

10-2021

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Wade, Sabrina (2021) "Atenism and Pharaoh Akhenaten's Attempt to Deify Himself," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2021.110201

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol11/iss2/1>

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Atenism and Pharaoh Akhenaten's Attempt to Deify Himself

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18th Dynasty (1550-1295 BCE) pharaoh Amenhotep IV (d. 1336 BCE) of the New Kingdom of Egypt (1550-1069 BCE) assumed the throne sometime around 1358 BCE.¹ He would eventually found a new monotheistic religion around the solar god Aten, change his name to Akhenaten, and ban the acknowledgment of other deities.² While it is ultimately impossible to say for sure what his motivations were, this essay posits that Atenism was Akhenaten's attempt to deify himself as an eternal, living god, and evidence for this may be found in *The Great Hymn to the Aten*, as well as within Amarna Period artwork.

A few years into his reign, Amenhotep IV decided to abandon Thebes.³ He founded an entirely new city he called Akhetaten, which is located in modern day Amarna.⁴ This new city was dedicated to Aten, the sun god, and one of Egypt's solar cults.⁵ Amenhotep IV changed his

¹ Ian Shaw, ed, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2002, Accessed April 15, 2021, ProQuest Ebook Central), 484-485; Cyril Aldred, *Akhenaten: King of Egypt* (London: Thames Et Hudson, 2001), 11.

² Ibid, 20; Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, 270.

³ Nicholas Reeves, *Akhenaten: Egypt's False Prophet* (London: Thames Et Hudson, 2001), 103.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid; James Karl Hoffmeier, *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 137.

name to Akhenaten and founded a new religion based on the monotheistic worship of Aten.⁶ Egyptian religion up until this point had been polytheistic, however, henotheism—the worship of a single deity while recognizing the existence of others—was not unusual.⁷

Henotheistic worship of the sun god in particular was extremely prevalent in Egypt, going all the way back to its first rulers.⁸ There were several versions of the sun's divine incarnation, and he usually had several different names and personifications that changed and evolved over time. One of the earliest examples is Horus, the hawk god of the sky, whose right eye was the sun and the left, the moon.⁹ Then there was Ra—who was later fused with Amon, Thebes' chief god, creating the supreme god Amon-Ra—and Aten.¹⁰ The 18th Dynasty was especially characterized by a deep trust in and reverence for the sun.¹¹ The sun was reliable. It always appeared every single morning without fail. The world was dependent on the sun's light, which was life-giving to the earth and its inhabitants, and it was also destructive towards dark, dangerous, forces.¹²

Aten indeed existed before Akhenaten's reign, but it was Akhenaten who elevated him to monotheistic status—in fact, Atenism was arguably Egypt's first monotheistic religion, not merely another henotheistic solar cult. During Akhenaten's first years as pharaoh, he did

⁶ Aldred, *Akhenaten: King of Egypt*, 20.

⁷ Hoffmeier, *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism*, 137.

⁸ Joy Collier, *The Heretic Pharaoh* (New York: Dorsett Press, 1991), 23.

⁹ *Ibid*, 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid*; "Amon, Egyptian Deity," *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition*, March 2021, 1, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=khh&AN=134486418>; Hoffmeier, *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism*, 76.

¹¹ Erik Hornung, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 19.

¹² *Ibid*.

recognize the existence of other gods, even though Aten was his primary patron deity. There exists iconography from early in Akhenaten's reign—when he was still Amenhotep IV—of Aten that includes images of other solar gods.¹³ However, those scenes of Aten sharing a space with other gods soon disappeared in later depictions, and some of these iconographs of Aten alongside other deities were defaced a few years after their creation.¹⁴ Additionally, any mention of Akhenaten's old name, Amenhotep IV, was also hacked out.¹⁵ Akhenaten would eventually officially proclaim that Aten was the one and only god, and he condemned the worship and/or acknowledgement of any other deity, even going so far as to “remove their names and effigies.”¹⁶

Not much is known about the Aten religion. The teachings of Atenism came from Akhenaten alone, and there is little surviving text.¹⁷ A great deal of what is known about Atenism's ideology comes from *The Great Hymn to the Aten*, which was mostly likely authored by Akhenaten himself.¹⁸ The hymn was located in the tomb of Aya until it was partially destroyed in 1890, although a full copy of the text was previously preserved by French Egyptologist Urbain Bouriant.¹⁹ The hymn directly addresses Aten and praises him as the sole creator of all life in the world:

How manifold are your works
which are hidden from sight,
you sole god without equal!

¹³ Hoffmeier, *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism*, 71.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, 270.

¹⁷ Hornung, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light*, 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

You have created the earth as you desired, quite alone,
with people, cattle, and all creatures,
with everything upon the earth
that walks about on feet
and all that is on high and flies with its wings.
The foreign lands of Syria and Nubia,
and the land of Egypt—
you set all in their place and care for their needs,
they have all their nourishment, their lifetimes
are determined.²⁰

Other passages speak of a living sun “who determines life,” filling and embracing the lands, causing women to carry children, and giving breath “to keep all creation alive.”²¹ Certainly, the central dogma is that Aten is the sole life giver.

The Great Hymn to the Aten describes the beauty and joy of the Aten as he appears in the sky every morning, but this then begs the question of: what happens at night? The hymn describes nighttime, when the sun is absent, as “a state of death.”²² People sleep, vulnerable and unseeing of the world around them.

Every beast of prey emerges from its den,
and all the serpents bite.
The darkness is a tomb,
the earth lies numb,
its creator has indeed set in his horizon.

In the morning, you rise on the horizon
and are radiant as the sun in the daytime;
you drive off darkness and cast your rays.²³

²⁰ Ibid, 81.

²¹ Ibid, 80.

²² Ibid, 79.

²³ Ibid, 79-80.

The hymn describes the night as a time of danger, darkness, and death. When there is no sun, there is no life.

Curiously, there is no mention of where Aten goes at night. The audience is only told that he appears during the day, and vanishes at night. The old sun god Ra—later fused into Amon-Ra—was said to travel through the underworld at night, battling evil creatures and the serpent Apophis until he rose from the other side at dawn.²⁴ But Aten seems to simply disappear, leaving the world in a state of darkness and danger—in a state of death. However, this could be intentional. When Akhenaten banned the other gods, this included funerary deities.²⁵ Previously, Osiris, the god of the dead, oversaw departed souls who passed into the kingdom of the dead.²⁶ Under Atenism, Akhenaten was the one who had dominion over the dead.²⁷ It was he who his subjects prayed to for patronage after death, and it was to him that offerings and petitions were made for mortuary favors.²⁸ Given that nighttime is described as a time of death and danger, this could be an attempt to encourage people to pray to Akhenaten as a deity, to honor him and give offerings in exchange for protection during night hours.

There is little about *The Great Hymn to the Aten* that is particularly revolutionary—sentiments about divine creation and life-giving properties of the sun were not new to the world

²⁴ Collier, *The Heretic Pharaoh*, 24.

²⁵ Aldred, *Akhenaten: King of Egypt*, 246.

²⁶ “Egyptian Mythology,” *Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia*, “Egyptian Mythology,” *Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia*, January 1, 2018, 1, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.shib&db=funk&AN=eg018500>.

²⁷ Aldred, *Akhenaten: King of Egypt*, 246.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 246-247.

of solar gods.²⁹ What makes the hymn unusual is the complete absence of other gods.³⁰ Earlier hymns to other gods typically included some mention of additional deities, including one hymn to Amon that spoke of him as “the Sole God,” the only creator, and yet also relates him to several other deities, to whom he gave life.³¹

Perhaps the biggest question surrounding the whole of Atenism is: why did Akhenaten go so far as to ban all other deities? While ultimately it is impossible to say for sure, some clues about his motivations for this may be found within the *Great Hymn to the Aten*,² as well as within the new art styles that appeared during the Amarna Period. The hymn describes Akhenaten as Aten’s son, “who emerged from [Aten’s] body.”³² Some scholars, such as Raymond Johnson, theorize that Aten was the deification of Akhenaten’s father, Amenhotep III (d. 1352).³³ *The Great Hymn to the Aten*’s assertion that Akhenaten came from Aten’s body is often cited as one piece of evidence for this, as well as earlier iconography that depicts Amenhotep III in the role of a sun god.³⁴ Images in a temple dedicated to Amon-Ra, built by Amenhotep III, also show Amenhotep IV worshipping his father.³⁵

²⁹ Aldred, *Akhenaten: King of Egypt*, 243.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 244.

³² Hornung, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light*, 83.

³³ Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, 254, 485.

³⁴ Hornung, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light*, 26.

³⁵ Hoffmeier, *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism*, 87.

However, it is important to note that Egyptian pharaohs were already regarded as divine.³⁶ They were gods on earth, an intermediary between humans and the other gods.³⁷ In the New Kingdom, there even appear images of the pharaoh worshipping his own image.³⁸ With this context in mind, these images of Amenhotep III serving the role as a sun god and his son in the act of worshipping him, are not altogether unusual, and do not necessarily lend credence to the idea that Aten was an attempt to further deify Amenhotep III. Additionally, the temple complex to Aten that was built in Karnak shows no particular connection to Akhenaten's father, and so it is very unlikely that Aten was an attempt to deify Amenhotep III.³⁹

With Amenhotep III eliminated, the next most likely possibility is that Aten was an attempt to deify Akhenaten himself. It has been established that pharaohs were regarded as gods already, but Akhenaten seemed to be attempting to cement himself, not just as a god on earth, but as the one and only god in the sky as well. Pharaohs, while gods, were yet human. They grew old, they died, and they were replaced by a successor, who was then worshipped as the next god on earth. Akhenaten was likely attempting to end this cycle of worship by establishing himself as the sole god, the only living god—so Aten was called—to be actively worshipped forever by each successive generation. He had already begun to force the people to rely on him to care for the dead when he banished Osiris by establishing himself as the only one who could guide departed souls. Akhenaten repeatedly made claims to his own divinity, one of which can be found in *The Great Hymn to the Aten*:

Since you founded the world, you rouse them

³⁶ Hornung, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light*, 26.

³⁷ Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), accessed April 15, 2021, ProQuest Ebook Central, 40.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Hoffmeier, *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism*, 90.

for your son, who emerged from your body,
the king of the two Egypts, who lives on Maat,
Neferkheperure Waenre,
the son of Re, who lives on Maat,
the lord of diadems, Akhenaten, great in his lifetime,
and the great king's wife, whom he loves,
the mistress of the Two Lands, Neferneferuaten Nefertiti,
who lives and is rejuvenated
for ever and ever.⁴⁰

From this passage, the audience is told not only of Akhenaten's divinity, but of his chief wife Nefertiti's as well. While the hymn praises Aten for bringing life to all, in reality, he does not show personal favor to anyone except Akhenaten and his wife. The world and all its inhabitants are "rouse[d]" for Akhenaten, who, along with Nefertiti, are alone "rejuvenated for ever and ever."

Amarna Period artwork further carries this theme of Akhenaten as the only one to enjoy Aten's personal favor, although this does extend to Nefertiti. During Akhenaten's reign, the only acceptable depiction of Aten was in the form of a sun disk with outstretched rays ending in hands, rather than the more traditional method of depicting the gods with human bodies and animal heads.⁴¹ Aten was clearly established as a being not of this earthen world, with no human qualities other than his symbolic hands reaching out to shine upon Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and their children. Further, depictions of Aten show him bestowing the gift of life exclusively upon the pharaoh and his queen.⁴²

Artistic depictions of Akhenaten are also strangely caricatured. Earlier iconographies from Amenhotep III's reign show a prince Amenhotep IV that looks quite normal for the time.

⁴⁰ Hornung, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light*, 83.

⁴¹ Ibid, 48.

⁴² Aldred, *Akhenaten: King of Egypt*, 111.

The pharaoh was traditionally depicted as though he was always in the prime of his youth: strong, fit, and perfect, and young prince Amenhotep IV looked the same during his father's time.⁴³ However, by the Amarna Period, Akhenaten's iconographic appearance altered drastically. His skull is elongated, he has a long neck and large lips, and he nearly has breasts. He also has plump thighs and wide hips beneath a pooching belly, offset by thin arms and calves.⁴⁴ Additionally, a colossus of Akhenaten shows him naked with no genitals, his broad hips swooping up into a narrow waist beneath what appear to be breasts, covered by his crossed hands gripping a crook and flail, symbols of the pharaoh's authority.⁴⁵

For years, scholars have attempted to understand why Akhenaten appears with such feminine attributes. Early excavators even mistook him for a woman.⁴⁶ Was this Akhenaten's true, physical appearance in his lifetime? Or was this a new method of artistic expressionism? If this was meant to represent Akhenaten's true physical appearance, then it is curious that he wished to be presented in that way to the public, rather than keeping with the tradition of exclusively depicting the pharaoh as a young, fit man in his prime. Unfortunately, it is impossible to say for sure why he appears the way he does, but some scholars believe that he perhaps suffered from some sort of medical disorder, such as Fröhlich's syndrome.⁴⁷ However, this is unlikely. One symptom of Fröhlich's syndrome is sterility, and Akhenaten had multiple

⁴³ Aldred, *Akhenaten: King of Egypt*, 233.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 231.

⁴⁵ Hoffmeier, *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism*, 96; "Statue: British Museum," The British Museum.

⁴⁶ Aldred, *Akhenaten: King of Egypt*, 231.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 232.

children—he is rarely depicted without the presence of his chief wife and six daughters, who are all titled as daughters “of the King, of his loins, born of Chief Wife Nefertiti.”⁴⁸

Another, and perhaps more likely explanation, is that Akhenaten intentionally wanted to depict himself as something less—or more—than human. His elongated skull and androgynous appearance give the impression that he is not simply a man like his subjects, or even like his royal predecessors. Given that Aten is the god that gives life, Akhenaten could have been attempting to emulate some sort of father-mother figure. The feminine appearance of his body—especially his wide hips and plump thighs, and the lack of male genitalia on his colossus—allude to female fertility, while his crown, crook, and flail cement his position as yet a male king. So, not only was Akhenaten the son of Aten, but he emulated Aten’s inhuman, godlike attributes. Given that Aten was only ever iconized in the form of the sun and his rays in the sky, it is very likely that Akhenaten was attempting to establish himself as the living embodiment of Aten on earth. Aten was the living god, and he lived on earth in the form of his son, Akhenaten—not unlike the Christian concept of Jesus Christ being the son of God, while also representing an embodiment of God himself. Some of this divinity extended to Nefertiti, but Akhenaten clearly came first in both divinity and favor of Aten.

But despite all of Akhenaten’s efforts to establish a new religion for the ages, he was ultimately unsuccessful. Amenhotep IV had ascended the throne during a time of peace and prosperity for Egypt, but Akhenaten left behind a shrunken, diminished empire.⁴⁹ Hyper focused on Atenism, he neglected important foreign affairs, and the Syrian war dealt a blow to the

⁴⁸ Ibid, 234.

⁴⁹ Collier, *The Heretic Pharaoh*, 223.

Egyptian empire.⁵⁰ Land, wealth, and reputation was lost, and while Akhenaten had a quiet death, he was labeled a heretic thereafter.⁵¹ Traditional polytheistic worship resumed, and Atenism was forgotten.⁵²

While it is impossible to say why exactly Akhenaten founded Atenism, there is evidence to suggest that this was an attempt to further deify himself. *The Great Hymn to the Aten* declares him as the son of Aten, and Akhenaten is the one with dominion over the dead, taking Osiris' place. Amarna Period artwork also depicts Akhenaten in a rather androgynous fashion, and he appears somewhat inhuman, with his elongated skull and mix of male and female attributes. Akhenaten was determined to embody Aten's life-giving, father-mother role, and establish himself as a living god—the only living god to be worshipped by the people forever.

Appendix

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Hornung, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light*, 112.

⁵² Aldred, *Akhenaten: King of Egypt*, 246; Hornung, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light*, 5.



Figure 1: Akhenaten (left), Nefertiti (right), and three of their daughters. "Into the Pharaoh's Chamber: How I Fell in Love with Ancient Egypt," *The Guardian*, April 26, 2019,



Figure 2: Akhenaten (Society for the Promotion of the Egyptian Museum Berlin)



Figure 3: Colossus depicting Akhenaten in feminine form. "Colossal of Akhenaten," The Global Egyptian Museum.

About the author

Sabrina Wade graduated from Georgia Southern University in 2021 with a BA in History and a minor in Professional and Technical Writing. She has always had a passion for history and research, and she aspires to become an academic librarian so that she can assist others in their own research.

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