'Thou dost appear beautiful
On the horizon of heaven
Oh, living Aten...
Thou sole God
There is no other like thee...
There is no other that
knows thee
Save thy son, Akhenaten'.
The author of this 4000-year-old hymn to one God has been portrayed as a mad idealist who turned the civilisation of the pharaohs upside down. John Ray discusses the man and his myth.

At some point around 1375 BC (Egyptian chronology is not yet an exact science) a flotilla made its way along the Nile. It contained the migrating royal court, or at least the royal family, and the purpose of the journey was to found a new capital. This sort of thing was not unknown in the ancient Near East, but the sequel to this particular voyage was unprecedented. A series of boundary stelae marks the spot to this day, a semi-circular bay in the cliffs of the eastern desert, some 200 miles south of modern Cairo. Here, according to the inscriptions, the new city would stand, with its palaces and administrative buildings, its complexes of temples, and its tombs for the king and his consort. There is no doubt that we are in ancient Egypt, with its preoccupation with death and the gods. The king informs us in these texts that he would never extend the boundaries of his new capital, although since the territory claimed covered a nine-mile swathe across the entire Nile Valley, this was hardly a concession, but the most interesting fact in the narrative is near the beginning: the site had been revealed to the king by his father.

By this term was not meant the pharaoh's earthly father, Amenhotep III, who had ruled Imperial Egypt for thirty-eight years, but a heavenly progenitor, the disk or globe of the sun,
generally known to us by its Egyptian name, the Aten. Indeed, the new capital was founded on a desert site which had never belonged to any previous god; the concept of divine territory was firmly held in the ancient world. Here the king, who had changed his name from that of his father to Akhenaten, ‘the pious one [or possibly the luminous emanation] of the Aten’, would be free to build his city, and to practise his new religion.

It is fitting that a hundred years ago nothing at all was known of this remarkable man; indeed, the one garbled reference which survived from antiquity, if it really pertains to him, could not even get his sex right. Akhenaten as we have him is essentially the creation of post-Freudian man, and the nature of the sources that survive – a winedocket here, a wall-painting or fragment of inscription there – gives all the necessary scope for twentieth-century imagination. The ingredients are rich: a tormented visionary, a misunderstood poet, a visual artist of genius whose mission went unheeded, the apostle of domestic virtue, an incestuous childabuser, a political disaster, an insane bisexual pope or ayatollah suffering from pathological endocrine disorder, a man out of his time. All that remains is to select some of these, stir, and season with political, psychological, and religious bias to taste. The result is then to be served as the truth about a man who regularly described himself as ‘living on truth [or cosmic harmony]’. The late Moses Finley once declared apologetically to colleagues that the study of ancient history was not history at all. To this an Egyptologist can reply that he did not know when he was well off. It is hardly possible to write an acceptable biography of any character in antiquity before Julian the Apostate, and certainly not before Alexander. It would be good, for example, to have Akhenaten’s complete diaries – authenticated, of course, by an acknowledged expert – and a sympathetic but hard-hitting account by an intelligent Babylonian contemporary; but if we did, Egyptology would not be Egyptology, and we would probably still be ungrateful.

What then can we do? We could campaign for international agreement to ban writing about the Amarna period, as it is called after the modern name of Akhenaten’s city, or at least to publish only new evidence in out-of-the-way places; but sooner or later the embargo would be broken. Alternatively, we could take the harder step of reassessing the scraps of evidence, in the hope that we can move crabwise towards a temporary solution, and in practice this is what will happen, whether we like it or not, since Akhenaten has escaped from his Egyptological playpen and now even has his own opera. Let us therefore try to establish what we can say and what we may not, in the hope that somewhere within these limits lies probability. This is at least a framework for new discoveries, whenever they occur.

The Egyptians had seen enough of Akhenaten in the first five years of his reign to know what to expect of him. The temple of the god Amun at Karnak is still the greatest religious complex ever built, and at the beginning of the new king’s reign it was rich with the tribute of an empire which covered much of the Near East and almost all of the Sudan (a country the size of western Europe). Akhenaten embellished this building with a sort of anti-Karnak, dedicated to the new god, and featuring the king and his consort Nefertiti in a series of rituals in the deity’s honour. Nefertiti is given remarkable prominence in this complex, possibly in an attempt to establish her as the female member of a trinity of gods, the other two being Akhenaten and the Aten.
itself. Much fuss is made of a mysterious thirty-year jubilee, whose meaning is unknown (the period since the first discovery of the new god in the previous reign, or possibly the thirtieth birthday of Akhenaten?). The courtyards of this temple produced the famous series of colossal statues, portraying the face of Akhenaten in a mystical gaze, while the body of the king is shown as feminine or at least epicene. To a modern observer these statues are haunting. They also frighten, and it is hard to imagine that these effects are not deliberate; they were designed to shock contemporaries. Later, Akhenaten was to describe his god as the father and mother of mankind, and it is possible that this concept was built into the physiology of the statues. The names which appear on the colossi are not those of Akhenaten, but of the Aten, who is treated exactly as an earthly king in this respect. On the surface, this shows the king as the pious servant of his god, but it is possible that a deeper message is also intended: for practical purposes, Akhenaten and the Aten are one.

Equally remarkable is a fragmentary proclamation, also from Karnak, which seems to contain the king’s own words. (Akhenaten’s speeches are recorded in the vernacular language, hitherto banned from official records; it is as if the actual words were of importance, not merely the substance.) In this edict the pharaoh seems to denounce graven images as futile, and remarks on the impossibility of creating one’s creator. This is in line with a phrase used in the boundary inscriptions at Amarna, that the king would not listen to the ‘great evil’ which had been followed by his father and grandfather. It is difficult not to conclude that this refers to traditional Egyptian religion, and specifically the cult of Amun; certainly the latter soon became a target for persecution. The name of this god was hacked out of inscriptions, even when it occurred in the name of the king’s father, or found itself at the top of hundred-foot obelisks. Other deities followed this fate, as did the plural form of the word ‘gods’ wherever it occurred. The singular, on the other hand, was left intact; the new god was clearly a monopolist. Erasures are of course difficult to date, but it does appear that the onslaught against traditional beliefs gathered momentum as the reign progressed, at least in the first ten years of Akhenaten’s seventeen as pharaoh.

The credo of the new faith is the greater of the two hymns to the Aten, found in two of the courtiers’ tombs at Amarna. The early assumption that this was the work of Akhenaten himself is probably correct; if he did not write it, he must have read through it with more than usual attention. In this hymn the Aten is sole creator and lover of mankind, even mankind which was not Egyptian; he also sustains and cherishes
The beauty of holiness – Akhenaten and Nefertiti worship the Aten in this stone stele.

the natural world, in phrases which are identical to verses in the Hebrew Psalm 104. The hymn culminates in a remarkable aerial view of the Nile valley, as it must appear from the sun’s globe itself, from the viewpoint of the god. It deserves to be called a masterpiece of literature, and it is difficult not to feel that we are dealing with a writer of genius; even parallels from earlier Egyptian literature, which certainly exist, do not erase this impression.

In a sense, the hymn to the Aten reads like a painter’s attempt to write literature (this is a criticism which can be made), but religious imagery needs to be made visual to succeed, and there is no doubt that a large part of the Amarna ‘revolution’ lies in the field of painting and sculpture. The products of the workshop of the sculptor Thutmose, now in Cairo and Berlin, have established the art of Akhenaten’s city as one of the finest in the ancient world, or for that matter any age. It is impossible to stand in front of the fresco of the pied kingfisher hovering against a papyrus-stem (a mere fragment, now in Cairo), or in front of the two princesses at a grown-up party, now in the Ashmolean, and not to feel, as with the hymn to the Aten, that one is in the presence of genius.

There is no reason to believe that Akhenaten painted these pictures, but at least one leading sculptor was happy to describe himself as an artist that his majesty himself taught, and the constant feature of Amarna art and (to an extent) architecture is its reinterpretation, even flouting, of convention. In the tomb of Mahu, a whole wall is devoted to a royal visit to the chief of police. It is a cold morning; some policemen warm their hands at a brazier. The police chief is overweight, and struggles to jog behind the royal chariot. Cold mornings and unfit officials do not exist in the ideal world of traditional Egypt; but presumably the Aten created them as well. Akhenaten repeatedly kisses Nefertiti in public, under the life-giving arms of the stylised symbol of the Aten. Deathbed scenes, like weddings, are banned from Pharaonic art, probably because they are rites of passage; Akhenaten and his queen weep in the royal tomb at the bedside of their dead daughter. Such scenes may well reflect the concept of

The artistic revolution wrought by Atenism is emphasised in this almost whimsical scene of the chief of police handing over robbers to Amarna’s vizier (from a tomb-painting).
‘living upon truth’, which the king uses like a slogan. Other conventions, however, are broken apparently for the sake of doing so, as in the way that the male and female postures for the feet of statues are deliberately reversed; but it is hard to be sure of the reason behind this. In all, it looks as if we are faced with a programme of artistic reform which in some way parallels religious changes; and when Atenism falls away, as it does rapidly after the king’s death, much of this artistic impetus withers too. It is hard not to regret its passing, to look fondly at Akhenaten and agree with Breasted’s judgement that the heretic pharaoh was ‘the first individual in history’.

But are ‘individuals’, not to mention geniuses, always likeable? Akhenaten has certainly attracted bitter critics, such as Pendlebury and Redford, but it must be admitted that the grounds for disapproval vary from author to author, are not always convincing, and are sometimes plain anachronistic. Let us therefore creep cautiously around the city of Amarna. The first thing to notice is that the place resembles an armed camp; policemen and soldiers accompany almost every ritual scene on the walls of the Amarna tombs, groveling as they do so. This may have been the case in normal Egyptian capitals, but it is hard to see why Akhenaten pays such attention to this unless he is trying merely to produce a captive audience for his new cult. Worse, indeed sinister, is the fact that while Akhenaten, Nefertiti and their six daughters idly worship the Aten, everybody else seems to be worshipping Akhenaten.

We are reminded of the ambiguity present in the colossal statues from Karnak: king or god? Pharaohs were of course quasi-divine to begin with, but it is chilling to read at the end of the Hymn to the Aten that there is no one who knows the Aten’s heart except his son, Akhenaten. Be that as it may, the revolutionary king certainly inspired devotion among his followers; instead of the traditional Egyptian afterlife among the gods, several of his courtiers prayed that they might spend eternity with him, ‘until the crow turns white, the swan turns black, mountains walk, and rivers flow to their source’. These sentiments, however, should be seen against the fact that almost all of Akhenaten’s followers are new men, quite alien to the aristocracy of the previous reign. If he fell, they would also. This is a technique used by another pharaoh, Queen Hatshepsut, whose authority was also questionable, and it certainly makes us suspicious of the courtiers’ motives. After all, the most unpleasant rulers have attracted stubborn devotion.

Equally thought-provoking is a letter from the king of Assyria, found in the diplomatic archives at Amarna, complaining that the pharaoh had made the foreign king’s envoys stand in the sun all day. Was this unavoidable protocol, or does it show the callousness that can accompany belief in a higher cause? Finally, in this negative catalogue, we need to consider the testimony of later kings. The Restoration Decree of Tutankhamun, which effectively put an end to Atenism and reintroduced the cult of Amun, and the Coronation Edict of Horemheb, which dates from slightly later, paint a picture of closed temples, desolation in the economy, widespread corruption, and military collapse. These texts are likely to be as truthful as the average party-political broadcast, but it is hard to discredit them completely. Atenism, even if ignored in practice by many, must have lead to the closure of major temples and accompanying confusion. If the English monks had returned to power, would Henry VIII’s memory have fared better than Akhenaten’s?

The mention of Henry VIII might seem willful, but it reminds us that in the confusing fragments of Akhenaten’s reign we have failed so far to find a model. He is in danger of always slipping out of focus. Several historians, impressed by the universalism of the Hymn to the Aten and the charm of Akhenaten and Nefertiti’s family life, conclude that he was essentially saintly, the man who invented God, misunderstood by an unready age. Some accounts, admittedly from earlier this century, make him appear almost like a combination of St Francis of Assisi and the founder of the Boy Scout movement. Obviously such icons tarnish easily, and it is hard to reconcile such a picture with the disturbing elements quoted above. In our summing-up, we have to ask ourselves what the com-
The old guard; Akhenaten's father, Amenhotep III - seen here in a youthful fresco painting - had consolidated Egypt's imperial prestige and expansion. Did his son's obsession with the new religion of the Aten lead him dangerously to neglect the conquests of his father?

Amun-Re (left) was the leading god in Egypt's pantheon - comparable with Zeus or Jupiter in ancient Greece and Rome - and the power, riches and influence that his priests had accumulated at their temple complex at Karnak, were the leading target of Akhenaten's zeal.

The go-between; The 'Divine Father' Ay - portrayed in the form of the god Nile. Personal scribe and lieutenant-general to Akhenaten (whose hymn to the Aten was inscribed on his tomb), Ay nevertheless oversaw the restoration of the old gods when Tutankhamen became pharaoh, and after the latter's death succeeded to the royal title himself.

A combination of near-absolute power and an overwhelming sense of religious mission is capable of producing. The result is likely to be unsettling. Even if ancient Egypt is a remote civilisation, whose values we cannot reconstruct completely, it is unlikely to be so alien that we cannot make predictions based on other societies. If this were the case, Egyptology would have insoluble problems. As it happens, there exists a model of sorts in Islamic Egypt, the caliph Al-Hakim, who ruled Egypt from 996 to 1021 AD. Al-Hakim was the son of an emperor known for his magnificence (such acts are hard to follow); he too is influenced by a powerful female, his sister Sayyidat ul-Mulk, and he exhibits a growing religious mania, even within the restraints of Islam. His reign is marked by strange decrees, often arbitrarily repealed, rule by inner promptings, and inhuman treatment of people, and even animals, which stood in the way of his view of the world. This, however, is accompanied by a great sensitivity to abstract ideas, which culminates in the founding of a remarkable scientific institute in Cairo, the Dar-ul-Ilm. Indeed, there is a tendency to forget that sensitivity to art and religion may go hand-in-hand with inhumanity, although our own century has taught us what Mozart- and Beethoven lovers are capable of doing in a day's work, not to mention those who think they are doing God a favour. It is not too fanciful to return to the face of the Karnak colossi, and to wonder what would happen to someone who disagreed with it.

This is as far as we can legitimately go; certainly there are no massacres or atrocities that we can confidently ascribe to Akhenaten. He too is innocent in the absence of testimony to the contrary. Let us therefore leave the doubts to lurk, and concentrate on what can be salvaged from the scraps of information left to us.

There is a strong tendency in the literature to treat Akhenaten in isolation, as if he had walked from the wings on to an empty stage. He must in fact be seen against the cosmopolitanism of his father's age, and the need to govern a far-flung empire. Solar worship, and the growth of universal expressions, are common in the religious writings of the period. Even the Aten himself
The head of Tutankhamen emerging from a lotus flower — the nine-year reign of Akhenaten’s teenage half-brother (originally named Tutankhaten) marked the restoration of the worship of Amun and the end of Akhenaten’s revolution.

makes occasional harmless appearances in the two previous reigns, although only in verbal form. At the very beginning of Akhenaten’s revolution, images and ideas are carried over from the orthodox religion; indeed, it would be surprising if this were not so. Shakespeare and Plato were not born fully-grown, and there is no reason why intellectuals in ancient Egypt should be different. Some writers, taking this into account, go to the other end of the scale, and seek to deny Akhenaten any originality worth considering. This seems equally perverse. The entire period, its art, its religion, its denial of accepted forms bears the imprint of a powerful mind, and it is surely unnecessary to look for this powerful mind elsewhere than with the pharaoh.

In some ways the figure of the pharaoh is the point to which all commentaries return. It has been fashionable to see the Amarna period, and indeed much of Egyptian history, as a conflict between Church and State, between the royal court and the power of the priesthood. Akhenaten himself has been variously seen as trying to restore the monarchy to an imaginary pinnacle, or consciously endeavouring to cut Amun down to size, or possibly as providing a neutral form of religion acceptable to a disparate empire. In some accounts he comes close to being a social democrat, with inclinations towards the Greens. This seems anachronistic. Pharaoh’s power was probably unlimited, at least in theory. He was bound by precedent, moral consensus, and the tendency of almost all forms of government to reduce to a small committee or inner cabinet. But a pharaoh could close temples if he wished, and was rash enough to risk the opprobrium; and a pharaoh with a mission would need no justification outside the mission.

What would an intelligent and educated contemporary have made of the Amarna revolution? Such people certainly existed, and the modern assumption is that any such person would prefer monotheism to a multiplicity of gods. But was a system widely sensed to be a metaphor for an implied monotheism, which functioned according to accepted rules and with rich imagery, automatically worse than a fanatical and austere creed interpreted by one mind? Do tendencies benefit by being taken to their logical extremes? Akhenaten was in effect taking the mythology out of Egyptian religion — in itself an amazing feat of abstract thought, for which he has been given too little credit — but was he necessarily putting something equally satisfying in its place? Was ‘the criminal of Amarna’, as he was later known, a prophet misunderstood by his contemporaries, or was he a visionary who was understood far too well?

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FOR FURTHER READING:
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