and Sue D'Auria (eds) (Museum of Fine Arts, 1999)

Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization by Barry Kemp (Routledge, 1989)

Akhenaten: History, Fantasy and Ancient Egypt by Dominic Monserrat (Routledge, 2000)

Akhenaten: Egypt's False Prophet by Nicholas Reeves (Thames and Hudson, 2001)

Women in Ancient Egypt by G Robins (London, 1993)

The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt by I Shaw (ed) (Oxford, 2000)

Places to visit

[The British Museum](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/visit/index.html) [http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/visit/index.html] . Great Russell Street, London. Tel: 0207 323 8299. The British Museum is free to everybody and opens at 10am every day.

[The Metropolitan Museum of Art](http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/department.asp?dep=10) [http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/department.asp?dep=10] 1000 Fifth Avenue at 82nd Street, New York, 10028-0198. Tel: 212-535-7710 A varied collection from Egypt consisting of approximately 36,000 objects dating from the Palaeolithic to the Roman period.

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- BBC News - Country Profile of Egypt - http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/country_profiles/737642.stm

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- Metropolitan Museum of Art - <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/department.asp?dep=10>
- The Louvre - <http://www.louvre.fr/louvre.htm>
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