

In c. 1375 B.C. the Egyptian pharaoh, Amenhotep III, "the Magnificent", after enjoying the fruits of a long and peaceful reign, decided to take as his co-ruler his son by a low-born woman named Tiy. This son was originally known as Amenhotep IV, and within his rather unusually shaped body there co-existed some rather unusual ideas. His chin was elongated and heavy and his cheek bones were somewhat prominent. A long, thin neck and equally proportioned arms and legs, together with rather fleshy hips and stomach, gave this pharaoh an almost hermaphroditic appearance. He married the beautiful Nefertiti, perhaps his half-sister, and together they set about introducing kingdom-wrenching religious reforms.

For generations, since the founding of the Egyptian New Kingdom, pharaohs had made lavish presents to the ram-headed god of Thebes, Amun, "the Hidden One". The priesthood of Amun had grown so rich and powerful that the cult had become a rival to the palace, and a possible threat to the uniqueness of royal power. So a new god was introduced by Amenhotep IV who was in many ways the opposite of Amun. This god was Aton, "the living Aton, the lord of all that the sun encircles, he who illuminates Egypt, the lord of the sunbeams". Indeed the pharaoh moved his capital to a new city, "the Horizon of Aton" or Akhetaton, and shortly thereafter changed his own name to Akhnaton, "He Who is Beneficial to Aton". The temples of Amun were closed and the new god hailed as supreme.

Akhnaton lived and breathed to honour his god, whose sign was the solar disk from which rays of blessings emanated. He may have personally composed a hymn which begins:

*Thou appearest so beautifully in the horizon of heaven
O living Aton, thou who were the first to live.*

Yet trouble was brewing for Akhnaton in Egypt and in the foreign provinces which were falling away in chaos. While the king prayed and meditated in his remote capital, the priests of Amun undercut him at home, while the enemies of Egypt advanced abroad. In his sixteenth year he turned away from Nefertiti who was now forced to live alone with the young prince, Tut. Apparently Akhnaton was at this late hour attempting to patch things up in his kingdom, and even sent his son-in-law to Thebes to placate the priests of Amun. The pharaoh himself married his thirteen year old daughter who presented him with another daughter. The daughter-wife of Akhnaton later married Tut.

When Akhnaton died after twenty-one years of rule he left only a nine year old boy, Tut, married to his fourteen year old daughter to carry on the struggle, obviously an impossible task. Thus, for want of strong leadership and direction, the Aton revolution in religion, with all its attendant artistic embellishments, failed. Tutankhaton changed his name to Tutankhamun; his wife, Ankhesenpaton, to Ankhesenamun. Amun and his priests had triumphed, and the sands came to bury Akhnaton's new city with its shining and vital god. A peculiar irony of history was that Tut, a pathetically weak and insignificant young pharaoh, was brought to the attention of the modern world when his tomb, almost untouched, was uncovered with its glittering golden treasures in 1922.