Dust & Blood: Famine and Fertility in the Age of Akhenaten

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Dust & Blood:
Famine and Fertility in the Age of Akhenaten

by
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This thesis is the result of a team who believed in me.

Mom and Dad, I walked into the first day of Kindergarten in pigtails and sneakers with confidence because I could feel your strength behind me. I wrote this with valor because the strong pulse of your love has never faltered. This is as much yours as it is mine.

Doug, you have inspired me every day. I fell in love with archaeology in your class, with your infectious passion and exacting execution. Done is better than good, and without you, this thesis would be neither. I can stand proud knowing that it is both. Thank you so much for all I will never be able to express.

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Carla, you have been the best cheerleader. Every conversation I have had with you has been bursting full of light and support, which painted this entire process with the warm glow of joy. Thank you so, so much for your genuine belief and encouragement.

I am humbled by the fact that all of you agreed to spend this last year talking to be about my ideas and reading my words. I will never be able to truly express how honored I am to have been able to work with and learn from you all. I have grown as a human and as a scholar because of your influence. I have grown into the person I wished to be.

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Abstract

This thesis expands on the ongoing inquiry into the unusual life of the pharaoh Akhenaten. Amongst the incongruities of his reign, the central deity known as the Aten has been one of the most elusive and heavily debated. The relationship between the pharaoh and the Aten was clearly central to much of the oddity of his reign, affecting the visual depiction of the pharaoh and the many alterations to the notion of kingship Akhenaten implemented. However, no clear understanding of Akhenaten or the Aten exists. Recent excavations at Amarna have allowed for a clearer view into these unanswered questions. It was previously believed that Akhenaten was motivated by religious zealotry and heresy resulting in his damnation of memory. Data from recent excavations point towards an alternate view of Akhenaten’s motivations. Bones exhumed from the South Tombs Cemetery show signs of malnutrition and disease, and environmental data show a decrease in inundation and pollen levels. The Amarna Letters confirm cultural contact between the Mitanni and the 18th Dynasty, as well as the influx of Near Eastern deities into Egypt. The combination of these factors demonstrates a possible alternate explanation for Akhenaten’s actions. In this thesis, it is argued that Aten worship was a synthesis of Mesopotamian notions of cosmologically abstracted fertility deities and the Egyptian sun god, Ra. The shift of the capital, theology, and depiction of the royal family were in response to a time of disease and famine, with the king’s body and deity being a propagandist tool to maintain control under the threat of collapse.
Chapter I: Introduction

The human mind struggles to grasp deep time. While names and numbers of years can roll off of one’s tongue with ease, the true contemplation of a human being who existed in Egypt 3300 years ago is difficult. Our short lives span a tiny fraction of that amount of time. Instead of attempting the near impossible, we find many ways in which to bridge that gap; we find their artwork beautiful or touching or personal, or we agree with their motivations or condemn their actions. In this, we make an empathetic link with a human being living in an age fundamentally divorced from our own in both time and worldview.

While this is our birthright as part of the human race, much is lost in this act of identification. The reality is that there have been 3300 long years spanning the time between the person standing with a beating heart and sweaty brow carving a piece of stone to the day we brush our fingers across its worn surface. In that time, the world has profoundly changed. Our notions of self, community, religion, duty, and the fundamentals around us have been completely altered. We do not understand why people worshipped a human as the manifestation of a god, nor do we understand what caused that belief to change, just as they could not fathom electricity or an airplane. In the attempt to rationalize their actions to fit within our notion of a sensible world, the contemporary viewer often finds him or herself unconsciously imposing modern beliefs, rationale, and sensibilities into the actions of these long-dead peoples. In order to get beyond this, it is imperative to fully understand the context of the time. A data-driven approach allows for a suspension of bias, and an understanding of the facts free from hope.

One of the figures that have proven to be most impervious to modern rationalizing is the Pharaoh Akhenaten. He continues to puzzle and captivate modern thought with his strange cocktail of reforms within the otherwise consistent Egyptian culture. He moved the capital to a
new location, changed the style of writing, vastly altered artistic depiction of the king and his family, and most shockingly, altered the extant belief system.

From a rich pantheon of anthropomorphized Egyptian gods boasting the heads of animals, Akhenaten turned his devotion to a simple circle. This circle, known as the Aten, has been read to be representative of the sun. The personal connection between this pharaoh and this deity is undeniable. Connectivity between the king and the Aten abounds in both image and text, with an unprecedented amount of affection being shown for this deity from Akhenaten. Much has been made of this vast departure from the established way of Egyptian belief, with explanations ranging from pathology on the part of the king to the Aten being the world’s first monotheistic god.

Each explanation is as likely to be correct as the last. This subject has garnered the attention of scholars since the late 1880s, with each new wave bringing theories and hopes of finally understanding this elusive monarch. However, in the rush to create a cohesive narrative, some areas were overlooked and great assumptions were made. This has led to contrasting theories, and many unanswered questions.

In order to move forward with our examination of this era, it is prudent and requisite to begin by casting aside all assumptions, and starting afresh at the very beginning. By reevaluating the most basic questions about this king and his god, theories will be built upon a foundation of data analysis.

Perhaps the most important question that we can ask is the most simple: Why did Akhenaten desire these changes? Many ideas have been put forth, from zealotry to political motives, and yet there is no conclusive answer. The implications of widening this inquiry will
inform the basis for establishing a solid narrative for the unusual and unique life of this Pharaoh who lived 3300 years ago.
Chapter II: Ancient Egypt

Figure 1
Map of Ancient Egypt

History

The history of Egypt is defined by the omnipresent and consistent influence of the Nile River. From the seemingly endless expanse of sand, this vein of water carved out a habitable mile on either side of its lapping shores (Figure 1). The Nile is extraordinary in many ways, all of which contributed to the flowering of Egyptian culture. The most striking of its features, however, is its reliability. The cultivation of wheat and other grains was only possible when the Nile flooded, and brought rich and fertile soil to its banks. Known as the inundation of the Nile, this event occurred at the same time every year, with water brought down from heavy rainfall in
the steppes of modern-day Ethiopia.¹ This consistency and reliability allowed for a stability that was unprecedented in the ancient world. There was no anxiety about rainfall or migration patterns, but rather an understanding that permanent settlements could be built without worry. As such, social organization was cemented, and a cohesive culture was established. This is the true source of the pharaoh’s power; the people knew that the Nile would flood every year, because the pharaoh would make it so. Conversely, failure to produce a reliable flood, which happened periodically, destabilized the king’s authority and power.

This relatively uninterrupted stability lasted an extraordinary 3000 years.² There was a clear importance placed on history and legacy, with monuments like the pyramids being a testament to the priority of remembrance. As such, each ruler had understanding of his predecessors, all of whom gained authority from their likewise constant gods. Even when viewing a specific king like Akhenaten, it is vital to understand the history of his legacy, which would have been vastly influential on him.

The narrative of Egyptian history has been sectioned into broad expanses punctuated by Intermediate Periods, which were functionally times of collapse. The chronology of time is also marked in dynasties, with the culmination being Cleopatra in the Ptolemaic Dynasty.

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For 1500 years from the Predynastic Era to the beginning of the New Kingdom, Egypt maintained a cohesive whole with a unified worldview and stable existence. Even in the Intermediate Periods, where local warlords vied for the throne, the theology and culture of Egypt remained intact. This solidarity as a people manifests strongly in the incredible monuments that still stand today, demonstrating social order and cultural identity. It was from this foundation of culture and history that the New Kingdom dawned, and brought with it some of the most extraordinary individuals and achievements seen in antiquity.

The New Kingdom began with Dynasty 18. It can be argued that more pharaohs of note reigned in this dynasty alone than any previously. The New Kingdom is likewise the subject of much of our knowledge and interest in Ancient Egypt. It is rare that a child learning about Egypt is not first acquainted with King Tutankhamen’s golden sarcophagus, and women are both impressed and inspired by Pharaoh Hatshepsut’s gumption. Eclipsing even these figures is the so-called heretic king himself, Akhenaten.

The first three pharaohs of the New Kingdom established the security and stability of the time.⁴ The fourth was Thutmose II, whose main wife was a particularly enterprising woman by the name of Hatshepsut. Upon his death, she decreed her desire to rule jointly with her young son, Thutmose III. In reality, she became the de facto pharaoh. Her absolute power extended to her image, in which she claims the symbols of pharaoh with false beard on her chin and the

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⁴ Ibid., 3.
crook and tassel crossed over her chest.\textsuperscript{5} However, the fact that she was a woman is one of the least remarkable features of her reign. She was incredibly prolific; she built monuments that dwarfed even the greatest achievements of her contemporary male counterparts.

After her death, it was decided that she was to be subject of a damnation of memory. The term “damnation of memory” comes from the Latin \textit{damnatio memoriae}, which was a legal decree to remove the name and works of an individual from a city.\textsuperscript{6} While the term came from Rome, the practice is also applicable to Egyptian leaders, who likewise wished to remove the names and monuments of those individuals deemed unworthy.\textsuperscript{7}

Damnation is a modern term, and comes with a Judeo-Christian, pejorative undertone. However, there were many reasons for wishing the record of an individual to be removed. Human complexity is an omnipresent phenomenon across time and space, and this is one instance in which it is all too easy to allow modern associations with a term to influence the way we view the motivations here. Whatever the reason, the attempted damnation of this female pharaoh’s memory proved to be wildly unsuccessful, primarily because of the scope of her accomplishments. The sheer volume of texts, statues, temples, and obelisks she had erected could not be destroyed, and she has never been truly stricken from memory. It is worthy of note that damnation of memory within the Egyptian context accompanied a female. While it is entirely possible that there were other individuals upon whom this practice was exercised more effectively, the female link is consistent with extant data.

The New Kingdom also boasts Pharaoh Amenhotep III. Amenhotep III is considered one of Egypt’s most successful pharaohs. His unusually long reign spanned 38 years, which oversaw

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 131.
the vast expansion of Egypt and a time of great wealth and prosperity.\textsuperscript{8} Egypt’s borders extended into Mesopotamia, and in order to strengthen ties with the local kings, Amenhotep III married several of their daughters.\textsuperscript{9} It is possible that his Great Wife, Tiye, was descended from a foreign land, with her lineage being slightly ambiguous on her paternal side.\textsuperscript{10} What is clear is that while Amenhotep III was a particularly warring king, he also embraced much cultural influx from the lands he conquered.\textsuperscript{11} This manifests in much religious permeation and diplomatic posturing, seen in the Amarna Letters discussed in chapter 5. It was into this time of connectivity and change that Akhenaten took the throne.

Amenhotep III’s heir apparent was his son, Thutmose.\textsuperscript{12} However, upon Thutmose’s sudden death, his younger brother became the heir. This was Amenhotep IV, later to be known as Akhenaten. He was married to Nefertiti, a woman of little known origin, and upon the death of his father, Amenhotep IV assumed the throne.\textsuperscript{13} He reigned for a laudable seventeen years, during which he executed a fantastic number of changes. While there is no evidence of issues with these alterations during his lifetime, the details of the reigns directly succeeding his are murky.\textsuperscript{14} The throne bounced around among a few individuals, at least one of whom was female, before it finally settled upon the boy king, Tutankhamen.\textsuperscript{15} The reason why a decision was made to execute a damnation of memory on Akhenaten is likewise unclear. Indeed, Tutankhamen’s

\textsuperscript{8} Smith and Simpson, \textit{The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt.}, 3.
\textsuperscript{12} Redford, \textit{Akhenaten, the Heretic King.}, 37.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 57.
original name was actually Tutankaten, in reference to the Aten. His royal decree shifting the official theology still exists, and is one of the main texts referred to when discussing this unusual turn of events. It reads:

…the temples and the cities of the gods and goddesses, starting from Elephantine [as far] as the Delta marshes … were fallen into decay and their shrines were falling into ruin, having become mere mounds overgrown with grass… The gods were ignoring this land. If an army was sent to Syria to extend the boundaries of Egypt it met with no success at all. If one prayed to a god, to ask something from him, he did not respond at all. If one beseeched any goddess in the same way, she did not respond at all. Their hearts were faint in their bodies, and they destroyed what was made.

However, it does not explicitly mention Akhenaten’s name. Rather, Tutankhamen mentions perilous times in the kingdom, which needs to be fixed. The extant evidence does not indicate that the temples were in this condition under the reign of Akhenaten, which points towards a more propagandist account from the boy king of his predecessor. Tutankhamen’s motivations for mirroring Akhenaten in changing both name and theology, therefore, probably stemmed from external political pressures. Much has been made of Tutankhamen because of the discovery of his intact tomb, but the reality is that he was an ineffectual king. Akhenaten was the last great king of Dynasty 18, and after Tutankhamen’s death at around age 19, warlords from the north took over. It is likely that Akhenaten’s damnation of memory was a political move on behalf of Dynasty 19 to discredit the power of their rival, rather than the religious motivation that has been previously assumed.

Whatever the reason behind it, Akhenaten’s damnation of memory was much more complete than Hatshepsut’s had been. Indeed, it was only relatively recently that we discovered Akhenaten had existed. His name does not occur on any king’s list, and even the ancient

17 Ibid., 24.
18 Ibid., 26-27.
19 Ibid., 24.
historian Manetho gives no mention of him.\textsuperscript{20} Tutankhamen became collateral damage in Akhenaten’s damnation of memory, with his name also failing to appear on any king’s lists.

Because of the totality of Akhenaten’s banishment from history, it was shocking for archaeologists when they stumbled upon the seemingly misshapen figures that bore this unfamiliar name. Indeed, they believed for a short while that Akhenaten was a woman. It was only after more buried evidence came to light that the role of Akhenaten and his revolution had played in Egypt became evident.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{Akhenaten’s Changes}

It is almost difficult to find anything about Akhenaten that is within the established norm for a pharaoh. During his reign, he caused radical changes in almost every facet of his life. This may have been due to his lack of a normal education for the heir apparent. Amenhotep IV was the second son of his illustrious father, Amenhotep III, and as the second son, he received very little contact from the priests and courtiers that hover around the future pharaoh. Instead, he was left to the care of his mother, with whom he had a clear bond. Indeed, evidence suggests that she may have been buried alongside Akhenaten in his tomb at Amarna, before their bodies were moved by later generations.\textsuperscript{22} Tiye was a cunning politician in her own right. She had deep connections to the vizier, the king’s closest adviser.\textsuperscript{23} Her role in the Akhenaten’s radical actions are unclear, but her intimate involvement in his youth points to her having a deep influence on him.

\textsuperscript{22} Kemp, \textit{The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti}., 191.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 33.
It has been believed that Amenhotep IV most likely ruled as coregent with his father, Amenhotep III, for several years before Amenhotep III’s death.\footnote{James Karl Hoffmeier, \textit{Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism} (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015)., 88.} This is noteworthy, as he may have already had experience with political life before ascending the throne. Akhenaten’s changes did not come from a place of naïveté, but rather a calculated understanding of kingship and his own personal desires.

Amenhotep IV became pharaoh of Egypt upon Amenhotep III’s death in 1377 BCE.\footnote{Kemp, \textit{The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti.}, 272.} Shortly into his reign, Amenhotep IV decreed a change in both the thought and location of his kingship. The capital of Egypt had always been in one of its established seats in either Memphis or Thebes, but Amenhotep IV desired a vast alteration. He changed his name to Akhenaten, which roughly translates to “Beneficial for the Aten.”\footnote{Bard, \textit{Introduction to the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt.}, 213.} A year later, he began construction of a city that would also be called Akhenaten, to house his new regime. The location of the new capital was between Thebes and Memphis, in a location in the middle of Egypt (\textit{Figure 2}). The site for modern excavation is called Tell el-Amarna, and as such is referred to simply as Amarna to avoid confusion with the pharaoh.\footnote{Williamson, “Amarna Period.”, 6.}
The city of Amarna gives great insight into the motivations and desires of the king. It is situated in the desert off of the Nile, with cliffs creating a curve to enclose the city (Figure 3). This portion of land was chosen for several reasons; foremost amongst them was Akhenaten’s desire to have virgin soil upon which to build a seat of worship for the Aten. The king’s desires are laid out clearly on 16 boundary stelae that are carved into the cliffs around Amarna. They show figures of the king and queen, along with text that states the intentions for this new city (Figure 4). The stele reads:

On this day, when One was in Akhetaten, His Majesty [appeared] on the great chariot of electrum… Setting [off] on a good road [toward] Akhenaten his [i.e. the Aten’s] place of creation, which he made for himself that he might set within it every day… There was presented a great offering to the Father, the Aten, consisting of bread, beer, long- and short-horned cattle, calves, fowl, wine, fruits, incense, all kinds of fresh green plants and everything good, in front of the mountain of Akhenaten…

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28 Kemp, *The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti*, 34.
29 Ibid.
This proclamation, made in the 5th year of his reign, establishes the foundation of what Amarna would be: the birthplace of this new deity, and the level of veneration that Akhenaten was expecting to bestow upon the Aten. The vast and plentiful offerings (symbolic or literal) show the extent to which Akhenaten was committed to piety.

Along with Akhenaten and his household, an estimated 20,000-50,000 people moved to Amarna with him. They quickly built temples and palaces for the elites, and constructed smaller village-like dwellings for the majority of the population. The center of worship for the Aten and the royal palaces were placed towards the north of Amarna, with the non-elite living towards the south, all of which was enclosed within the boundary stelae. From the excavated tombs, it appears that people moved to Amarna who wished to find royal favor. Many of these individuals were non-elites, who jumped at the chance at upward mobility by following the king.

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30 Ibid., 272.
31 Ibid., 43.
However, the modern narrative surrounding Akhenaten focuses most strongly upon his radical shift away from the Ra cult towards a new sun deity, the Aten. Truly, Akhenaten’s kingly relationship to the Aten was intimate and unique. The pharaoh addressed the deity directly, and the images of this deity as a sun disk was reserved for depiction with the royal household. In this, Akhenaten (and Nefertiti) has deep influence over the god, much more than any priest. This was starkly different from the established social stratification, in which priests played an influential role. Akhenaten brought personality to his representation, which was manifest in his actions, his relationship with the Aten, and in his unusual artistic record.

Depictions of Akhenaten are immediately striking as odd. He has elongated features, a distended belly, enlarged breasts, and thick thighs. Indeed, he looks female and pregnant (Figure 32)

32 Ibid., 24.
This is a far cry from the rigid representations of previous pharaohs, who had always been shown with narrow hips, stiff and straight bodies, and little to no personal details (Figure 7). Furthermore, Akhenaten had the rest of his household shown in much the same way. Nefertiti is almost indistinguishable from Akhenaten, and their daughters are shown as miniaturized versions of the two of them (Figure 8). There is also intimacy between Akhenaten and Nefertiti, with them touching each other’s faces and embracing (Figure 8). This is shocking, as no pharaoh previously had demonstrated affection in his pictorial representation.\(^{33}\)}

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Throughout almost all of the artistic depiction, the Aten is placed over the heads of Akhenaten and his family. The Aten is displayed as a large circle, with rays extending from it. Each of these is tipped in what appears to be a human hand, holding the *ankh*, or the symbol of life (*Figure 10*). Likewise, much of the extant text from the city of Amarna is referential to the Aten. Both the texts and the images display an unusual amount of affection between the king and the god, as well as between Akhenaten and his family.\(^{34}\)

However, the Aten was not an invention of Akhenaten. The deity appeared previously, at least as early as Amenhotep III’s reign, as a disk above the head of a falcon-headed god (*Figure 11*).\(^{35}\) While it was under Akhenaten that the sun disk shed any anthropomorphic connection, it is


important to note that this belief shift may have not been as radical as has been previously thought. The origins of the Aten are more deeply explored later in this chapter.

The repulsion of the cult of Ra, however, was undeniably radical. There is evidence during Akhenaten’s reign for the destruction of the written name of Ra, as well as images of him.\(^{36}\) This has led some to believe that Akhenaten was a monotheist; however, this term is fundamentally inappropriate given the context for Egyptian belief. Being mono- or polytheistic denotes a concept of belief in one or more gods. As belief was an alien notion to the Egyptians, it is highly improbable that any Egyptian at this time would have harbored the concept of one god versus many gods. Rather, it was a choice made by pharaoh to focus worship and adoration upon a new facet, which would not change the fundamental worldview that the gods in whatever form were the foundation upon which the entire world was built.

Evidence against monotheism is rife outside of Amarna, as well as within its gates. Outside of the city, the average citizen would have only minimally felt the impacts of the pharaoh’s new system of thought. There is no evidence for major rejection of the Ra cult in any other city outside of Amarna, and likewise no record of discomfort on behalf of the people during this time. While birthing, women still appealed to Hathor, and grieving people would have continued to trust Osiris with their recently departed dead. Even within the city walls of Amarna, shrines to other deities exist.\(^{37}\) These data are not consistent with the absolute heresy that has been attributed to Akhenaten within the modern narrative.

Amarna continued as a functioning city for the lifetime of Akhenaten, and at least one of his successors. It left behind an incredible resource, with the Amarna Letters, a series of clay tablets found at Amarna, being hailed as one of the most extraordinary collections from antiquity.

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\(^{36}\) Kemp, *The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti.*, 27.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 30.
extant.\textsuperscript{38} The cuneiform tablets spell out an intimate view of Amarna, and Egypt’s relationship with foreign rulers. Due to the oblivion of Amarna, these artifacts were successfully saved from the prying hands of treasure hunters for centuries. However, the preservation of Amarna’s goods came at the cost of Akhenaten’s vision. Tutankhamen executed the extremely successful damnation of memory due to the external pressures examined above, and Amarna was abandoned to the sand of the desert, disappearing along with the might of the 18\textsuperscript{th} Dynasty.

\textit{Mythology}

One of the central issues the modern human has in understanding the daily lives of the Egyptians is the thought that their mythology functioned much the same as our religion, a belief that some unseen force yields power over the world based entirely on faith. This was not the way Egyptian religion functioned. Rather, their gods were the explanatory framework for their entire world view. As such, there is no notion of belief or faith. It was similar to our notion of gravity; things fall when you drop them because of gravity, and one’s belief in gravity is not needed to validate its existence. Much the same, the waters of the Nile flowed because of the gods, the sun tracked across the sky because of the gods, and the only contact the people had to these undisputed and all-powerful entities was the Pharaoh, the god’s kin and representative on earth.\textsuperscript{39} It is precisely because of this fact that the populous was amenable to the notions of the pharaoh, whether that notion is building a great pyramid or changing his name and worshipping a new god.

The polytheistic pantheon and mythology of Egypt is richly diverse. Allowed to germinate across deep time, a complex and sophisticated narrative arose to bring order and

\textsuperscript{38} Moran, \textit{The Amarna Letters.}, xi.
\textsuperscript{39} Wilkinson, \textit{The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt.}, 54.
meaning to the fundamentally chaotic reality of nature. The formation of the pantheon dates back to the Predynastic Era, in which different warring tribes had their patron god. The solidified pantheon arose around 3000 BCE, along with the notion of state.⁴⁰

In the hot and dry desert, it comes as no surprise that the most powerful god was the sun god, Ra. Ra takes different hybridized names throughout history, merging with similar gods such as Amun, to create Ra-Amun.⁴¹ However, for the purpose of clarity, the overarching name of Ra will be used for this thesis (Figure 12).

![The enthroned Re-Horakhty-Atum, Tomb of Roy, Thebes](image)

**Figure 12**

*The enthroned Re-Horakhty-Atum, Tomb of Roy, Thebes*

The creation myth of Egypt speaks directly to the fundamental notions held by the Egyptians about the world around them and how it worked. Indeed, it was this myth that gave the pharaoh the divine right to rule. Different versions of the myth existed in differing locales on the Nile, but the most common one was from Heliopolis in central Egypt.

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⁴⁰ Ibid., 15.  
⁴¹ Ibid., 205.
It was believed that the sun god (known as Atum in Heliopolis) came into being via the “primordial flood.”42 However, desiring to create more deities, Atum utilized bodily fluid either through masturbation, spitting, or sneezing, which interacted with the soil to create two more gods. In the masturbation account of creation, Ra takes on the role of both male and female, with his hand acting as the other sexual organ.43 This speaks to notions the Egyptians held about masculine and feminine features within their gods. The creator god could and did possess both.

The deities that arose from the ground were Tefnut and Shu, the air deities, and they in turn created more children; the earth god Geb and the sky goddess Nut. From this pair, four children were born. The sisters were Isis and Nephthys, and the brothers were Osiris and Seth. Within these ‘siblings,’ Osiris became the god of the underworld, and Seth was the god of chaos, destruction, and war.44 Within this mythology, the constraints of the universe are fleshed out with the sky and earth deities, and the dichotomy of Seth and Osiris show order and chaos, the pair of opposites that dominated Egyptian worldview.

Egyptian mythology deals with the ultimate demise of the cosmos in an interesting way. There is death of all living things, god and man, but not in some catastrophic or apocalyptic end; rather, the earth would devolve back into the primordial goo of chaos from which it came.45 This demonstrates the amenability of the population towards a simplification of their worldview back towards primordial elements, whether that is the destructive force of chaos, or the life-giving heat of the sun.

42 Ibid., 17.
The child of Isis and Osiris was Horus, the hawk-headed god that replaced Osiris as the ruler of earth. He was also the god of kings, who each had a Horus Name in addition to their official name as king. The Horus Name was special, and like the other names of the king, always portrayed within a cartouche. Even after changing his name, Akhenaten maintained his Horus name, as well as his prenomen, which referenced Ra. The impact that this mythology had cannot be overstated. It was, truly, a worldview rather than a mythology. While Atenism clearly shifted around power within the pantheon away from Ra and towards Aten, it is inappropriate to assume that the entire worldview changed.

Horus, along with the other children of these gods, became the pantheon of animal-headed gods with discrete roles that remained constant within Egypt for almost 6000 years. Different gods experienced times of greater popularity, and cities usually had one god or goddess to whom they felt particularly attached. However, the entire pantheon did exist, and were called upon for their specific functions. Contact with other cultures introduced new deities, which were absorbed into the ever-growing pantheon of the Egyptians. Worship of one specific god did not offend; it was viewed more as a personal preference than any sort of blaspheme.

The mythology of the Egyptians indicates a people strongly linked with their natural environment and contemplating sophisticated notions of eternity, life, and death. The inevitable degradation of the universe back into chaos points towards the potency of the Egyptian notion of chaos versus order. It was the pharaoh’s duty to speak to the gods to make sure order was upheld. Any alteration within the orthodox belief system would have compromised the stability of order,

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46 Ibid., 21-22.
47 Hornung, Akhenaten and the Religion of Light., 32.
49 Zivie-Coche, “Foreign Deities in Egypt.”, 1.
and therefore it can be assumed that such an alteration would only have occurred if the pharaoh truly believed that it was the best chance his people had at staving off chaos.

**Birth of the Aten**

Discussing Aten prior to Akhenaten is difficult, as there is very little data showing its existence previously. As stated above, the Aten was not an invention of Akhenaten. The first mention that we have of this deity is within the 12\(^{th}\) Dynasty, when there is a passing remark made about a dead king rising into the sky to merge with the sun-disk, Aten.\(^{50}\) The sun-disk is Aten; however, in what physical manifestation it is remains unclear. The first record of Aten worship appears under the reign of Amenhotep III, when the Aten is shown as a circle above the head of a falcon-headed god, which looks remarkably similar to the god Ra. The function of this deity during the reign of Amenhotep III is likewise unknown. However, the Aten clearly had a vast influence on the young Amenhotep IV, who changed his entire life for this deity. The Aten also changed for Akhenaten, shedding any anthropomorphized representations to appear as a sun-disk over the heads of the royal family. Interpretations of Atensim have been quite varied, as will be discussed in chapter 3.

While it is unclear what role the Aten played previously to Akhenaten’s reign, it is generally understood that his mother planted the seeds of Akhenaten’s radicalism. Indeed, Heinrich Brugsch states that Amenhotep III had a “bad marriage” to a “foreigner.”\(^{51}\) By this, he is most likely referring to Tiye, Akhenaten’s mother. Furthermore, Akhenaten’s “documented aversion to the worship of Amun, the revered national god, and his divine circle, was to be


blamed on the daughter of foreigners.”52 His mother had, apparently, “planted the teachings of a single god of light in him when he was a tender youth.”53 In order to understand what these foreign notions might have been, a look into Egypt’s neighbors is requisite, and is fleshed out in chapter 5.

**Gender Roles**

Discussion of both the Aten and Akhenaten is confusing due to the fluidity of gender roles within the visual narrative. Akhenaten, as discussed previously, is feminine within his representation. Furthermore, the Aten is the first Egyptian god to exist as a pure abstraction with no connection to an anthropomorphized body. This deity cannot be so easily sexed.

However, in contrast to the figures of Akhenaten and the Aten, Egyptian thought is incredibly rigid with regard to gender roles. While other ancient cultures did have notions of intersex individuals, the Egyptians aligned in strict binaries that were dependent on morphological sexual characteristics. Differentiation of labor and cult practice occurred based on gender. The only fluidity was seen if a man was castrated, who took on female pronouns in some cases. However, the binary was strong—although, notions of masculinity and femininity were not the same as they are in contemporary society. The king was the only individual who was required to display hyper-masculinity. He is associated with the bull, and is expected to balance the chaos of Seth along with the order of Osiris.54

While there is no evidence for humans breaking the gender binary, there are examples within the pantheon of individuals that are inclusive of both. As touched on earlier, Ra contains

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Deborah Sweeney, “Sex and Gender.”, 2.
both masculine and feminine in his masturbatory creation of the gods. Furthermore, the god of the inundation, Hapy, is portrayed as having breasts and a distended belly, even though his masculine sex is readily apparent (Figure 13).\textsuperscript{55} This has been read as being referential to the abundance and plenty the inundation brought, rather than the possession of actual feminine characteristics.

![Figure 13](image)

*Figure 13*

*Dual depictions of Hapy, throne decoration, colossal statue of Ramesses II, Luxor Temple*

Both Ra and Hapy point towards a broader notion of gender within the pantheon than the living population. The deities associated with life were in possession of both the masculine and feminine components of creation, while still being referred to as a male. This is impactful in understanding the Aten and Akhenaten, where the pronoun used in reference to the Aten is not necessarily definitive of its role. Akhenaten, as the corporeal link to the Aten, would have likewise been applicable to a broader notion of sex and gender roles as the representative of the deity on earth.

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Chapter III: Established Narrative

History of Scholarship

Study of Akhenaten is unique in that it is purely contemporary. As the Egyptians lived more or less congruently for thousands of years, they had much interest in their own history and the actions of their predecessors. There is commentary from kings on past kings, and connection to their practices and notions. Because of this, the narrative of the majority of kings has been crafted as much by their contemporaries as by modern scholars.

However, one of the consequences of Akhenaten’s damnation of memory is that his legacy has been almost completely controlled by modern historians. This narrative has been anything but consistent. Indeed, it is clear that the majority of people writing on Akhenaten do not have any particular affinity for him. He has been labeled as villain and heretic, qualifiers that have stuck in the absence of alternative narrative.

This is largely due to the modern skew that inevitably gets placed on anything recently discovered. While this is not a good or bad thing, it has vastly altered the way in which we view this king. In order for an understanding of why his narrative is currently overwhelmingly pejorative, an understanding of the history of his scholarship is vital.

The first Egyptologist was, in a sense, the Egyptian priest Manetho, who wrote in Greek in the 3rd century BCE to chronicle his country’s history. He compiled a list of the past kings, reaching back to the Predynastic Era. However, he makes no mention of either Akhenaten or his successors in the 18th Dynasty, moving straight from Amenhotep III to the 19th Dynasty.56

56 Manetho and Waddell, Manetho.
The first accounts that we have on record are from the French priest Claude Sicard, as he stumbled upon the ruined site of Tell el-Amarna in 1714. While Akhenaten would remain untouched after that for several hundred years, this was far from his end. Scholars rediscovered Tell el-Amarna in the nineteenth century, and were quick to pass harsh judgment on what they found there, including whether or not Akhenaten was a woman. Upon clarity that this was, indeed, a man, and that he was, truly, worshipping a different god, much excitement was stirred. It was polarizing, with one group thinking of these changes as the first move towards individuality, science, and enlightenment, and the other finding him a poor reject from an otherwise unblemished line of Egyptian splendor.

Our modern understanding of the Amarna period is heavily influenced by the writings of early Egyptologists, especially James Henry Breasted and Arthur Weigall. They provided the foundation for much of our understanding and beliefs about Akhenaten and his religion. However, these sources are far from impartial. Indeed, when we begin to look at their writings on the matter, the cultural bias towards Christian beliefs becomes incredibly clear. Regarding the religion of light, Breasted writes, “[Akhenaten was a] ‘God-intoxicated man,’ whose mind responded with marvellous sensitiveness and discernment to the visible evidences of God about him. He was fairly ecstatic in his sense of the beauty of the ethereal and universal light.” This quote displays several of the assumptions and cultural notions early Egyptologists made, which were vastly influential in the formation of his narrative. The use of the capital G in god demonstrates that Breasted was working under the assumption that Akhenaten was venerating

57 Hornung, Akhenaten and the Religion of Light., 1.
58 Ibid., 3.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 13.
the Christian god. As a Christian, Breasted and other early scholars would see Christian themes whether or not they were the best conclusions based on the facts.

This is further shown in the writings of Weigall. He says, “[Akhenaten founded] a religion so pure that we must compare it to Christianity in order to discover its faults.”61 This quote proves that the founding scholars did, indeed, utilize Christianity as a context in which to view Akhenaten and his deity. Furthermore, Weigall’s use of terms such as “faults” and “pure” show that their assessment of Akhenaten’s sun deity was one that relied heavily on judgments rather than pure fact. While neither Breasted nor Weigall are directly referenced within the modern narrative of Akhenaten, their work created the foundation upon which the current narrative was built.

Within text, the seminal work discussed in reference to Atenism is The Great Hymn of Aten. However, it is not actually titled that—Breasted ascribed the name to it. He likewise formatted the English translation to appear like a Christian hymn, with stanzas and breaks. This was a purely stylistic choice on the part of Breasted, as the original text was written on a stele, which was composed of vertical lines of hieroglyphics stacked next to each other.62 Given this, it is important to divorce oneself of any associations and cultural connotations with the word “hymn.” It was merely a stele, much like the hundreds of other ones from Ancient Egypt.

While the overt Judeo-Christian notions of the first Western scholars are no longer seen within the scholarship, it was their work that created the platform for all further study. The Great Hymn, for example, is still referenced and reproduced with the title and format that Breasted created. The assumptions and assertions of these scholars have likewise been propagated, especially in the absence of exhaustive archaeological excavation until recently.

61 Ibid.
The more recent wave of Amarna scholars includes individuals with extensive research such as Jan Assmann, Cyril Aldred, Nicholas Reeves, Erik Hornung, Dominic Montserrat, James F. Hoffmier, Donald B. Redford, and Barry Kemp. The latter two have conducted archaeology in Egypt, with Redford working in Karnak and Kemp in Amarna, which has allowed for a deeper understanding based on data. However, they are not always in agreement with their interpretations. Reeves views Akhenaten as a manipulative politician, whereas Assmann sees him as a cosmological monotheist. The majority view Akhenaten within a rather pejorative light.

It is difficult to have a discussion about Akhenaten without some mention of him as a humanist, a scientist, a monotheist, or a heretic coming into the mix. The fact that there is no clear consensus amongst Egyptologists today about what brought on these massive changes points to the dichotomizing influence of the early writings, and calls for greater exploration of motives outside of the ones already assigned to Akhenaten in scholarship.

‘The Heretic King’

It was Donald B. Redford who gave Akhenaten the title that had defined him within the modern narrative when he wrote his book titled “Akhenaten, The Heretic King.” Redford made the argument that Akhenaten was a religious zealot for this minor deity named Aten, and the worship of this deity greatly weakened the prosperous and wealthy kingdom Amenhotep III left for him. The term ‘heretic’ has come to be synonymous with Akhenaten. Redford, Aldred, Assmann, Reeves, Hoffmier, and many others have all added to this notion, with the notable addition of the assumption of monotheism.

However, both ‘heretic’ and ‘monotheism’ are both notions that harken back to Breasted and Weigall, with their culturally situated assessment of Akhenaten. The major evidence that is
drawn on to make this claim is the defacement of the temples as referenced above, with the name of Ra-Amun scraped off. Further evidence exists to show that temples were closed during the reign of Akhenaten, and it is presumed that only temples to the Aten were allowed to function with royal commissions. References within the Great Hymn to the superiority of the Aten also gave rise to the notion that this was one god that had emerged above all others. The starkness of these actions from the rest of Egyptian history demanded answers, and in response the heretic king was born.

However, the totality of the accepted narrative was created before Amarna was fully excavated. The evidence with which these scholars crafted their narrative was mostly visual, as well as the much-cited decree from Tutankhamen when he denounced Akhenaten. Indeed, almost all of the works on Akhenaten are speculative. Further sources were the text of Breasted, who translated a large portion of the extant stelae. I argue that, were the information from the most recent excavations available to the founding scholars, their narrative would have been much different. Rather, the extant narrative is based on incomplete data and culturally situated notions. A new narrative is called for, which is based upon the data available from archaeology at Amarna.

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63 Redford, *Akhenaten, the Heretic King*., 142.
Chapter IV: Amarna Archaeology

Excavations

Amarna is known as the only Ancient Egyptian city one can visit, due to its vanishing into the desert until recently.66 As touched on above, Sicard was the first individual within recorded history to mention this city within the archaeological record, which opened up European exploration. It is reasonable to assume that while Amarna had been wiped from the official record, it was still known by local communities.

European curiosity was further piqued when Napoleon’s forces visited the city in 1798-1799.67 Sir John Gardiner Wilkinson fleshed out the preliminary map published from this expedition out in 1824.68 Wilkinson’s was was further elaborated by Richard Lepsius, who gave a lecture in 1851, proposing that Akhenaten was a monotheist. This garnered much interest and excitement, which allowed for wider knowledge about this site and interest in further study.69

A major breakthrough occurred in 1887 by a local resident, who stumbled upon the Amarna Letters.70 The translation of these documents elucidated the importance of this site, as well as giving an intimate and poignant view into both Egypt and the Near East. The clarity of the letters and their contents made many seriously question their authenticity. However, they were proved to be authentic, and the intrigue surrounding them served to further interest and curiosity.71

66 Kemp, The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti., 17.
68 Ibid., 1.
69 Ibid., 2.
70 Ibid.
In the early 1890s, Alessandro Barsanti and Sir Flinders Petrie both executed major archaeological excavations, uncovering much of the central city.\textsuperscript{72} In the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century a German expedition led by Ludwig Borchardt performed an exhaustive excavation of the area outside of the central city, which is especially noteworthy for the discovery of the bust of Nefertiti (\textit{Figure 14}), a symbol that has become one of the most famous in Ancient Egypt.\textsuperscript{73}

\textit{Figure 14}

\textbf{Bust of Nefertiti}

Sir Leonard Woolley, Henri Frankfort, and others turned their focus to Amarna from 1921-1936.\textsuperscript{74} Currently, excavation is still underway with director Barry Kemp (\textit{Figure 15}).\textsuperscript{75} Recent finds include the South Tombs Complex, which has proven to have deep impacts upon the field of study.

\textsuperscript{72} Williamson, “Amarna Period.”, 2.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Kemp, \textit{The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti}.7.
XXXV Outline plan of the Central City at Amarna, in reality, the royal palace in its entirety. It illustrates some of the evidence for its underlying economic role. The distribution of quernstones and jar labels is after B. J. Kemp, ‘Feeding an ancient city’ In Luff and Rowley-Conwy, Whither Env. Arch., 141, Fig. 14.4. The quernstone data were collected by Delwen Samuel.

**Figure 15**

*Outline plan of the Central City of Amarna*
**Interments**

Perhaps the most poignant piece of evidence that counters the extant narrative is the recent excavation of the South Tombs Cemetery. Excavation began in 2006, and after six seasons of excavation some surprising evidence came to light.  

As Amarna was only occupied for 15-16 years, the individuals buried in the South Tombs Cemetery (referred to hereafter as the STC) are directly referential to Akhenaten’s reign. As such, the general health of the population and the trends apparent in the bones are direct evidence of the circumstances surrounding this pharaoh.

While the STC was only excavated within the last ten years, the knowledge of the tombs in Amarna is much older. Indeed, the king’s tomb was to be cut into the rock face, a prerogative that is clearly expressed in the boundary stelae:

> Let a tomb be made for me in the eastern mountains [of Akhenaten]. Let my burial be made in it, in the millions of jubilees that the Aten, my father, has decreed for me. Let the burial of the Great King’s Wife, Nefertiti, be made in it, in the millions of years that the Aten, my father, has decreed for her. Let the burial of the King’s Daughter, Meryeaten, be made in it, in these millions of years. If I die in any town downstream, to the south, to the west, to the east in these millions of years, let me be brought back, that I may be buried in Akhenaten.  

This was manifest in a rock tomb carved into the eastern mountain. However, as is true of many elite tombs in Ancient Egypt, it is devoid of its occupant. Several candidates for Akhenaten and Nefertiti’s bodies have been suggested over time, as it is probable that their bodies were moved. No clear consensus exists. Several elite tombs that were also carved into the rock wall joined

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76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
80 Kemp, *The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti.*, 289.
Akhenaten’s, although none in the eastern mountain reserved for the royals. It is within these tombs that much of the textual and visual record of Amarna has survived. The Great Hymn of the Aten is often cited, as well as the occupant’s gratitude towards Akhenaten and his teachings. The bodies and goods of the owners have been either lost or moved.

However, the majority of the people living in Amarna were non-elite. Their tombs received little attention from ancient robbers and excavators alike, until recently. As referenced above, an estimated 20,000-50,000 people went with Akhenaten to this new city, which required quick assemblage to make the barren desert into a functioning city. This was achieved by a large number of non-elites utilizing the new technology of a talalt block. This smaller stone could be hauled by a single individual, and allowed for rapid construction. During the occupation of Amarna, there was inevitable death, especially in the non-elite.

The STC is 1550 square meters and consists of many tombs, with estimation of the number to be somewhere in the thousands. As of 2013, 274 remains have been excavated from 222 tombs (Figure 16). The majority are merely pits in the ground, with rudimentary coffins appearing sparsely. Looting by grave robbers is seen quite frequently, although the lack of burial goods within the untouched tombs points towards a lack of ornate burial for the Amarna non-elite. It is worthy of note, however, that the rare grave goods are almost always food or drink contained within pottery.

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81 Ibid., 248.
84 Ibid.
While the tombs themselves appear ordinary for the Egyptian non-elite, analysis of the bones has unearthed unexpected and unusual results. In sharp contrast to the voluptuous and rich imagery presented by Akhenaten, the skeletons of the common citizen show extreme stress from malnourishment, hard work, and disease. The distribution of death is unusual within the New Kingdom:

**Figure 16**
Plan of the upper excavation area at the South Tombs Cemetery

Distribution of Deaths

- 0-3 years: 17%
- 3-7 years: 11%
- 7-15 years: 12%
- 15-25 years: 21%
- 25-35 years: 17%
- 35-50 years: 19%
- 50+ years: 1%, 2%
Of 274 excavated remains, 232 can have their age estimated.\textsuperscript{85} Within this group, 30% died before the age of seven, which is common within contemporaneous populations of Egypt.\textsuperscript{86} However, post-infant sub-adult mortality in the age range of 15-25 is usually low within these populations. The data of Amarna displays the exact opposite of this expected trend. The highest portion of individuals died within this range, with a staggering number of 42 deaths. The fact that the peak mortality is seen when mortality should be at its lowest indicates that the people of Amarna were under unusual duress.

The stress of the population is further seen in the overall stature of the individuals. Height is the best indicator of nutritional deficits, as malnutrition in youth arrests long bone development.\textsuperscript{87} Skeletal remains from 5000-1800 BCE in Ancient Egypt allow for understanding of approximate stature as shown below:\textsuperscript{88}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Computed stature (cm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badari (c. 5000-3900)</td>
<td>154.9 ± 2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Predynastic</td>
<td>157.3 ± 4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Predynastic</td>
<td>157.2 ± 3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Dynastic (c. 3100-2700 BCE)</td>
<td>159.5 ± 6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Kingdom</td>
<td>159.6 ± 7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Kingdom</td>
<td>155.2 ± 3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>157.5 ± 5.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{85} Kemp, *The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti*, 228.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Badari</td>
<td>162.9 ± 4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Predynastic</td>
<td>168.3 ± 5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Predynastic</td>
<td>168.6 ± 4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Dynastic</td>
<td>169.6 ± 5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Kingdom</td>
<td>168.8 ± 3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Kingdom</td>
<td>166.4 ± 5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>167.9 ± 5.1</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within Amarna, the average female stature is 154.02 cm and male stature is 163.75 cm.\(^{89}\) This is shorter than any known average with the exception of the males in the Badari period. However, since the formation of the dynastic Egyptian state, such a low number had never been seen. The short height of the adults of Amarna creates a line of evidence pointing towards nutritional stress that began in childhood and continued until death.

While stature indicates general malnutrition, specific deficits of iron and Vitamin C are indicated by identifiable occurrences in the bones. In 42.7% of the remains of both children and adults with extant occipital orbits we see signs of pitting in the eye sockets, known as cribra orbitalia.\(^{90}\) Vitamin C deficit manifests within the skeletal record as porotic lesions of the sphenoid, temporal, and occipital bone, which is seen in 5.2% of the sub-adults.\(^{91}\) The much greater percentage of probable iron deficiency markers points towards a lack of staple diet rather than fringe nutrients, such as Vitamin C. Iron is a nutrient that is associated with digestion of

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\(^{89}\) Kemp et al., “Life, Death and beyond in Akhenaten’s Egypt.”  
\(^{90}\) Ibid.  
\(^{91}\) Ibid.
high-quality foods like meat or a large quantity of grain.\textsuperscript{92} The fact that almost half of the population was lacking in meat or sufficient grain speaks to inadequate foodstuffs at Amarna.

However, malnutrition is not the only cause of mortality. The high number of post-infant sub-adult deaths is consistent with comparable data in which populations are suffering from disease.\textsuperscript{93} Ill health and plague is known of from inside Egypt, and from outside its borders.\textsuperscript{94} It is generally understood that Egypt must have been suffering from some sort of epidemic at this time. Lack of sufficient calories exacerbates extant health issues, and the evidence from STC shows a combination of probable famine and definite malnutrition that concluded in the most malnourished population seen for almost 4000 years in Egypt with one of the highest levels of post-infant sub-adult mortality rates.

\textit{Climate Data}

Understanding that the pantheon of Egypt was the very foundation upon which all life was built for its people, and any alteration in the veneration of the gods could mean obliteration, it seems unlikely that Akhenaten’s changes stemmed from some romantic notion of revelation. Rather, just as every human, Akhenaten was responding to his environment as much as to his internal notions. As pharaoh, it was his duty to do what he believed to be the best path of action to keep order in the universe. As such, we must examine what that universe looked like, and what order needed to be upheld.

As the Nile River floods regularly, bringing with it a fresh layer of sediment to coat the riverbank, it has been relatively easy to track changes reaching back to antiquity, showing the

\textsuperscript{93} Kemp, \textit{The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti}., 228.
\textsuperscript{94} Redford, \textit{Akhenaten, the Heretic King}., 187.
violence of the floods along with the changing pattern of the river. Also available are records kept by the Egyptians themselves, which chart the annual flood. Used in conjunction, modern geological data and ancient records have allowed a rather clear image of the patterns seen in Egypt.

![Figure 17](image)

*Figure 17*

*Height of ancient Nile floods*

However, the data become less clear when moving into the Dynastic Era. Many of the seminal works charting the Nile flooding are limited to purely Pre and Early Dynastic eras. From even this minimal information, however, several trends are apparent. In the Predynastic Era, the Nile flood reached up to three meters, flooding the surrounding land and providing easy

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95 Bell, “The Oldest Records of the Nile Floods.”, 569.

96 Ibid.
irrigation. The levels steadily fell, showing a strong trend toward less water and greater incongruity in the Nile floods (Figure 17).

It is clear to see a correlation between times of political stress in the history of Egypt, and the lack of water in the annual inundation. This makes logical sense, as the very foundation of power and life in the Nile Valley was the inundation. Incongruity in this would have manifested in the Egyptian worldview as disfavor from the gods, and a weak monarch that was inept in his job of maintaining order and fertility throughout the land. Perhaps the most striking example of this was an event known as the 4.2 kiloyear event. Widespread climate change affected nearly every major civilization. In Egypt, years of low Nile floods manifested as famine and a fracturing of the social order, which brought an end to the Old Kingdom and began the First Intermediate Period.97 This example shows clear precedent for environmental factors affecting Egyptian social order.

While there are no exact data on the Nile inundation during Akhenaten’s reign, it is known that, given trends seen in antiquity, that the consistency and level of the inundation were falling. Furthermore, data exist to indicate a changing landscape. Pollen data indicates a marked decline of all kinds of plant life, especially Nile water plants and swamp vegetation, starting in the Middle Kingdom and reaching its low point in the New Kingdom. Indeed, some data do not exist for certain plants, which may indicate that the gap is caused by dryness.98 These data were collected in the Delta, which is the part of Egypt least affected by low inundations. Low levels of pollen in the Delta are indicative of even starker trends in the rest of the desert.

 Mediocre inundations would be a cause of concern for Akhenaten. Any king does not wish to appear weak to his country or his neighbors, especially after the massive expansion that had happened during the reigns of Amenhotep II and III. Were the crops to be weak, this would be a clear rationale for Akhenaten looking to other gods for support to feed his people and keep his power.

Furthermore, the imagery seen in Amarna, specifically in graves, was that of excess and bounty. Heaps of overflowing goods are seen as offerings, and the king and his family are shown as lush and full. Pictorial representation, however, is not always consistent with reality, and is instead more likely to demonstrate a propagandist narrative of an intended reality. The fact that bounty is so heavily featured in Amarna actually points toward a different desire, which was to show the fertility and abundance that may have been lacking. The data from the STC supports this notion, as seen above.
Chapter V: Mesopotamia

*Egyptian Connection*

Akhenaten’s philosophies are almost impossible to comprehend within the Egyptian context. However, this was not the only context in which this pharaoh was functioning. Amenhotep III had opened the cultural gates to Mesopotamia, with familial connections being solidified through marriage. In the Amarna Letters, discussed in greater detail below, it is clear to see that the importance of Mesopotamian notions is vastly underestimated in the current scholarship, and that this connection reached back to the time of Amenhotep III himself. Brides, presents, and religious goods are exchanged, and the jealousies and desires of the respective kings are blatantly expressed. Akhenaten is not usually discussed with respect to these Mesopotamian influences. However, as I will show below, the connection to Mesopotamia is undeniable, and several of the more bizarre aspects of Akhenaten’s reign can be traced back to Mesopotamian influence.

*Mesopotamian History*

As Egypt had refined the cultivation of their land and settled down in permanent communities, so too had the cultures in Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia literally means ‘between rivers’ and is a broad term that encompasses the manifold cultures that existed between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers encompassing modern day Iraq, Syria, and Kuwait.99 While ‘Mesopotamian’ is an overarching and unspecific term, it will be used to denote notions and cultural components that reach across dynasties and regions.

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Because of the more plentiful supply of water that existed in this part of the earth, a monopoly of power like the pharaohs had was not possible. Rather, different warring factions living in different areas existed, with kings rising and taking control at different times. However, even with all this cultural change, there was a relative consistency that existed in their pantheon. Most strikingly, each king, regardless of his origin, was only given the right to rule by having a symbolic marriage with the fertility goddess Inanna. She was by far the most powerful and constant deity within their pantheon. Kingship was directly linked to fertility. If a king could not ensure that Inanna would bless his land with livestock and fertile fields, he lost the right to rule. This is a theme that remains constant throughout political changes in Mesopotamia.

Figure 18
Map of Empire of Mittani

The Akkadian Empire had collapsed around 2200 BCE, which created a power vacuum. Egypt was eager to conquer some of this land, with Amenhotep III and his processors claiming territory up along the Mediterranean. The Mitanni and the Hittites divided the old Akkadian kingdom between them. The Hittites claimed land near their origin in the Anatolian mountains, and the Mitanni took much of the central territory (Figure 18). Of these three, the Mitanni were arguably the most successful, and yet they are archaeologically invisible. Some of the strongest data we have for the Mitanni are the Amarna Letters, which speak directly to the relationship between Egypt and their king.

The land conquered by Amenhotep III became part of Egypt. The evidence suggests that the cultures and deities of these peoples were willingly accepted into both the religious and political sphere. Several Mesopotamian deities were adopted, including Ba’al, Reshap, Hauron, Astarte, Anat, and Qadesh. This was particularly true of the Delta, which was close in proximity and had already experienced much contact with Mesopotamia from years of trade at their ports.

However, Mesopotamian influence did not stop there. The Amarna Letters are written in cuneiform, the writing style of Mesopotamia. Cuneiform was used to write in both Egyptian and Akkadian; a clear piece of evidence indicating the cultural influence of Mesopotamia at this time is a tablet recovered from one of the residences upon which both Egyptian and Akkadian words are written side by side (Figure 19). This was likely a teaching tool, used for learning either the Akkadian language or cuneiform script. The existence of this tablet within the residential section

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105 Zivie-Coche, “Foreign Deities in Egypt.”, 3.
106 Ibid., 2.
further underscores both the cultural influence of Mesopotamia at this time, as well as the probable immigration of individuals who taught cuneiform and Akkadian.  

Furthermore, the Letters are personal correspondence between the Mitanni king and members of the royal household. The language and tone within them speak to a close relationship of equals, and they often ask each other for various tokens—on one occasion, it is possible that Amenhotep III wrote to the Mitanni king asking for aid in curing a toothache.  

The evidence extant in these letters shows the intimacy between these rulers and their customs. Mesopotamian influence on Akhenaten—and all of Egypt—is undeniable.

**Amarna Letters**

The strongest piece of evidence for the relationship between the 18th Dynasty of Egypt and Mesopotamia is the existence of the Amarna Letters. Several caches of letters have been

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108 Redford, *Akhenaten, the Heretic King*, 52.
found, and many more clay tablets known to have contained similar letters have been destroyed due to vandalism. The extant texts number some 382 letters, with hundreds more speculated to have existed.\textsuperscript{109} The extraordinary nature of these letters cannot be overstated. They offer an intimate view into international politics, personal relationships, and the eventual instability that marks the end of the 18\textsuperscript{th} Dynasty.

The letters stem from a variety of sources, and often include the response of the king sent in reply. The earlier texts are regularly from the Mitanni king speaking directly to Amenhotep III, Akhenaten, or Tiye. The inclusion of the queen as a recipient underscores her unusual power as queen, and her vast affinity for Mesopotamia. The Mitanni king likewise often speaks to the literal familial connection between the Egyptians and Mitanni, speaking of daughters that have been sent as brides both ways. While much of the correspondence demonstrates petty jealousies at not being offered enough gifts or not receiving enough letters, they are also indicative of a greater amount of cultural cross-fertilization than had been previously thought. Egyptian deities would be the expected source of appeal, and the fact that Amenhotep III called for foreign aid speaks greatly to the shifting theological notions in the generation prior to Akhenaten.

While much of the content of the letters is merely political posturing, there is still an undeniable amount of familiarity, permeability, and even affection shown between the neighboring kings. This relationship remained strong until well into Akhenaten’s seventeen years as pharaoh. However, the next generation of Mesopotamians—specifically the Hittite—wished to regain some of the land Amenhotep III conquered.\textsuperscript{110} The last third of the Letters are mostly pleas from local Egyptian authorities for military aid to maintain borders. An example reads:

\begin{footnotes}
\item[110] Ibid., xxxviii.
\end{footnotes}
Say to the king, my lord, my god, my Sun: Message of NIN-UR.MAH.MES, your handmaid. I fall at the feet of the king, my lord, 7 times and 7 times. 8-14 May the king, my lord, know that war has been waged in the land, and gone is the land of the king, my lord, by desertion to the Apiru. 15-24 May the king, my lord, take cognizance of his hand, and may the king, my lord, know that the Apiru wrote to Ayyaluna and to Sarha, and the two sons of Milkilu barely escaped being killed. 25-26 May the king, my lord, know of this deed.\textsuperscript{111}

The surprising number of these letters from multiple sources underscore that the once amicable relationship had turned to conflict. Understanding that Akhenaten and his immediate heirs would have had to deal with foreign invaders offers some explanation as to why Tutankhamen changed the theology back to orthodox worship; he was attempting to maintain the internal integrity of the country against foreign threat. However, as discussed above, it was domestic threat that proved to be more pressing, as a new dynasty took over after Tutankhamen’s young death.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 318.
Chapter VI: Argument

Excavations in the STC starting in 2006 uncovered a fundamental flaw within the accepted notion of Amarna life: the people were malnourished and dying of disease. This is in distinct contrast to the rhetoric of Akhenaten, both visually and textually. Explanations have arisen to account for this disconnect; namely, that Akhenaten’s religious upheaval had devastating impact on the population that followed him. However, this is an inadequate theory to cover the extent of the disparity between Akhenaten’s verbiage and the reality of his people. Rather, I argue that the Aten is a fertility cult with its origins in Mesopotamia that arose in response to the threat of collapse.

Under the Threat of Collapse

From the skeletal remains of Amarna, it is shown that this was not the time of bounty and magnificence that is displayed in Amarna art. Rather, there was famine and disease, as well as pressure from foreign influences seen in the Amarna Letters that were anxious to regain some of the land Amenhotep III had conquered. These conditions were similar to previous times of collapse during the Intermediate Periods, when the king was overthrown.

Furthermore, the poor health of the population also points towards a religious stress. Remembering that the Egyptian belief system held that a god ruled every part of life, illness and disease were likewise somewhat magical forces, from which the gods—and pharaoh—were supposed to protect them. The evidence of plague within Egypt extends well into Amenhotep III’s reign, meaning that Akhenaten would have inherited a kingdom already familiar with

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113 Stanley et al., “Short Contribution.”
epidemic disease.\textsuperscript{114} Understanding that there were hungry rivals from both outside of and within Egyptian borders, Akhenaten needed a bold move in order to maintain control.

Viewing Akhenaten’s theological shift from a practical standpoint, the major alteration was in closing down the temples to other gods. While this has been read as a move towards monotheism, this is inconsistent with the data as shown above. The main effect, therefore, was the centralization of pious offerings to the House and Mansion of the Aten. While offerings for most gods varied, from gold to incense and animal sacrifices, the Aten is unique in its preferred offerings. Almost every visual and textual representation of the Aten includes a shocking amount of food. Grain, poultry, cattle, and fruit are stacked up on tables (\textit{Figure 20}). The excess of offerings is seen in many different locations, from the inside of elite tombs to the temples to Aten (\textit{Figure 21}). It is clear that the Aten was intrinsically linked with offerings of food, an understanding that was prevalent throughout the population. Indeed, there are many faience figures that have been excavated in the shape of grapes, which would have presumably been worn around the neck of individuals in lieu of a direct image of the Aten (\textit{Figure 22}).\textsuperscript{115} Images of the Aten seem to be reserved for depiction with the royal family.

\textsuperscript{114} Kuhrt, \textit{The Ancient Near East.}, 202.
\textsuperscript{115} Kemp, \textit{The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti.}, 56.
Figure 20
The rear of the Aten temple carved in tomb of Meyre

Figure 21
Royal banquet depicted in tomb of Huya

Figure 22
Architectural ornament in the shape of a bunch of grapes
The presence of such bounty is odd, given how unwell the population was. However, the visual rhetoric was creating a strong propagandist narrative that piety to the Aten included donation of foodstuff. The archaeological record of the Long Temple furthers this. Here, a staggering more than 920 tables have been excavated that were clearly supposed to house offerings of food to the Aten.\textsuperscript{116} These tables appear within the artistic record with foodstuffs heaped on them, showing their intended purpose. The number of tables and obsession with food is absolutely unique to Akhenaten and the Aten.\textsuperscript{117} This sort of worship had never been seen before for any deity.

\textbf{Figure 23}

\textit{The Long Temple}

The placement of the tables within the temple is worthy of note. They lie within a large open courtyard in the Long Temple (\textit{Figure 23}). It is clear that the function of this was to spread out food for the population of Amarna. It has been suggested that the function of this open

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 92.
  \item \textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
courtyard and many tables may have been a feasting arena, a place where the population gathered for consumption of food. However, no evidence suggests communal feasting ever having been a part of Egyptian life previous to Akhenaten. With the disbandment of the worship of the other gods and their celebrations, however, it is likely that feasting became a part of worship of the Aten. If this was the case, there was not enough food to keep the population healthy.

The archaeological evidence points towards the practical worship of the Aten being centered on notions of amassing and distributing food. With the excavations of the bones, however, it is clear to see that this obsession with food was symbolic and propagandist rather than representational. As such, the focus on food in the worship of the Aten creates a strong line of evidence that the Aten was created as sanctuary within times of great stress. Akhenaten, with his piles of flesh, exudes confidence that the worship of Aten will bring food and prosperity. These are the actions of a monarch attempting to hold on to power in times of unrest and uncertainty.

Furthermore, the exclusivity of the image of the Aten is remarkable. The personal connection between the royal family and the deity underscores the notion that Akhenaten and his bloodline are central in the appeasement and proliferation of the Aten. This visual rhetoric made Akhenaten irreplaceable. In order for the plenty Atenism promises, Akhenaten must be in charge. The deity favors him, the deity loves him, and he is the only one with whom the deity shows itself. This points towards unrest, which Akhenaten responded to by making himself even more irreplaceable than the traditional pharaoh.

Overwhelmingly, the evidence points towards an incredibly unique time in Egypt. It is not merely the visual and religious components of Akhenaten’s reign that make it unique. The
cultural mobility, obsession with food, and poor health seen in the archaeology of Amarna strongly demonstrate an unstable time within Egypt. Akhenaten’s actions, when placed within the context of the evidence, show a king utilizing rhetoric, divinity, and hope to maintain control.

**Rise of a Fertility Cult**

In response to the unstable time shown above, the Aten was birthed. However, it is not the monotheistic or cosmological solar cult that some have argued. Rather, the Aten is a fertility cult centered on the personal fertility of the king and his wife. Evidence for this alternate narrative is vast. A close examination of the practical cult of the Aten and the visual and textual rhetoric of the king point towards a society obsessed with fertility rather than zealotry.

Evidence for the Aten’s role as a fertile deity is clear both in text and practice. The content of The Great Hymn of Aten is particularly striking. It reads as a love letter from Akhenaten to the Aten. He venerates the Aten’s works, and proudly claims to be beloved of this omnipotent deity. The level of intimacy expressed in this hymn is unprecedented. The direct connection by the king straight to Aten clearly shows not only a kingly right to contact with the deity, but also a personal one. Members of Akhenaten’s family are referenced, including Nefertiti, but there are no priests.

Rather, the central theme of the hymn is fertility, quite strikingly so. Indeed, every kind of fertility is attributed to the Aten within this hymn. It reads:

All beasts are content with their pasturage;  
Trees and plants are flourishing.  
The birds which fly from their nests,  
Their wings are (stretched out) in praise to thy ka…  
Creator of seed in women,  
Thou who makest fluid into man,  
Who maintainest the son in the womb of his mother…  
Thou nurse in the womb,
Who givest breath to sustain all he had made!
On the day when he is born,
Thou openest his mouth completely,
Thou suppliest his necessities…
O sole god, like whom there is no other!
Thou didst create the world according to thy desire…
The countries of Syria and Nubia, the land of Egypt,
Thou settest every man in his place,
Thou suppliest their necessities:
Everyone has his food, and his time of life is reckoned…
The world came into being by thy hand,
According to thou hast made them…
[Everything is] made to flourish for the king,…
Since thou didst found the earth
And raise them up for thy son,
Who came from thy body: the King of Upper and Lower Egypt,…Ak-en-Aten,…and the Chief Wife of the King…Nefertiti, living and youthful forever and ever.118

Within these lines from The Great Hymn of Aten, it is clear to see that the main emphasis of the Aten was providing life in a manifold number of ways. The more obvious ways, like making crops grow, and subtle ways, like nursing a baby in the womb. What is fascinating about the Great Hymn is that it shows great familiarity and affection between the Aten and Akhenaten, and also demonstrates a broader set of duties than one would automatically assume to accompany a masculine sun god. Making sure the infant comes to term is a duty that would not fall on the masculine side of our modern gender binary, and yet fall within the jurisdiction of the Aten. Furthermore, the Aten is much more far-reaching than previous gods had been. The Hymn mentions its reach into Syria and Nubia, as well as Egypt. This is a connection between the system of thought in Egypt and in the Near East, which may be a reference to Atenism’s origins in foreign thought. This possibility will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Given the continued worship of Ra, the emphasis on fertility, and what we know about the population of Amarna, the evidence points towards a broader understanding of the Aten.

118 C. N. Reeves, Akhenaten, Egypt’s False Prophet (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 143.
Because of its circular shape and the allusions to the sun in the Great Hymn, it has always been assumed that the solar disk is representative of the sun. While this is probably accurate, the fact that the rays are tipped in human hands bearing the sign for life allows for a broader meaning. Combined with all the other aspects of Atenism, a clear line of evidence emerges for Aten being a fertility symbol, giving life both metaphorically and literally. It is clear that Akhenaten’s Aten is much more than a sun god.

_Akhenaten’s Fertile Body_

One of the issues with understanding the visual representation of the king is the notion that Egyptian art was realistic. The use of the term “realistic” is inherently problematic, as notions of reality and its expression in art has changed over time. Likewise, judgments about Akhenaten’s appearance are entirely varied; some think of this style of art as a sort of hyperrealism and others think it is entirely unrealistic.\(^\text{119}\) The varying levels of perceived realism give birth to various theories as to why the king chose to look the way he did, with pathology and genetic disorder being a serious contemplation.\(^\text{120}\)

However, as stated above, notions of realism within Egyptian art are scattered modern judgments based on our own sensibilities. Even outside of Amarna art, humans were portrayed differently, with skin color, size, and appearance varying based on the rank, gender, and ethnicity of the one being portrayed.\(^\text{121}\) As such, it is more accurate to state that Egyptian art was a


\(^{121}\) Examples of this can be seen as far back as the Narmer Palette (Bard p. 107), which dates from the Predynastic Era and shows the king smiting his foes, which are portrayed differently in size and shape. The king also has an attendant shown much smaller, to give the notion of his kingliness.
measure of desired or intended reality—whichever reality that particular ruler wished to express. This was manifest by appearance beside gods, of large size, and of the particular signs of kingship—the false beard, whip and tassel, and double crown.

This imagery was incredibly important to the Egyptians. An illiterate population living with endless sand around them responded strongly to the landmarks and art of the upper classes. It was a display of might and power in a way that was much more poignant and effective than we can comprehend. Given the value placed upon pictorial representation, it is irrational to think that a king would present himself in a way that would do anything other than underscore his power, stability, and favor.

Understanding both the nature of reality in Egyptian art and its power, Akhenaten’s strange appearance holds much more meaning and merit. The accuracy of the image to life was not important; rather, the intended reality Akhenaten wished to display to his subjects is of interest.

The fact that Akhenaten was mistaken for a pregnant woman for several hundred years should not be so immediately dismissed. The reality is that he looks extremely feminine. Given that the pharaoh was expected to be the pinnacle of masculinity, it is improbable that Akhenaten would wish to display himself in a style that could be mistaken for feminine. Indeed, feminizing opponents had been a way of shaming them in the Egyptian past. Likewise, the queen of a king would have never adorned herself as his equal. Rather, she would round out the pantheon by being representative of the goddesses, as her husband was representative of the gods.

The homogeny of Nefertiti and Akhenaten points toward another radical aspect of Aten: the rupture of firm gender binaries and roles based on sex. Rather, the Aten is a fertility deity.


\[123\] Ibid., 7.
one that, much like Ra, is inclusive of both masculine and feminine qualities. Unlike Ra, the Aten shed itself of any anthropomorphic qualifiers, and therefore does not need to be sexed. This abstraction allows for this one deity to be inclusive of all things. Because of the totality of the Aten, the pharaoh is allowed to demonstrate that which is most needed at the time—in the case of Akhenaten, that was a bountiful land full of fertility and richness. Nefertiti is also shown in the same lush manner; she does not need to signify the goddess to her husband’s god, but rather they are both inclusive of the masculine and feminine of the Aten.

The lush appearance of Akhenaten is also similar to the other deity that encompasses both masculine and feminine components: the inundation god Hapy. Hapy is shown with breasts and large belly, much like Akhenaten. The major differentiating feature is Hapy’s skin, which is blue. However, the similarity is striking. The inundation deity was one of the most popular and well-known deities within Egyptian thought. Indeed, their very life depended on “the coming of Hapy” each year. The population would not have overlooked the visual similarity between Akhenaten and Hapy. Rather, the connotations they had with Hapy—the flood of the Nile, the cultivation of fertile crops, and the continuation of life—would have been associated with Akhenaten and his heaps of flesh. Akhenaten’s similarity to the inundation god further underscores that there may have been issues with the inundation, and Akhenaten needed to assume the power over that event. This, again, points towards the rise of a fertility cult in response to environmental pressures.

The Aten as a fertility deity reconstitutes the framework by which the reign of Akhenaten is viewed. The cohesiveness and encompassing nature of the Aten was read as monotheism mostly due to the polarity of the modern notions of mono- and polytheism. Rather, it was merely

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an encompassing circle that connected many different notions, cross-culturally and temporarily. The reason why the people did not reject it was because of the amenability of Egyptian belief towards new takes on their basic theme.

Fertility is manifest through the artistic depiction of the royal family. The affection shown between Akhenaten and Nefertiti is sexual. It points towards the possibility of procreation and continuation. The fact that their many infant children surround them underscores this fundamental fertility.

The children pictured also underscore fertility. They are all daughters, females that would grow into women with the potential to give birth and continue the fertile dreams of their parents. The fact that only girls are shown highlights this point, if indeed Tutankhamen was truly his son, as certain evidence suggests. Traditionally, only the male heirs would be shown in royal representation, and the exclusion of any of his male issue point towards the premium placed on women in the royal court.

Mesopotamian Origins

While the evidence suggests that Akhenaten cultivated a fertility cult in response to environmental and political stressors, the question still remains about where these notions originated. Extant narrative states that it was a personal revelation that led to a monotheistic centering on a previously minor deity. However, this explanation is vastly incomplete. Why is the Aten depicted as merely a circle when the previous deity was the hybridized anthropomorphic form familiar to Egyptian belief? Why is the method of worshipping the Aten so wholly different than any previous examples in Egypt? Furthermore, why is Akhenaten so deeply connected to this deity?
The answers to these questions may be found in Mesopotamia. Chapter 5 established the contact and cross-fertilization between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Indeed, according to Brusch, the notion of the Aten came to Akhenaten from a foreign land. I will show that a clear similarity exists between the Aten and Inanna, which allows for greater clarity in the function and origin of this deity.

It is understood that the beginnings of Aten worship stem from the reign of Amenhotep III. Likewise, it is also within his reign that the influx of Mesopotamian deities into the religious pantheon occurred. Indeed, next to the teaching tablet found in within the private residence was a list of Near Eastern deities. This was an unexpected find, and points toward teachings about Mesopotamian deities as well as Mesopotamian writing. However, the extent to which Amenhotep III was amenable to Mesopotamian notions is seen more clearly through the Amarna Letters. In particular, one letter discusses the welcoming of a Mesopotamian goddess into Egypt. It reads:

Say to Nimmureya, the King of Egypt, my brother, my son-in-law, whom I love and who loves me: Thus Tusratta, the king of the Mittani, who loves you…Thus Sauska of Nineveh, mistress of all lands: “I wish to go to Egypt, a country that I love, and then return.” Now I herewith send her, and she is on her way. Now, in the time, too, of my father…went to this country, and just as earlier she dwelt there and they honored her, may my brother now honor her, (then) at (his) pleasure let her go so that she may come back. May Sauska, the mistress of heaven, protect us, my brother and me, 100,000 years, and may our mistress grant both of us great joy. And let us act as friends. Is Sauska for me alone my god(dess), and for my brother not his god(dess)?

This exceptional letter contains several pieces of evidence. The kinship between the kings of the Mittani and Egypt is expressed formally with the royal familiarity in “my brother” and literally, with the alliance through marriage that makes them son and father-in-law. While this is not

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125 Kemp, The City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti., 270.
surprising, the literal contact of the presumable figurine of a Mesopotamian goddess into
Egyptian lands is. Moreover, Sauska is the Mitanni goddess of fertility.\(^{127}\) Mesopotamian fertility
and sex goddesses often differed in name, but were adopted into the overarching notion of
Inanna.\(^{128}\) Indeed, some translations of this letter actually use the name Inanna instead, although
Sauska is the more literal and accepted translation.\(^{129}\) However, the fact that a Mitanni fertility
goddess was welcomed onto Egyptian land is noteworthy. The phrase, “I wish to go to Egypt, a
land that I love,” is also curious. While this was, doubtless, political posturing, the amenability is
clearly seen here.

Furthermore, there was precedent in previous generations of connecting the land’s belief
systems with the phrase “Now, in the time, too, of my father…went to this country, and just as
earlier she dwelt there and they honored her, may my brother now honor her, (then) at (his)
pleasure let her go so that she may come back.” This gives precedent for the contact between
Mesopotamian fertility goddesses and Egypt.

Most striking, however, is the final line. It is a question, with the gendered “goddess”
being edited in by modern translation. The line between god and goddess being associated with
gender is fluid, as are the lines of belief. The answer to the Mitanni king’s question is that,
indeed, his goddess is quite like Akhenaten’s Aten. The similarities are rife both in
characteristics and visual representation. The notion of a purely abstract deity was completely
unfamiliar to Egypt; no such deity existed before Akhenaten’s transformation of the Aten into
the sun-disk.\(^{130}\) The classical interpretation of this abstraction has been a shift to Judeo-Christian
monotheism. However, this is not a reasonable assertion given the lack of monotheistic

\(^{127}\) Joshua J. Mark, “Sauska - Ancient History Encyclopedia,” accessed March 8, 2016,
http://www.ancient.eu/Sauska/.


\(^{129}\) Redford refers to the goddess as Inanna, p. 53, whereas Moran et al translate the name to Sauska, p. 61.

precedent and the foundation of Egyptian belief as outlined above. Instead of asserting that the Aten’s abstraction was a spontaneous combustion of monotheistic belief, it is more reasonable to assume that it was built upon extant precedent from Mesopotamia.

Figure 24
Seal with blank panel for inscription (Akkadian Era)

The fertility goddess Inanna had been transformed within her visual representation to a sun shown over the head of the king several hundred years before Akhenaten imagined the Aten (Figure 24). This visual representation of Inanna was utilized across dynasties and in different cities, with the goddess appearing under the different local manifestations of Inanna, such as Ishtar and Sauska. The similarities between the Aten and Inanna are striking. Both deities appear as suns over the heads of monarchs. Inanna as the sun gave merit and validity to the king’s rule in Mesopotamia, just as the Aten did for Akhenaten. The exclusivity of both deities’ appearances in art—both only appear over the head of the king—is a link in the utilization of visual rhetoric to underscore the divine right of the king to rule. Evidence of this shared notion of kingship can

be found at a later date in Mesopotamia. The ‘broken obelisk’, from approximately 1110 BCE, shares similar motifs and icons seen in both earlier Mesopotamian renditions and in Amarna art (Figure 25). Here, a sun disk over the head of a king has human hands extending from it, literally giving the ruler symbols of kingship. While the sun disk was not a new motif in Mesopotamia, the human hands are unique to this monument.\textsuperscript{132} The Aten is always depicted with human hands extending from its rays, and as such the evidence of this broken obelisk suggests a shared cultural notion with artistic inspiration taken from both directions.

\textbf{Figure 25}
\textit{Base of obelisk}

This visual rhetoric was cultivated in Mesopotamia, a land where the crown changed hands fairly regularly. The lack of stable lineage necessitated the use of divine powers to

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 134.
underscore kingship. This, however, was not the case in Egypt, where the right to rule was based on thousands of years of history and the belief that the pharaoh was a god, rather than married to one in the Mesopotamian notion. The utilization of the exclusivity of the Aten by Akhenaten points towards conditions more similar to Mesopotamia than to Egyptian history—a time of political instability, and uncertain prosperity. Likewise, the worship of the Aten is remarkably similar to the worship of Inanna. The Great Hymn of Aten sounds quite similar to the poetry directed at Inanna, which underscores fertility in both land and humans.

![Figure 26](image.png)

Figure 26

*Alabaster relief panel with a winged genie approaching a "sacred tree", from Nimrud, reign of Ashurnasirpal II*

Within Mesopotamian thought, it was the king’s symbolic marriage to Inanna that would result in her bringing forth the bounty of fertility. While the Aten is referred to with masculine

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133 Jones, “Embracing Inana.”, 291.
pronouns, the marriage of Akhenaten to Nefertiti fills a similar role. The Mesopotamian king
takes an active role in ensuring the fertility of the land, seen in representations like Assurbanipal
fertilizing the date palm tree, which is the symbol of Inanna (Figure 2).\textsuperscript{136} Akhenaten is shown
embracing Nefertiti, and their children are placed around them as symbols of their fertile union.
As stated above, no pharaoh before or after Akhenaten was shown touching his wife so
intimately. Furthermore, Nefertiti is shown in positions of power as elucidated above. The queen
of Akhenaten has always been an oddity within the narrative, with little understanding of why
she held such a large role. The contextual framework of a relationship similar to the king and
Inanna provides an answer for the incongruity of their affection. While the marriage of Nefertiti
to Akhenaten was literal and the marriage of the Mesopotamian king to Inanna was symbolic,
there are similarities that present a possible answer to the oddity of Akhenaten and Nefertiti’s
affection.

Given the multiple similarities, it is reasonable to infer that the Aten had its origins in
Mesopotamian thought. Contact between Amenhotep III, Akhenaten, and Mesopotamia is clear,
as well as the religious and cultural influx that came with this sharing of cultures. Amenhotep IV
was born into this time of the expanding Egyptian worldview and witnessed his own father’s
amenability to foreign ideas. This, combined with his mother’s “foreign notions,” would have
manifested within his young mind as a positive association with Mesopotamian deities.
Furthermore, any contact with Mesopotamia would have included Inanna, as she was the
undisputed preeminent god.

When viewed within this context, a possibility for the Aten’s origins arises. I propose that
the Aten is a synthesis of Inanna and Ra; Ra the sun deity, and Inanna the fertility goddess who

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
is represented as an abstracted sun. In time of famine and disease, Akhenaten looked towards more prosperous neighbors for answers when the traditional Egyptian way of life and their gods were no longer working.
Chapter VII: Conclusion

The sand has been scraped away from the city of Akhenaten, and our prying eyes have tried to peer into his mind. It is not, however, his thoughts that have elucidated his mystery, but the bones of his people. The excavation of the STC has afforded us a clear view at what was once purely assumption. Their incongruity with the rhetoric of the king called for explanation, and there truly was none. This was due to the speculative nature of the established narrative. However, once the gaps within the literature were exposed, it was clear to see that a new understanding of this pharaoh and his actions was requisite.

Furthermore, ancient societies did not function within the discrete categories of modern scholarship. Rather, the world is and always has been curious and interactive with their surroundings. Understanding the patterns of trade and cultural influence allow for a humanistic view at the people we study.

By placing Akhenaten’s Aten worship within the broader context of the multicultural world he was truly living in, there are clear similarities with Mesopotamian notions of fertility and depiction. The compilation of data from Amarna shows evidence of a time of environmental stressors that would push for cultural and theological shifts. It is rational to infer that Akhenaten’s radical behavior is in response to these factors, rather than a spontaneous combustion of religious zealotry.

However, we must remember that we are neither Akhenaten nor Nefertiti. We cannot profess to understand the exact motivations that led him towards damnation or modern fascination. What is understandable is a human attempting to cope with a changing world and the uncertainty that death brings. While I have found the strongest line of evidence pointing towards a fertility cult, the reality is that we simply do not know. It is not, however, in ambiguity that we
reach failure, but in the continuation of a narrative based on assumptions rather than deal with the discomfort of radical honesty and the uncertainty it brings.
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