

"Father Knows Best?":

Family Life in the Eighteenth Dynasty

by S.L. Ager

The Eighteenth Dynasty comprised some of the most colourful characters in Egyptian history. These were the monarchs who ruled Egypt in the centuries between about 1600 and 1300 BC, a turbulent period in the ancient Near East, a time of political upheaval, of military reversals, and of religious ferment. Among the Pharaohs of the Eighteenth Dynasty were Hatshepsut, the woman who claimed the title of 'King' for over a decade; the wealthy Amenhotep III, who commissioned the great Amun temple at Luxor; and the boy-king Tutankhamun, whose tomb is one of the greatest archaeological discoveries ever made.

But perhaps the most notorious of the Eighteenth Dynasty rulers was Amenhotep IV, far better known by his chosen name, Akhenaten. Akhenaten ruled Egypt for only a decade and a half, in the mid-fourteenth century, but in the space of those few years he had an impact which still reverberates today. He does not seem to have been a man interested in the traditional pursuits of kingship: military glory and political manipulation were for others, for his chief general Horemheb and his chief civil servant Ay. Akhenaten's driving motivation in life was his commitment to religion, and to his own peculiar concept of the divine. In the context of his times, he could perhaps be best described as a "heretical monotheist", a man who rebelled against the prevailing polytheism of the ancient world, and especially against the overwhelming influence of the Egyptian god Amun and his powerful priesthood. Akhenaten rejected Amun's worship, and changed his own name from Amenhotep ('Amun is Pleased') to Akhenaten ('Servant of the Aten'). 'The Aten' was a manifestation of the sun-god, the solar disc, and the heretic Pharaoh elevated its worship above that of all other gods. After a brief foray into substituting the Aten's worship for that of Amun at Karnak, Amun's traditional home, Akhenaten gave his god and his court a new home at Akhetaten (the modern el-Amarna). He then devoted the rest of his life to the pursuit of his religious dream, a dream

which has touched modern imaginations more than it did the contemporary Egyptians. In the end, they remained largely unaffected by the religious aberration of Akhenaten's reign. After his death, his decrees were reversed and his religious ideas suppressed. Amun was once more a powerful god, and Akhenaten's young successor, Tutankhaten, adopted the name Tutankhamun.

Akhenaten was clearly a man of interesting parts. This is an assessment which can be extended to his physical appearance as well. Although he indulged in all the artistic spectacle and portrayal of himself that one might expect of an Egyptian monarch of this period, he undercut it, almost deliberately it seems, by insisting that his portraits not flatter him. If they offer an accurate depiction of him, then Akhenaten was indeed a rather strange looking man. They show a malformed skull, a protruding lower jaw, an elongated neck, and a figure more typically female than male, with excess weight in the hips, thighs and stomach. It has been suggested that he suffered from a pituitary tumour; what he certainly didn't suffer from was excessive personal vanity.

There may be a rather pleasing irony in the fact that this man of distinctly odd appearance was married to one of the most beautiful women ever to be depicted in art: Nefertiti ('A Beautiful Woman has Come'). Nefertiti was actually Akhenaten's first cousin, since Akhenaten's mother Tiye and Nefertiti's father Ay were sister and brother. Tiye and Ay came from a non-royal but clearly influential family: the former became the wife of Amenhotep III and played a very prominent role as queen; the latter became Egypt's chief bureaucrat, the father-in-law of Akhenaten, and ultimately Pharaoh himself.

The honours accorded to Nefertiti as the 'king's principal wife' greatly surpassed even those given to her aunt and mother-in-law Tiye. Nefertiti's influence and authority probably never matched Hatshepsut's, but she ran a close second. No other Egyptian queen was portrayed as frequently as Nefertiti in art; perhaps her extraordinary beauty had something to do with this. But Nefertiti was not only a beautiful image to inspire artists, nor were her portrayals restricted (as those of many royal females) to traditional

roles of childbearing and mothering. That element is certainly there; Nefertiti bore six daughters to Akhenaten, and there is abundant artwork showing the happy family. But Nefertiti was apparently something of a 'career' woman as well. She may have played an independent role in the new religion, since she is shown at Karnak making offerings to the Aten without the mediation of the king, and since prayers could be addressed directly to her. Other artwork shows her wearing a crown identical to that of her husband, which suggests a degree of equality between them as far as their public roles went. And like a king, she is even shown in a military guise, holding captive enemies by the hair and despatching them with a mace.

Nefertiti, then, was principal wife and clearly chief partner to Akhenaten through much of his reign. But she wasn't his only wife, and no doubt never would have expected to be. Polygamy was an accepted practice among the Pharaohs, and in addition to Nefertiti Akhenaten was married not only to various foreign princesses, but also to one rather mysterious 'Kiya', who may have been the mother of Tutankhamun.

It is probably easier for us in the modern world to accept the fact that Akhenaten and other Egyptian Pharaohs had numerous wives, than to accept that those wives occasionally included the Pharaoh's own daughters. Akhenaten's father, Amenhotep III, seems to have married his own daughter, while the uxorious Nineteenth Dynasty Pharaoh Ramesses II (better known as Yul Brynner) married three of his. It's hard to say why Ramesses, who boasted of having over a hundred children, felt the need to extend his conjugal relations so far. But perhaps one can see why Akhenaten might feel the pressure. Akhenaten and Nefertiti had six daughters together; the evidence for Akhenaten fathering sons is sketchy, and even the paternity of Tutankhamun is in doubt. If Akhenaten felt the need for one or more male heirs, and if Nefertiti was repeatedly failing to produce them, then we can see why he might turn to the other females of royal blood: his own daughters.

Three of Akhenaten and Nefertiti's children may have become their own father's sexual partners, even during Nefertiti's lifetime. One

daughter, Mekytaten, died in childbirth; the unborn child may have been Akhenaten's, but the artwork commemorating the event displays both Akhenaten and Nefertiti in the uncomplicated role of grieving parents. Nefertiti herself seems to have died not long after this, and another daughter, Merytaten, was then elevated to the status of 'king's principal wife' for the last three or four years of Akhenaten's life.

The last threads of the Eighteenth Dynasty were woven by a third daughter of Nefertiti and Akhenaten, Ankhesenpaaten. After bearing a daughter to her own father, Ankhesenpaaten married Tutankhamun, perhaps her half-brother, when he came to the throne at about nine years of age. He died less than a decade later, leaving her a young widow with no sons and no men of royal blood as potential

husbands. But there were men of ambition around her, and Ankhesenpaaten showed something of the independence of other women of her line in trying to escape their stranglehold. She wrote a letter to Suppiluliumas I, the Hittite king (her letter survives in the Hittite archives), and asked him to send her one of his many sons to marry. He complied by sending one Zannanza, but that prince's murder at the borders of Egypt put an end to Ankhesenpaaten's efforts to throw off the weight of the powerful men about her. She was forced to marry the new successor to the throne: her own grandfather, Ay.

The reign of the elderly Ay was a short one, and Ankhesenpaaten disappears from the records after her marriage to the new Pharaoh. Either she predeceased him, or successfully managed to slip into an obscurity that might have offered some peace and contentment after the turmoil of her political-marital life. With her the blood line of the Eighteenth Dynasty came to an end. Akhenaten's efforts to establish a lasting line and a lasting religion had both failed.