

THE ROYAL WOMEN OF AMARNA

Images of Beauty from Ancient Egypt

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THE RELIGION OF AMARNA

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For all its revolutionary aspects, the Amarna Period of Egyptian history was traditional in one central respect: each of its innovations was carried out in the name of—and in service to—religion.

The role of religion in the life of ancient Egypt can be difficult for modern minds to appreciate. In most contemporary societies, religion represents only one means by which human beings relate to the world around them, along with politics, science, and social mores. In addition to the values by which people govern and judge their behavior, religion today generally encompasses an individual's relationship to those aspects of life that cannot be explained "scientifically."

In ancient Egypt, as in other ancient societies, religion and science were one. Where modern science explains the universe in terms of a set of physical laws, ancient minds saw natural phenomena as the manifested wills of sentient beings; in other words, gods. In Egyptian thought, there were as many such beings as there are elements and forces in the universe: the sun (Re), the earth and sky (Geb and Nut), the atmosphere (Shu), the annual inundation (Hapi), life and growth (Osiris), order (Maat), disorder (Seth), and kingship (Horus)—to name only a few.

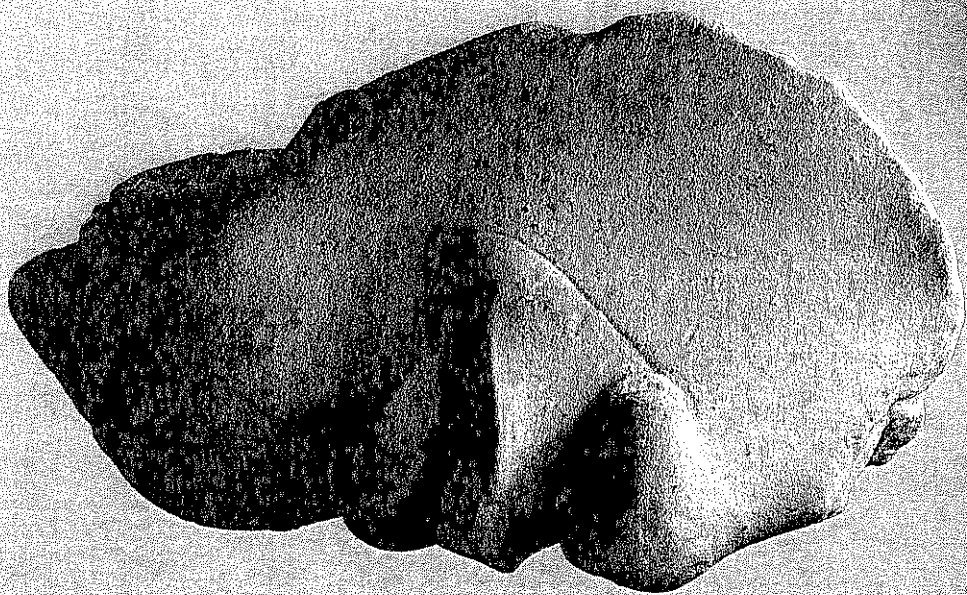
In simplest terms, the intellectual revolution known as the Amarna Period represented an attempt to replace this time-honored view of reality with one based on a single governing principle of life: a "sole god, with no other except him."¹

The notion of a single ultimate principle did not originate at Amarna. Perhaps by as early as the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040–1640 B.C.),² Egyptian theologians had come to believe that everything must finally derive from the creative power of a single divine force above and beyond the physical universe. This transcendent

deity was called Hidden (Amon), because his nature was not evident in any of the world's elements or forces.³ The Eighteenth Dynasty (the later part of which included the Amarna Period) witnessed a rise in the prominence of Amon in the Egyptian pantheon and in theological speculation about his role in the created universe.⁴ Both movements focused on the daily manifestation of Amon's life-giving power through the light of the sun, in the form of the combined god Amon-Re, "whose rays illuminate at his emergence of the daytime."⁵

This "new solar theology" was reformulated at the beginning of Amenhotep IV's reign. In the king's earliest inscriptions, the place of honor formerly occupied by Amon-Re was now given to the god Re Horus of the Akhet (Re-Horakhty), embodiment of the life-giving power of the sun (Re) as the dominant force in the universe (Horus).⁶ Although this combined god had existed in the Egyptian pantheon since the Old Kingdom, under Amenhotep IV he received not only central prominence but also a ubiquitous new epithet, which described him as "Re-Horakhty, who becomes active from the Akhet in his identity as the light that is in the sun disk."⁷ This didactic name serves as the credo of the Amarna revolution. In effect, it united standard Egyptian solar theology (Re-Horakhty) with a radical new concept of light as the ultimate force in the universe.

At first, the new god was portrayed as a falcon-headed man, the traditional symbol.⁸ In Amenhotep's third or fourth year, however, the image was discarded, along with many other traditional forms of Egyptian art. From then on, the god was depicted only through the symbol of the sun disk with rays.⁹ Although his earlier didactic name was retained in a set of double cartouches flanking the new image, elsewhere the god was referred to only as the Sun Disk (Aton).¹⁰ At the same time, the king changed his given name (which identified him as Son of Re) from Amenhotep (Amon Is Content) to Akhenaten, which probably means "Effective for the Aton."¹¹



Opposite: Fig. 1. T-jugate head of Amenhotep IV from Karnak. Sandstone. Staatliche Sammlung Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich.

Despite these visual and textual references to the sun disk, however, Akhenaten's new religion did not involve worship of the sun per se. As the god's didactic name emphasized, the object of Akhenaten's devotion was rather "the light that is in the disk." The rayed sun disk that dominates Amarna art is not an icon of worship but simply a hieroglyph for *light*.¹¹

The new religion seems initially to have tolerated the traditional Egyptian pantheon, although official texts avoid any mention of other gods after the royal family moved to Amarna. In the king's fifth year or later. Sometime between Year 8 and Year 12, however, Akhenaten's deity was elevated from the foremost among many gods to the one and only god. The older religion seems to have been officially banned, and the plural word *gods*—as well as the names of Amun and his consort Mut—was erased from monuments throughout the country.¹²

At the same time, the didactic name of Akhenaten's own god was altered to "The Sun, ruler of the Akhet, who becomes active from the Akhet in his identity as the light that comes in the sun disk." This involved three changes: substitution of "Sun, ruler of the Akhet" for "Re-Horakhty" ("Sun, Horus of the Akhet"); replacement of one word for light by another; and alteration of the phrase "that is in the sun disk" to "that comes in the sun disk." These changes not only removed all reference to older gods,¹³ they also made clear the true object of Akhenaten's worship, which was light itself rather than the sun disk through which light comes into the world.

Though it is addressed initially to "the living Aten, who begins life," the great "Hymn to the Aten" from Amarna is equally clear about both the nature of the god and the distinction between the god and his vehicle:

When your movements disappear and you go to rest in the Akhet,
the land is in darkness, in the manner of death,
darkness a blinder, the land in stillness,
with the one who makes them at rest in his Akhet.

The land grows bright once you have appeared in the Akhet.

Shining in the sun disk by day,
When you dispel darkness and give your rays,
the Two Lands are in a festival of light.¹⁶

This and other Amarna texts emphasize the daily nature of the god's activity. Although there are occasional references to his original creation of the universe,¹⁵ these are rare. Far more important is the fact that the god continues to re-create the world every day.¹⁶

This focus on the present rather than the eternal is one of the hallmarks of the Amarna Period and one of the features that set it off most strongly from traditional Egyptian culture. It is perhaps most recognizable in the immediate, dynamic quality of Amarna relief and painting, as compared with the more formal, static quality that usually characterizes Egyptian art. But it can be seen in other facets of Akhenaten's revolution as well: for example, in the adaptation of writing to reflect the contemporary spoken language. It even appears in the architectural innovation of *talatat*, buildings constructed of these small stones, which could be handled by one worker, could be put up very quickly, though they proved to be less enduring than structures erected with the multiton blocks of traditional Egyptian masonry.

Together with the emphasis on the present, Akhenaten's religion also stressed visible and tangible reality at the expense of the unseen and the mysterious. This undoubtedly contributed to the antagonism between the new theology and that of Amun, the "Hidden" par excellence. The traditional Egyptian temple was a place of mystery, with the god's image hidden within its innermost recess. In contrast, the Amarna temple was a place of light; its courts unroofed and even its doorways open to the sun.

Despite this apparent openness, however, the new religion was even more restrictive than its predecessor. Direct access to the new god was effectively limited to the king and his family. Images of the Aten show its rays presenting life to the king and queen alone. Private monuments of the time do not depict the beneficiary directly before the god, as they had prior to the Amarna Period; rather, they show the royal family itself as intermediary between the Aten and lesser mortals. Such features suggest that Akhenaten and his queen alone could worship the new god, and the texts themselves say as much: "There is no other who knows you except your son, Nefer-kheperu-re-wa-en-re [Akhenaten]."¹⁷ The rest of humanity was apparently constrained to worship Akhenaten himself, or the royal couple jointly, since "everyone who hurries on foot . . . you sustain them

for your son . . . Akhenaten . . . and the chief queen, his beloved."¹⁸

This situation is reflected in depictions of the royal family on typical Amarna "house stele" (shrine stela; see pp. 96–104), which were erected in private houses at Amarna.¹⁹ With its sole god, the religion of Amarna faced a theological problem that had also confronted earlier Egyptian philosophers: in a culture that understood all creation as an act of birth, how can the generation of the universe from a single ultimate source be explained? The older solar theology had posited an answer in the concept of the Ennead—a group of nine deities descended from the god Atum, the original source of all matter.²⁰ In the Ennead, life began when Atum evolved into the first two gods, the twins Shu and Tefnut "when he was one and evolved into three."²¹ At Amarna, this older group of nine gods was replaced by a new Ennead, consisting of light, the ultimate origin of all life; the king and queen, the royal "twins" through whom life passes into the world;²² and their six daughters. Here again, Akhenaten's religion commuted the abstract mystery of traditional Egyptian theology into the concrete reality of everyday life.

The Amarna texts leave no doubt as to the source of this radical new theology—Akhenaten himself.

My lord promoted me so that I might enact his teaching . . .
How fortunate is the one who hears your teaching of life,
for he will be satisfied from seeing you, and reach old age.²³

He is the one who taught me, and I am telling you: It is good to listen to it . . .

He [the king] makes his force against him who is ignorant of his teaching and his blessing to him who knows it.²⁴

Perhaps in part because of this close association, the new religion did not long survive the death and ultimate condemnation of its founder as "the enemy of Amarna."²⁵

Undoubtedly more serious in the Egyptian mind, however, were the intellectual limitations inherent in the new theology itself. Certainly, Akhenaten's philosophy—with its emphasis on the present, its rejection of mystery in favor of reality, and its insistence on the singleness of divinity—resonates more closely with modern thought than do the concepts of traditional Egyptian theology; witness, among others, Freud's attempt to make of Akhenaten "the mentor of Moses and the instigator of Jewish monotheism,"²⁶ and Breasted's characterization of him as "the world's first idealist and . . . the earliest monotheist . . . a brave soul, undauntedly facing the momentum of immemorial tradition, and dauntlessly stripping out from the long line of conventional and colourless Pharaohs, that he might disseminate ideas far beyond and above the capacity of his age to understand."²⁷

The Egyptians themselves, lacking such romantic hindsight, could only view Amarna theology in the context of their own religious traditions, and by that measure they found it wanting. In place of the traditional richness and diversity of Egyptian thought, it imposed a single-minded view of the universe—one which, in many respects, was less a religion than a natural philosophy.²⁸ Intellectually, its identification of the natural phenomenon of light as the ultimate principle of all life was less satisfying, if not also less sophisticated, than the belief in a divine power that existed above and beyond the phenomena of the created universe. And on the emotional level, this natural force was too impersonal and too far removed from the experience of daily life to fulfill the common human need for a recognizable god who could be addressed not only in hymns of awe but also in prayers of need.

Like many movements in the history of human thought, the Amarna revolution began with the insight of a single person; but like all too many such movements, it seems also to have degenerated eventually from liberating revelation to stifling fanaticism. What makes Amarna unique—and ultimately, perhaps, so continually fascinating—is its primacy: for the first time in recorded history, we are able to witness the profound effect that the thought of a single individual can have on human life.