

## INTRODUCTION

### AMENHOTEP III AS HE IS VIEWED TODAY

Beginning in 1391 B.C., Amenhotep III was for 38 years the richest man on earth and commander in chief of the largest, best equipped army of his day. A successful though infrequent warrior, he was also a thoroughly cultivated man – religious, literate, and an art lover – at the height of Egypt's Eighteenth Dynasty, what is often called her "Golden Age." His foreign vassals addressed him as "the Sun," and he justifiably called himself "dazzling," here termed "radiant" for his effect on the then-known world. One could search for his equal through all the rulers of ancient Rome, the emperors of China, the kings and queens of England and France, and the czars of Russia and generally come up wanting.

Yet, today, 34 centuries later, his heirs are the world-famous ones. Two of these were far weaker and less productive men. His son Akhenaten is regarded as a champion of monotheism (the so-called Amarna Revolution) in an age of nearly universal polytheism, when, it will be argued here, his new devotion was a reaction to the traditional gods having failed their country in a time of crisis. Tutankhamen, Amenhotep III's short-lived grandson, accomplished little in his lifetime but rose to superstardom when his tiny tomb crammed with golden treasures was found nearly intact in 1922, the finds subsequently paraded around the world in a series of traveling exhibitions. In the following dynasty, Ramesses the Great reigned for 67 years, usurping Amenhotep's statues and temples in his own name and leaving the false impression of a large artistic and architectural footprint. Living to 90 years of age, Ramesses was a successful sire, producing around 200 children; a lucky soldier; and finally, a Middle Eastern peacemaker in a land of eternal turmoil.

Among Egyptologists, however, Amenhotep III is a favorite. His reign produced prodigious amounts of sculpture and decorative arts in every medium, material, and size. Each is marked by a deliciously ornate

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aesthetic and a quality of workmanship rarely equaled in world history. Even when successors usurped his statuary, enough traces of his original artists' incomparable technique and style can be found beneath the later, cruder chisel marks. He built extensively throughout the Nile Valley, not only in Egypt, but far south in the Sudan as well. His temples are elegantly designed and enormous in size, providing generations of excavators with infinite fields for study.

For epigraphers, linguists, and literary experts, Amenhotep III left plentiful records and texts to decipher, ponder, and discuss. For theologians, he revived and revered ancient traditions while gathering new influences from Nubia and the Near East. His most profound effect on religion, at the climax of his reign, was his own deification, perhaps creating a foundation for his son Akhenaten's retreat from many gods to one.

As a result of his artistic production and his apparent avoidance of major wars, the reign of Amenhotep III has traditionally been viewed as peaceful, idyllic, full of luxury, and devoid of problems. Women became especially prominent during his reign. More statues, carvings, and paintings of sensuously attired, exquisitely beautiful, and curvaceous women exist from his reign than from any other. As a result, and because of the number of foreign princesses Amenhotep III acquired for his harem, he has generally been viewed until very recently as a rather effete, though lovable, womanizing oriental potentate.

This general belief likely started with Jean-François Champollion's studies of Amenhotep III's cartouches on the thrones of the Colossi of Memnon along with the inscriptions on the Rosetta Stone, which led to his remarkable decoding of hieroglyphs in 1822. Once our king's name became widely recognizable during the nineteenth century, the elements of his persona most likely to titillate the Victorian mind-set began to emerge from monuments large and small such as the Colossi, where Amenhotep's regal form is surrounded by those of shapely women; two voluptuous statues of the goddesses Isis and lion-headed Sekhmet previously shipped by the eighteenth-century Italian traveler Donati to Turin; and numerous chance finds of exquisite cosmetic vessels and jewelry inscribed for Amenhotep and easily found on or near the surface at his unique city on the west bank of Luxor, Malkata.

One hundred seventy years later, the exhibition and catalogue *Egypt's Dazzling Sun, Amenhotep III and His World*, by Betsy Bryan (who, in 1991, had published her exhaustive study of Amenhotep III's father Thutmose IV), Lawrence Berman, Élisabeth Delange, and me, began to probe more

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deeply into our pharaoh's intellect and spirituality, seeking and finding greater meaning behind the earlier vapid impression. In 1998, David O'Connor and Eric Cline organized *Amenhotep III: Perspectives on His Reign*, a collection of essays concerning this king's family, administration, foreign relations, and artistic output, further adding to a sense of the intricacy and depth of this ruler's mind and the breadth of his scope. In 2000, Agnès Cabrol produced a book titled *Amenhotep III Le Magnifique*, organized as a series of topics about his life and reign, with some interesting new ideas and observations. The same year, Joann Fletcher wrote *A Chronicle of a Pharaoh: The Intimate Life of Amenhotep III*, an entertaining weave of a number of interesting facts and personalities, colorful tales, and fanciful details.

These works, organized thematically (the king's family, administration, statuary, etc.), form the foundation stones for the biography presented here, but this book takes a different approach. Studying a period by themes is a perfect way to begin organizing huge amounts of information, but it separates facts and events from the historical order in which they occurred. This book is the second step. It reorganizes the documentation into chronological order, forcing us to deal with the real-time framework in which events occurred and people lived. As a result, we arrive at new insights, some very much at odds with the assumptions of the past.

A true biography, in the sense of a chronological history of a person's life, is not possible for most of Egypt's kings, who rarely left enough records to provide a continuous and complete timeline. In the case of Amenhotep III, however, records exist in mind-boggling numbers. We know more about him than most of us know about our own great-grandparents. There are portraits of him as a young prince and youthful graffiti in his name. Large commemorative scarabs record two marriages, bull hunts, lion hunts, and the construction of a great lake. We know the names of several sets of his in-laws, both royal and common, and we have the mummies and burial treasure of his great queen Tiy's parents. We know the names of his nonroyal grandmother and mother, royal stepmothers, sisters, brothers, children, grandchildren, and even his first son's pet cat. We know the king's favorite colors, and Tiy's as well.

There are records of openings of quarries providing stone for the construction of certain temples and testimonials to his two brief military campaigns in Nubia. There are literally tens of thousands of statues, funerary objects, and other belongings of the king, his family, and his courtiers in museums and collections around the world, including, of

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course, in Egypt. This ancient land (including the Sudan) is virtually an open-air museum, with many of the structures built by Amenhotep III still above ground and visible, while many more have been excavated, retraced, and recorded.

The king's three jubilee festivals in Years 30, 34, and 37 of his reign are documented in temples and tombs, but even more remarkably by more than 1,000 potsherds, gift labels from jars holding donations of food to Amenhotep III and his family at his Malkata palace. These handwritten notations usually name the recipients and/or the donors, the latter coming from a cross section of Egyptian society. They often document the precise type of wine, ale, meat, honey, vegetable, and oil held in the jars and the year-dates the gifts were sent. Published by William Hayes of the Metropolitan Museum, these pithy records are rich nuggets of information about the players and their practices in the last years of Amenhotep III's reign.

In addition to the royal records, even more documentation comes from inscriptions left by private individuals in and on their own monuments. Courtiers amassed unprecedented wealth and power during Amenhotep III's reign and, as a result, were able to commission or have the king endow them with large tombs and impressive statuary of their own, some with autobiographical texts including important information related to their sovereign's activities.

Most of what we know about Egypt's international relations in the last years of this reign and the next two or so decades is revealed in correspondence found in an archive at Tell el Amarna, the capital founded by Akhenaten. This historical treasure holds more than 300 personally dictated letters between late Dynasty 18 royalty and Cypriote, Hittite, Mitanni (upper Tigris-Euphrates Valley), and Babylonian kings as well as Canaanite mayors and governors. One letter is dated as received by Amenhotep III at Malkata in the third to last year of his reign. When Akhenaten abandoned Thebes, he moved his father's palace correspondence file from Malkata to Amarna, and the exchange of letters continued.

Almost all the Amarna letters were written in Middle Babylonian Akkadian, the English of its day, which was a foreign language to all but Babylon and Assyria. Mitanni king Tushratta sent one long missive in his native tongue of Hurrian, and provincial Arzawa sent two in Hittite. Some of the Syrian and Palestinian mayors, vassals of Egypt, managed to slip terms from their own West Semitic dialects into the texts as well. All the scribes formed the words by punching cuneiform

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(wedge-shaped) signs onto large, damp clay tablets, which were fired to make them durable enough for long journeys. Just as the modern Latin-based alphabet is used by most Western languages today, cuneiform served many Near Eastern tongues and dialects in antiquity.

In 1887, the hoard was discovered accidentally in the remains of palace storeroom at Amarna by scavengers looking to take and reuse bricks from the ancient walls. The Assyriologist turned Egyptologist Reverend A. H. Sayce described the find:

At the risk of repeating a well-worn tale, I will describe briefly the nature of the discovery in the ruins of a city and palace, which like the palace of Aladdin, rose out of the desert sands into gorgeous magnificence for a short thirty years and then perished utterly, some 300 clay tablets were found, inscribed, not with the hieroglyphs of Egypt, but with the cuneiform characters of Babylonia. They were, in fact, the contents of the Foreign office of Amon-hotep IV, the 'Heretic King' of Egyptian history.

Now these tablets are scattered among museums and collections in Cairo and abroad. They form the basis of important studies regarding the military, trade, economy, international marriage, social conditions, and chronology of this era.

Given all these documents, statues, tombs, and monuments – a virtual worldwide web of information – the reign of Amenhotep III *can* be studied chronologically, but some of the dearly held beliefs about this reign are upended in the process. For example, Cyril Aldred, one of the most dedicated and inspiring twentieth-century scholars of Amenhotep III's life and art, assumed that royal children were born only during kings' reigns. Of course, there is no biological or historical reason for this, yet Egyptologists, including me, continued to follow this line of thinking for decades. That meant refusing to entertain the possibility that our Amenhotep was born while his father was still prince, which in turn forced us to discount as fantasy our king's stelae inscribed with detailed accounts of the military campaign he led in Nubia in Year 5, whereas similar stelae recording similar events for other pharaohs were taken as fact.

The biography presented here takes the point of view that our Amenhotep was born before his father became pharaoh. Doing the math of the ages of his recent ancestors and their length of reign seems to bear this out. Furthermore, it is suggested here that Amenhotep likely held an administrative position of great importance during his father's reign,

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that he was an adult when crowned king, and that he did lead the Year 5 campaign to Nubia, as he claimed. Most of the evidence is circumstantial, but a great deal of it comes from giving Amenhotep's writings the same respectful validity ascribed to those of other pharaohs. These inscriptions may be boastful, exaggerated, and arrogant, but they generally have their dates right and are a fair indication of the nature of the events, even when the win-loss column favors the texts' authors.

One of the most interesting features of Amenhotep's reign crystallizes in a period when there was not an abundance of records but a total lack thereof. In a reign otherwise flooded with documents, there is a long drought from Years 12 to 19, when there are none, zero. This phenomenon is often excused by pointing out that other periods in Egypt's history have similar gaps, but no other reign has the quantity, detail, and character of records that we find during Amenhotep III's good years. The eight-year silence in his chatty reign is remarkable, as is the subsequent radical change in Amenhotep III's life – and world – views in the second half of his reign.

The reason for both the historical gap and Amenhotep III's new approach is unknown, but it occurred at a time of voluminous production of statues of the goddess of war and pestilence, Sekhmet. More statues exist for her than for the king and all the other gods combined. Dozens more have been found in recent excavations at Kom el Hettan, the site of Amenhotep III's gigantic memorial temple. The general lack of major warfare during this period begs the historian to ask if this was a period of pestilence. This theory is hard to prove, but evidence gathered by infectious disease experts and Egyptologists is mounting. Gradually, the likelihood that Amenhotep's reign was victimized by a series of crippling plagues becomes more and more apparent according to some, and not ruled out by others.

There may also have been other problems caused by Mother Nature. Egypt is prone to earthquakes today, and it was in antiquity as well. Whether any might have occurred and done great damage during the reign of Amenhotep III is not yet known. Added to that is the recently gathered evidence that during these years, Egypt's lifeline and main highway, the Nile River, was changing its shape. This is normal for a river left to its own free will. What it meant for Karnak was that the temple's front gate needed to be moved gradually westward to keep up with the Nile's receding edge. At Kom el Hettan, across the river from Karnak, front gates were moved eastward toward Karnak. This seems to

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suggest that the Nile at Thebes, at least, was shrinking in width, which would have had devastating agricultural consequences.

In sum, there are many signs that Amenhotep III's 38 years on the throne were not the blissful and carefree period we have come to imagine on the basis of his stellar art production. In fact, his voluminous oeuvre, especially his colossal temple construction, may have been devised to win the gods' intervention against Egypt's decline. His plan and his efforts had no effect, however, and his family dynasty spiraled downward into oblivion in the decades following his death.

A bright spot is Amenhotep III's tremendous personal devotion to and esteem for his great queen Tiy, which is revealed not only in the sheer number and complexity of monuments he commissioned in her honor but also by the king of Mitanni, who wrote to her after Amenhotep III's death, making it clear that he regarded her as an impressive power and intellect behind the throne. The couple's relationship has no more touching evidence of their mutual love than a memorial left by the widow at her husband's birthplace. Such testimony to the depth and breadth of a royal marital relationship is extremely rare in Egyptian history.

One of the thorniest issues relating to Amenhotep III is the possibility of a coregency between him and his son Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten lasting anywhere from a few months to 12 years. The point of view of this book is that current evidence does not clearly support a coregency. The Amarna letters written to Akhenaten suggest that he was his father's successor, and they indicate that he needed tutelage in international affairs from the dowager queen Tiy. Obviously, he knew nothing about this arena firsthand as a coregent. Donald Redford's 1967 examination of the coregency was so thorough and logical that it should have put the question to rest. It continues, however, because the obscure details of the controversy are fascinating and the passionate arguments too much fun to resist. The decades-long academic debate has been full of provocative personalities, factions, and politics, and it deserves its own separate study.

This book does not pretend to have all the answers to all the questions about the life of Amenhotep III. The reader will not be surprised to see the words *perhaps*, *maybe*, *probably*, and other forms of hedging one's historical bets frequently throughout the text. The reasons for these best guesses are given, and the reader is directed to multiple sources in the notes.

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Every year, new information appears in one way or another, either through excavations in Egypt, through discoveries in museums throughout the world, or in the process of scholars examining the period from new angles or with more updated methodologies and by sharing information with each other. Some of this will, as time goes by, undoubtedly alter some of the points made in this book.

GEOGRAPHIC, CULTURAL, AND HISTORICAL  
BACKGROUND

*The Serpentine Nile*

Egypt has an odd shape totally dependent on the world's greatest river, the Nile – a long, winding serpentine of swiftly flowing water, a few hundred yards wide and half a continent long. Patches of green crops emerge from the black soil sheathing each bank, adding to the snakelike image. North of Memphis, the Nile fans out into a delta of branches and streamlets before it empties into the Mediterranean Sea. From the air, this broad, green swath forms the Nile's cobralike cape and head. Before modern dams were built, the Nile annually swelled with the melted snows and silt of Ethiopia and central Africa. It flooded its banks in northern Sudan and Egypt and sloughed off the fertile, black mud it had transported – like a reptile shedding its skin – renewing itself and the valley for another year. This inspired Greek historian Herodotus to memorialize Egypt as the "gift" of the Nile, as if the river were benign and inexhaustible, when it could be, in some years, devastatingly stingy and in others over-generous to a fault. Even in good years, which, thankfully, outnumbered the bad, the gift, as is often true, required a tremendous amount of management and capital expenditure in order to provide a dependable agrarian economy.

Egypt's ancient name, *Kemet* (the Black Land), refers to the Nile's sable banks and contrasts with *Desbret* (the Red Land), the broad deserts lying east and west. On a map, this sinuous empire, 1,000 miles long, including Nubia in the northern Sudan, and sometimes only a very few miles wide, looks impossible by every standard – impossible to control, impossible to defend, and impossible to unify under a single religion, culture, or language. Yet the reason for its peculiar shape, the Nile, also made the impossible possible for it provided about 675 land-miles of nearly uninterrupted, easily navigable waters from the First Cataract, just south of Aswan, to the Mediterranean Sea. It was, for all practical purposes,



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a super-highway making both travel and communications quick and easy.

The Nile was so basic to Egyptian thought that it had no name but *iteru*, "The River." Its modern name may descend from a form of that – *nai-iteru* – changed in Greek to Neilos. It was so crucial to Egyptian travel that the wheel was not adopted as a means of transportation until long after the Pyramid Age, many centuries into Egypt's known history. The words meaning "to travel north" and "to travel south" were written with hieroglyphs in the form of sailboats, the one, with sails furled, taking advantage of the river's northward flow, and the other, in full sail, carried by the prevailing north to south wind.

Egypt's strung-out geography meant that early cult centers along the ancient Nile had developed their own creation myths somewhat similar to each other in theory but with different names and duties given to the paternal gods, mother goddesses, and pantheons. The various divinities married each other, had children, and carried out heavenly tasks and duties. This meant that they interacted and communicated with and related to each other in ways that made them understandable to humans.

Each deity had its visible symbol or avatar, sometimes more than one, and sometimes one served several deities. The god of wisdom and writing, Thoth, could be represented by an ibis or a baboon. The sycamore tree could be home to the goddess Nut, Hathor, or Isis. Yet Hathor could also appear as a cow, and Nut could also personify the Milky Way as a golden-bodied, nude young woman, arching her body across the nighttime sky. Their devotees had personal amulets or drew personal images of their special deity's avatar to use as focal points for their devotions. Any official petition to a god or goddess, however, could only be made by or with the assent of the king, who represented all deities on earth and who commissioned statues of them and built temples to them.

The easy coexistence, overlap, and occasional mergers of these many cult systems are a tribute to the success of the unification and the religious tolerance of the ancient Egyptian people. There was never a sense, except during the benighted Amarna period, that only one set of belief systems was correct and that all others were either anathema or substantially inferior. Furthermore, the ancient Egyptians welcomed foreign deities into their spiritual fold. It is interesting that this open-minded and intellectual approach of ancient Egyptian spirituality did not extend to human encounters. For the Egyptians considered themselves

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culturally superior to all others – Nubians, Syrians, Cretans, and dozens of other ethnic groups. Foreigners were traditionally depicted as bound prisoners writhing beneath the pharaoh's delicately sandaled feet.

*Egypt's Early History: From the Unification to the First Intermediate Period*  
(ca. 3000–2040 B.C.)

No kingdom on earth has a longer continuous history than ancient Egypt. It began sometime around or before 3000 B.C., when the towns dotting the banks of the long Upper (southern) Nile were joined politically with the settlements of the Lower (northern) Nile and the Delta (Map 1). The unification, traditionally ascribed to a king named Menes, set the cornerstone for the first three dynasties that comprise Egypt's Early Dynastic Period (ca. 2920–2575 B.C.).

From that time forward, every pharaoh held the title King of Upper and Lower Egypt, wore the two lands' combined crowns, and used their combined insignia. Menes placed his capital, "White Walls," at the juncture of Upper and Lower Egypt, at what is now Memphis, south and west of modern-day Cairo. Memphis was the cult center of a most ancient god, Ptah. The town's ancient name was "Hikuptah" (Mansion of the Spirit of Ptah), from which "Egypt" is derived. According to the theology of Memphis, Ptah was the creator god depicted as a mummiform man. He was thought to have sculpted the earth itself, and he created individual beings from clay on a potter's wheel. Not surprisingly, Ptah was the god of craftsmen and of the arts.

Heliopolis (ancient "Iunu"), now beginning to come to light under the modern El Matariya area of eastern Cairo, was the other northern city of great prominence. This was the cult center of Re, who was both the creator of life on earth (according to the Heliopolitan creation myth) and the physical embodiment of the sun. The Egyptian king was thought to be the son of this sun god. When he died, the king joined the sun god in his travels through the sky, while *his* son replaced him as the earthly son of the sun god. With few exceptions, every pharaoh from Dynasty 5 (beginning ca. 2490 B.C.) until the Roman invasion (30 B.C.) used some form of "Re" in his throne name.

After the Early Dynastic Period, the succeeding five dynasties of the Old Kingdom (2575–2134 B.C.), the Pyramid Age, lasted over 400 years. Memphis blossomed during this period. On the desert escarpment just to the west, huge pyramids were built as royal tombs for Djoser, Khufu, Khaefra, Menkaura, and others. Pepy I's pyramid was named