

Compare and contrast the architecture of the Great Aten Temple at Amarna and the Temple of Amun-Ra at Karnak. What does the comparison tell us about Akhenaten's religion?

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I hereby declare that the materials contained in this Essay are entirely the product of my own work, that sources used are fully documented and the whole has not been previously submitted for any other purpose.

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Introduction

Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV) during his 17 years on the throne of Egypt personally led what has been described by different scholars as a theological reformation, a destructive heresy or a religious revolution. Apparently, he could be regarded as either an 'effete, limp wristed dreamer, or a fearsome, despotic madman' (Kemp 1991, p.266). Regardless of how positively or negatively we may view Akhenaten and his ideas, the purpose of this Essay is to highlight how these ideas have been reflected in temple architecture, by comparing some key architectural features of the Temple of Amun-Ra at Karnak with the corresponding features of the Great Aten Temple at Akhetaten; and commenting on how these features reflect the underlying ideology specific to each temple. As Kemp says, 'ideology needs architecture for its fullest expression' (Kemp 1991, p.185).

I. Temple Orientation

A. The Temple of Amun-Ra

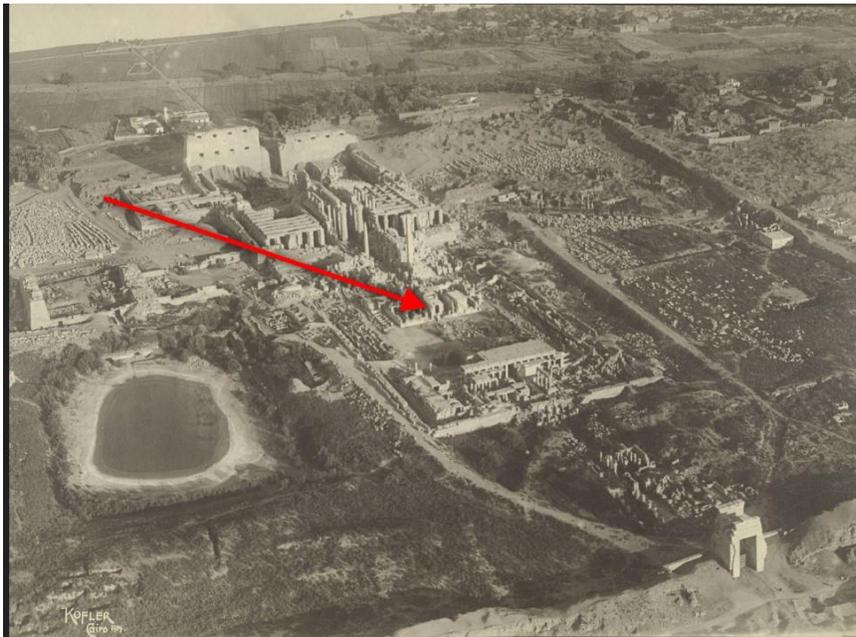


Figure 1 Aerial View 1914 of the Karnak Temple - the Nile westwards to the top (Wikipedia 2018)

At the end of the First Intermediate Period with the success of the rulers of Thebes in reunifying Egypt, Thebes gained considerable importance which lasted throughout the Middle Kingdom. The god Amun by the 12th Dynasty had become the chief god of the area where Thebes was located. He along with his consort the goddess Mut, and their son Khonsu formed the 'Theban Triad' (Armour 2001, p.111). A temple to 'Amun' built by the Intefs was later expanded by Senusret I (see Figure 1 above the arrow pointing to the location of the Middle Kingdom temple). Excavations to the east and southeast of this early temple indicate that it was surrounded by an urban community (Digital Karnak, pp.3-4). With the victory of the Thebans at the end of the Second Intermediate Period, the city gained great importance, and the Temple of Amun underwent major expansions during the New Kingdom. The old city surrounding the temple was evacuated and levelled in the early 18th Dynasty to make room for such expansions (Digital Karnak, p.5).

The original Middle Kingdom temple was located a few hundred meters east of the Nile and was aligned to the winter solstice sunrise; an alignment that may be explained astronomically to coincide with the new year at the time it was first built (circa 2000 BCE). Additions by King Hatshepsut some 500 years later followed the same alignment but this time coincided with midwinter sunrise which was the same orientation she chose for her magnificent temple at Deir El Bahari (Magli 2016, p.176). The veneration of the rising sun at winter solstice was continued when Thutmose III constructed a large rectangular temple (the 'Akhmenu') which included a solar shrine with the inscription: 'we applaud your beautiful face, you biggest of all the Gods, Amun-Ra' (Magli 2016, pp.175 – 178; Balmonte, Shaltout and Fekri 2009, pp.265 - 267).

B. The Great Aten Temple

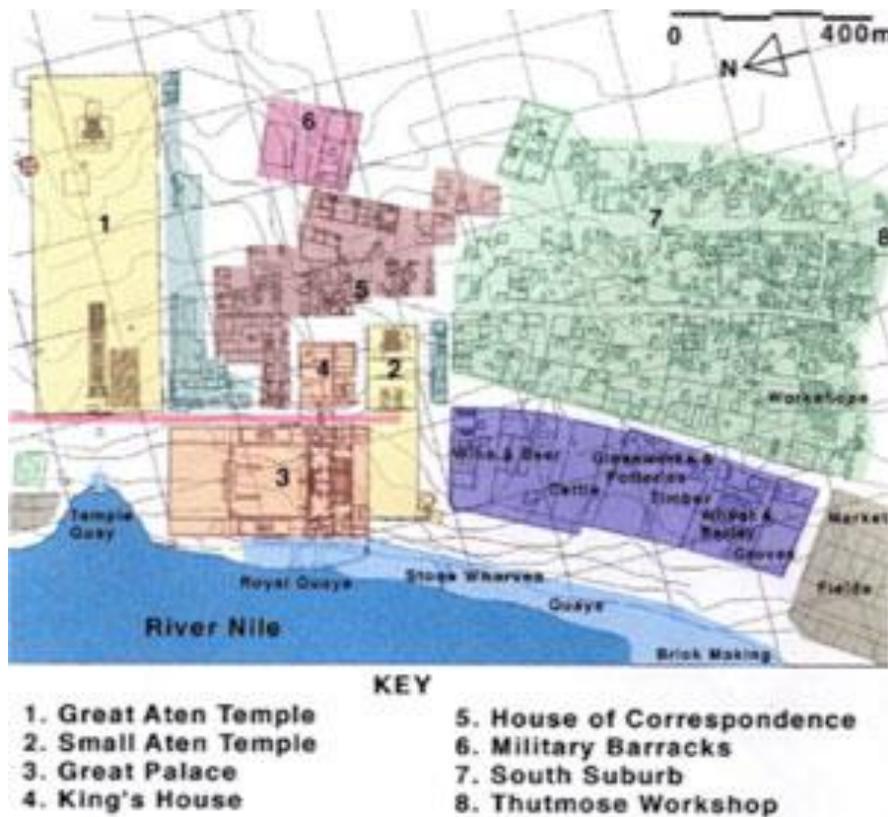


Figure 2 Central City of Amarna and the Great Aten Temple (Brown University – Internet 2018)

The great and small temples are both constructed in the central part of Akhenaten's new city Akhetaten. In Figure 2 above the Great Aten Temple has an east-west orientation so that the Aten would be visible throughout the day, and lies within the central part of the city.

C. Orientation: Comparison and Comments

In terms of orientation the reverence given to the sun, whether as the representation of the anthropomorphic Amun-Ra of the New Kingdom or the abstract Aten of the Amarna period, is emphasized through the solar orientation of both temples. This supports the view that the theology of Akhenaten did not in its essence represent any radical departure from the prevailing theology at the time of his father Amenhotep III, where the cult of a dominant sun god had been in place since

the Old Kingdom, albeit within a more intellectually complex system that developed over millennia and which allowed for anthropomorphic and zoomorphic conceptualization of various gods under that dominant sun god.

According to Kemp, even before Amarna, the sun god Ra represented a unity that encompassed all the gods. Ra being the ‘substance’ of the other gods. Kemp describes this approach by ancient Egyptian theologians as a ‘theological word-game’, designed and developed to reconcile the concept of numerous divinities with the apparent existence of a single divine will. He summarizes this as follows:

“The idea of many gods was held within a mental shell of ultimate singleness whose essence was the power of the sun.”

(Kemp 1991, p.262)

Assmann describes this as ‘cosmogonic monotheism’ (Assmann 2016, p.67).

Akhenaten has attempted to simplify all of this by rejecting the anthropomorphic Amun-Ra and replacing him with the abstract Aten. This is not a departure from the dominance of Ra and the sun cults (Ra, Amun-Ra and Ra-Horakhty), it is a simplification of the whole theology and its encapsulation into *an abstract concept of one creator god*, the source of all life. This attempt was rejected by the establishment. According to Kemp Akhenaten was telling the Egyptians something they already knew, but in a manner that stifled further intellectual developments (Kemp 1991, p.264).

Similarly, Hare states:

“Akhenaten’s monotheism was certainly not a period of increased political or intellectual freedom for New Kingdom Egyptians. If anything, it was rather a tightening and constriction of possible constructions of the divine that went hand in hand with a strict cult of personality centered on Akhenaten.”

(Hare 1999, p.200)

II. Temple Scale, Grandeur and Art

A. The Temple of Amun-Ra

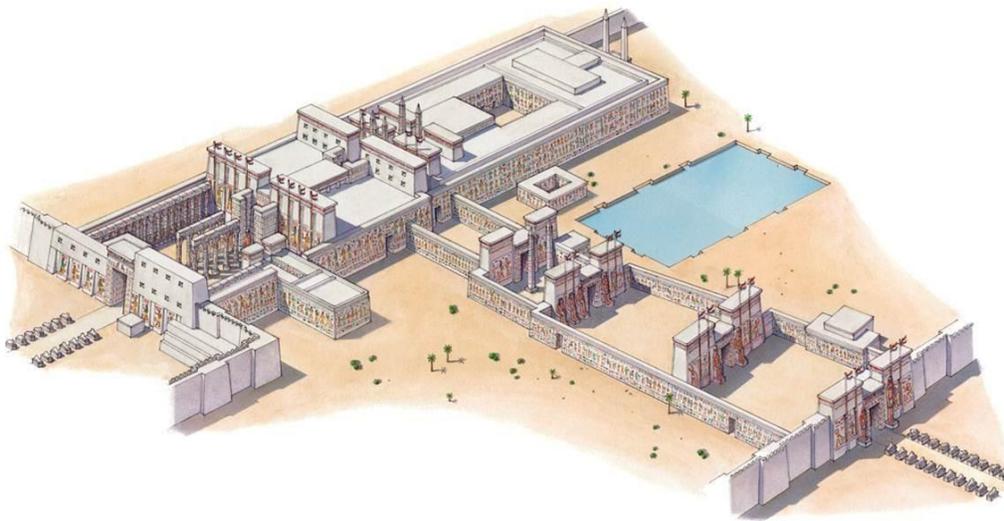


Figure 3 Reconstruction of the Temple of Amun-Ra (pinterest.com – Internet 2018)

The temple precinct of Amun extends over a site roughly 550 x 480 meters (Verner 2013, p.179). In line with standard New Kingdom cult temple design (Snape 1996, p.33), it is characterized at the gate by giant pylons with ‘temple furniture’ including tall monolithic obelisks and colossal

statues of the king. There was extensive use of stone in building New Kingdom temples, including the Temple of Amun-Ra at Karnak, which made it possible to decorate most of the available wall space with carved and painted reliefs (Snape 1996, p.29).

The art of the wall painted reliefs at the Temple of Amun-Ra prior to the additions made by Akhenaten there, was in line with traditional artistic standards and norms. The king is depicted in the idealized form in conformity with standard proportions.



Figure 4 Wall relief of Amenhotep III offering at the Temple of Amun-Ra (egyptlandofeternity.com Internet 2018)

B. The Great Aten Temple

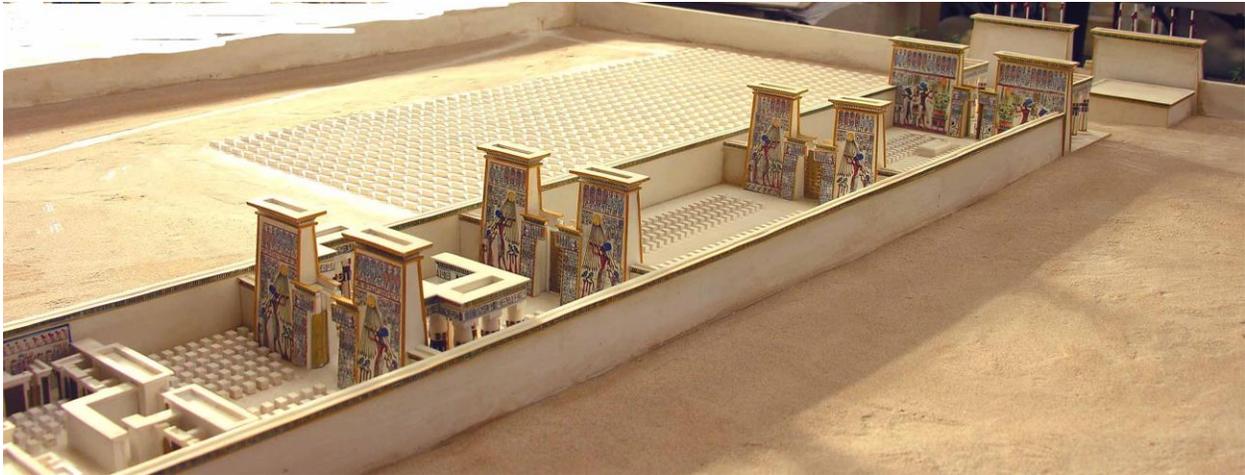


Figure 5 Reconstruction of the Great Aten Temple with the Long Temple in the foreground (whettonandgrosch.co.uk Internet 2018)

The Temple was a vast complex of about 760 x 270 meters. It boasted huge pylons. Unlike traditional New Kingdom temples, it was initially mostly constructed in bricks perhaps with the intention of replacement and enhancement in stone later (Kemp 1991, p.281). Only some sections had walls faced with stone and decorated with scenes in low relief (Verner 2013, p.294).

One huge departure in terms of wall decorations must have been in the new artistic style of the Amarna period. As explained by Aldred, this featured three important new elements: (i) Idiosyncratic distortions in the portrayal of the king, the chief queen and their daughters; (ii) The deliberate exclusion of all gods' images except for the Aten (in the abstract form of a sun disk with rays etc.) and (iii) Point (ii) resulted in the exclusion of most of the traditional subjects of temple decorations (Aldred 1980, p.173).



Figure 6 example of the new Amarna style (people.ucls.uchicago.edu Internet 201

C. Temple Scale, Grandeur and Art: Comparison and Comments

The temples at Karnak that were established and/or expanded during the 18th Dynasty, including the temple of Amun-Ra, reflected the wealth and grandeur of the State and kingship during the New Kingdom. In this ‘mature’ period of the Egyptian State temples played an important visual role in emphasizing to the populace the power of the State/king and the gods, “people in general began to live in the shadow of giant stone constructions” (Kemp 1991, p.185).

In terms of visual effect, we see little difference between the two temples. In that respect at least, Akhenaten’s ideas did not diverge from the established State ideology emphasizing the absolute power of the king and of course his god(s).

Where an important divergence occurs is in the temple art. The banishment and exclusion in the Great Aten Temple of all gods and traditional temple motifs, to be replaced by the Aten in the abstract form being worshiped primarily by Akhenaten and his family.

The distorted image of Akhenaten and his immediate family was ascribed by some scholars to an actual physical deformity or disease. This theory has been dismissed by many prominent scholars. Verner points to a ‘normal’ image of Akhenaten in a statue at Cairo museum which while ‘realistic showing some plumpness does not show physical deformity. Verner leans to the view that these distortions were a deliberate artistic device used to express the difference between the king and his family and ordinary mortals (Verner 2013, p.288). Kemp also sees this ‘surrealistic’ portrayal as a message through art, placing kingship well beyond the normal plane of human experience. According to Kemp, the family scenes were not designed to bring Akhenaten closer to the people, rather they were used ‘perversely’ to set this family completely apart as an independent object of worship:

“The new cult offered no channel for personal piety amongst the people. For them it was not a democratic cult, only a revised and eccentric focus for loyalty.”

(Kemp 1991, p.265)

This idea is taken to a further extreme when Hare quoting Allen and Kemp proposes that Akhenaten regarded himself as the only god in his theology with the Aten as a natural phenomenon (Hare 1999, p.198).

Wilkinson views the status of Akhenaten and Nefertiti and their daughters as a ‘holy family’ replacing the traditional groupings of deities (Wilkinson 2010, 294). the replacement of the traditional iconography of the anthropomorphic deity standing on equal footing with king, with

the Aten in primary position shining its rays on the royal family, this image allows the focus to be on the family itself (size wise much bigger) with the king being the living materialization of the Aten (McArthur 2013, p.41). Residents of the city kept statues and images of the royal family in their household shrines (Wilkinson 2010, p.295).

III. Internal Temple Structure

A. The Temple of Amun-Ra

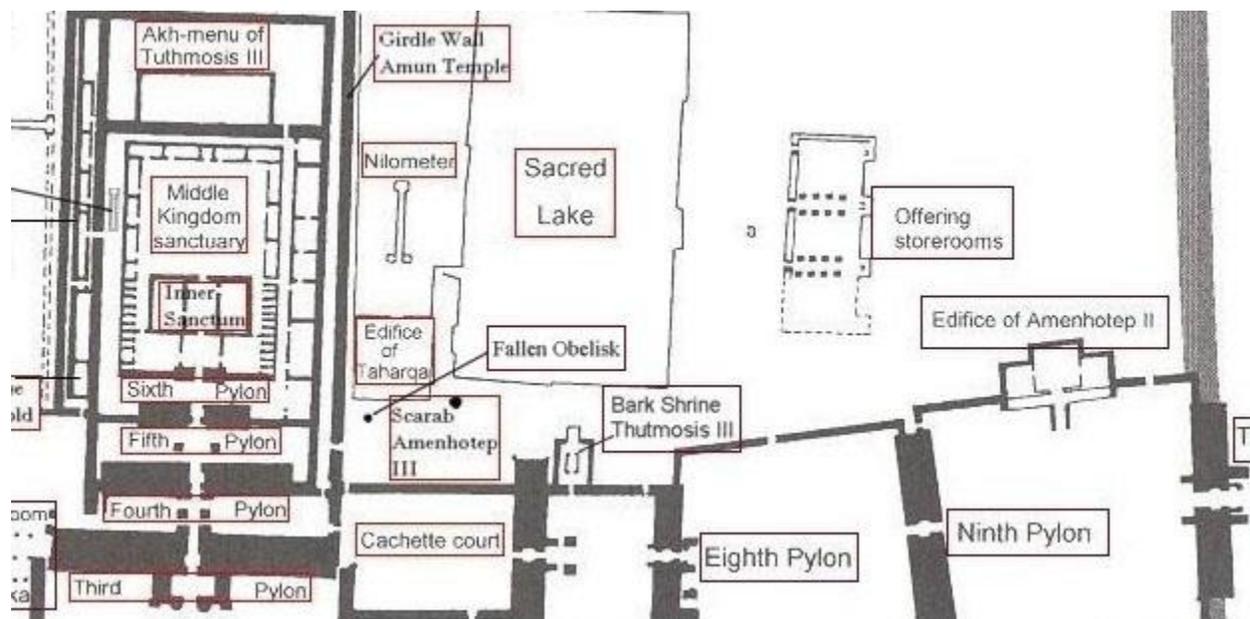


Figure 7 Plan View of part of the Karnak Temple Complex prior to Amarna (extracted from Sudesh, academia.edu 2017, p.15)

Figure 7 above is a plan of the Amun precinct immediately prior to the Amarna period (excluding the much later edifice of Taharqa). The 3rd pylon was built by Amenhotep III. The 4th and 5th pylons were built by Thutmose I. The 6th pylon was built by Thutmose III. If we follow Verner's description of temple functionality during the New Kingdom (Verner 2013, pp. 5-12), as we move

into the temple interior through these gates we are moving from the outer courtyard into the hall of the barque (where the statue of the god (the 'noble god')) is kept in a wooden casket to be carried by priests and paraded in religious processions during special festivals.

We then move into a covered hypostyle hall and then at the end of this journey to inner sanctuary and the Shrine where the statue of the god (the 'holy') is kept submerged in darkness.

It is very much a journey from the sunlight outside in the courtyard into the dim and dark recesses of the temple culminating for the king (or his representatives who have been initiated into the 'mysteries') meets the god in the Shrine, the place where 'Heaven met the Earth' (Verner 2013, p.14). Kemp described the integration of king and temple cult of Amun as a process that 'enveloped the person of the king in an elaborate cocoon of mystery and pageant' (Kemp 1991, p.217). To add to this sense of mystery, apart from the dimming light, the floors of each successive room was higher and the ceiling lower (Verner, 2013 p.10) so the person embarking on this spiritual journey is moving more and more into a darker and more intimate place.

Offerings would be made to the principal god by priests three times a day in the 'offering hall' (Verner 2013, p.9). Such daily rituals would be performed within the Temple of Amun-Ra within the covered area after the 6th pylon. The sacred lake symbolizing the primordial waters from which the creator god emerged, also had an important function as it the place where priests went through their daily purification rituals.

B. The Great Aten Temple

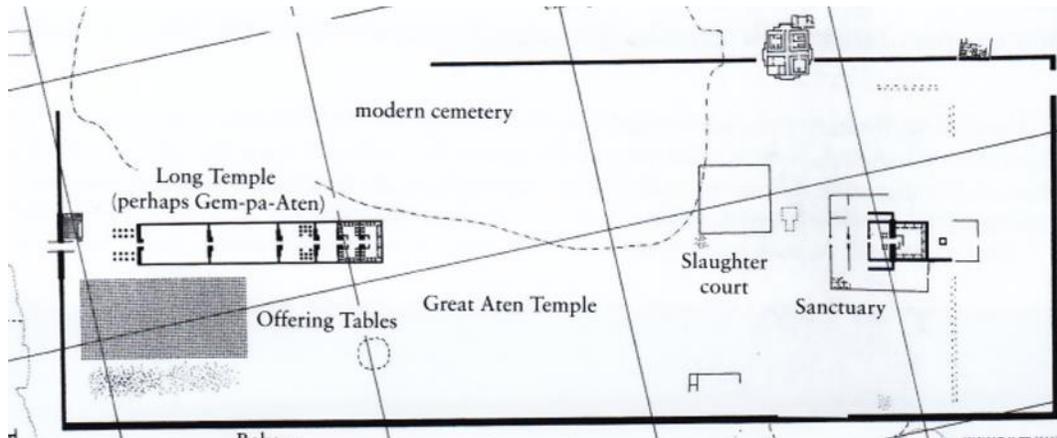


Figure 8 Plan of the Great Aten Temple (Kemp, Hill, Hodgkinson, Shepersen 2012, p.2)

The temple precinct is huge but mostly unbuilt space. There is no sacred lake or pool for ritual purification of priests.

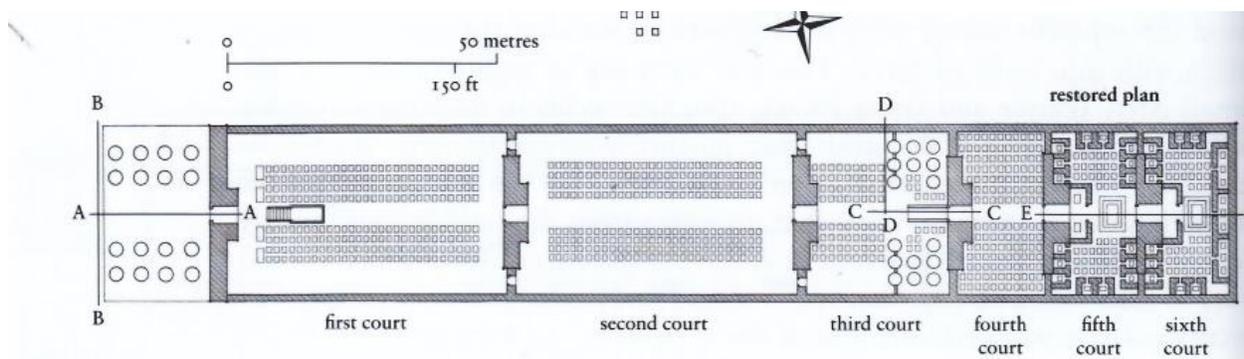


Figure 9 Plan of the Long Temple (re-drawn by B. Kemp, civilization.org.uk Internet 2018)

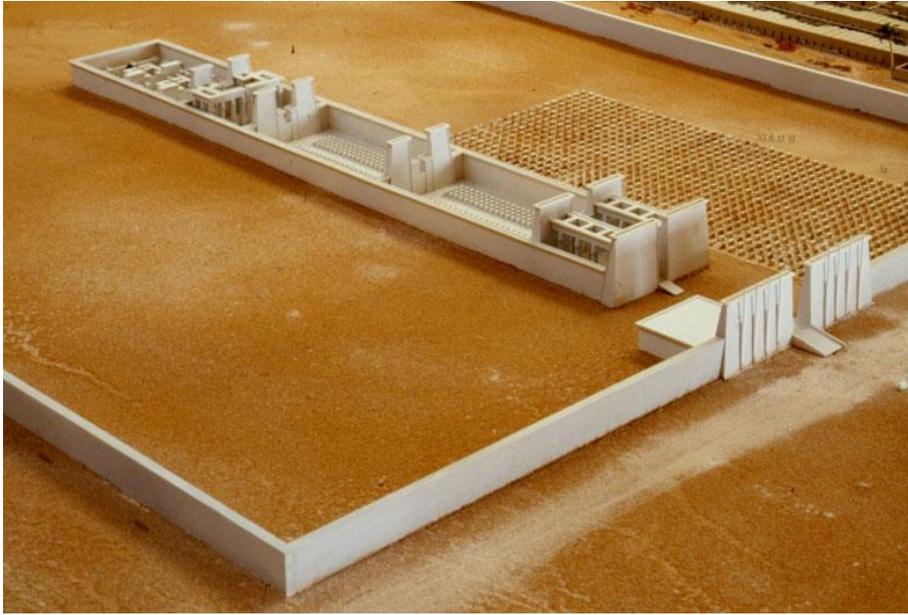


Figure 10 Long Temple and offering tables reconstruction (amarnaproject.com Internet 2018)

The Long Temple features a series of open courts. It does not have covered chambers and halls. The temple included a symbol of the *benben* solar cult and apart from offering tables outside the Long Temple it included within its walls about 730 regularly arranged altars half for Upper Egypt and half for Lower Egypt representing each day of the year for both lands (Verner 2013, pp.294 – 295).

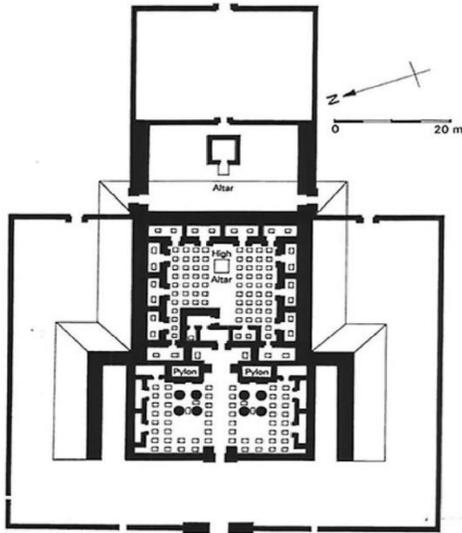


Figure 11 Plan of the Sanctuary (what-when-how Internet 2018)



Figure 12 the Sanctuary at the rear of the Great Aten Temple (amarnaproject.com Internet 2018)

The Sanctuary on the eastern end had an open courtyard in which statues of Akhenaten and Nefertiti were placed (Verner 2013, p.294) with a large altar in the middle and again rows and rows of open air offering tables (Kemp 1991, p.281).

C. Internal Temple Structure: Comparison and Comments

Here we can identify major differences. In the Temple of Amun-Ra we move from light to mysteries and sacred darkness. The ‘holy’ god is in a dark shrine accessible only to the king or those who are initiated into the mysteries. By contrast the Long Temple and the Sanctuary are open to the sun. The architecture is geared to open air worship under the rays of the sun. The Aten is visible to all. Images from some Amarna tombs may shed some ‘light’ on the worship rituals within the Great Aten Temple:

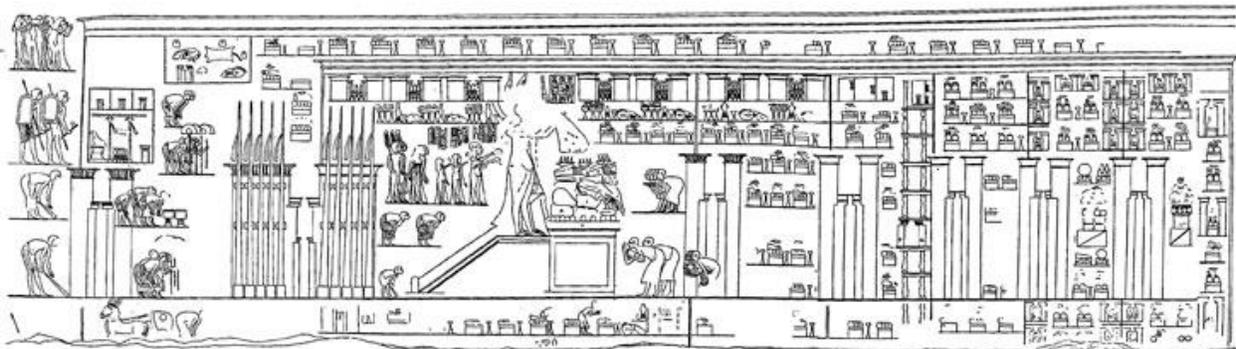


Figure 13 image from the tomb of Panehsy (commons.wikimedia.org Internet 2018)

Panehsy was the chief servitor at the Great Aten Temple and had a tomb in the northern tombs at Akhetaten (Amarna Tomb 6). The image in Figure 13 above shows the king standing on a raised platform making offerings. Kemp proposes that it is possible that the temples within the Great Aten Temple were constructed on raised platforms (of gypsum concrete) so that the king’s acts of worship would be widely visible (Kemp 1991, p.282). This would confirm the theory discussed in Section II above that Akhenaten conceived of himself and his immediate ‘holy’ family as the sole conduit between humanity and the Aten.

The banishment of all other deities in Akhenaten's theology, includes the removal of all traditional closed chambers from his temples. There is no 'Hall of the Barque', there is no Shrine and there is no statue of the Aten.

Religious processions had an important political value in the Amun temple cult when the god's image was carried out in its barque within the populace and could even perform a miracle (Kemp 1991, 204). With the removal of the 'Hall of the Barque' and the 'noble god', Akhenaten replaced this ritual procession with the First Family's procession within the city accompanied by their bodyguards, which Kemp views as analogous to the image of motorcades and the public 'leader' in modern society (Kemp 1991, p.183 and p.276).

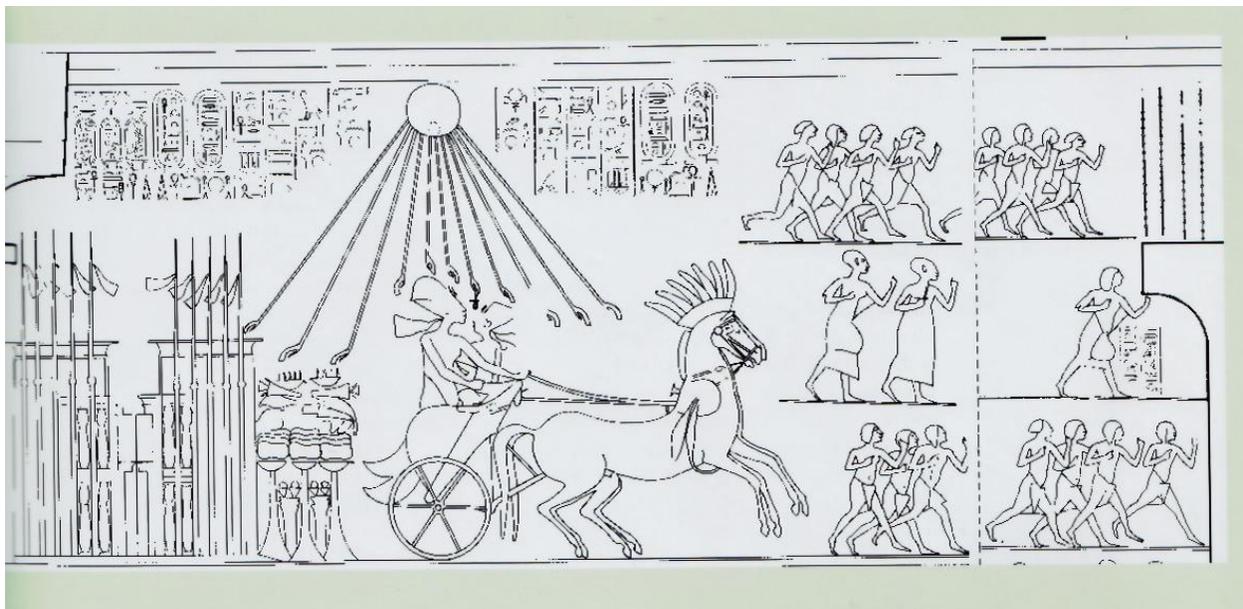


Figure 14 Akhenaten and Nefertiti Chariot ride through the city (civilization.org.uk Internet 2018).

We can see the royal procession in Figure 14 above from the tomb of Akhenaten's chief of police (the 'Medjay') Mahu at the southern tombs (Amarna Tomb 9):

IV. Conclusion

I will try here to summarize my conclusions. The comparison between some key architectural features has illustrated some of the main concepts in Akhenaten's theology. It has shown that the new theology was not in essence a radical departure from the traditional Egyptian cosmogony where there was always an initial creator god, and which was identified with the sun god Ra from the Old Kingdom onwards, taking various form, Amun-Ra and Ra-Horakhty etc. The radical departure lay in two basic aspects. The simplification and abstraction of the concept of this creator god, perhaps even tending towards its identification with a natural phenomenon rather than a god in an anthropomorphic image (with all that this entails in terms of man not being in the image of god and vice versa) *to the exclusion of all other possible intellectual constructs*. The second aspect is Akhenaten's view of his and his family's role in his theology. He seems to have elevated himself and his family to some higher 'divine' level, where they alone were the recipients of the absolute 'Truth' emanating from the Aten. Through both aspects he ushered in a regime of intolerance for all other ideas in Egyptian theology as it has been developed by the priesthood over millennia.

Assmann confirms that it was indeed not the solar cult of the Amarna period *per se* that was abhorrent to Egyptians, rather it was the spirit of intolerance of this new theology (Assmann 1995, Kindle location 2594). The ancients attempted to destroy religious 'intolerance' when they obliterated all references to Akhenaten and his successors up to and including Ay from their history. They were not successful, Akhenaten's concept of one absolute 'Truth' to the exclusion of all other 'truths' has unfortunately survived in many forms up to this day.

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C. Figures

Figure 1 :
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karnak>

Figure2 :https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute/courses/templesandtombs/8518.html

Figure 3 :
<https://i.pinimg.com/originals/6c/44/74/6c44747a82926b651e80c31d59ec42f5.jpg>

Figure 4 :
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Figure 5 :
<http://www.whettonandgrosch.co.uk/projects/great-aten-temple/>

Figure 6 :

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Figure 7 :

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Figure 8 :

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Figure 9 :

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Figure 10 :

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Figure 12 :

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Figure 13 :

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Figure 14 :

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