

ANCIENT HISTORY: *CORE*

Assess the political and religious purposes of the city of Akhetaten.

Upon a vast desert plane near the ancient cities of Memphis and Thebes, lie the remains of a city born out of the dramatic overhaul that was the reign of Pharaoh Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV). Located on the site of the modern day El Amarna, the ancient capital city of Akhetaten is a remnant of a singular period in history that saw Akhenaten briefly transform the religious landscape of New Kingdom Egypt. The specific purpose the city has been debated. Suggestions have been put forward by historians implying various religious and political purposes for the city that may have proved advantageous to the Pharaoh and defined the nature of his motivations. However, despite the contention, there is a general consensus that the reason for the existence of Akhenaten would have been of immense personal importance to the Pharaoh; and while the city was abandoned hastily following Akhenaten's death, the purposes for its development as well as its remains provide great insight into the motivations of the man that became known as the 'heretic king.'

The layout of Akhetaten is important to understanding its purposes. The construction is believed to have begun five years into Akhenaten's reign. In c. 1346 BC he is said to have paid a visit to the site and found it was in accordance with his beliefs. The shapes of the cliffs in the east, over which the sun's rising can be witnessed, resemble the hieroglyph for 'horizon'. This may be the derivation for its name which translates to 'the horizon of the Aten.' The extent of Akhenaten's vehement adoption of the site can be seen in one of large stiles cut into the northern and southernmost cliffs of the site, where the pharaoh proclaims that even if his wife, Nefertiti says "Look there is a good place of Akhetaten elsewhere', nor shall I listen to her." The city was completed within about two years and named the new capital of Egypt. It was poorly constructed as Akhenaten "was impatient to live with his father the Sun-disc in his own special city" (Redford, 1987). The city was mainly constructed from small talatat blocks of sandstone, limestone and mud brick. It possessed a variety of buildings including: palaces, administrative headquarters, houses of courtiers, a workers village, archives (the site of the discovery of the Amarna letters) and temples. It is unlikely Akhenaten's plan extended beyond the principal buildings and temples as evidenced by the haphazard way in which houses for the city's people, especially those in the workman's village, were built. The houses of the wealthy, mainly located in the North Suburb, while more commodious, did not compare to their counterparts in cities like Thebes.

Due to this, it is mainly structures of religious and royal significance that provide historians with information about the city's purposes. The sixteen rock-cut stiles, while damaged, provide historical detail about the reasons for Akhenaten's abandonment of Thebes. The majority of the stiles serve to elucidate Akhenaten's religious purpose in that he wanted to make a city that functioned as the undisputed home of the Aten, untainted by the past presence of other deities. Largely translated and reconstructed by scholar Donald Redford, the stiles record Akhenaten's address to his courtiers that highlights the pharaoh's religious vision for the city. "I shall make Akhetaten for the Aten, my father; in this place...I shall make the "House of the Aten" for the Aten, my father, in Akhetaten in this place." The temple of the Aten mentioned in the latter inscription dominated the site, reiterating the city's function as the religious heart of Akhenaten's Egypt. Subverting the archetypal tradition of depicting the gods in temple art, no cult image has been found in the temple of the Aten. However, other constructions of significance, such as the Great Palace and tombs of significant people abound with depictions that show the pharaoh in close association to the Aten. When this vital archeological evidence is examined, it is evident that Akhetaten was constructed to promote the new religion, expanding the pharaoh's reforms. Many artworks, for example, the piece of balustrade at the entrance ramp of the Great Palace, depict Akhenaten and his family living and worshipping under the radiant rays of the God. Others, as shown in the tomb of Ay, depict Akhenaten acting as monarch to his subjects with the aid of the Aten as the sun disk shines above him. Similarly, letters discovered at the archives of Akhetaten contain vassal kings' reference to the pharaoh as 'the sun', supporting Akhenaten's personal cooperation with the Aten. When these inscriptions and his

passionate rhetoric are considered, there is foundation to the claims that Akhenaten was driven by personal religious fervor into building the city. A new settlement, the primary purpose of which was to be home to great Aten would have been instrumental in advancing the religious revolution the pharaoh seemed to have so desired.

However, while the purposes of Akhetaten appear to be of an overwhelmingly religious nature, some political intentions for the site have also been suggested. Akhetaten was not only intended as a religious centre, but was made into the new capital. As the capital, the city would have certainly become a centre for administration in Egypt, an inference that archeological evidence supports through the presence of an archives as well as the tombs of eight individuals described as having fulfilled the role of royal scribe. Similarly, there is presence of tombs of other important officials such as the vizier Nakhtpaaten and Sutaui, a treasurer. This, as well as the discovery of upper class homes, suggests that men instrumental in running the Empire inhabited the city, making it a centre of politics as well as religion. Similarly, the presence of wide streets that stretch around the city and to the Great Palace along with the window of appearances imply that Akhenaten wanted to be seen by his people. It is therefore possible that the Akhetaten served the purpose of publicizing the worship of the Aten and displaying Akhenaten's role as intermediary between god and man. Frequent public appearances were uncommon among previous pharaohs, and these occasions would have evoked the immense importance of Akhenaten, making the God and pharaoh more popular.

This attempt to concentrate all power in his new capital is potentially a rejection of the cult and priesthood of Amun. One of the more simplistic reasons suggested is Akhenaten's drastic need of funds as the wealth of Egypt was reduced due to expenses used for the extensive building programs of Amenhotep III. The wealth of the priesthood would have provided the money to build Akhenaten's new city. However, there may have been another event that may have provoked Akhenaten's disapproval. There have been long-running tensions between the priesthood and the pharaoh. As the priesthood accumulated wealth and influence, it put them in a position to undermine the absolute power of the king. While relations eased slightly during the reign of Amenhotep III, it has been proposed that the priesthood had not taken favorably to Akhenaten as possibly shown in one of the much damaged stiles at Akhetaten "It was worse than those things I heard in reign year 4, it was worse than the things I heard in reign year 3...It was worse than those things that Amenhotep III heard...It was worse than those things heard by any kings who had ever assumed the white crown!". While this could be interpreted in a variety of ways, Reeves (2005) suggests that it refers to an assassination attempt by in around year 5, as he asks "What could have been worse than regicide?". While Reeves draws on the fate of Amenemhat I in pointing out the possibility of an internal plot, no concrete evidence has been found to support the theory. However, an assassination attempt could justify Akhenaten's successive political and economic prosecution of the Theban God. The sun temple in Thebes shows Akhenaten already had his own religious inclinations. However, a new capital, entirely unassociated with Amun, would have separated him both religiously and politically from the priesthood he detested, diminishing the cult's importance and bringing economic gain to the royal family that would have made the construction of Akhetaten possible.

In conclusion, through archeological evidence found on the site, it can be concluded that the city of Akhetaten served a number of religious and political purposes. It was the undisputed home of the Aten, set in a site untarnished by the presence of other gods. Akhetaten gave the pharaoh a place that would have augmented the progress of his revolution and worship the Aten without having to be confronted with the powerful Amun priesthood. Evidence suggests that Akhetaten also briefly became the center of political life and administration, allowing the pharaoh to try and popularize himself and the Aten. In turn, these various purposes elucidate possible motivations for the city's creations, reasons greatly intertwined with deeply personal convictions and universally human emotions.

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