Tell el-Amarna

from Collins English Dictionary

1 a group of ruins and rock tombs in Upper Egypt, on the Nile below Asyut: site of the capital of Amenhotep IV, built about 1375 BC; excavated from 1891 onwards

Summary Article: Amarna

From The Encyclopedia of Ancient History

Amarna (also known as El-Amarna and Tell el-Amarna) is the modern name given to the ancient Egyptian city of Akhetaten "Horizon of the sun disk," built by the New Kingdom king Akhenaten (ca. 1352–1336 BCE) in Middle Egypt (see Akhenaten (Amenhotep)). The city was founded in the fifth year of Akhenaten's reign as a royal residence and contained at least four palace structures with associated temples, institutions, workshops, storage facilities, necropoleis, other outlying ritual structures, and areas of housing constructed by the Egyptians who followed the king and court to the site. The city was occupied for just over fifteen years, with the court moving away from the site early in the reign of Tutankhamun. "Amarna" is also used as an adjective to describe the period during which Akhenaten and his immediate successors ruled Egypt, as well as the distinctive religious beliefs and art deriving from that time.

Akhenaten came to the throne as Amenhotep IV and changed his name after a few years on the throne to express his devotion to the visible sun disk (the Aten), which he raised to the position of supreme god, increasingly excluding the traditional Egyptian pantheon. The major royal centers of the New Kingdom, Memphis and Thebes (modern Luxor; see New Kingdom, Egypt; Memphis, Pharaonic; Thebes, East) were closely associated with the old state gods Ptah and Amun, respectively (see Amun-Re and the decision to build a new royal center at Amarna was closely tied to Akhenaten's stated aim of finding a place that had not previously been sacred to any other god.

The site chosen by Akhenaten is on the east bank of the river, where a broad desert bay is enclosed by the cliffs of the high desert. Into these cliffs Akhenaten carved a number of boundary stelae, inscribed with texts describing his intentions in founding the city, its future role as a royal and religious center, and key structures within it (Murnane and van Siclen 1993). The texts also describe Akhenaten's arrival in a golden chariot for the foundation ceremony of the town (Murnane and van Siclen 1993: 36); the location of the foundation ceremony is unknown, although a location in the Central City seems likely.

The plain on which the city was constructed was desert, and there was probably only a very narrow strip of cultivable land along the river edge. The desert location has resulted in excellent preservation of the site, as only small sections of the ancient city have been built over or cultivated, but in ancient times provisioning the settlement must have proved difficult, as all foodstuffs, as well as the majority of building materials, must have been brought in from the plain across the river or further afield.

Key royal elements of the city are laid out along a notional line extending from the Central City to the north and south (Kemp and Garfi 1993: 48). The so-called "Royal Road" links the North Riverside Palace and the North Palace, near the cliffs at the north end of the site, with the temples and palaces of the images from: The ruins of the North Palace at Amarna. The city... in Encyclopedia of African History

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Central City (Kemp 1989: 276–9). Although the religious site at Kom el-Nana to the south of the city is also located according to this alignment, the Royal Road does not extend to the south. The location of the Central City seems to have been dictated by a secondary alignment to the Royal Wadi, a valley leading from the high desert in which Akhenaten's tomb was cut. Aldred (1976: 184) suggested that the visible notch in the cliffs at the entrance to this valley may have been viewed as a physical manifestation of the "horizon" hieroglyph, which shows the sun disk rising in a valley between two mountains.

The Central City is made up of a number of state buildings (Pendlebury 1951). There are two temples: the Great Aten Temple, an enormous rectangular enclosure over 700 m in length, which contained two separate cult buildings alongside other structures; and the Small Aten Temple. In line with Akhenaten's religious changes these temples are hypaethral, and even door lintels are split so that the cult participant did not lose contact with the rays of the sun. Altars and offering tables are the focus of the structures, as cult practice seems to have focused on intoning hymns and making food offerings to the god. Scenes of Akhenaten making offerings in the temples are found in some of the nobles' tombs at the site (Davies 1903-8–8).

There are two palatial structures in the Central City, in addition to the two palaces at the north end of the site. The Great Palace is an enormous structure, largely built of stone rather than the mud brick from which the other palaces are constructed. The structure features at least one massive courtyard lined with monumental statuary and columned halls of a size unparalleled in the city and clearly intended to overawe. The second palace, the King's House, is a much smaller mud-brick structure, with gardens and numerous storage rooms. The palace building itself is less formal in its organization and was perhaps used for administration as well as providing a more human-scaled residence for the king. These two palaces were linked by a bridge across the Royal Road, the king moving like the sun from east to west above the heads of those on the thoroughfare below.

To the east of the Royal Road, between and behind the temples and palaces, are administrative and institutional structures, including magazine buildings for storage and production and settings for bureaucratic activities. The Records Office, directly east of the King's House, was where the famous Amarna letters were found, clay tablets bearing the diplomatic correspondence of Egyptian kings with Near Eastern rulers in cuneiform scripts (Pendlebury 1951). The police and military quarters were situated further to the east.

The courtiers and other individuals who followed the king and his family to Amarna mainly lived in suburbs to the north and south of the Central City. There is a fairly sharp distinction between the carefully planned royal center and related outlying structures and the residential suburbs, which do not show evidence of significant planning restrictions. The houses range significantly in size and complexity, with the largest set in extensive grounds with private wells, gardens, and ancillary buildings, but almost all follow the tripartite layout characteristic of pharaonic houses (see Houses, Housing, Household Formation, Pharaonic Egypt); small houses often cluster between and around larger ones. At its peak the population is estimated to have numbered 20–50,000 (Kemp 1989: 306).

Akhenaten's tomb was constructed in the Royal Wadi to the east of the site. The tomb fits into the pattern of 18th Dynasty royal tombs (see Valley of the Kings, although its proportions are particularly large and it is unfinished. The decoration of the tomb breaks with tradition, being focused on scenes of funerary ritual, death, and mourning alongside a representation of temple ritual. The tomb seems to
have been used for the burials of at least three individuals, Akhenaten, his mother, Queen Tiye, and his second daughter, Meketaten (Martin 1989). Other unfinished tombs are also found in the Royal Wadi.

Tombs for Akhenaten's most important officials were cut into the cliffs surrounding the city in two groups, one to the north of the site and one further south (Davies 1903-8–8). These tombs vary in size, design, and extent of decoration; all seem to be unfinished. The decoration is dominated by scenes showing the king and his family in their palaces, worshippers in the temples, and traveling around the city in chariots. A particularly prominent scene found in many of the decorated tombs shows the king at a "Window of Appearance" in a palatial structure, passing gifts to the loyal tomb owner: this ceremony seems to have been the highlight of many careers. The cemeteries of the ordinary people of Amarna have only been discovered in the last decade and are the focus of ongoing excavations by Barry Kemp and his team (Amarna project website).

Amarna has been central to the study of settlements in Egyptology, a subject that has been dogged by the poor preservation of the majority of town sites. Amarna is the most extensively excavated Egyptian town site, other than state-constructed planned settlements, primarily as a result of work by the Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft (1911–14) and Egypt Exploration Society (1921–36, 1977–present), which have exposed much of the plan of the ancient settlement. Because it was inhabited for only a short time—fifteen to twenty years—there were usually only minor changes to the layout of buildings and chronological as well as geographical inter-relationships between buildings are therefore usually clear. Questions as to how representative of normal Egyptian practice the urbanism of Akhenaten's reign is persist, but the majority of research points to continuity in settlement planning, domestic architecture, and institutional buildings. Clear differences are limited to religious architecture and the low density of the settlement as a result of a short occupation period.

**SEE ALSO:**
Cities, Pharaonic Egypt; Elephantine, Pharaonic; Palaces, Pharaonic Egypt; Temples, Pharaonic Egypt

**References and Suggested Readings**


Kate Spence

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