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Articles

Akhenaten-Controversy and Catastrophe: The Reassertion of Pharonic Power

Chase Childs

Overview of Amenophis IV-Akhenaten

When one thinks of political controversy, hidden agendas, and twisted behavior, one commonly thinks of modern times and of modern figures. Yet, one of the most controversial leaders of all time lived over 3,000 years ago in the age of the Egyptian Pharaohs during the eighteenth Dynasty of the New Kingdom. His name was Amenophis IV, or Akhenaten. Akhenaten would do much in his time to ensure that his legacy was one of grandiose change for Egypt and political and religious realignment around himself. Because of growing archeological evidence, much is now known of what he did. However, a great deal of who he was and why he chose such severe actions has been lost due to the systematic destruction of his name and monuments by subsequent rulers and priests whom he had wronged or

Figure 1: A deliberately destroyed statue of Akhenaten. Photo taken at the Louvre Museum Paris, France courtesy of author.
alienated during his reign. This deliberate destruction of his name from the historical record speaks to the reign of Akhenaten and the way his actions affected Egypt and its people.

Records of these actions, which affected Egypt in such titanic ways, are riddled with missing information and uncertainties that have led to misinterpretations and assumptions. Dominic Montserrat in *Akhenaten: history, fantasy, and Ancient Egypt*, claims because of this missing information, different groups (racial, sexual, social, etc.) have been able to adapt Akhenaten’s reign and life to fit into whatever mold they need to use to stand as an example or icon for their movements and beliefs. Eaton-Kraus argues that these uncertainties include possible marriages to his daughters and a probable co-regency with his father, King Amenophis III. However, this debated co-regency has unanswered questions of its own, such as its length and impact on Akhenaten himself. While these aspects may not seem like major factors when one takes into account all of the actions that compose a Pharaoh’s reign, they could have had a profound impact on the way that Akhenaten ruled.

Many conclusions can be drawn from what is known of Akhenaten through the surviving archeological evidence. First, one can infer that Akhenaten decided to continue with the expansion of the Aten cult of his father, Amenophis III, and his grandfather, Thutmosis IV, beyond its earlier place in Egyptian mythology as the king’s private cult, to one of national prominence and sole devotion. This single change was an action that defined his reign and outlined all of his later actions. Second, he saw the need to regain power for the throne from the elite class and priests of the Amun and Re cults in order to ensure his power and dominance over Egypt’s international and domestic affairs. Although these actions were effective in the time of his reign, they ultimately condemned Akhenaten’s legacy and memory for millennia. His sons, daughters, former advisors, and future generations not only abandoned

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his gleaming new capital city of Akhetaten ("the Horizon of the Aten"), but also dismantled his heretical temples and changed their own names to honor the gods that Akhenaten had defiled. This likely outcome could not have been unforeseen by Akhenaten. He must have known that his drastic changes would not endure and that his actions were too radical to be forgotten so easily by those they affected. Why he chose to break so many social taboos is still interpretable, but if Akhenaten’s heritage and co-regency with his predecessor, his personal beliefs in the Aten cult, and his desire to wrench power from the nobility and priests are taken into account, one can start to better understand the life and logic of Akhenaten. Yet, other mysteries remain: Why did Akhenaten apparently forgo providing a more secure transfer of rule in order to ensure the survival of the Aten cult? Was Akhenaten caught off guard by a sudden series of events that hindered such a transfer of power?

Co-regency: Impact of Predecessors

The question of whether or not Akhenaten served as a co-regent with his father Ahmenophis III is still unanswered. However, some sources point towards a possible short co-regency of just a few years. The common consensus among most archeologists, represented by D. B. Redford in Akhenaten: the Heretic King, is that there was no co-regency between Akhenaten and Amenpohis III. Yet, it was not infrequent for Pharaohs who were getting elderly to take a male heir as coregent to ease the transfer of power from one ruler to the next. However, according to Nicholas Reeves, the difference on this occasion is that Akhenaten was never intended to be heir to the throne. That position was first held by Amenophis III’s eldest son Thutmosis V until he unexpectedly died, prompting Amenophis III to name Amenophis IV as co-regent and heir.

Due to this unexpected and sudden change, it is plausible to assume that Amenophis IV would have been co-regent for a short period due to the urgency of his appointment. In contrast, according to W. Raymond

4 Nicholas Reeves, Akhenaten: Egypt’s False Prophet (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), 75-76.
Johnson, there is substantial evidence that points towards the plausibility of a longer co-regency between Amenophis IV and Amenophis III. Johnson claims a letter recovered from el-Amarna (Akhetaten), speaks of Akhenaten’s internationally recognized ascension to the throne in year [1]2 of his reign (the tablet is contested by most scholars to read simply year 2). One can infer that it had not taken twelve years for the international community to recognize Amenophis IV’s ascension to the throne. Thus, a large portion of this twelve year reign must have included his time as co-regent. This suggests a much longer co-regency than previously accepted, even up to a decade.\(^5\) Whatever the conclusion reached on the duration of the hypothetical co-regency, it is more important to consider the impact of this time on Akhenaten.

**Thutmosis IV**

The impact that Thutmosis IV imparted on his grandson, Amenophis IV-Akhenaten, dates back three generations to the reign of the Queen Hatshepsut. She served initially as a temporary regent for Thutmosis III but had chosen not to relinquish power when he came of age. Instead, Hatshepsut had given immense power to the priests of the Amun cult in order to maintain her control of the throne and to gain the divine right to rule through the god Amun.\(^6\) By taking on such a debt to the Amun priests, she stripped the throne of much of its unquestioned power and voice in domestic and international matters. Her debt and gratitude was recorded on many monuments, including two obelisks she erected at Karnak’s “Red Temple” to Amun.\(^7\) They speak of the instruction she takes from Amun (in essence his priests) on her decision-making and the actual rule of Egypt. According to Reeves this debt to the Amun cult would cripple her and later reigns for years to come.

The power lost to the priests was regained incrementally by later rulers such as her successor Thutmosis III. He deliberately destroyed Hatshepsut’s record at her mortuary temple at Dier el-Bahri in a way later similar to the fate of Akhenaten’s record. Power was regained

\(^5\) Reeves, 76-77.

\(^6\) Ibid., 36-37.

\(^7\) Ibid., 37.
even more so by his successor Amenophis II. They both used military campaigns to reassert Egyptian control over the extremes of the empire and, in doing so, regained some domestic power from the elites and priests through the sheer muscle of the military might they controlled. However, the greatest reassertion of Pharaonic power in domestic issues prior to Akhenaten would come from his grandfather Thutmose IV. He used diplomacy instead of warfare with the conquered regions of the empire so that he could focus more of his reign on domestic affairs. Moreover, by using the same tactics that Hatshepsut had used to give power to the Amun cult, he was able to give power to the cult of Re, thus draining influence and support away from the pseudo-state of the Amun cult. In the Dream Stela, which was discovered between the forepaws of the Sphinx at Giza, he attributes the mythological hereditary lineage of his divine right to rule not to Amun, but to Re. This was the first step towards the assertion of the solar cult of Re as the primary cult and the Aten as the physical embodiment of Re and later the Aten as monotheistic deity.

Amenophis III

Amenophis III was the eldest son of Thutmose IV and chief queen Mutemwiya. He had become king after his father unexpectedly died. In many ways, he was just like his father and other predecessors in relation to diplomatic and royal decrees. Yet, despite his heritage, he did not take on the divine lineage of Re, but instead reverted back to the cult of Amun. This implies that, by the time of his reign, the Amun cult had lost its authority in affairs and would be included once more in Phaoronic mythology in a way that would be beneficial to the king. Due to this implied peace within and outside of Egypt, he was able to take on many more domestic matters.

Amenophis III made Thebes an international city with the construction of a massive temple complex to Amun at Karnak that would

8 Reeves, 38.
9 Ibid., 40.
10 Ibid., 48.
11 Ibid., 51.
made it comparable in size and wealth to Memphis. He went even further during his reign to make one last change that was seen during the reign of Ahkenaten. In the time between his first and second jubilee, Amenophis III took on the persona of a living god. This had previously been a title only reserved for kings after death. In the new rebus writing of his name, he positioned himself in the sun, declaring that he was one with the sun as it traversed the sky. In doing so, he gave his reign and life divine significance by being a part of the daily rebirth of Re. With this, it is clear that co-regency would have had a lasting importance on Akhenaten and his beliefs. For Akhenaten, by watching his father, he must have learned that power was attainable through drastic change and that by declaring himself a god and retaining power, he further expanded the role of king to never before achieved levels in every aspect of Egyptian life and society.

Aten Cult: Beliefs and Effects

The Aten cult was not a new invention by the time of Akhenaten. Before his reign it had been a part of the Re cult at Heliopolis. The Aten was the son and the physical embodiment of Re in the form of the light that comes from Re. Amenophis III had used the Aten figure during his reign to serve as the intermediary between himself and Re once he declared himself a living god. However, according to Thomas in Akhenaten’s Egypt, Akhenaten had some beliefs and plans for the Aten cult that would go even farther than that of his father. In the same way that Amenophis III had become a god to separate himself from other mortals near the end of his life, Akhenaten became a god and the sole intermediary with Aten. Yet, the biggest change was that Akhenaten declared the Aten to be the only god, a true monotheistic religion that revolved around him as pharaoh, high priest, and the living embodiment of the Aten. According to Cyril Aldred, in order to achieve this

12 Reeves, 65.
13 Ibid., 72.
15 Darrell Baker, “Akhenaten”, in The Encyclopedia of Egyptian Pha-
momentous change he had to make drastic changes in what amounted to all parts of Egyptian mythology, life, and government. To begin this set of changes, his first executive order as pharaoh was the founding of a sandstone quarry at Gebel Silsileh in order to expand the small Aten shrine at Karnak into a grand temple complex.\(^{16}\) This sudden change, among others, drew backlash from the elites and priests of the old cults. Early in his reign, Akhenaten took drastic measures to deal with this questioning of his will.

**The Priests and Elites of Old**

The priests of the Amun and Re cults at Karnak and Heliopolis, respectively, had grown increasingly more powerful all throughout the New Kingdom. This power had given them the means by which to impact domestic and international affairs in a way that countered that of Pharaoh. This dominance was visible in their growing wealth and voice in political matters. Yet, there was one power that the pharaohs had not only maintained but expanded with political maneuvering since the reign of Thutmose II: the military. Pharaoh himself was still solely responsible for calling a standing army to do his unquestioned bidding. Although no previous pharaoh had used such power to impact the cults, Akhenaten was unlike any pharaoh before him.

According to Baker,\(^{17}\) as early as year two in his reign he had either repurposed the temples of Amun and Re to Aten, or had withdrawn royal economic and material support, denying them the ability to function. Due to the strength of his army, it is safe to assume that no one openly resisted. According to Thomas, he systematically removed the names and statues of the old gods from all the temples throughout Egypt and replaced them with new images of the solar disk or Aten. By closing or withdrawing much of the financial support from these grand temples, much of the assets could be repossessed by the crown. These funds would prove essential to the final phase of Akhenaten’s plan to assert the

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\(^{17}\) Baker, 15.
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Aten as sole god of Egypt. Yet, his plans could only go so far as long as the old priests still ran the temples and those temples were recognizably linked to the old gods who occupied them.

Akhenaten had to make two final sweeping blows to the old ways. First, he had to abandon completely the old temples of Amun and Re and build a new temple complex that would be built to function for the Aten cult, but still draw on architectural aspects of both of the old temples. Second, he had to staff this temple with men who had no connection to the old elite class that had filled the old priesthood and directed its action. In doing both of these things, he forced the old elite class, which had come to usurp the King’s power, to swear loyalty to him and his god, or be left out of the state and religious affairs of the time.

To carry out this abandonment of the old temples and placement of a new priestly class loyal to him, he made his final change: the moving of the administrative capital from Memphis and the religious capital from Thebes, where he could be pressured or even assassinated by the old nobility, to Akhetaten (“Horizon of the Aten”) a new capital entirely devoted to the Aten and its worship via Amenophis IV-Akhenaten.

Akhetaten: The Horizon of the Aten

Akhetaten was to be a capital built entirely for the purpose of worshiping the Aten and connecting Akhenaten to this new religion. According to Thomas, most of the major work on the temple complex was completed by year four of Akhenaten’s reign, which suggests he wasted no time in using the funds taken from the old cults. The first step was to pick the location for his new capital, and for Akhenaten this decision held special religious and political significance. According to Reeves, the location he chose lay half way between Memphis and Thebes, a symbolic uniting of the two old power seats of Egypt into one new capital. This was his first move meant to regain once again the political and economic power that had been lost to the old elites

18 Thomas, 21.
19 Baker, 15.
20 Thomas, 22.
21 Ibid., 21.
by his predecessors. This shift of the economic and political capital to Akhetaten is displayed in the Amarna letters, newly translated by William Moran. These letters reveal numerous foreign missives being sent and received not via Memphis, as had been the New Kingdom norm, but from Akhetaten. One such letter sent by Akhenaten to the Babylonian king answers this king’s requests for an Egyptian princess to marry after sending many of his daughters to Egypt. This was a highly diplomatic message that would have affected alliances and treaties and yet it was sent to and replied from Akhetaten not Memphis. Also, the physical geography of the site had special meaning to the Aten cult. In an outcrop of the nearby cliff east of Akhetaten, King Akhenaten chose a double-peaked locality that would symbolize the “horizon”-glyph (Akhet) where the sun was reborn everyday with his aid, making Akhetaten the new center of Egyptian mythology. By doing this, he made the necessary connection between his new cult city and the old mythology, which was ingrained in Egyptian culture.

In laying out the plans for his new city, Akhenaten used a series of boundary stelae that would be erected or rock-cut through his reign. These numerous giant monoliths provided the vast majority of what is known about why Akhetaten was founded. Hieroglyphs on many of these stelae refer to the evil things supposedly being said in Memphis about Akhenaten or the Aten. This is commonly understood to be the likely reaction his new cult was getting in Memphis from the old priests and elite. Either Akhenaten was just paranoid, or he truly feared for his life and cult and saw the need to abandon Memphis and start anew. Furthermore, the stelae make mention of the large military force stationed around Akhetaten, which is further proof that Akhenaten saw it necessary to protect his new religion by force and drastic changes.

Aside from the reasons for founding the city, these texts outline the way in which the city itself was laid out. The temple complex was

23 Reeves, 113-115.  
24 Thomas, 21.
directly linked to the Great Palace along the eastern banks of the Nile. This link displayed the role that Akhenaten played in his new cult. He was himself the sole high priest and one worldly connection to the Aten. It was through him that all others had to bask in the glory of the Aten.\textsuperscript{25} Since religion played such a pivotal role in not only real worldly matters, but also in the metaphysical rebirth of the sun and continuation of all life, it was not an option for the elite who had such contempt for Akhenaten and his cult simply to ignore him. This religious domination seems to be exactly what Akhenaten wanted, a way to put the elite back in a position where they owed some sort of loyalty or fealty to the king. Although this loyalty was only temporary and solely contingent upon Akhenaten and the place he awarded himself in his new cult, for a time it seems, through the archeological evidence, that Pharaoh was again all powerful and at the center of Egypt.

If one looks at Akhenaten as solely a narcissistic tyrant bent on domination, then one might overlook the possible idea that it was all part of his larger plan to accomplish exactly what his actions succeeded in doing. Akhenaten had learned from his father that to be a living god and have sole power he had to separate himself from every other mortal, which his Aten cult allowed. He also learned from his grandfather that the nobility and priests, who had sold out their throne to Hatshepsut, could not be trusted and needed to be put back in their ‘proper place’ in society. If all of this is true and these were really his plans, then maybe Akhenaten was not just a ‘crazed leader’ with his own political aspirations in mind, but a pharaoh who saw a need to return the throne to a place of prominence. If one takes into account his heritage and loathing for the nobility and old cults, then it is possible to understand truly Akhenaten and his actions.

Aftermath of Akhenaten

In the time after the reign of Akhenaten there were more great changes to be made, but these were meant to undo what he had done. These redeeming changes for Egypt were almost immediate. No sooner than when Akhenaten had been placed in his tomb and the last

\textsuperscript{25} Thomas, 22.
incantations read, all the elites and all those related to Akhenaten’s heresy began to abandon his new capital and return to Memphis and Thebes. According to Eaton-Kraus, his successors, Smenkare and Tutankhamun, would stay only for a short period until the need to return to Memphis became inevitable. Upon Tutankhamun’s return, not only would he undo all of Akhenaten’s changes to the cults of Amun and Re, but he would take on names meant to regain favor with and make amends for what Akhenaten had done. For example, Tutankhaten changed his name to Tutankhamun to show his lineage and devotion to Amun.

As profound as Akhenaten’s changes were, the undoing of his deeds would be even more drastic. Throughout Egypt his name and figure were erased, and his record as king was omitted from the royal roster at Thebes. As soon as the tarnish of his changes could be washed away, his eighteen years of reign were simply forgotten and disregarded. Only through lore and legend did even a mention of a king like Akhenaten remain (e.g. “the enemy of Amun” as later subsumed in archival records, etc). His temples were leveled, the housing abandoned, and what remained was covered by the desert sands. The Bedouin, who inhabited the area at the time of its unearthing in the nineteenth century AD, did not even know of its origin.

Despite ancient attempts to remove all mention of him from record, Akhenaten has been rediscovered and now lives on. The archeological evidence pertaining to him grows and changes every year. Still, the broad appeal to interpret his actions and make him an icon will not change. According to Montserrat, black nationalists claim he was really Nubian, gay rights groups claim he was homosexual, and the Nazis even adapted his persona to represent one of the first Aryans. This wide array of interpretations only shows that one must continue to keep an open mind when dealing with Akhenaten and his actions in order to begin to understand this controversial and intriguing character of ancient Egypt.

27 Montserrat, 1.
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