

Ancient Egypt: Amarna Period
The British Museum

The Amarna period comprises the reigns of Akhenaten, Smenkhkare, Tutankhamun and Ay. The period is named after the capital city founded by Akhenaten, son of Amenhotep III. Akhenaten ascended the throne as Amenhotep IV, but changed his name when he rejected traditional religion in favour of the worship of the Aten or sun disc. He closed all the temples to other gods and obliterated their names from monuments.

Akhenaten was succeeded by the short-lived Smenkhkare, then the famous Tutankhamun. Rejecting Akhenaten's religious beliefs, Tutankhamun restored the traditional gods and abandoned Tell el-Amarna. He died young and was succeeded by an elderly courtier, Ay. Subsequent kings did their best to remove all traces of the period from the record and the names of the Amarna period kings are not found on 'kinglists', various ancient texts that list the names and other details of the kings of Egypt in chronological order.

The art of the Amarna period is very distinctive. The royal family were depicted with elongated heads, long necks and narrow chests. They generally had spindly limbs, but heavy hips and thighs, with a pronounced paunch. Literary developments of the period include a revision of the written script to more closely reflect the spoken language of the time, and the replacement of funerary texts with a hymn to the Aten.