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Vision of a Visionary: Summoning the Aten into a Physical Space Through the Use of Architecture

By Alma Lilia Jimenez

From Admired Revolutionary to Misunderstood Visionary

Few great cult leaders are born into greatness, even fewer are born into royalty and ascend to a throne. In Akhenaten’s case, all it took was the death of his brother Thutmose to propel him to the position of crown prince and later pharaoh during the 18th Dynasty. According to Michael Mallison, Akhenaten was the second son of Amenhotep III (one of the more successful Egyptian kings) and his main wife, Queen Tiye. While he may not have been the intended heir, he was nonetheless crowned Amenhotep IV and reigned over
Egypt during a time of peace. Expectations were high for Amenhotep IV, given his father’s accomplishments and reputation for using his “extensive building program to elevate his position in the divine order and to reformulate worship within the city” of Thebes.\(^1\) Amenhotep III’s building program undoubtedly influenced his son’s future goals, namely Akhenaten’s visions of the sun-disk Aten, which encouraged him to dream higher, expand his horizons and spread the one true faith of the Aten.\(^2\)

The concept of the Aten was not a new one, and other pharaohs made references to him during their kingships. Hatshepsut and Thutmose IV both acknowledged the Aten as a means of enhancing their legitimacy as rulers. Thutmose IV battled “with the Aten before him” and campaigned to convert foreigners into servants of the sun-disk.\(^3\) Hatshepsut proudly declared that she was “(also) the Aten who procreated the beings, who bound up the earth and finished its shapes.”\(^4\) Even Amenhotep III promoted the sun deity: his boat’s name was the “Radiance of the Aten,” which he sailed during the opening of Birket Habu.\(^5\)

Norman Davies drew examples to explain the parallels found between the religious practices of the sun-deities of Amun-Ra and the Aten. In some cases, the names could have been used interchangeably until Akhenaten chose to create a solid distinction between the two. In elevating this lesser god, he also chose to promote the idea of monotheism by shutting down sun temples in Thebes. He chose to change his name from Amenhotep IV to Akhenaten, then chose to replace the traditional concept of an


\(^2\) Ibid., 74.


\(^4\) Ibid.

anthropomorphic representation for a god with a simplified image of a sun-disk with rays reaching out.\textsuperscript{6}

\textbf{Constructing a Dream into Reality}

Barry Kemp, who wrote extensively on Amarna, described how the city of Thebes was built on the east bank of the Nile River. The main temple in Karnak (which was dedicated to Amun-Ra) faced the river and ran southeast; Amarna followed a similar design in its layout. In the central city of Amarna, the three places that used the most architectural stone and ran parallel to the river were the Great

Palace, the Great Temple of the Aten and the Small Temple of the Aten. Evidence of an early attempt to build the Great Aten Temple can be found in the hasty construction of the Small Aten Temple. Karnak already had examples of temples being constructed or indications of having been built in the Atenist style by the time Amarna began to take shape, but Akhenaten found even the great constructions at Karnak unsuitable for the expansion of Atenism.

According to Davies, the location of Amarna (which Akhenaten named Akhetaten) was essential to establishing the Cult of Aten, so much so that the new pharaoh was willing to relocate the religious and administrative capital of Egypt there. Akhenaten wanted to make Amarna the “soil where the worship of Aten could flourish in purity, uncontaminated by older traditions and without being overshadowed by a more imposing cult.” His preliminary building trials at Karnak in Thebes were unsuccessful despite his best attempts; Ra’s influence proved too great to overcome. Upon finding his suitably virgin land, Akhenaten had a series of fourteen stelae engraved and placed around the invisible bounds of the city instead of enclosing it within a wall like other religious cities. Within one of the first boundary stelae he proclaimed, “I will make Akhetaten for the Aten my father in this place.”

Davies further states that the construction of the city began almost immediately. In under two years Akhenaten was able to relocate the capital and its people from Thebes to Amarna, even though the city was still incomplete. Tombs were constructed first, bearing images of his idealized vision for the city. While the

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8 Ibid., 84.
10 Ibid., 21.
11 Ibid., 30.
12 Ibid., 20.
new city did share some similarities with the art conceptualization found in the tombs, it was not an exact reproduction. Even so, it demonstrates the level of direct decision-making that Akhenaten had in the construction of his new monument to the Aten. “I will make Akhetaten for the Aten my Father upon the Orient side of Akhetaten, the place which he did enclose for his own self with cliff.”\textsuperscript{13} From the grounds of this new location, when looking towards the eastern mountains, the sun would rise above the horizon line of the desert cliffs.\textsuperscript{14} Aten’s special place, according to Kemp, was the desert, especially at the point of sunrise in the eastern mountains.\textsuperscript{15} Given this knowledge, one could see why Akhenaten would have considered Amarna the ideal location to create his monument to the Aten.

The central city of Amarna was influenced by the south/north orientation of the temples found in Thebes. To the east, there were desert cliffs which contained the royal and private tombs built prior to completion of the central city. By the end of the king’s fourth

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 30.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Kemp, “The City of the Sun-God,” 82.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 94.
\end{itemize}
year as pharaoh, the city contained multiple temples and palaces in addition to the royal and private tombs.\textsuperscript{16} The Great Palace, the Great Aten Temple and the Small Aten Temple were along the Royal Road and within a short distance of the Nile River’s east bank. Within the Great Aten Temple, the Long Temple and a field of offering-tables were at the western end while the Sanctuary was on the eastern side and centered on a longitudinal axis.\textsuperscript{17} According to Ian Shaw the construction “of ramps and steps […] leading to the alters surrounded by parapets” was a distinctive feature of temples to the Aten.\textsuperscript{18}

Of the two Aten temples, the smaller one appears to be constructed as temporary rather than permanent and is not fully and clearly acknowledged in tomb pictures. Kemp explains that the alternative names of the Great Temple of the Aten can actually be applied to both the small and larger temples. “The Great Aten Temple to the north is the ‘House of the Aten’ while the one Small Aten Temple to the south could be the ‘Mansion of the Aten.’”\textsuperscript{19} He supports this claim by pointing out that royal mortuary temples in Thebes generally pointed to the royal tomb. The Small Temple seems to fulfill the function of a mortuary temple since it points to the entrance of the Royal Wadi and Akhenaten’s tomb. “The idea of two temples was thus in the king’s mind from the outset” even if an explanation has not been found as to why the tomb pictures illustrate only one “idealized Aten temple in use.”\textsuperscript{20}

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\textsuperscript{16} De Garis Davis, “Part V.” 20.
\textsuperscript{17} Badawy, “The Symbolism of the Temple at ‘Amarna’,” 80.
\textsuperscript{18} Ian Shaw, “Balustrades, Stairs and Alters in the Cult of the Aten at el-Amarna,” in \textit{The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology} 80 no. 1 (1994): 112.
\textsuperscript{19} Kemp, “The City of the Sun-God,” 84.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
Uniqueness: The Great Temple of the Aten

The Great Temple was one of the earliest buildings constructed at Amarna, consisting of three main structures: The Long Temple, the field of offering-tables and the Sanctuary. The Great Aten Temple was composed of a mud-brick wall measuring 800 by 300 meters that enclosed a nearly empty area. The main entrance was centered on the west side of the structure and flanked by a pair of enormous pylons that measured 22 meters by 5 meters.\textsuperscript{21} Excavations done at the Great Temple suggest that all the temples there were open to the sky.\textsuperscript{22} The tomb scenes support the archaeological findings and confirm the sun-disk temples had that characteristic.\textsuperscript{23} The Sanctuary may have contained the \textit{benben}, even though the tomb art does not support that notion.\textsuperscript{24} Pictures of the temple do display a round-topped stela, accompanied by a statue of the king sitting

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 87.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 96.
\textsuperscript{23} Badawy, “The Symbolism of the Temple at ‘Amarna’,” 80.
\textsuperscript{24} The \textit{benben} is the representative of the primordial mound that arose from the waters of creation in Egyptian myth.
next to it. The Sanctuary also had “arms” coming out of either side at the front of the Sanctuary. It was features like these that Badawy calls “new unknown elements [that] appear for the first time and will never occur again.”

Another unique aspect of the Great Temple was the use of land within its walls; it had “a huge central space almost devoid of features.” No evidence was found to suggest that this area had been intended for gardening or that it served as tree plantation considering there were no “traces of irrigation installations.” Compared to the inside of the Long Temple and the Sanctuary, or other buildings dedicated to sun-god worship, all of which had numerous architectural features, the center of the Great Temple is architecturally deserted. According to Badawy, there were 365 offering-tables within the Long Temple, a little over 900 in the field south of it and 52 inside the Sanctuary.

Overall, Kemp estimates that there may have been as many as 1,700 offering-tables within the Great Temple. Based on claims made by excavators in the 1930s, there may have been another set of offering-tables to the north of the Long Temple, but Kemp argues there is not sufficient information to determine that. Further excavation in that part of the temple is difficult due to a modern Muslim cemetery currently located there. The Long Temple consists of even more offering tables with the second court, serving as the site for important religious function for the Royal Family.

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27 Kemp, “The City of the Sun-God,” 93.
28 Ibid.
30 Kemp, “The City of the Sun-God,” 92.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 81.
Thesis: Coexistence with the Aten

Kemp argued that “conventional temples were designed to sweep the imagination into a straight line from the river frontage to the concealed sanctuary at the back of the temple.” 33 Akhenaten, in his attempts towards making the faith appealing to the people, gave them a direction to focus their acts of devotion towards. 34 The Small Temple and the Sanctuary within it, called the Mansion of the Aten, had a role similar to the royal mortuary temples at Thebes. 35 At the spring equinox, the Small Temple would point to the sunrise and the Royal Tomb at the same time. 36 The general “intention to direct prayers and offerings to the sun was sufficient and outweighed the need for the considerable extra labour required to orient a tomb at other than right-angles.” 37

Akhenaten went to great lengths, both metaphorically and physically, to create a proper monument to the sun-disk Aten. While Amarna as the religious and administrative capital of Egypt may have been short lived, it was Akhenaten’s direct authority over the planning and construction of the city that demonstrates the power he invoked to support his religious beliefs. The tomb art

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33 Ibid., 80.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 84.
36 Ibid., 82.
37 Ibid.
shows a connection between the physical realm and the godly one through the use of offering-tables and offerings to the Aten. To what extent did the architecture of the central city, but more specifically the architecture of the Great Temple of the Aten present the idea that it was the place of the Aten? In other words, given the Amarna architectural style that emerged almost as swiftly as it vanished, was the Great Temple able to summon the Aten from the divine realm and bring him into a sanctified place?

Architecture for the Royals: Leading a Cult by Example

The abundance of offering scenes featuring the Royal Family were unlike the depictions previously found with other pharaohs. According to Kemp, Akhenaten and his kin would stand in front of the offering tables, always facing the Aten yet never looking directly at the sun-disk. In the art, archeologists found a depiction of Akhenaten and Nefertiti standing on top of a platform in front of offering tables. A structure similar to these two tables can be found within the second court of the Long Temple. Worshippers present received the honor of being able to witness the royal family performing rituals at the center of their faith. Their art not only invoked ritual magic by physically inscribing it, but inscribing in

38 Ibid., 81.
39 Ibid., 91.
stone symbolically made it stronger through permanence. After such a divergence from religious tradition, from many gods to only one, one might wonder to what extent the rituals, practices and faith surrounding Aten’s worship involved the populace? Kemp argues that while there are two contradicting theories regarding the inclusiveness of the faith, the idea of a private practice by an exclusive elite seems to be the more realistic assumption. The idea of an exclusive religion is further supported by evidence found outside the central city of Amarna and in the suburbs. Serving as a minor comparison, the “private chapels at the Workmen’s Village probably served ‘ancestor cults’” instead of the Aten’s. Excavations within the Amarna suburbs did yield evidence that the larger population still clung to their polytheistic ideology. The considerable number of offering-tables that were found in the outer court of the Long Temple were likely reserved for privileged citizens of Amarna. It was at the offering-tables outside the second court where Akhenaten’s supporters could receive their own offerings.

40 Ibid., 105.
41 Ibid.
Architecture for the Masses: Following a Cult Via Example

The Sanctuaries found at the Great Temple and Small Temple of the Aten are replicas of one another. Due to their height, the pylons found at the Small Aten Temple Sanctuary resembled mountainous landmarks when viewed from the ground and from far away. These pylons likely served as a deeper connection to the simplified symbolism that Akhenaten endorsed. Kemp suggests that “the Sanctuary stood for the Horizon of the Aten” and from a ground perspective it elevated the eastern cliffs. Therefore, the Sanctuary’s location, to the east side of the Long Temple and the field of offering-tables, was enhanced during the celebration of the progression of the sun.

Offering-tables were a reoccurring scene in all sacred places associated with the Cult of the Aten. In examining written material, pictures and reconstructions of buildings, there is always one reoccurring question: why were there so many offering tables situated inside and outside the structures of the Great Temple? Perhaps the quantities of tables inside the Long Temple are linked to a solar calendar associated with the bissextile year. If so, as Badawy points out, the Egyptian texts make no mention of any association. Kemp, however, offers a more reasonable interpretation which makes sense when considering Akhenaten’s attempts at simplifying the worship of the Aten:

All temple income was classed as ‘offerings’, but only a token was ever presented before the gods. Akhenaten seems to have been following a more literal interpretation of the practice, setting out quantifies that might have approached a more

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44 Kemp, “The City of the Sun-God,” 94.
45 Ibid., 86.
46 Ibid., 94.
47 Ibid.
realistic representation of the full temple income. What you saw was what existed.⁴⁹

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**Architecture for the Divine: The Horizon of the Aten**

The use of symbolism and the performance of magic was essential to religious ideology before, during and after the Amarna period. Badawy believed that the back of the Sanctuary being 1354 cubits may have represented “1354 years of the Gods before the foundation of Memphis.”⁵⁰ Or, Akhenaten may have wanted to portray a feeling of “increased optimism corresponds to the advance of humanitarian sentiment.”⁵¹ A reflection of this idea can be found in the openness and lack of roofing within the temples, and the lack of a city boundary or defensive wall. Davis noted that the Cult of Aten treated the sun-disk as a visible orb, whose nightly journey was not supposed to influence the lives of mortals. It was through this practicality of worship that the “destructive and oppressive action of the sun” was not taken into consideration and the Aten was a presence of benevolence, not fear.⁵² There was a

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⁴⁹ Kemp, “The City of the Sun-God,” 93.
⁵¹ De Garis Davis, “Part I,” 47.
⁵² Ibid.
sense of “gratitude and a sense of dependence [which] are regarded as the natural motives of piety.”

The walls of the Great Temple were not meant to exclude but instead to enclose and designate the area as a sacred place. The original name of the location, Akhetaten, was a clear indication of a link between the physical city and the divine. Mallison points out the composition of the name Akhetaten: it comes from the combination of “akhet” which meant horizon and “Aten” which is self-explanatory. The traditional image of this concept was “represented by an image of the sun cradled between two mountain peaks” much like the hieroglyph. “Aten’s special place was the desert, especially his place of the sunrise in the eastern mountain” which the pylons of the Sanctuary could have represented.

With this knowledge in mind, the layout and architecture of the Great Temple can be understood as an ensemble made up of three sections, each meant to symbolize parts of the surrounding geography. The goal was to simplify how the sun-disk Aten was summoned to the terrestrial plane, which Akhenaten would then consecrate for his worshippers. Kemp supports this idea by stating that to the west, the temple and field of offering-tables represented the city where people would gather to celebrate the sunrise. The gradual incline found within the temples via the use of steps and ramps represented the ascending terrain as one approached the eastern cliffs. The openness of the center represented the desert, which was the Aten’s special place, and to the east the Sanctuary represented the eastern cliffs. Thus, the arrangement and placement of the Great Temple is an example of a divine *mise en abyme*. The architecture of the Great Temple is a microcosm of the geography which, itself, links the terrestrial to the divine.

53 Ibid.
54 Mallison, “The Sacred Landscape,” 75.
55 Kemp, “The City of the Sun-God,” 94.
56 Ibid.
57 The technique of placing a copy of an image within an image, similar to the effect of standing between two mirrors. Thus, Akhenaten has recreated the image of the world within the world.
Bibliography


Author Bio

Alma Lilia Jiménez (commonly known as Soul) graduates from CSUSB in spring 2019, receiving her Bachelor’s degree in Public and Oral History. She was Vice President of CSUSB’s History Club (2018-2019) and a member of the Phi Alpha Theta Honor’s Society. Her academic interests include architectural history, with an emphasis on religious architecture history, conservation, and collections management. Special thanks to Nicolas Roux for all his encouragement and support, without his infectious enthusiasm this paper may not have been completed. Additional thanks to James Martin and the rest of the Atenist group for making long hours of research fun.