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Iconoclasm: Ancient Egypt

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Picture standing in front of the sarcophagus of Tutankhamen, the famous boy pharaoh whose tomb held the most grave goods to date. Now imagine humanity never finding his tomb, or at the most finding it mangled and empty. It is hypothesized that his tomb was saved because the Egyptians wanted to forget him—more specifically, they wanted to forget his father and his lineage. This led to the destruction of many works. In other words, an iconoclastic movement began. Iconoclasm, defined by Dario Gambodi, is the typically premeditated destruction of icons that are often religious in nature (*The Destruction of Art*, 191). However, Egyptian iconoclasm may have focused on much more than just religion when practicing iconoclasm. This study will specifically look at iconoclasm from Ancient Egypt and discuss the culture's iconoclastic policy.

The most prominent examples of iconoclasm manifested in Egypt during the New Kingdom. This was a time of great political and religious change and unrest, namely due to Pharaoh Akhenaten, or Tutankhamen's father who was mentioned before. Akhenaten, originally Amenhotep IV, changed his name at the beginning of his reign to reflect on his shift in religion and the desire to diminish the power of the priesthood. He was hated among the Egyptians for a multitude of reasons; the priesthood loathed Akhenaten's decree to change the religious structure from polytheistic to monotheistic, with the sun disc Aten at the center of the religion. This ultimately angered the Egyptian priesthood who were in place in order to cater to the needs of their pantheon of gods. With polytheism uprooted, the key to their power and political weight, the priesthood was rendered useless. And the priesthood was not the only thing that Akhenaten uprooted. To reiterate the power of Aten, Akhenaten sent armies all over Egypt to break into tombs and remove Amun-Ra, the original head god under polytheism (Wilkinson 292). As a result, Egypt was "cleansed" of any unwanted images of the ex-sun god, strengthening Akhenaten's regime.

Akhenaten also disrupted politics by moving the capital to Tel-Amarna in the deserts of Upper Egypt. People greatly suffered under his actions; archaeological data shows malnutrition and stunted growth in children and spinal damage in adults presumably caused by the labor required for the new capital. Bodies were buried hastily in pits—a sign that people were dying so frequently that there was no time to construct proper tombs or graves. Interestingly enough, there was no sign of Aten, Akhenaten's precious god, as a religious symbol in the necropolises. It seemed that, despite his efforts, the new religion did not stick in the kingdom that had been polytheistic for generations (Hessler 126). To Egyptians, it may not have been worth pleasing a new ruler if it meant possibly jeopardizing their soul reaching the afterlife.

It was after Akhenaten's soul began its own journey to the afterlife that a widespread effort to erase his name began. This erasure encompassed Akhenaten's wife, Nefertiti, and any of his descendants—including the famous Tutankhamen mentioned before. The boy, who ascended the throne at a young age, had to take on the failures and public hatred towards his father. This resulted in a poor treatment of his image as well, shown in his hasty burial. In all fairness, those following the reign of Akhenaten could be justified in their treatment of his image. Through the Egyptians' eyes, he was a ruler who did not necessarily take his people into consideration, disrupted the Egyptian religious hierarchy, and caused the death of many. It would make sense to destroy Akhenaten's image to ensure these poor qualities of kingship would not be passed down, and Egypt would not be associated with his rule.

The most concerning aspect of this near-total destruction of Akhenaten's likenesses are the consequences it would have in Egyptian religion and reaching the afterlife, mentioned in Penelope Wilson's study (*Negating the Image*, 114). In Ancient Egyptian religion, the *ka*, or the soul, required a place to be housed. While the soul could initially be housed in the body, it

would need a new place to reside after the body decayed. The Egyptian's solution was to create imagery or likenesses of the person using the idea of *Ma'at*, or this truth and perfection from when the universe was created (Brewer 189). If these likenesses are destroyed, the results on the *ka* are catastrophic. If there is no imagery of a person in the tomb, there will not be a place for the soul to stay after the body withers away. As a result, the soul would ultimately be lost, and the possibility of the soul reaching the afterlife could be jeopardized. In Figure 1, even the cartouche of Akhenaten, or the written likeness of himself, is destroyed. Not only does society forget about the pharaoh's existence from destroying works of him, but the gods may also forget him if his soul does not have something tying it to the physical realm. It is arguably the harshest form of damnation.

Akhenaten was not the only ruler to be damned by the Egyptians during the New Kingdom. Queen Hatshepsut, a woman ahead of her time, was in a constant struggle to make herself worthy in the eyes of her subjects. While her images and likenesses were not as widely destroyed as those of Akhenaten, she still struggled. Upon the death of her husband, Thutmose II, his son Thutmose the Third, born to the pharaoh and a harem queen, ascended the throne. Due to his young age, Hatshepsut acted as regent—at least at first. Eventually she had declared herself as pharaoh; however, many rejected her due to her sex. To remedy this, Hatshepsut went as far as to alter her image in sculptural works, omitting her breasts and adding a beard, a common symbol among pharaohs (Hilliard 27).

Despite her attempts to fit in with the other pharaohs of Egypt, she was ultimately rejected. Upon her death, an erasure of her image similar to that of Akhenaten's ensued. The greatest offender of iconoclastic campaigns against her was her own stepson, Thutmose the Third. Similarly to the pharaohs following Akhenaten, he did not want to be associated with any

policies or institutions his mother had upheld. Fortunately, Thutmose was unable to have a complete erasure, only destroying easily accessible works of his stepmother (Tydesley 55).

This nature of dissociating oneself from the previous ruler was not identified solely for the successors of Akhenaten and Hatshepsut. In many cases, Egyptian sculptures of pharaohs are missing the crook and flail, the hallmarks of kingship and power. While this could be attributed to damage over the ages, it is also possible that these were instances of iconoclastic action. Since the crook and flail were so important to justify one's leadership as a pharaoh, after their death, it is possible that they were removed from their sculptures as a way of symbolically removing their power. In a brief visual comparison of Egyptian artifacts from the collections of the numerous museums, statues of pharaohs were juxtaposed. It is important to note that only pharaohs were examined, as other research has speculated that the "cores" in non-royal statues' hands may represent objects like papyrus scrolls or linen, though there is still no definitive conclusion (Fischer 10-21).

Multiple examples of what could be the remains of a crook and flail were present in the sculptures' hands. (See Figures 2-4.) These findings were similar, if not exact, among all kinds of materials used throughout all time periods. In regards to time, if the damage done was not deliberate, it would make more sense for there to be less uniform breaks that were similar among all the sculptures. Even if the breaks were uniform due to weak points in the sculpture, different materials should show varying degrees of weathering in areas where the crook and flail are present. A possible answer for this uniformity is that after removing the crook and flail, the pieces were sanded down and rounded. Not all pharaohs were hated in Egyptian history, so it would not make sense to conclude that the sculptures, which had hard work put into them, would be treated so carelessly without reason.

There is further evidence to prove the ability for these symbols to withstand time, as depictions of Egyptian gods (namely Osiris) are still holding the crook and flail (See Figure 5.); these depictions are as old as some of the pharaohs' sculptures compared in this study. This proves Egyptians' capability to sculpt the crook and flail in a manner that would withstand time. This makes sense in the context of Osiris, who is a key god and holds power indefinitely. Removing the crook and flail from Osiris, equating to removing his power as a ruler, would not be an outcome Egyptians would want. Moving power from one pharaoh to another after their death, however, and passing along the crook and flail makes absolute sense.

With some evidence pointing to deliberate breaking of statues, then it is a likely conclusion that there was routine iconoclasm in Egypt following the death of pharaohs. This iconoclasm may not have been out of disrespect, rather out of necessity to continue the flow of power from one ruler to the next. It is important to note that removing the crook and flail did not negate a soul's ability to make it to the afterlife, as the likeness of the pharaoh would still be intact. The only change as the power to rule Egypt given to them by the gods was taken away. The soul could continue on its journey through the afterlife unperturbed and avoid subsequent damnation.

As a whole, it can be understood that Ancient Egyptian iconoclasm revolved around political agendas, which sometimes bled into the realm of the religious like the case of Akhenaten's image being destroyed. However, iconoclasm was not necessarily as benevolent as the term is seen as today. Back then, it is entirely possible that today's iconoclasm was the Egyptian's way of symbolically dethroning a pharaoh. Their actions were not fueled by hatred or the desire to erase someone from history; it was merely something necessary for the political process of kingship to continue. That said there is no way to know for certain what the

Egyptians' thought processes really were. For now, historians will continue theorize but ultimately understand Egyptian iconoclastic actions as political in nature.



Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft (DOG), Relieffragment mit drei Kartuschen des Echnaton und des Aton, Ident. Nr.: AM 22082, Schenkung James Simon, 1920
© Foto: Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
Fotografin: Sandra Steils



Figure 1.

Unknown. *Relieffragment mit drei Kartuschen des Echnaton und des Aton*. Ca.1350 BCE, bronze.



Figure 2.
Unknown. *Statue of a king*. Ca. 332 BC, marble.



Figure 3.
Unknown. *Statue of Nebhepetre
Mentuhotep II in the Jubilee Garment*.
Ca. 2051-2000 BC, sandstone and
paint.



Figure 4. Unknown. *Statue of Tanwet-amani*.
Ca. 664-653 BC, granodiorite.



Figure 5. Unknown. *Statuette of Osiris*.
Ca. 664-332 BC, bronze.

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