

Analysis of the heretic pharoah: akhenaten



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During the New Kingdom Era there was a period where the most powerful and famous Pharaoh's reigned. It was known and still is known as the Eighteenth Dynasty. However, out of all the pharaohs during this time, there was one who transformed the infrastructure of Egypt's system of life in several ways. His name was King Akhenaten and his leadership over seventeen years changed older traditions established before his existence (Mark). Akhenaten's reign wasn't superior in a political form however his religious reform and influences on artwork were enough for his remembrance and created a significant timeframe in Egyptian history.

Akhenaten was the son of Amenhotep III and Tiye, and before his reign he was formally known as Amenhotep IV. Akhenaten's ruling was through the years of 1353-1336 BCE and during the beginning of his ruling he followed in his father's shadow in which he constrained himself to the norms of the priesthood and respected the priesthood and deities (Mark). It is said to be around the fourth or fifth year of his leadership something shifted, and Akhenaten became infatuated with one sole deity who was called Aten. Aten was a deity that was identified as a sun-disk figure and he converted his people to this single god. Amongst this religious change he created a new city called Akhetaten and announced it as the new capital (Mark). He not only modified the religious aspect of the Egyptians, he also changed the view of art and innovated a unique art style in which sculptures, paintings, and multiple pieces of artwork were created based from the Amarnan period. Pharaoh Akhenaten's impact on their culture and beliefs was so distressing, that generations to follow crowned him as the " Heretic King" and he

seemingly was omitted from Egyptians pharaoh records as well as most of his structures and his city were obstructed (Hessler).

Although not accepted by the Egyptians, Akenaten had a place in history because of his unique ideas that went against what was written in their history as a successful king. His conversion from being polytheistic to monotheistic was a first for any ruler in Egyptian history and this put Akenaten in his own category which was not looked upon as glorious.

(Thompson) His reign was significant because he attempted what no one else had which was to be brave enough to go against the system. “

Akhenaten is one of the most controversial Egyptian pharaohs” (Thompson pp. 12). His desire to create a new religion, one where he was the sole primary contact, so he controlled the beliefs of the people was stronger than his desire to be king. He focused most of his years creating Aten and building his temples and city to worship the new deity. He did not stop the belief in other gods from his people, but he focused his source of worship and praise on the sun-like figure (Thompson).

During the Amarna Period, Akhenaten's rare artistic style was not the usually block and even figured depictions. “ Akhenaten used this art style to emphasize his intentions of ruling very differently unlike his precedents. Multiple art pieces from the Aten Temple were highly exaggerated when compared to the Egyptian royal and influential art during the millennium preceding Akhenaten's birth” (McLaughlin). Artwork before was characterized by its formality and restraint while art during Akhenaten period such as Aten Temple is oddly stunning today, although it had a shocking effect on the minds of people who were never exposed to any new art style before his

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reign. During the Amarna period, art became less embellished, it was inspired on a naturalistic look yet, it remained exceedingly formalized in its interpretation of the human figure (McLaughlin).

Akhenaten's ruling the royal family members were shown with extended skulls and rounded bodies having small torsos and arms with full hips and stomach areas. Although normally, depictions of the king worshipping the Gods remained important, he increased artwork of ordinary and normal life activities. Some interesting portrayals were those that displayed in intimate settings of Akhenaten and his wife playing with the children under the rays of Aten (McLaughlin). While traditional Egyptian art stressed the idea of eternity, his art focused on the small details of life. Not only was Akhenaten notorious for the changes he made in the religious practices and art, but he also was known for the changes in temple architecture and construction methods. Even inscriptions changed from the antiquated language used in traditional periods to monumental texts to reflect the spoken language. (Hessler).

As a god, he seemed to have felt that the affairs of state were below him and stopped concentrating on his responsibilities. One of the ill-fated results of Akhenaten's religious reforms was the neglected foreign policy. Many documents and letters had evidence of other nations, that were known as allies, who wrote numerous times asking for help in multiple situations and that most of these requests were ignored by him. (Reeves) Egypt was known as a wealthy and prosperous nation and had been progressively growing in power since before the reign of Queen Hatshepsut. The era before employed a balanced approach of tact and military action in dealing with foreign

nations; Akhenaten elected to disregard what happened beyond the margins of Egypt and most dynamics outside of his palace at Akhetaten. (Reeves)

Akhenaten's leadership was significant in his attempts to change the religion he became consumed by his own beliefs and not the well being of the country. He made himself an outlier of Egypt and he caused issues in its economy, leadership and allies. His attributes to Egypt's history were not contributed to history until centuries later and his potential as a pharaoh was diminished due to his selfish choices as king. Akhenaten's decisions were a detriment to his people during the time because his religious reform and art work paved no benefit during the era, however it did become a sensation from his abnormalities of how he ruled. His significance is in his differences and his bravery as a Pharaoh to attempt to change eras of traditions and that difference allowed for his reign to be widely intriguing to many people to learn of his intent and the method behind his madness. Akhenaten's reign wasn't superior in a political form however his religious reform and influences on artwork were enough for his remembrance and created a significant timeframe in Egyptian history.

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