

Aside from the mighty builders of the pyramids (Dynasty IV 2613-2494 BC) and the lavishly buried boy-king, Tutankhamon (Dynasty XVIII 1567-1320 BC), one of the most significant and well-known pharaohs of Egypt was Akhnaton (1387-1366 BC), Tut's immediate predecessor.

Egypt had emerged from the decline and foreign occupation of the Second-Intermediate Period at the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty and under such kings as Thutmose III (1482-1450 BC) had created a strong, rich regime with subject possessions stretching all the way to the Euphrates river in Syria. By the reign of the soft, luxury-loving father of Akhnaton, Amenhotep III, "The Magnificent", (1412-1375) the dwindling golden age of Egypt's power had arrived.

Apart from growing Hittite strength in northern Syria, and general restiveness in the subject lands, there existed destructive internal forces within the Black Land (Egypt - from the colour of the earth after the Nile flood). These forces of ruin had in fact been at work since the foundation of the Middle Kingdom by the XIIth Dynasty (2000 BC). This family originated in Thebes in southern Egypt and as they slowly brought central authority back to a fractured land they promoted a heretofore unknown local deity called Amon. Religion was used as a unifying force, something perhaps more possible in a polytheistic society. Indeed, by the New Kingdom (1567 BC) Amon was even being synthesized with older gods such as Ra, the sun god of Heliopolis, into a composite god called Amon-Ra (a corporate merger which we might find baffling).

The pharaohs of the XII Dynasty had built the first great temple of Amon at Karnak in the southern capital, and for the next 800 years pharaohs would vie with one another by making lavish additions to this structure, culminating in the grandiose construction of Ramesses II (1299-1237 BC). Hand in hand with the building projects went a concomitant increase in the numbers, wealth and power of the priests of Amon. It was this threat to the divine majesty of Egypt's kings which Akhnaton attempted to challenge and overcome. A new solar deity, Aton, was to be elevated as Egypt's supreme deity. The temples of Amon were closed, his priests cast adrift, and the pharaoh changed his name from Amenhotep to Akhnaton, i.e. "Serviceable-to-Aton". Nevertheless the worship of Aton was to be reserved for the royal family (including Tutankhaton - later known as Tutankhamon after Akhnaton's death). Akhnaton venerated Aton; the Egyptian people were to worship the pharaoh.

A whole new realistic direction in art and literature was initiated, the famous Amarna style, and a new untainted capital Akhetaton, "Horizon of Aton", was built a few hundred miles south of Cairo. Akhnaton and his queen-sister Nefertiti ruled in isolation over a declining empire. While Akhnaton fought his internal struggle the foreign possessions were slipping away. Lionel Casson (Ancient Egypt p. 59) describes Akhnaton as "a physically weak man with a long, thin face, drooping shoulders, broad hips and spindly legs. He was a visionary who was not in tune with his times."

With Akhnaton's death the Aton cult disappeared and the desert sands covered his abandoned capital within a generation. The Amon cult was back in business and business was to be better than ever. In 1085 the high priest of Amon, Hrihor, overthrew the last of the Ramessid pharaohs and put the double crown of Egypt on his own head. The pharaoh had indeed prevailed in godliness by combining the office of high priest with that of pharaoh but not in a way to please the Ka (soul) of the long departed Akhnaton.