

# THE AMARNIAN BAS-RELIEF IN THE CONTEXT OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ART

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## *Le base-relief amarnien dans le context de l'art égyptien antique*

**Résumé** *Considérée la première période monothéiste de l'histoire des religions, l'époque amarnienne est tout à fait particulière dans l'évolution de la société égyptienne, dans laquelle ont eu lieu des échanges importants dans tous les domaines: religieux, politique, social et artistique. Dans l'art, le pharaon Akhenaton (Amenhotep le IV<sup>ème</sup>) a introduit un nouveau type d'esthétique, qui mettait l'accent sur le manque d'idéalisation, ses difformités physiques constituant le nouveau idéal de la beauté humaine. En ce qui concerne le bas-relief et la peinture, ces deux domaines artistiques ont représenté un seul type d'art dans l'Égypte. Dans le Nouveau Royaume (époque qui finit une fois avec l'ère amarnienne), la peinture avait déjà commencé d'être un type d'art indépendant. Par conséquent, le bas-relief amarnien est devenu un art individuel ou un art en soi-même. Le relief en creux est, par exemple, une technique innovatrice dans le Nouveau Royaume. Par rapport à la vision artistique, en comparaison avec l'aspect des représentations jusqu'à ce moment là, dans l'époque amarnienne la scène entière est rendue comme une composition complexe, celle-ci représentant une vision très moderne. La perspective hiérarchique continue, compte tenu du fait que jamais jusqu'alors le culte de la personnalité n'a pas connu un niveau si haut. Le disque solaire*

*abstrait et géométrique a remplacé les représentations zoomorphes; de plus, le lyrisme, le sentiment de l'espace et le naturel des gestes font leur apparition. Dans l'ensemble, on parle d'un type d'art très modern, aussi comme l'est d'ailleurs toute l'époque amarnienne, qui, en fait, dépasse son époque.*

**Mots clés** *eneada, ankh, uraeus, sistrum, stelas*

**Rezumat** *Fiind considerată prima perioadă monoteistă din istoria religiilor, perioada amarniană este un moment special în evoluția societății egiptene – în care au avut loc schimbări importante în toate domeniile: religios, politic, social și artistic. În artă, faraonul Akhenaton (Amenhotep IV) a introdus un nou tip de estetică, cerând lipsa idealizării, deformările sale fizice constituind noul ideal de frumusețe umană. În ceea ce privește basorelieful și pictura, aceste două domenii artistice au constituit un singur tip de artă în Egipt. În Regatul Nou (perioadă care se încheie cu era amarniană), pictura începuse a fi deja un tip independent de artă. Prin urmare, basorelieful amarnian poate fi acum discutat ca un tip individual de artă, ca o artă în sine. O tehnică inovatoare în Regatul Nou este relieful en creux. În ceea ce privește viziunea artistică, în comparație cu aspectul reprezentărilor de până la acel moment, în perioada amarniană întreaga scenă este redată ca o întreagă compoziție, aceasta fiind o viziune foarte modernă. Continuă perspectiva ierarhică, ținând cont de faptul că niciodată până atunci cultul personalității nu a atins un nivel atât de înalt. Discul solar abstract și geometric a înlocuit reprezentările zoomorfe; în plus, apar lirismul, sentimentul de spațiu și naturalețea gesturilor. În ansamblu, vorbim despre un tip foarte modern de artă, la fel cum foarte modernă este întreaga epoca amarniană care, fără doar și poate, depășește timpul ei.*

**Cuvinte cheie** *eneada, ankh, uraeus, sistrum, stelas*

## The beginning of atomism

### The deformed pharaoh appears

As far as the royal family of Amenhotep IV is concerned, nothing is sure. There is nothing confirmed about the immediate succession of Amenhotep IV or about family relations: the last three daughters - among the six - were not his own, while the only male heirs - Smenkhkare and Tuthankamon, legitimized the ascension to the throne by their marriage with the first daughters - it is not known exactly what degree of relationship they had with the pharaoh, they were probably cousins or nephews. (Grimal, 1988: 308) The IX-th pharaoh of the XVIII-th dynasty, Amenhotep III, had many descendants, but he died, after a reign of 38 years. Probably Amenhotep III ascended to the throne at a very early age, because his father died when he was 28. In the II<sup>nd</sup> year of reign, Amenhotep III was already married to Tiye - the daughter of Yuya and Tuya. (Turner, 1996: 781) The throne of Egypt was occupied by Amenhotep IV (Neferkheperurewaenre). In the past, researchers agreed on a co-regency period of the two, but there is nothing to prove this assumption, consequently nowadays many Egyptologists believe that Amenhotep III and his son have never reigned together. (Vandenberg, 1988: 148-149) This name (Neferkheperurewaenre) taken by the pharaoh when he ascended to the throne means "Re's transformations are perfect" (Neferkheperure), and also "The Only One of Re". (Waenre) (Grimal, 1988: 291) He was a strange young man, considered cursed, obviously deformed: his skull was elongated, visible prognathism, a long neck, narrow face and shoulders, long and thin fingers, a large basin, protruding abdomen, round thighs, delicate feet and arms and short body.

In archeology and history, genetics and biology play an important role; many genetic diseases can be identified at important individuals, thus explaining their moral and physiologic attributes. The body of Amenhotep IV was not found, consequently all theories referring to the possible reasons for such an unnatural body are speculations, until his body will be discovered. These hypotheses are based on the analysis of the mummy of Tutankhamen and on the representations from that time.

### **Continuing tradition**

In the first months of reign, Amenhotep IV had a traditional building program: he continued work at the Gate of the IInd Pillar of Karnak, which remained unfinished at his father's death; he completed the decoration of the Temple of Amenhotep III of Soleb. But the building from Karnak made for Aton proves the desire for renewal, together with a certain haste reflected in the use of certain smaller sandstone blocks, easier to work for people who were not accustomed to hard work. They were called "talatat" by the Egyptologist H. Chevrier (respecting local tradition), their decoration style is realist and frust, their small size made them to be used later by Horemheb in his own buildings (especially for the IX<sup>th</sup> Pillar). (Grimal, 1988: 292)

### **The beginning of change**

Once the second year of reign ended and the third year started, there is a change in the iconography of the new god, introduced in order to coincide with the celebration of the jubilee. The former head of the falcon disappears, being replaced only by the ubiquitous solar disk Aton who had his rays over the pharaoh and his family. The name and the title of the new god are very long and enclosed in two vertical cartridges (both are similar to those used to represent the name of the pharaoh), placed in pairs on both

sides of the disk. Writing the name of the god in two cartridges – similar to those of the pharaoh – suggests the idea that the power of Aton is imperial, in the absence of old gods. This fact is important in foreign territories, dominated by Egypt. (Aldred, 1968: 66) This is named “The Great Jubilant Alive Disk, master of the sky and earth, that rules in (the name of the temple)”. (Redford, 1987: 173)

At the jubilee celebration, Amenhotep IV appears together with Nefertiti and their first daughter, Meritaten; before the IV-th year, their two daughters are born, Meketaten (who will die probably giving birth to the child of Amenhotep IV) and Ankhesenpaaten (who will later marry Tuthankamon; according to some researchers, she had also had a son, Ankhesenpaaton-Tashery, with the pharaoh). In the new capital, the following three daughters are born: Neferneferuaton, Neferneferure and Setepenre; the last two daughters are said to be the daughters of Nefertiti and one of his lovers. (Rachett, 1997: 208)

### **Amenhotep IV's reform (Akhenaten)**

#### **Religious novelties**

During the Amarnian period, the novelty of Akhenaten's religious philosophy was that of ignoring the traditional cult of death, which was connected to the increased concern for this life, in the detriment of that beyond. (Croix, Tansey, 1996: 95) After the XVIII<sup>th</sup> dynasty, Egypt will never return to the worship of old gods, a new worship will appear, that of Osiris – popular religion which will prepare the adoption of Christianity. Because the new pharaoh wanted to give the country a new divinity, he chose Aton among all gods – because he did not have a zoomorphic or anthropomorphic image, but was represented only by a disk – and he transfer him all the divine attributes patronized by Amon-Re. (Kernbach, 1995: 28) Aton is a common noun usually translated by

“disk”, but in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> dynasty, its representation is convex, globular, actually representing the sphere, the orb of the Sun. (Turner, 1996: 782) The first inscription of Amenhotep IV about Re – “Long live Re-Harakhty who is happy in his horizon in his name Shu that is Aton” (*Ibidem*) – clearly shows that it was not glorified the materiality of the disk in the sky, but the energy of the Sun, the force which warms earth and brings it back to life. In the eneads from Heliopolis, Shu is a god with the face of a man, an ancient cosmic divinity, god of the air that sometimes carries the sky and the Sun. He is the son of Atum and husband of the goddess Tefnut, whom he is sometimes identified with. (Daniel, 1985: 277) We have to underline that the pharaoh did not know the laws of biology, everything was based on observation [...] Love for nature is one of the great ideas of the Amarnian religion, because nature has a piece of the creator in all its creatures. Just appears a new hierarchy for the requirements of ritual practices, led by a “High Priest”, who had the title of “Great Prophet”, “Ur-mau”, the greatest of the seers. (Rachett, 1997: 56) Among his duties, there was the management of the solar cult, but in all representations, he appears subordinated to the pharaoh. He wore a censer and a vessel for libation; he only had the duty to cense before the pharaoh and to give him everything that was required for the cult. (Redford, 1987: 180) The cult was just a simplification of traditional practices, many of those having legendary or magical origins had been abandoned. In a world in which religion was funeral, based on Doomsday, Atonism excluded all myth, magic, witchcraft. Akhenaten rejected the existence of a hell, with demons, ghosts, spirits, monsters, one should be protected from these by magic spells. (Freud, 1991: 186) Mythological symbolism is removed, the only act which is infinitely repeated in representations is that of bringing offerings to the god (the most known term for this was “sm3’ ’3bt” – “to make the big sacrifice”): “oxen, cattle, wine, incense, all pure and fine things and all vegetables”. (Redford,

1987: 180) They also offered flowers to the god, more poetically than in other religions. Prayers and hymns accompanied these ceremonies. (Rachett, 1997: 56) The main altar of the temple was for the royal family, while the numerous secondary altars were used by one man or one group of people to bring offerings to the god and to the royal family. The temple itself had neither roof nor representations of the god, except for the Sun that spread its rays only above the royal family. The rays end with small hands – the only concession to anthropomorphism (Redford, 1987: 173), some of these even reach the mouth only of the king and queen, the “ankh” is located at the end, being the Egyptian symbol of life. Represented by an ansata cross, ideogram which was originally a sandal strap, “ankh” was the symbol of life. Previous to the Amarnian period, it is held in the left hand by Amon. Even during the Middle Kingdom, Sesostri I (the XII<sup>th</sup> dynasty) is represented receiving the “ankh” from a god, carrying it to his mouth (it was placed at the end of a *djed* – an amulet, a symbol of Osiris having the shape of a pillar). The similarity with the scenes of Akhenaten is obvious. (Posener, Sauneron, Yoyotte, 1974: 98) In his roles as solar creator and chief of rituals, Akhenaten is represented on top of the stelas as the only person who encouraged submissiveness in people. Due to the same reason, he did not forget the dead. Funeral tradition tends to fade (Grimal, 1988: 293): Osiris and the other funeral gods (for example Sokaris), disappear in time, they are no longer mentioned, while the texts in the tombs are drastically changed. (Marseille, Laneyrie-Dagen, 1992: 31) Because the king claimed that he was guiding his people towards the worship of Aton, many courtiers had stelas at the tomb entrance engraved with: “learning the doctrine from the king himself” or “daily listening to the doctrine from the king himself”. This doctrine which is impressive by its modernism actually was the description of a universe bathed in the powerful sun rays. What we know about these learnings comes from the original texts preserved on

the tomb walls of the Amarnian noblemen who did not engrave the traditional stereotype of forbidden Amonism, but the hymns composed by Akhenaten for Aton. They contained, in optimistic terms, a synthesis of his elementary theology – the joy of living – unlike the traditional Egyptian hymns (to the kings, crowns and cities, having the same structure: the title was worshipping the divinity, then it was the invocation).

### **An art under the sign of modernism**

As far as art is concerned, the influence is reciprocal: reform will put its fingerprint on art which will, at his turn, influence reform. One thing is sure: the few pieces of information that we have about life in this period also come from works of art, which are not so many (compared to the rich Egyptian artistic heritage), without which all we understood from the diplomatic letters and hymns would be just a pale reflection of an unequaled reality in the history of the world.

### **Bas-Relief – an art which reached its peak during the Amarnian period. The place of the Amarnian bas-relief in the art of the New Kingdom**

Bas-relief and painting are, practically, a single type of art in Egypt, with techniques that intersect with the same motifs: ritual scenes (in the reliefs on the temples), scenes from family life (in grave reliefs and paintings, where humour and freshness are higher than in the Oriental style – Moscati, 1982: 180-181). During the New Kingdom, in Egypt (and met only here) it was widespread the so-called relief *en creux*, with sunken contours, where the characters placed in a groove are highly patterned, without exceeding the surface of the wall. At the beginning of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> dynasty, the traditional archaism and rigidity are still visible, for example on the stela of Ahmosis from Abydos. But at Deir el-Bahari, the liberty of the characters' movement and the



safety of the pattern announce the new style of the official relief. It is representative a victory scene of Tuthmosis III putting down his enemies on a pillar from Karnak: the sunken relief makes light vibrate, movement is underlined, but the symmetry of the composition supports the idea that the scene is symbolic, being a ritual act, not the narration of a real moment. Here, at Deir el-Bahari, but also in the reliefs from Memphis, the ethnic difference between the Egyptians and the foreigners is very well underlined; gestures and physiognomy types are excellently surprised. From the point of view of composition, artists succeed in balancing these scenes, alternating groups of characters with large open spaces; the figures are arranged on several levels. Movement, but also passion – actually movement which expresses powerful feelings – are two characteristics met in the relief “The Mourners”, where the continuous rhythm of arms continuously winding can offer an idea about the old funeral dance, a ceremony of the Old Kingdom. But now, in the New Kingdom, death is no longer viewed with the same tranquility, but it awakes despair and compassion which are so expressively represented here. During Amenhotep III, relief art reaches its peak as far as the harmony of bodies is concerned, the purity of the figures, of easy model, in contrast to the details of clothes and wigs. The ethnic character of the foreigners is well captured, but the imposing figure of the pharaoh always emerges. (Châtelet, Groslier, 1990: 57)

### **Specific features of the Amarnian bas-relief**

As far as the Amarnian style is concerned, the contrast between old and new is very pronounced especially in the new meaning of form, which is less geometric, more agile, more lively, sometimes even caricatured, compared to traditional immobility. If we compare the head of the tomb of Ramose (the end of the reign of Amenhotep III) with the head of Akhenaten, the difference will be striking. Practically, realism existed before, there was no lack of

movement, but it was less free. (Janson, 1986; Drioton, Bourguet, 1972: 87)

In the first years of Akhenaten's reign, the relief was still based on tradition, but the radical later style was not yet felt. In the private tombs at Thebes, for example in the tomb of Ramose, it is very clear that one wall is decorated in the old style, another one in the early Amarnian style, with characters that resemble the king. At Karnak, there are some scenes (left unfinished) showing Akhenaten as a powerful pharaoh, preparing to strike his enemy (the resemblance with the relief where Tuthmosis III is in the same position is striking) or together with Re-Harakhty, the falcon-headed god, also a legacy of the previous period. (Many of these reliefs are known from small talatat blocks – about 52x24x26cm, in order to be carried by one person – from Aton's temple built by Akhenaten in Thebes or in some private tombs from Thebes). These scenes from the beginning period have varied themes: celebrating the god, highly concentrating on the role of the king as god's representative and Nefertiti who appeared even without her king. The representations of rewards and preparing for religious feasts are exquisite; they are opportunities to study and play the crowds (come to greet the king), the prostate servants, the procession of animals (they are all in the background, in opposition with the royal scenes in the foreground). Typological variety reflects the expansion of the empire under the mighty sun. The topic of animals getting up at sunrise is new, being the artistic representation of the "Great Hymn". Moreover, for the first time, daily life scenes are represented in temples, previously they could be seen only in private tombs. From the point of view of the technique, these characters are placed on different registers; multiplication is done by "stratification", including drawing many lines around one thing, thus suggesting more characters in a similar position. (Turner, 1996: 884; Freed, Markowitz, Auria, 1999: 110-115) Subsequently, in the Amarnian style, reliefs will show in

many cases, the royal family worshipping “the royal disk of the Sun”.

In one of the most well-known reliefs of this type, the royal family brings offerings to the Disk, on the lower edge, it can be seen the *uraeus* from which rays start, being a symbol of protected life and action on destiny. These rays reach only the members of the royal family: by receiving eternal life, the royal couple should turn it to radiate over people who would have access to divinity in this way. If we compare this relief with one from Amenhotep III's period of reign – *The Stela of Wesi* having the same topic (the worship of a god) – we will clearly see that some elements are the same, while others are totally changed. The Amarnian relief is different from the traditional because of the direct expression of the ritual act, of the sacred gesture, without complex esoteric formulas. (Vlad, 2003: 188) In the stela of Wesi, the god is Osiris, the legendary leader who died and was resurrected, being represented as a crowned, mummified king. Aton is depicted by an abstract sign of the solar disk, having rays which end with small hands. Certainly, the symbolism of the hands ending the rays of the Sun is not the result of Akhenaten's ideas, but the development of a symbolic language from the time of Tuthmosis IV or Amenhotep II. Even the serpent *uraeus* on the lower edge of the disk appeared in older representations, but now, even in two-dimensional art, it is seen from the front and located in the middle, a technique which was previously used only in three-dimensional. (Freed *et alii*, 1999: 110-115; Vandenberg, 1988: 190) In the stela of Wesi, the worshipers are he and his wife, Ipyu who bring their offerings to Osiris that will prepare them for the afterlife. In the Amarnian relief, Akhenaten, Nefertiti and one of their daughters bring offerings to Aten – nobody in the Amarnian reliefs had the right to be portrayed as an intermediary between God and the other people. Wesi offers bunches of lotuses in blossom, while his wife shakes a “sistrum”, a ceremonial instrument used by women,

and holds a “menat”, a ritual instrument. Akhenaten and Nefertiti bring dishes with sacred substances; their daughter also has a “sistrum”, used previously. The table in front of Osiris is full of traditional offerings: food and flowers. Offerings for Aton often include food and flowers, and here tripods have bunches of blossomed lotuses. Flowers are frequent offerings in el-Amarna. Traditional conventions in the Amarnian relief are found in the profile of the characters, in attributes, in costumes, in the hierarchical view. The caricature drawing shapes forms and underlines the prominent hips, thus symbolizing the incarnation of the pharaoh – like the Sun-father and mother of people – and it also symbolizes the fertility of nature through the features of Hapi, the god of the Nile. (Flon, 1993: 97) The stela of Wesi had a funeral purpose: it had been ordered by the pharaoh in order to prepare his afterlife and it was probably put in his tomb or in a temple. The Amarnian relief ornamented a road for procession in the Great Palace. Many such images were engraved on the Amarnian buildings, so this image is a daily ritual, an effective ceremony. As far as the inscriptions are concerned: on the stela, there are the name and the title of Wesi and a prayer invoking gifts for the spirits, the name of Athon being destroyed in the subsequent campaign of Akhenaten.

The fragment in which Akhenaten is the one standing in front of an altar full of offerings is from a worship scene; even if the layout is traditional, there is nothing conventional here. A hand holds an olive branch (rarely represented in Egypt, having a symbolic meaning that we do not know) full with fruit. The Amarnian artists were very interested in representing the human hand in as many variants, combining styling with naturalism. Here, it is even suggested depth, the third dimension and, of course, movement. (Cooney, 1965: 5)

The scenes of tenderness in Akhenaten’s family are more frequent in bas-reliefs than in statues. The scenes where the two

husbands affectionately embrace each other transmit powerful feelings, announcing lyricism for the first time. In a domestic altar, the royal couple is depicted in privacy, protected by Aton, holding his daughters in his arms. The gestures are very natural; the great liberty of the line is obviously in contrast with the rigidity of the traditional Egyptian scenes. Movement is represented in the ribbons of the protection cloth for the head, which seem to be wavy. The well-known elegance of the figures is reflected by Akhenaten's presentation with a cervical convex posterior profile, while Nefertiti's has a concave neck bent inwards. (Châtelet, Groslier, 1990: 54) The intimacy of the royal family is also depicted in the scene where a small royal princess eats; she is resting on a pillow in front of a table with three legs. Here, the proper perspective precludes anatomic exaggerations. The relief is only sketched, but with a greater certainty, on a plate of limestone, probably it will be transposed on a stela. Painters reached dexterity if they painted figures on flat stones or on broken pots to reach perfection. (Brion, 1977: 55)

Stylistically, these compositions, which are complex as far as the number of elements in the paper is concerned, amaze us by the way they highlight the centre of interest – the solar disk and the royal family. In all scenes, this area is etched more deeply, so that it is sharpened in powerful contours, if the bas-relief is strongly lightened. Otherwise, the main characters would be lost in the vastness of the whole wall, sometimes, uniformly coloured. (Freed *et alii*, 1999: 116)

There are in the Amarnian relief pieces worked by artists formed in the style of Amenhotep III, having less distortion, especially depictions of ordinary people, but also of the pharaoh and of the queen (especially Nefertiti was represented in this way). (*Ibidem*)

As far as the technique of the relief is concerned, the quality of the materials used in the temples of Karnak (especially

sandstone) varies, and the worker's haste while working gave birth to some works which are not technically accomplished. At el-Amarna, the limestone used for building temples was a material considered more appropriate for bas-reliefs. (Turner, 1996: 884)

Despite the return to religious orthodoxy, the artists of Akhenaten still continued to work for a while in the Amarnian style. Even at the beginning of the time of Ramses (epoch which englobes the XIX<sup>th</sup> and the XX<sup>th</sup> dynasties), there are geographical differences, especially among sculpture styles. The artists from Lower Egypt have a greater creative freedom and a tendency towards naturalism, having an Amarnian basis; the workshops from Upper Egypt are faithful to the traditional canon, particularly in Thebes, where it was an intensive program of building. But the influence of the Amarnian art continued for many years, reaching Sethi I and even Ramses II, especially in the triumphal reliefs of the first, without influencing but little three-dimensional art. (Maspero, 1912: 188) The classic style, the balanced reliefs of Sethi I (the temples from Thebes and Abydos) leaves way to powerful chiaroscuro and schematization from the later Rameside reliefs. The large number of temples asked that sculptors worked quickly, consequently they chose deep relief (because high relief was time consuming), offering a better representation of space, depth and can suggest perspective. During the reign of Sethi I, great battle scenes and victories of the pharaoh will be very much used, becoming a leitmotiv of the Rameside temples. Sketching is compensated by movement and dramatism. (Turner, 1996: 886)

### **The return to the orthodox religion**

Once the last artists of Akhenaten disappear, the mark of Amarnian art also disappears. The death of the greatest protector of arts, Ramses II, the pharaoh having the biggest number of monuments is the beginning of a decline of a thousand years an Egypt will not be stopped: invasions and foreign influences will

gradually weaken its power. Anyway, with Horemheb, the last king of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> dynasty, the period usually considered “The Golden Age of Egyptian Art” is completed (Piper, 1991: 26), and the death of Akhenaten is seen by most historians as the end of the creative Egyptian genius.

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