

Akhenaten's Religious Revolution



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I

Akhenaten is one of the most controversial figures of ancient Egypt. He has been called the world's first individual, a heretic, a monotheist, and a madman. The reasons for these labels are the changes he made to Egypt's traditional cults and the gods they were dedicated to. The changes are not so much what he added, but what he left out. His intentions are still a topic of debate three thousand years later. Most scholars subscribe to one of three different views. He was either trying to strengthen the position of the Pharaoh, or making a move to against the priesthood of the cult of Amun, or that he was a sincere religious reformer. The aim of this paper is to show that Akhenaten was sincere in his beliefs, and that he created a new religion out of the trends in solar theology that had been taking place during the 18th dynasty of Egypt

Pharaoh Akhenaten came to the throne as Amenophis IV on the death of his father, Amenophis III, in 1353 B.C. and reigned of seventeen years, until 1336 B.C. (or 1351 - 1334 B.C. subject to the debate in Egyptian chronology.) But even the historians of antiquity had no clear idea of who he was or the religious revolution that he set in motion. Manetho, writing a history of Egypt in the third century B.C. knew nothing of him, placing the reign of Ramesses directly after Amenophis III.¹ Herodotus, Diodorus, and Strabo also had no knowledge of the Amarna, writing nothing about this period. Jean-Francois Champollion also had no clear knowledge of Akhenaten. spending only one day in Amarna during his first visit to Egypt, he called the ruins of the city "psinaula" and only made a few remarks about the boundary stela at the city boundaries. The Napoleonic expedition of 1714 saw that there was ancient city at "El Till" but made no more of it.

Our knowledge of Akhenaten only comes to light in the 19th century with the expedition to Egypt by Karl Lepsius. Lepsius spent three days at Amarna in 1843 and another seven on his return of upper Egypt in 1845. The first results of his expedition were that “Bekh-en-Aten” was not a woman, as the representation of him in the artwork of the period to a rather feminine form. In his first published work in 1851 he explained further the mystery of Akhenaten. Lepsius writes that Akhenaten opposed the traditional cult of Amun in a favor of a god that he developed out of the solar theology of ancient Egypt, his “pure solar cult.” He also ordered the erasing of the name of Amun from all monuments and a destruction of all his images in an effort to suppress the cult. The effort failed and when Akhenaten died, his new religion quickly died out with him. His religion was not actively persecuted through the reign of Tutankhamun, but when Seti I the first came to throne and through the reign of his son Ramses II an active effort to erase Akhenaten from history was pursued. His name was erased from all the official kings lists, the cult of Aten was persecuted and his city razed to the ground, as well as his name erased from as many monuments as could be found, including his tomb.²

II

Most of our knowledge of Akhenaten’s theology comes from the “Great Hymn to the Aten.” The most intact version was found in the tomb of Ay, a general of Akhenaten’s and Pharaoh for a short time after Akhenaten’s death. The hymn is not that dissimilar from earlier sun hymns, except that in Aten’s hymn, mention of any other god is missing. The hymn can be summed up in a few points.

The first point is that Aten is one. He is the only god. This was not the case at the beginning of Akhenaten's reign, but farther along into it, the other deities of Egypt were suppressed. An example of how far the suppression went is how Akhenaten changed how things were written. For example Maet (truth) was no longer written in the hieroglyph form of a woman with a feather upon her head, representing the goddess Maet, but was spelled phonetically. Maet was no longer deified, but reduced to a concept, that of truth.³

The second point is that Aten is universal. In the days of old the Egyptian gods were only thought of as Egyptian gods. In the new religion Aten rules over all places and all peoples.⁴ This new universal aspect of god came as a result of Egypt's conquests during the 18th dynasty. Aten is universal as well as specifically the god of Syria-Palestine and Nubia.

The third point is that Aten is light. The light of Aten is central to Akhenaten's religion. It is the light of Aten that lights the world. The sun rising and falling is a symbol of life and death. The prevailing theme of the Hymn to Aten is the contrast between light and darkness. The rays of Aten are often depicted ending in hands when depicted with the royal family, caring for them.

Aten is also beauty. The light of Aten shines on all things and makes them beautiful, by giving shape and contour to all objects that its rays fall upon.

Aten is also love. He has compassion on all his creatures. He watches over them from his place in the sky and takes of all, from the chick hatching from the egg to an infant human being born, Aten cares for all.

The fourth point is that Aten is the father. In particular he is the father of Akhenaten, his only son. Akhenaten came forth from Aten and Aten lives within his son. Akhenaten is the only one who truly knows the father and thus the only one who can communicate his will to everyone

else.⁵ Another change that takes place in the Atenist religion is that the name of Aten is placed inside of cartouches. The enclosure of a name in cartouches had formally been reserved for the Pharaoh alone to denote his name. It was a kingly prerogative. The implication is that Aten is a kingly god. He reigns with and through his son Akhenaten. This can be seen in the way the *Durbar* that took place in year twelve was dated. In one place it is dated to the 12th year of Akhenaten's reign, and in another place it is dated in the 12th year of the Aten's reign.⁶

Two things that are missing from the Hymn to Aten are any reference to the other Egyptian gods, to a netherworld, or afterlife in the traditional sense. There are no more elaborate burial rights to ensure a continuation in the next life. We are told that the dead live on and worship Aten every morning when he rises.⁷ The Osirian cult was not persecuted, but simply discontinued. Akhenaten takes his place as the judge of the dead and the one who provides for them. Since the new religion is so preoccupied with light and the life that comes from it, there is no room for the world of darkness that Osiris rules over. The dead sleep at night and awake with the Aten when he rises in the morning, and make their way to the great temple in Akhetaten to share in the sacrifices being made there. Traditional funerary rites were still observed, but they were purged of references to any other gods save Aten and his prophet Akhenaten. Bodies were still mummified. The use of *Shawabtis*, figures used to carry out work for the deceased, were still used, but they were no longer inscribed with passages from the *Book of the Dead*, but are inscribed with an offering formula to the Aten or with Akhenaten's name.⁸

The nature of being a Pharaoh changed during Akhenaten's reign as well. There is now only one god, and the Pharaoh is his prophet. The Pharaoh is still called "the Son of the Sun-god" but with the addition of "the Beautiful Child of Aten." In relationship to the Aten the

Pharaoh is "Thy son who issued forth from thy rays."⁹ The Pharaoh is, at least in his inner circle, addressed as the earthly incarnation of Aten. He is referred to as "my god who fashioned me"; he is "the god who fashions mankind, and makes the Two Lands live." Prayers are addressed to Aten as well as to Akhenaten. And why not? If the son is the only one who knows the mind of the father, and is created by him and out of him, then it is not too far of a jump to address prayers to both as equals.¹⁰

III

When Amenophis IV came to the throne, Egypt was the most powerful empire in the world. It was at the height of its power to which it would never achieve again, thanks to the efforts of his predecessors. The first ruler of the 18th dynasty, Ahmose I, drove out the Hyksos conquerors and drove them all the way to Syria. His successor Amenophis I extended the empire all the way to the Euphrates. And the next king after him, Thutmose I conquered all of Syria. The next Pharaoh, Thutmose II, was occupied with war on his southern boundaries and his successor, Queen Hatshepsut, ruled for twenty years in peace.

The next Pharaoh was the great warrior and conqueror Thutmose III. He conducted many campaigns in Syria, while also raising the prestige of Egypt to its greatest heights, Receiving tribute and gifts from as far away as Crete and Cyprus.¹¹ The next two Pharaohs, Amenophis II and Thutmose IV, had similar success in Syria, and at the accession of Amenophis IV (Akhenaten) the empire of Egypt stretched from Syria in the north to the fifth cataract of the Nile in Nubia in the south.

When Akhenaten became king, his new religious ideas were already forming into the religion that was to become the hated thing of later generations. His overseer of all the prophets of the gods, a man by the name of Parennefer, addresses him thus: "Hail to thee, O thou child of the disc, W-n-r, one without peer, who formed me and fostered me!"¹² Donald Redford states that at this early point of his reign, large amounts of offerings were already being diverted to the cult of the disc Aten at the expense of the other cults. But despite all of this, construction at Karnak at Thebes went on the same as it did under Amenophis III for up to a year into the reign of Akhenaten, except for one pylon which shows Akhenaten offering to the falcon-headed sun god, Re-Herekhty. The only exceptional thing about this is the inscription below which reads "He who rejoices in the horizon in his name 'Sunlight that is in the Disc.'" At this point in the reign, Akhenaten decided to celebrate a Sed-festival. This is unusual because the Sed was traditionally celebrated for the first time in the thirtieth regnal year as a rejuvenation of the king's powers and a reaffirmation of his right to rule.¹³ We must look at this festival in detail as it is very important to the development of the religion of Akhenaten.

IV

The Sed-festival was a very ancient rite in Egyptian religion, dating back to the first dynasty (31-30 century B.C.) The exact procedures of the Sed are not known because no plan of the festival has ever been found. There are however, four great collections from different periods of Egyptian history that have similarities to them, so we have a general idea of the event, but it is not complete, nor do we know the order of events precisely or how long the festival lasted. The

four collections are from King Ne-Woserre (2400 B.C.), Amenophis III (1400 B.C.), Akhenaten's Sed-festival (??), and Osorkon II (840 B.C.)

The Sed-festival being a rejuvenation of the king and a reaffirmation of his right to rule, he had to have the consent of the gods. Therefore all of the gods from upper and Lower Egypt were represented. Shrines were built for the statues of the gods and they were of two varieties one was in imitation of the "House of Flame" of Lower Egypt, the other in imitation of "The Great House" shrine of Nekhbit, patron goddess of Upper Egypt. The place of the festival also had a race course, symbolic of Egypt, which would be run by the king at a later time.

After the dedication of the shrines, there was a procession of the gods and there standards, the kings court, and then the king himself, with the gods going to their respective shrines at the end. This procession was to be repeated many times because the king had to visit each one to receive the consent of that god to rule. The king would wear the proper attire for each set of gods, the white crown for Upper Egypt, and the red for Lower Egypt.

Another event that took place was the re-enactment of the coronation ceremony. The king would be crowned twice, once with the white crown on one throne, and with the red on the other. After the coronation ceremony all the official of Egypt present as well as the envoys from other countries would proceed to the king on his throne to offer their allegiance.

At another point in the festival, the king would run a ritual race around the course that was laid out. In his hand he would hold a document called "the Secret of the Two Partners," or "The Will of My father." He would then chant "I have run holding the Secret of the Two Partners, viz. The will which my father has given me before Geb." The symbolism is this. The racecourse is Egypt. The secret will is his right to rule, and by running through "Egypt" he takes

possession of his kingdom.¹⁴ Concluding all of this was the ritual shooting of arrows to the four directions, hymns, and another procession.

V

The date of Akhenaten's Sed-festival is not known. From the evidence that is known it must have been before regal year six, because at the time of the festival his name was still written Amenophis.¹⁵ This is supported by the fact that other non Aten elements are still used in the buildings of the Sed-festival. Two other examples that support an early Sed-Festival are two scenes on the north and south sides of the vizier Ramose. The south scene shows Amenophis IV seated under a baldachin with the goddess Maet, which is in the traditional style of art. The other scene is of Amenophis IV and Queen Nefertiti in the window of appearances under the rays of the sun disc Aten, and is executed in the new Amarna style. This suggests that the religion of Aten is not fully developed, and that this is a transitional period, which would have to be before regal year six.

Another piece of evidence that supports an early celebration of the Sed-festival is that none of Akhenaten's daughters appear in any of the scenes that have, so far, been put back together. From the frequency of the portrayal of Akhenaten's family life in his art one would think that they would be in this set of art as well. Princesses were depicted in other Sed-festival relief's as well, most notably those of Amenophis III and Osorkon II, so it would be expected to be the same for Akhenaten, had any of his daughters been born at this time.¹⁶

There is a problem that would have faced Akhenaten while celebrating the Sed-festival. It is apparent that his theology had developed to the point where he would no longer worship and deity but the Aten. And one of the primary objectives to the Sed-festival was to receive the

consent of the gods to keep ruling. Akhenaten solved this problem by worshiping the Aten in a series of open roofed shrines (Kiosks), where he would offer different items to the Aten.

All the evidence from the Sed-festival points to a period of transition in the thinking of Akhenaten. He has eliminated the all the gods except Aten from actual worship during the ceremonies, but there are still scenes that depict traditional elements in the festival. Scenes like a lion furniture sequence, and the ritual race. There are also the souls of Pe and Nekhen decorating a Dias in one scene, with the Re-Herekhty altars with him in his anthropomorphic form¹⁷, as well as the above mention representation of the goddess Maet. Then there is the art, which is also in a state of transition, sometimes in the traditional from, sometimes in the reserved Amarna form, and then again in the grotesque exaggerations of the middle-late Amarna period. All this points to an early point in the development of Akhenaten's new religion. It may also be possible that the Sed-festival was an early testing ground for the new religion, to see how it was received and reacted to, especially by the priesthood of Amun.

VI

The expected break with the cult of Amun happened in the 6th year of Akhenaten's reign as can be seen by his decision to build a new capital city.¹⁸ He did not at this time actively persecute the Amun religion. The move would affect the cult of Amun nonetheless though. By moving the capital to a new city, Thebes would no longer be the royal residence and would no longer have the backing of the king, and thereby lower its influence. It would be reduced to the status of a provincial town and hopefully the religion of Thebes would fade as well. Along with

the step of leaving for a new city he changed his name, forever leaving behind Amenophis and its references to the hated cult and changing it to Akhenaten (Aten-is-satisfied.)

The place of the new city was situated in middle Egypt about 160 miles south of modern Cairo. It was built at a place where the rock cliffs move away from the Nile River, creating a naturally fortified area, protected on the west by the river and the cliffs on the east. The reason for choosing this spot, first and foremost, was that it had not been previously dedicated to any other god. Here was fresh ground on which Akhenaten could develop his religion and dedicate a city in honor of his new god.¹⁹ Akhenaten says that the site of his new city was revealed to him by his father the sun-disc. Another reason for the selection of this site could be because that the geography of it roughly resembles the hieroglyphic for "Horizon."²⁰ The name of the city "Akhetaten" meaning "Horizon of the Aten." The city mainly consisted of the House of the Sun Disc, the Mansion of the Sun-Disc, the Sunshade of the Queen, a House of Rejoicing, royal apartments for himself and his queen, and a necropolis.²¹

Another aspect of Akhenaten's religion that developed at Amarna was the concept of the divine family. The idea of a divine family was an old concept in Egyptian religion, and the grouping of three gods together was something that Egyptian beliefs usually tended towards.²² It may have been developed by Akhenaten to make his belief system more appealing to people, it being a more familiar concept. At Memphis there was the divine family of Ptah, Sakhmet, and their son Nefertem. At Thebes it was Amun, Mut, and their son Khonsu. The most well known of the divine families was Osiris, his wife Isis, and their son Horus, who became king of Egypt after the death of Osiris. At Amarna, the divine family consisted of Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and since they never had a son, their six daughters. This depiction of family was also used to stress the

value of family life, which was a very important thing in ancient Egypt. Nefertiti was very important part of Akhenaten's religion, being the female principle. She appears in art she was nearly his equal. She offered sacrifices, and is almost always depicted at his side.²³

VIII

The changes in the art of the Amarna period are as unique in Egyptian history as the religion that characterizes it. Most, if not all of the artistic changes began at Karnak and were subsequently carried over to Amarna, though the grotesque forms of the early part of the reign were toned down in its waning years. The most important and noticeable change in Egyptian art during this period is the absence of all other gods except for Aten. At Karnak he was at first depicted as the falcon-headed form of Re-Horakhty as well as the sun-disc, but only for a short time, probably the first 3 years of the reign. After Akhenaten's religious ideals had matured, the Aten is always depicted as the sun with his rays shining down and the rays ending in human hands. Along with the royal family, the Aten Disc is the most common image in all of Akhenaten's building projects. He appears in almost every relief of the family. These two replaced all other gods that normally would have adorned the walls of a temple. The processions in honor of the gods that were formally depicted were replaced by images of the royal family riding between palaces and temples in chariots.²⁴

The representation of the King and Queen during this period was also a complete departure from Egyptian tradition. Before the Amarna period, the king was always depicted in an idealized way. All representations of Pharaoh in art have some basic things in common, such as being young and slim. During Akhenaten's reign a new exaggerated way of depicting the human

figure is introduced. Akhenaten is depicted as having an elongated head, slit eyes, full lips, large hips and a pot-belly that pushes his kilt down in a U. the hips are very pronounced and are feminine in form. The legs from the calves down are spindly and thin. Nefertiti was shown in the same way as Akhenaten, and no matter which one was drawn, they both had full hips and breasts.²⁵ The reason for the feminine depiction of male characters could be because the King was the manifestation of Aten on earth, and Aten as creator was an androgynous being, so this may be Akhenaten's reason for depicting himself with certain female characteristics.²⁶

Some temple relief's that were in Karnak and repeated at Akhetaten were things never before shown in temples. They were reliefs of everyday life, farm work, Nile scenes, administration and household work. Another innovation found at Amarna were the relief's of animals waking at sunrise to greet the Aten, as well as relief's of Nefertiti smiting enemies or standing over captive enemies, all activities usually reserved for the King. When Nefertiti is shown next to Akhenaten, she is at a smaller scale, though she also possesses her own temple, where Akhenaten is not depicted at all. Another component of the relief's is the fact that the more important elements, such as Aten and the royal family, are carved much deeper than other less important elements, so when the sunlight hits them it shows a preeminence of these people. Emotions of the royal family are also depicted for the first time. Nefertiti and Akhenaten gaze at each other intimately, they hold hands, and play with their children. They also show grief for the first time. After the death of their daughter Meketaten, Akhenaten is shown grief-stricken, reaching back with his hand to comfort his wife, who is also grief-stricken. The art at Amarna could be summed up as a snapshot of life, whereas temple relief's had been depicted in a timeless and idealized manner that would help the deceased in the next life.²⁷ Such depictions,

like the offerings on walls that would ensure that a sacrifice would be given always in case those who were supposed to offer the sacrifice ceased to do so, are no where to be found in the Amarna period.

The art in the Amarna period always centered around the royal family, so much so that any depictions of other people or themes were made only if they somehow related to them. Private statues or even relief's of the deceased are rare, and except for the rear were a statue of the deceased received the funerary offerings, the owner of the tomb was only shown in his relationship with the royal family.²⁸ The royal family, even when depicted in this way with other people, are still shown on a larger scale and are still centrally located in the relief.

IX

The prominence of the cult of Amun is one of the most striking features of the 18th dynasty.²⁹ One of the reasons for this was because the kings acknowledged Amun as the one responsible for their victories.³⁰ After the war against the Hyksos conquerors that drove them from Egypt, there was a great quantity of empty land and other wealth that could not be safely claimed by the king, nor given to any one class of citizens, so it was put into the trust of Amun.³¹ There was also a great amount of new land available since the kingdom of Egypt was once again reunited under a single ruler. This land had to be governed and the priesthood of Amun was chosen, since it would stabilize the southern country and at the same time it would deprive potential rivals to the throne from establishing a power base.³²

The priesthood of an Egyptian cult had in the past been very small, consisting usually of between four and twelve priests, depending on the cult. But in the cult of Amun in the reign of

Thutmose III we have a whole community of administrators of Amun. Prophets, gods-fathers, scribes, superintendents of the mysteries, shrine-openers, etc. The positions within the priesthood seem to be hereditary, since we find whole families involved over several generations with the cult. The two highest offices of the cult were the first and second prophet of Amun. These positions were controlled by the Pharaoh, because of the control the priests had over so many resources. This control seems to have lapsed under Queen Hatshepsut. During her twenty year reign the priesthood of Amun gained considerable power. The first prophet became the leader of all Amun temples throughout Egypt, as well as overseer of all prophets. This process of gaining control has been likened to the power of an Archbishop, who has power over other bishops within his province.³³

During the reign of Akhenaten's grandfather, Thutmose IV, came a reassertion of the king's right to appoint the first prophet. He chose a priest by the name of Amenemhet, who at the death of the previous king Amenophis II, was a lowly priest within the cult of Amun. This can be seen as a move to control the cult of Amun by appointing a man that owed his position entirely to the king. During the reign of Amenophis III, a pretty high number of men occupied the position of first prophet. It is not known why, but it could be because they died in quick succession, or because Amenophis did not want one man to become too powerful through length of time spent in office.³⁴

During the first three years of his reign, Akhenaten did not follow an open policy of persecution against the cult of Amun. In his boundary stela at the city of Akhetaten, he speaks of "bad things" which he has heard during the first three years of his reign and which his father had heard as well.³⁵ This is presumably the opposition to his new doctrines that was put up by

the cult of Amun. Akhenaten did not help to appease the situation at all, because early in his reign he changed the name of Thebes, the home city of Amun, to "City of the Brightness of the Aton [Aten]."³⁶

During the twelfth year of his reign, Akhenaten began his persecution of Amun. This may be because of the death of his mother, Queen Tiy in the same year, and it seems that her influence was the only thing holding Akhenaten back from his obliteration of Amun in the preceding years. Judging from the fierceness of the persecution, he might have been provoked. Arthur Weigall suspects that it might have been the Theban priesthood that staged a revolt that led to Akhenaten's reaction. The name of Amun was to be erased wherever it was found. It was hammered out from stone monuments, and his agents even broke into tombs to erase the name wherever it might be found therein. They even erased it from kitchen utensils in private houses. People, both male and female, who had names that were a compound of Amun were obliged to change them. This did not exclude his dead father, for wherever his name was found it was erased as well, but in most cases it was plastered and then written over with the king's second name, Nebmaara. Akhenaten even went back and erased his previous name of Amenophis IV where he had it inscribed in earlier years.³⁷ Donald Redford states that the thoroughness of the program of Akhenaten to get rid of Amun must have taken a small of army sent out from Akhetaten to complete the work or that local representatives of the king must have been charged with overseeing the process.³⁸ The hieroglyphic form of the name of Amun was also erased, along with casual inscriptions of his name³⁹ such as graffiti along the Nile and on cliffs near roads where travelers had written his name.⁴⁰

X

The theory that Akhenaten created his new religion to strengthen the position of Pharaoh is another popular suggestion. This tendency can be seen already at Karnak, where the Aten is made into a king as well as a god. This we can tell from his name being included in cartouches, which was previously a kingly prerogative. This idea of a king in heaven selecting Akhenaten to rule for him on earth becomes even more blatant in Akhetaten. Akhenaten is represented as the son of Aten, and the Aten is his father.⁴¹ This is meant not only in a religious or theological sense, but he is the physical son of the disc. Akhenaten is also spoken of as occupying the throne of Aten on earth and being granted the kingship from his father. Akhenaten is given the world by Aten. he is a universal ruler who rules over not only Egypt, but Syria and Nubia in particular, but also the whole world.⁴² Akhenaten's birth is often compared to the birth of the sun-disc that happens daily⁴³

Another aspect of Akhenaten's monarchical religion is that he is the only one who knows the mind and heart of his father the Aten, and Aten obeys the wishes of his son on earth. Akhenaten being the only one who knows the mind of Aten is, therefore, the only one who can interpret his will to the people. This can be seen from the many artistic representations of this idea in art. Akhenaten is always shown with the sun-disc above him, denoting the close relationship between them. Only he can make certain sacrifices to Aten, though Nefertiti has her own temple in Amarna, it is dedicated to the disc as it sets in the horizon, so her role in the performing of rites is very specific. Always Akhenaten is shown worshipping the disc, and the people worship him. Indeed no one can truly worship the disc because he has only revealed himself to his son Akhenaten, and it is only through him that the people can know Aten and

worship him. The people worship Akhenaten, and he worships the Aten for them. But this concept of divine king and son who was the only intermediary was a foreign idea in Egyptian religion. This new kingship would have the effect of making everyone, not only in Egypt, but the rest of the world, or at least the empire, indebted to Akhenaten, for he was the only one who could offer sacrifice for them. But Akhenaten was obliged to get rid of the other Egyptian cults as well as promulgating his new religion to such a degree that it could not go unnoticed, for it to take hold, and this had the effect of confusing and alienating a good part of the population.⁴⁴

The argument I am going to make is that Akhenaten's religious reforms were an evolution of the changing solar theology of the 18th dynasty and more specifically an outgrowth of his father Amenophis III's solar theology.

With regards to his god, the Aten, The Sun Disc had been a part of Egyptian religious beliefs for most of Egyptian history, though Akhenaten was to change it into something that was completely different from the way it was presented in its earliest stages. Early on the Sun Disc was the vehicle through which the gods traveled in their journey through the land of the living. The earliest examples of this are from the Coffin Letters, where people in the lands of the gods address them "hail to thee, O thou who art in the (var. his) disc, who rulest over the gods." Or the sun god being addressed "O Re who is in his egg, who shinest in his disc!"⁴⁵ The Sun Disc can also signify a vehicle through which a person can go to be with the god: "I have made my way at the prow of his barque, I shine in his Disc." At this point the Sun Disc is an impersonal entity, a vehicle through which the god travels or through which a person travels to meet the god in the place where the god resides. The god Re is in the disc, but he is never confused with being the disc himself, or the disc being a god in its own right.⁴⁶

By the Middle Kingdom, The word "Disc" comes to be used to describe the universal dominion of the pharaoh. Sinuhe says of the Pharaoh "Thou has subdued what the Sun-Disc encircles." The Sun-Disc being the protector of the Pharaoh and the entity through which he has come to rule the world leads naturally to the Sun-Disc being thought of as a person instead of just a vehicle, so much so that later on in the Middle Kingdom when a Pharaoh died he was spoken of as "The god (i.e. the king) has gone ascended to his horizon...uniting with the sun disc, the divine limbs coalescing with him that begat him." Here the Pharaoh is said to have gone back to the one who begot him, so it follows that the Pharaoh must be like the one who created him. So the Sun-Disc must now become something personal, a god in his own right. The Pharaoh is described as having the splendor of the sun, such as when Amenophis III is described: "He is Re, by whose beams people see, he is the one that brightens the Two Lands more than the Sun-Disc."⁴⁷

During the 18th Dynasty prior to Akhenaten the popularity of cult of the Sun-Disc increases with the writing of the Hymn to the Sun. During this time before Akhenaten, descriptions are found of Amun-re as the visible Disc, the Disc being given attributes that were previously held by Atum, and Kephry.⁴⁸ He is described as "one who created all being, who shaped the earth, who completed its creation." these are all acts traditionally ascribed to a named son god but are now being ascribed to the Disc itself. Thus it is now a small step to make the Disc a god.

There was also a foreign influence on the religious ideals of Akhenaten. Queen Mutemua, the wife of Thutmose IV, was from north Syria. The Aten was worshiped first in north Syria.

Her religious beliefs would have had more in common with Heliopolitan beliefs, because their sun religion had more in common with her Syrian beliefs than the Theban based cult of Amun.⁴⁹

The grandfather of Akhenaten, Yuua, was also from Syria. During the reign of Thutmosis IV he held the title of Priest of Min. This is important because the god Min was the closest Egyptian equivalent to the Syrian god Adonis, who was god of fertility and vegetation. Min was also a universal god, not representing any strictly Egyptian prerogatives. Yuua held high offices in the Egyptian court and would have passed on his ideas to his offspring, the future queen Tiy, Akhenaten's mother. They also had more in common with the sun cult of Heliopolis and many of their ideas would later be found in Akhenaten's theology, namely the universality of Aten, his love for his creatures, and his sustaining their existence.⁵⁰

Another factor that would support the idea that the new religion was a sincere belief is the presence of domestic shrines, that is, shrines built by people not connected with the royal administration, or private temples. The simplest form of the private shrines contains a flight of stairs leading into a room where an altar made of brick or limestone was kept. What were most often found in these shrines were statues of Akhenaten and Nefertiti. There were also depictions of the Aten with his rays ending in outstretched hands, but only once is it found depicted on its own. In all other instances it is depicted as the receiver of sacrifice from Akhenaten and Nefertiti. In the bipartite shrines (shrines divided into two rooms) there are also depictions of Akhenaten and his daughters. Some of the shrines show evidence of having roofs while others were clearly open. The open air shrines would be to let the light of Aten shine down upon the offerings being made there.

Shrines of this type are found not only in Amarna, but in Thebes and Memphis. They all depict the concept of the holy family that Akhenaten stressed in his theology. They all stress the fact that if one wanted to ask a favor of the Aten, it had to be asked through Akhenaten and Nefertiti, because they are the only ones who have direct access to Aten. All other must go through them.⁵¹

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