

SUN WORSHIPPING

THE AMARNA PERIOD

Imagine your father owned the richest and most powerful country in the world. Not just ran it, *owned* it. It wasn't only the land that belonged to him, but also all the gold and grain in the treasury. He owned every brick in every building and every cow on every farm. The people and all that they owned were his as well. All of it one day would be passed down—but not to you, to your older brother. Since birth, he had been in training for the job while you watched from the sidelines. Tutors and generals and government overseers prepared your older brother for the day when he would take the reins. Your father, the king, and your mother, the queen, focused their attentions on your older brother, fussing over his every move, while you went unnoticed. That was life for Amenhotep IV, the second son of Amenhotep III.

Getting the lion's share of attention wasn't all good. You both learned to read and write, but when your brother was struggling with the language of diplomats, you could swish

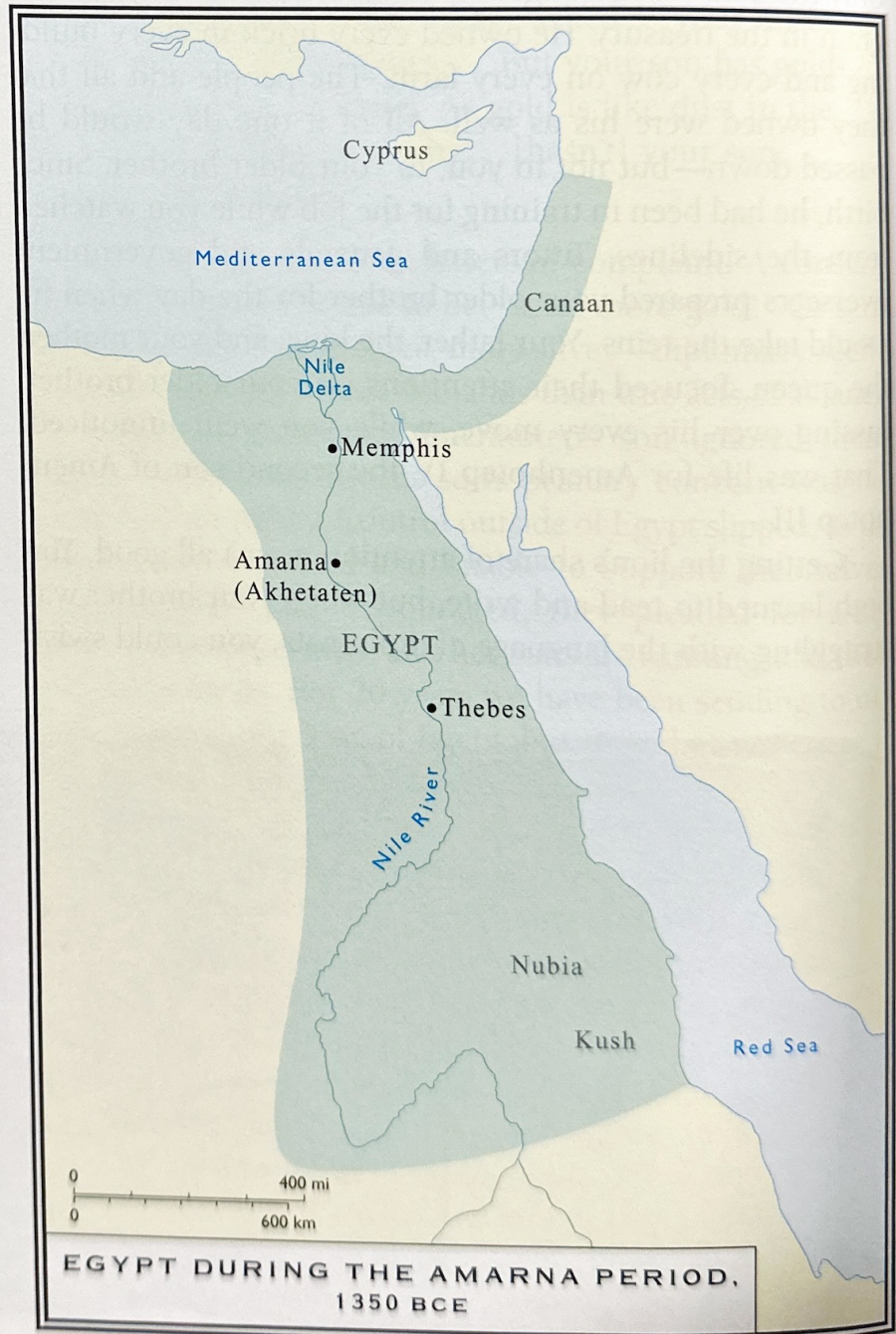
“ PROVERB,
AMARNA LETTERS,
HOMER, AND
THE GREAT HYMN
TO THE ATEN

Taxi anyone? The chariot was the mode of transportation for the royal family and their entourage around the city of Amarna.



66 Proverb used by students,
date unknown

your damp brush in the ink cake and practice your penmanship on sayings like, "Report a thing observed, not heard." You both learned to drive a chariot, but while your brother had to practice looking regal, you could flush grouse out of the papyrus patch. The vizier grilled him on how each department in the government worked while you grilled the grouse.



EGYPT DURING THE AMARNA PERIOD,
1350 BCE

When Amenhotep IV was a young boy, Egypt was . . . well, simply fabulous. The mid-1300s BCE was the golden age—literally. Gold flowed in from the Nubian mines so steadily that envious foreign leaders peevishly observed, “in my brother’s country gold is as plentiful as dirt.”

Egypt’s empire stretched from Nubia to Syria. Tribute gifts flooded in from neighboring rulers who hoped to ally themselves with the powerful Egyptian king. Amenhotep IV must have watched a procession of riches being presented to his father. One ambassador after another laid gifts at his feet—exquisite jars from Crete, copper from Cyprus, jewels from Afghanistan, elephant tusks, giraffe skins, and ebony wood from Kush. Materialism was alive and well in Egypt. And everything had to be over the top. It wasn’t enough to build a temple; the temple had to be COLOSSAL. A cloud of dust must have spread across Egypt from the dust raised by quarrymen and carvers, working the stone for all the buildings.

Traveling the Nile on the royal barge that was a floating palace, Amenhotep IV would have watched his father stop at town after town, performing rituals and paying tribute to the dozens of gods whose temples dotted the riverbank. Sailing against the current for the 400-mile trip from the northern capital of Memphis to the southern capital of Thebes would have taken three weeks without stops, but of course, there were always stops. Gratitude had to be expressed to the gods for Egypt’s good fortune. That was the king’s job. One day it would be Amenhotep IV’s older brother’s turn.

How different the two capitals must have seemed to young Amenhotep IV. In Memphis he wouldn’t have been able to turn around without bumping into a scribe. Egyptians were compulsive record keepers. The archives bulged with their documents. A foreman couldn’t hand out a loaf of bread to a workman without someone writing it down. Governors and overseers bustled through the streets of Memphis conducting Egypt’s business, and the scribes recorded it all.

If Memphis were the brain of Egypt’s operations, Thebes was its heart. Instead of government offices and business

“ Amarna Letters, about 1386–1334 BCE

CRUNCHY

Toothaches were common in all ancient cultures. But they weren’t from eating too much sugar. Grains were ground with stones to make bread and porridge. Along with your meal there was always some grit and sand, not to mention the occasional rock-hard husk that had escaped grinding. A lifetime of tooth abuse wore away the protective enamel, making teeth vulnerable to decay.

66 Homer, *Iliad*, about 750 BCE

ONE AND ONLY

Some scholars credit Amenhotep IV with being the first monotheist, or person who believes in one god. Although he is the first man we know of in history to speak of a single god, religion in Egypt 3,300 years ago was nothing like it is today. The gods gave no guidance or direction on how to live a good life. In fact, with all the lying, cheating, and murder (not to mention dismemberment) going on among the gods, they weren't even good role models.

Egyptian morality was not part of its religion. Scribes taught proper behavior, not priests. The role of religion in ancient Egypt is the same as the role of science today. We use astronomy and physics to explain why the sun rises each morning; the Egyptians used the gods. The gods explained the unexplainable.

centers, temples sprawled across the landscape. There were so many columns gracing so many entrances to so many temples that Homer called the city "Hundred-Gated Thebes."

When the royal barge docked at Thebes, priests would have greeted the king. What would Amenhotep IV have thought when he watched the power-hungry priests approach his father? Were they humble? Or had they grown too big for their kilts? The temples of Amun acquired more and more land with each passing year. Their farms were not meager vegetable plots feeding servants of the gods, but a thriving mini-kingdom lorded over by the priests. If the priesthood didn't eat away at his father's power, it certainly ate away at his father's treasury. With each conquest, Thebes received a share of the plunder. With every tribute or trade mission, Thebes took its cut. It was the gods' goodwill that had brought Egypt to this level of glory; payment was expected.

Although there were temples to many gods at Thebes, the main god of Thebes was Amun, "the hidden one." Amenhotep IV would have been left behind when his father followed the priests into the dark recesses of the inner temple. Only the holiest of holy could enter the inner sanctum where secret rituals were performed. Amenhotep IV was left out again.

Then, in a flash, everything changed. Amenhotep IV's older brother, groomed for the throne, died. All eyes turned to Amenhotep IV. And what did they see?

Some scholars believe that Amenhotep IV was a normal-looking young man. Their theory is that the distorted human forms artists began drawing at this time were the result of a new artistic style. The bodies, neither male nor female, but a bit of both, were meant to show the king as "everything." Other scholars have a different theory. They believe that Amenhotep IV was deformed by disease. They believe the long spidery fingers and toes, the head that looks like pulled taffy, and the stick arms, full breasts and sagging belly represent a true likeness. Amenhotep IV's mummy has never been found, but if one turns up with an unusual body shape, we'll know who it is.

Scholars aren't sure if Amenhotep IV ruled alongside his father for a short time or not. It would have been excellent on-the-job training for the inexperienced prince. It would also have made it crystal clear to anyone who might have designs on the throne that the job was filled. From Amenhotep III's mummy we know toward the end he was fat and in poor health. Two of his teeth on the right side were abscessed. He would have been in constant pain. With Amenhotep IV ruling beside him, Amenhotep III could escape the toothache with the latest painkiller from Cyprus—opium. If he had packed his teeth with opium, he would not have been able to make clear-headed decisions; a co-ruler would have been not only useful, but also necessary.

When Amenhotep III died, embalmers used a new method. They injected tree resin and salt under the skin to plump it up and give the body a more lifelike look. This innovation was the first in increasingly drastic changes that marked the reign of the rebel Amenhotep IV—a short blip in Egypt's history we know as the Amarna Period.

About the time that Amenhotep IV took the throne, he also took a wife—Nefertiti, which means “The Beautiful Woman Has Come.” His parents' unusually close relationship could have been the model that led Amenhotep IV to break tradition again and share

Akhenaten holds the hand of his wife, Nefertiti. Some scholars believe that Nefertiti may have co-ruled with her husband. Others believe that although Nefertiti took an active role alongside her husband, there is no evidence that she shared his power.



66 The Great Hymn to the Aten,
about 1350–1334 BCE

The way Queen Nefertiti's name and title are written on this scarab suggests that it is from the first five years of her rule as queen. After the fifth year, both she and her husband, Akhenaten, changed the spelling of their names to reflect their new worship of the god Aten.



his power with “the Foremost Wife of the King, whom he loves, the Mistress of the Two Lands, . . . Nefertiti, living and young, forever and ever.” Amenhotep IV’s devotion to Nefertiti was displayed on temple walls. Traditional paintings of the king as a muscled, fierce warrior were replaced with paintings of the king as a loving, doting family man—Amenhotep kissing his wife, Amenhotep with a daughter on his knee, Amenhotep surrounded by his family.

Soon Amenhotep IV found another obsession. He latched onto an obscure sun god that his father had fancied, Aten, which means “the disk.” In the fifth year of Amenhotep IV’s reign, he changed his name to Akhenaten which means “Spirit of the Sun Disk.”

The name change was not as shocking as what followed. Akhenaten announced that the gods Egyptians had been worshiping for thousands of years no longer existed. The Aten was the one and only. Akhenaten cut off funds to the temples. There would be no more tributes to these false gods, no more temples built in

Thebes, no more revenues funneled into the priesthood. Those riches would now go directly to the Aten and (perhaps rather shrewdly) to his representative on Earth, the king himself—Akhenaten.

The Aten needed his own city, a new capital built on new ground. Akhenaten sailed the Nile in search of the right spot to build the city. On the east bank of the Nile, halfway between Memphis and Thebes, a semicircle of cliffs rose above an arc of windswept desert. It was there, on an isolated strip of land, that Akhenaten built the city we know as Amarna.

Thousands of workers descended on Amarna, intent on raising a city. Brick makers poured mud from the riverbank into wooden molds then turned the bricks out to dry in the desert heat. Stone workers cut blocks from the quarries with bronze chisels and wooden mallets. In just four years the city was in full operation with commuters riding their donkeys from the suburbs in the north and south to the center of the city.

The largest structure in Amarna was the royal residence, of course. Built half on one side of the road, and half on the other, the east and west wings of the palace were connected by an overpass. The overpass was called the “Window of Appearances.” From there Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and their children would greet the crowds gathered on the road below.

The new temple at Amarna was nothing like the old gloomy houses for the gods. The open courtyard allowed the Aten’s rays to shine in. The rambling open-air place of worship stretched the length of two football fields, empty except for small stands to place food offerings, one for each day of the year.

Akhenaten’s new capital was lined with office building after office building: the palace, the House of the Correspondence of Pharaoh, where the Amarna Letters were found; the police station, with a full staff of policemen who rode around in chariots; and a university, where priests of the new order were educated. Now that the old myths were no longer taught, Akhenaten had to write new ones. *The Great Hymn to the Aten* shows us Akhenaten’s poetic side. He writes that even “Birds fly up to their nests, their wings extended in praise of your *ka* [spirit].” The hymn teaches that the Aten created not just Egypt, but the entire world and everything in it:

You create the earth as you wish, when you were by yourself, . . . all beings on land, who fare upon their feet, and all beings in the air, who fly with their wings. The lands of Khor [Syro-Palestine] and Kush [Nubia] and the land of Egypt. . . . Tongues are separate in speech, and their characters as well; their skins are different, for you differentiate the foreigners.



Akhenaten’s family worships Aten, the sun god. The Great Hymn to Aten proclaims, “You rise in perfection on the horizon of the sky, living Aten, who determines life. Whenever you are risen upon the eastern horizon you fill every land with your perfection.”

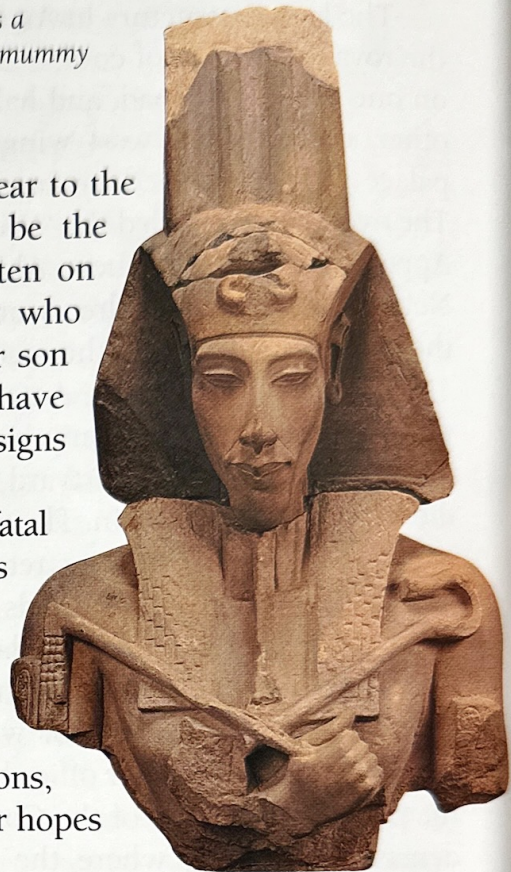
“ The Great Hymn to the Aten, about 1350–1334 BCE

Were Akhenaten's elongated features a deformity or an art form? Until his mummy is found, no one will know for sure.

“ The Great Hymn to the Aten, about 1350–1334 BCE

The hymn also makes it clear to the priests that they will *not* be the ones who represent the Aten on Earth, “There is no other who knows you except for your son [Akhenaten], for you have apprised him of your designs and your power.”

Then Akhenaten took a fatal step. He denied Egyptians the afterlife. He doomed his new religion to failure. He had rankled the people by taking away the old gods and the old traditions, and now he took away their hopes for eternal life.



NAME THAT TOWN

Akhenaten named the city Akhetaten, which means “Horizon of the Aten.” We know it as Amarna, named for the tribe who lived there centuries later.

“ Amarna Letters, about 1386–1334 BCE

In his fervor for the Aten, Akhenaten forgot Egypt. The city of Amarna was like the royal firstborn son who took all the attention. The rest of Egypt became the second son, ignored and neglected. Egyptians outside Amarna were paying taxes to build a city they would never see, dedicated to a god they did not want.

Egypt's foreign subjects fell one by one to outside conquerors. The Amarna letters flooded in with pleas for help. They fell on deaf ears. One poor prince wrote at least 64 times, “Why will you neglect our land?”

Akhenaten had inherited an empire but left a country in decline. After his death the new capital was abandoned. The kings who followed Akhenaten demolished his temples and erased his name. Once Amarna had been stripped of stone it was forgotten and left to crumble. The sun had set on the Amarna Period.