



# AKHENATEN & THE ORIGINS OF MONOTHEISM

JAMES K. HOFFMEIER

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*James K. Hoffmeier*

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*Dedicated to  
Donald B. Redford,  
my professor and friend  
on the occasion of his eightieth birthday*



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## *Preface*

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NO FIGURE FROM ancient Egyptian history has stimulated more interest and literature than Akhenaten, the 14th century B.C. pharaoh. Students of Egyptology, history, and religion, be they amateurs or academics, are equally fascinated by this intriguing ruler because of his bizarre appearance in statues and reliefs, as well as those of his family. The art of this period amazes the art historian with its naturalism and realism. The cuneiform tablets discovered in 1887 at Tell el-Amarna in Middle Egypt, known as the Amarna Letters, provide an unparalleled glimpse into dealings between Egypt and world potentates and local petty rulers of Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Canaan, and Syria. Then, too, there are all the perplexing issues surrounding his reign: moving his capital from Thebes to Amarna, his name change, and the uncertainty of the royal succession. Did Queen Nefertiti reign with him or succeed him? How was king “Tut” related to Akhenaten? Akhenaten’s unique brand of solar worship evokes vigorous discussions. Was he a henotheist, monotheist, or merely focused on a novel ancestor cult, as has recently been proposed? Was he so preoccupied with his devotion to his sun-god, Aten, that he allowed Egypt’s empire in western Asia to implode?

With so many mysteries surrounding Akhenaten and his relatively short 17-year reign, nearly every question raised here has been addressed and various interpretations argued over the decades. Indeed, the body of literature on Akhenaten and the so-called Amarna period is immense, with many excellent articles and books available by eminent scholars like Donald Redford, Cyril Aldred, Nicholas Reeves,

Jan Assmann, Erik Hornung, and Barry Kemp. With so much good literature on Akhenaten and his era, why would I even attempt to write another book on Akhenaten? A brief biographical note is in order. I grew up in Egypt. In fact, a small village in Middle Egypt was home. It was located on the western side of the Nile, not far from Tell el-Amarna, where Akhenaten established his capital (Akhet-Aten) around 1347 B.C. As a youth I was able to stroll the streets and explore the ruins and tombs of Akhet-Aten. Within 5 miles (8 km) of my childhood home in the village of Nazlet Herz was the ancient city of Hermopolis (in Arabic, Ashmunein). Its necropolis in the nearby desert was the location of one of Akhet-Aten's 14 boundary inscriptions. Many times my family visited this site, even having picnics near the strange depiction of Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and their daughters adoring the sun-disc that stood atop the stela.

These early experiences no doubt influenced my decision to study Near Eastern archaeology as my undergraduate major at Wheaton College (IL). Graduate studies took me to the University of Toronto, where one of my principal teachers was Dr. Donald Redford, professor of Egyptology, a distinguished scholar and one of the leading experts on Akhenaten. He was also the director of the Akhenaten Temple Project that was engaged in piecing together photographs of thousands of inscribed blocks that revealed amazing decorated scenes from Akhenaten's Theban temples. After the king's death they were violently destroyed and dismantled, and the blocks were dispersed and reused elsewhere. Through this painstaking work, Redford broke new ground on the early years of Akhenaten's developing religion, which is frequently called "Atenism."

In early 1975, Professor Redford began excavations east of Karnak temple in Luxor, Egypt, thought to be the area where Akhenaten's long-lost temples were located. During the summer season that year, I had the privilege of working with the project, and again in 1977. Subsequently, Dr. Redford invited me to study the assembled chariot scenes from the Theban temples for publication in *Akhenaten Temple Project*, Volume 2. Being able to work with the Akhenaten Temple Project furthered my interest in this king's religious revolution.

In 1992, when I was considering engaging in field work in Egypt, Dr. Redford, who by then was investigating Tell Keduia in North Sinai, wrote to me and encouraged me to come work in Sinai. There was some urgency to excavate endangered sites east of the Suez Canal before they were destroyed due to the As-Salam irrigation project. Following this suggestion, I spent short seasons in 1994, 1995, and 1998 investigating possible sites to dig. At the urging of Dr. Mohamed Abd el-Maksoud of the Supreme Council for Antiquities (now the Ministry of Culture for Antiquities), I visited a threatened site that had already experienced significant damage from the irrigation project; a drainage canal already crossed the east end of the tell, roads were

being laid, and pipelines dug. It was Tell el-Borg. During the initial survey of the site in 1999, my team discovered scores of New Kingdom period potsherds on the surface, including a painted “Amarna blue” sherd that immediately caught my attention, since this type of decoration was so well known from Amarna period pottery. Could it be that this site flourished during the Amarna era? Subsequent excavations revealed two New Kingdom period frontier forts. During the first season’s work, we uncovered some reused talatat blocks—the very type of building blocks developed by Akhenaten’s architects for the Aten Temples at Karnak! Had there been an Aten temple that was demolished at the site or somewhere nearby in North Sinai? In the nearly decade of work at Tell el-Borg, it became clear that throughout the Amarna era this site was occupied, and we also found evidence of Akhenaten’s iconoclasm against Amun (see Chapter 6).

In the light of my experiences in Egypt as a youth, along with my training with the Akhenaten Temple Project, combined with this new evidence from an unlikely location on Egypt’s eastern frontier (or just outside Egypt proper) about Akhenaten and his religious program, there are good reasons to write a new book on Akhenaten.

Aware of the vast body of literature on every subject related to Akhenaten, a narrowly focused study seemed prudent. Because many issues about his religion remain unsettled, and there are some new data, this seemed like the route to take.

Often archaeologists and historians approach matters of religion with a jaundiced eye. I have tried to avoid this tendency by using my training at the Centre for Religious Studies at the University of Toronto, where I received my PhD. I benefited greatly from a course on religious studies methodologies from the late Professor Willard Oxtoby. He introduced me to the phenomenological approach to the study of religion, a method I have found to be fruitful in my study of ancient religions. This approach, which will be described in Chapter 5, has been used in the current study to offer some new insights into some of Akhenaten’s inscriptions. This book inevitably touches on historical, art historical, political, and other areas of research, which could blossom into major studies. But this is avoided in favor of concentrating on Akhenaten’s religion and the origins of monotheism.

Since the early 20th century, scholars have posited that there was some possible connection between Akhenaten and ancient Israelite religion, Moses and monotheism. These important issues will only be touched upon briefly at the end of Chapter 8 and in Chapter 9. The main thrust of this book is to try to tease out the motivation for Akhenaten’s religious reforms and the quick transition to what will be argued was a monotheistic faith. The sources used will be the remains of the Aten temples, the iconography, and contemporary inscriptions. What prompted the unexpected oppression of Egypt’s state god, Amun (or Amun-Re), at the height of his power and the attendant elevation of Aten to position of sole god or God?

In this regard, Donald Redford's work over the years has been essential and laid a solid foundation for my work. As my teacher he was always cheerful and friendly, ready to answer questions, discuss problems, and entertain theories. So in this book I have some new (provocative?) theories for him (and others) to ponder, and I dedicate this volume to my teacher on his eightieth birthday in appreciation for his friendship and encouragement over the years.

While on Sabbatical during the Fall of 2010, I was able to spend several days studying the Amarna collection at the Neues Museum in Berlin. The research conducted there laid the groundwork for the writing that followed. A follow-up visit to Berlin in March 2014 permitted some final study of various texts and reliefs. Then I also visited the Louvre in Paris where I was able to examine a number of important sculptures and reliefs. These visits were extremely valuable to my research and provided the opportunity to photograph many objects, some of which serve as illustrations in this volume.

The majority of the research and writing for this book took place during a Sabbatical I was awarded during the Fall of 2013. I am grateful to my dean, Dr. Tite Tienou, for this time off. I also want to acknowledge the helpful conversations and e-mail exchanges about the Amarna period with Arielle Kozloff over the past two years. I want to acknowledge the help provided by Edwin (Ted) Brock, who sent me a copy of his unpublished report on the drain/sewage project in East Karnak that exposed materials from Akhenaten's temple. I am very grateful to Dr. Foy Scalf, Archivist and Librarian at the Oriental Institute, for invaluable assistance with references and library material. Thanks are owed to William Hupper who created the bibliography for the book from the footnotes used in each chapter.

When I was writing Chapter 5, I thought that it offered a bit of a paradigm shift in how I understood Akhenaten's religious evolution. The data and the phenomenological readings of key texts actually resulted in a change in my working hypothesis about the motivation for Atenism. Aware of the potential breakthrough, I asked four respected Egyptologists to give me their feedback. I was delighted to receive helpful comments and positive responses from Kenneth Kitchen, Ellen Morris, Boyo Ockinga, and Richard Wilkinson, who were most encouraging. While the feedback was appreciated and helpful, I am obviously responsible for the ideas advanced here.

I am also grateful to Cynthia Read and her colleagues at Oxford University Press, New York, for assisting with this, my third book with OUP. Unless otherwise specified, quotations of Egyptian texts are my own translation, and when the Bible is cited, it is from the English Standard Version unless specified.

It is my hope that the ideas proposed here will stimulate discussion and advance our understanding of Akhenaten, his religion, and the origins of monotheism.

## *Abbreviations*

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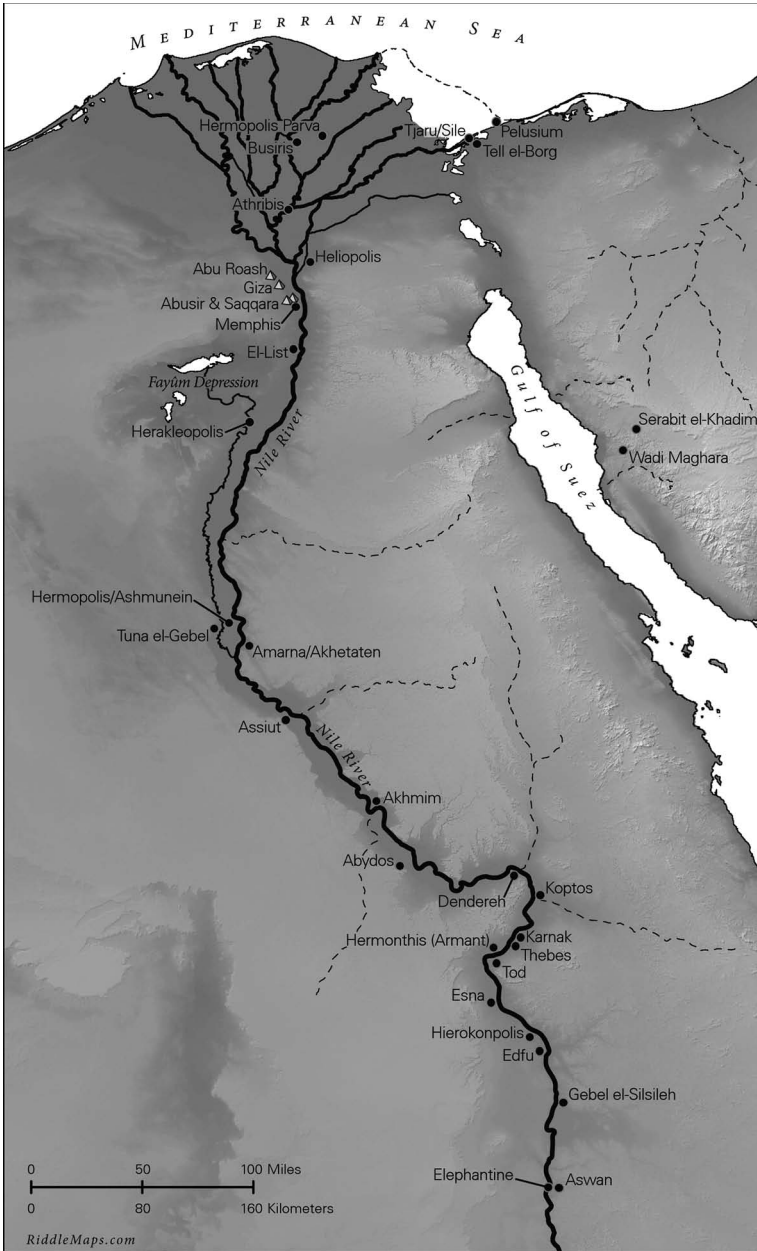
- ABD* *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5 Vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992)
- AJSLL* *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature*
- ASAE* *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte*
- ATP* Akhenaten Temple Project
- BASOR* *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
- BES* *Bulletin of the Egyptian Seminar*
- BIFAO* *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* (Cairo)
- BSEG* *Bulletin de la Société d'Égyptologie, Genève*
- CANE* *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East I–IV* (ed. J. Sasson; New York: Scribner, 1995)
- CASAE* *Cahier Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte*
- Cd'É* *Chronique d'Égypte*
- COS* *Context of Scripture I–III* (W. W. Hallo & K. L. Younger; Leiden: Brill, 1997, 2000, 2003)
- CT* Coffin Texts
- GM* *Göttinger Miszellen*
- JAMA* *Journal of the American Medical Association*
- JEOL* *Jaarbericht ex Oriente Lux*
- JETS* *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
- KB* Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: Brill, 1985)

- OEAE* *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, 3 Vols. (ed. Donald Redford; New York: 2001).
- PT Pyramid Texts
- NIV* New International Version of the Bible
- SÄK* *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kulture*
- Urk. IV* Kurt Sethe, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*, 4 Vols. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961)
- Urk. IV* Wolfgang Helck, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie: Historische Inschriften Thutmosis' III. und Amenophis' III* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1955)
- Wb.* Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, 5 Vols. (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche, 1926–1931)

*Map of Egypt*  
(created by A. D. Riddle)

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# Map of Egypt



Hail, O Re, in your beauty, your splendor,  
On your thrones, in your radiance!  
PYRAMID TEXT, 406

# Chapter 1

## When the Sun Ruled Egypt

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THE DISCOVERY OF the Amarna letters in 1887 opened the door to a new, and largely obscure, period of Egyptian history now known as the Amarna period. The curiosity created by the diplomatic correspondence from Western Asia and Mesopotamia to Amenhotep III and Akhenaten during the mid-14th century B.C. led Sir Flinders Petrie to begin excavating the site of el-Amarna, or Akhet-Aten. Of special interest to early Egyptologists, and still the focus of considerable attention today, was Akhenaten's religious revolution. Not only has Akhenaten's religion been the focus of Egyptologists and historians of religion, but it has attracted the curiosity of academics in other fields, including Sigmund Freud<sup>1</sup> and C. S. Lewis.<sup>2</sup>

In various reliefs and in the decorated rock cut tombs of the high-ranking royal officials in middle Egypt, King Akhenaten and his famous Queen Nefertiti, sometimes along with their daughters, are shown in attitudes of worship and adoration of the sun-disc, that is, the Aten (Eg. *itn*), while in other instances they are seated in their living quarters or riding in chariots throughout the city. Regardless of the type of scene, the rays of the sun-disc cascade downward surrounding the royal family, with human hands extending to the devotees, sometimes with the sign for life (𐎃) being offered to the royals (Figure 1.1 a–b). Such scenes are found in different contexts

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939).

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harvest/Harcourt, 1986; reprint of 1958 edition), 85–87.

(a)



(b)

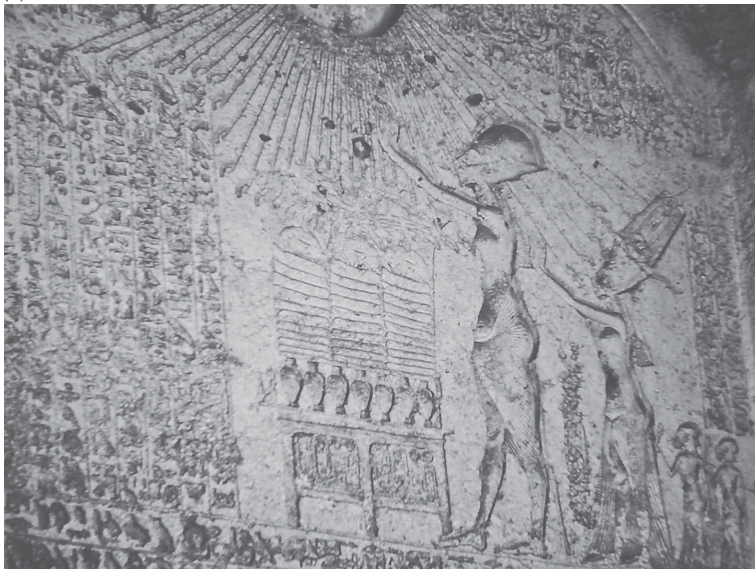


FIGURE 1.1 a. Akhenaten and Nefertiti and daughters under the sun and its rays (Neues Museum Berlin). Photo James K. Hoffmeier. b. Royal family worshipping Aten (Tuna el-Gebel Stela). Photo Charles S. Hoffmeier.

throughout the city of Akhet-Aten, even on the large boundary stelae that encircled the greater city, marking it as the Holy See of the Aten.<sup>3</sup>

Within the tombs of some of Akhenaten's loyal officials are found the words of hymns devoted to the Aten, including the so-called Great Hymn to the Aten that not only elevated this deity to a place of supremacy, but, as will be argued below, affirm the king's monotheistic religion (see Chapters 7 and 8). Along with this doctrine went the inevitable program of persecution of the Theban deity Amun by closing his (and other) temples and obliterating his name and image.<sup>4</sup> How does one explain this unusual behavior in conservative Egypt, where deities that had been worshiped and honored for 1,500 years suddenly fell into disfavor and were abandoned and even efforts to execrate their memories, especially Amun's, were undertaken mercilessly? Polytheism, by its very nature, is inclusive. Deities are not typically excluded. More than seven centuries after Akhenaten's day, Jeremiah the prophet of Judah castigates his audience in Jerusalem for abandoning their God YHWH for pagan deities (Jer. 2:5–8), a practice that was rare indeed, if not unparalleled in the ancient Near East. It was so extraordinary that the prophet was appalled: "For cross to the coasts of Cyprus and see, or send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods?" (Jer. 2:10–11). The answer to this rhetorical question was "no"! Clearly something radical took place in Egypt during Akhenaten's reign that was unprecedented.

Scholars have offered different assessments of Akhenaten's extraordinary action. James Henry Breasted, early in the 20th century, described Akhenaten as engaged in a "revolutionary movement"<sup>5</sup> that came about because the king had "immersed himself heart and soul in the thought of the time, and the philosophizing theology of the priests"<sup>6</sup> at the expense of maintaining the great empire that his predecessors had won for Egypt. For John Wilson, Akhenaten's universalistic religion was a logical development out of Egypt's imperialism in the 15th century B.C. in which the power and scope of once local deities expanded with Egypt, thus giving birth to this revolutionary expression.<sup>7</sup>

Cyril Aldred, one of the late 20th-century premier specialists in the Amarna Period, described Akhenaten as having "single-minded zealotry" and depicted the king and his wife as "religious fanatics."<sup>8</sup> The director of the Akhenaten Temple

<sup>3</sup> William Murnane & Charles Van Siclen, *The Boundary Stelae of Akhenaten* (London/New York: Kegan Paul International, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Donald Redford, *Akhenaten: The Heretic King* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 175–176. Jacobus van Dijk, "The Amarna Period and the Late New Kingdom," in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (ed. Ian Shaw; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 269–270.

<sup>5</sup> James Henry Breasted, *A History of Egypt* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1921; 2nd edition), 367.

<sup>6</sup> Breasted, *A History of Egypt*, 356.

<sup>7</sup> John Wilson, *The Culture of Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 206–209.

<sup>8</sup> Cyril Aldred, *Akhenaten King of Egypt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), 7.

Project for more than 40 years, Donald Redford, has called Akhenaten “the heretic king,”<sup>9</sup> and one who “consigned to the rubbish heap far more than he created.”<sup>10</sup> More charitably, David Silverman has recently stated that Akhenaten “was a man of distinctive nature, character, and personality.”<sup>11</sup>

Egyptologists who have seriously studied the half-century prior to Akhenaten’s reign have rightly observed that there was a steep rise in solar religion during the first half of the 14th century B.C.; however, the word *itn* was not new to this period. Rather, it can be traced back to the Old Kingdom.<sup>12</sup> One early attestation of Aten is in the 12th Dynasty Story of Sinuhe, when the death of Amenemhet I is announced: the king “went up to the sky, being united with the sun-disc (*itn*), the god’s (i.e., the king) person being joined with the one who created him.”<sup>13</sup> Then there are more than a dozen occurrences in the Coffin Texts,<sup>14</sup> which largely date to the 12th Dynasty, although some go back to the First Intermediate Period. The Aten-disc especially grew in importance during the reigns of Akhenaten’s father, Amenhotep III (1390–1353 B.C.) and Thutmose IV (1400–1390 B.C.).<sup>15</sup> Raymond Johnson has advanced the view that Amenhotep III was actually deified in his final years, and that identifying himself with “the sun god Ra-Horakhty must have been a major influence on his son Amenhotep IV/Akhenaten”; he “was referred to as ‘the Dazzling Aten.’”<sup>16</sup> Based on this, Johnson suggests that Akhenaten’s Aten cult was in reality the celebration of his deified father. In his words, they “were one and the same god.”<sup>17</sup> (This view will be discussed further in Chapter 3.)

It is the contention of the present investigation that in order to understand fully the foundations of Atenism and some of the factors that motivated Akhenaten’s unusual religious activities, one has to go back nearly 1,500 years before his day to the early dynasties of Egyptian history, especially to the Old Kingdom (ca. 2700–2200 B.C.), when the sun ruled Egypt.

<sup>9</sup> Actually this is the subtitle of his excellent book, *Akhenaten: The Heretic King* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> Donald B. Redford, “The Sun-Disc in Akhenaten’s Program: Its Worship and Antecedents, I,” *JARCE* 13 (1976): 47.

<sup>11</sup> David Silverman, “Divinity and Deities in Ancient Egypt,” in *Religion in Ancient Egypt* (ed. B. E. Shafer; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 75.

<sup>12</sup> Redford, “The Sun-Disc in Akhenaten’s Program,” 47.

<sup>13</sup> Translation the author’s, based on A. M. Blackman, *The Story of Sinuhe*, Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca II (Brussels: Édition de la Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1932), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Rami van Der Molen, *A Hieroglyphic Dictionary of Egyptian Coffin Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 59.

<sup>15</sup> Erik Hornung, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 20–22. Stephen Quirke, *The Cult of Ra: Sun-Worship in Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 147–151. The most significant study is that of Lawrence Berman, “Overview of Amenhotep III and His Reign,” in *Amenhotep III: Perspectives on His Reign* (eds. D. O’Connor & E. Cline; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 1–26.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Johnson, “Monuments and Monumental Art under Amenhotep III: Evolution and Meaning,” in *Amenhotep III: Perspectives on His Reign*, 89–90.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, “Monuments and Monumental Art under Amenhotep III: Evolution and Meaning,” 91.

## THE SUN-GOD AT THE DAWN OF EGYPTIAN HISTORY

The piercing blue sky and dazzling sun are the two most striking and inescapable forces of nature in the land of Egypt. So it is little wonder that the sun's dominance over the land has a corresponding ascendancy in the religion and politics of Egypt from earliest times. More than 60 years ago, Henri Frankfort, the Dutch specialist in Near Eastern cultures and religions, held that "polytheism is sustained by man's experience of a universe alive from end to end. Powers confront man wherever he moves. . . ." <sup>18</sup> The blazing sun was such a power in Egypt, and this is probably why solar religion in various forms was supreme for the three millennia of the Pharaonic era. It is not surprising, as the historian of religion Mircea Eliade framed it, that "the religion of Egypt was, more than any other, dominated by sun-worship." <sup>19</sup> Eliade argued that the chief reason for embracing the sacred is that humans "become aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane." <sup>20</sup> No doubt the early Egyptians saw the omnipresence of the sun during daytime as a potent presence through which the deity revealed itself. As a consequence of these factors, Egyptologists would agree with Richard Wilkinson, who concludes that "the sun god Re was arguably Egypt's most important deity." <sup>21</sup> This was certainly true during the Old Kingdom, as Rosalie David observes: "until the end of the Old Kingdom, no cult rivaled that of Re' in power and importance." <sup>22</sup>

The picture is not so clear in the late pre and early dynastic periods (ca. 3200–2700 B.C.). The fact that there are several different names of solar-deities documented in the Old Kingdom suggests that the names may have originated in different parts of Egypt and that some were fused together in the course of time to represent different facets of the sun. Atum, for instance is the name the patron deity of On (Eg. *iwnu*), יָם (ʾōn) of the Hebrew Bible, and Heliopolis (city of the sun) to the Greeks, where his principal cult center flourished over the centuries. <sup>23</sup> The name Atum is often coupled with the more generic word Re or Ra (*r*) <sup>24</sup> (Figure 1.2). Re is the standard term for the sun and also means "day." <sup>25</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), 4.

<sup>19</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Clinton, MA.: Meridian, 1963), 128.

<sup>20</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 205.

<sup>22</sup> A. Rosalie David, *The Ancient Egyptian: Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 29.

<sup>23</sup> A. H. Gardiner, *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica* II (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 144\*–145\*.

<sup>24</sup> Karol Mysliwiec, "Atum," in *OEAE* 1, 158–159.

<sup>25</sup> *Wb* 2, 401–402.



FIGURE 1.2 Atum (Deir el-Bahri Temple of Hatshepsut). Photo James K. Hoffmeier.

Khepri, or Kheperer, is another name for the sun god,<sup>26</sup> and that word means “come into being” and “exist,” and as a noun means “form.”<sup>27</sup> Often depicted as a scarab or dung beetle, this solar deity pushes the sun-disc across the sky, just as the beetle pushes the dung ball across the ground. In that ball were the eggs of the beetle. When they hatched, the tiny baby beetles emerged, seemingly in a spontaneous manner to the ancient Egyptians. “This mystery,” Stephen Quirke writes, “could be expressed as an act of spontaneous self-creation, for which the Egyptians used the word *kheper*.”<sup>28</sup>

A final manifestation of the sun god is found in the Re-Harakhty (Figure 1.3). This is a composite name meaning “Re [is] Horus of the Horizon,” which Maya Müller suggests “should be understood as a surname describing the character of the god,” or that Horus is the son of Re.<sup>29</sup> The name “Horus” derives from the Egyptian term *ḥr* meaning “the distant one” who was portrayed as a falcon that represented

the sky in which hawks soar.<sup>30</sup> Horus is certainly one of the earliest deities whose iconography is known from the beginnings of kingship and was associated with the ruler throughout Egyptian history (Figure 1.4). The Horus-falcon is depicted on the famous Narmer Palette, and it appears on standards in the Scorpion Macehead and the Battle Field palette; on the Tjehenu or Cities palette fragment the falcon is shown hacking up an enemy city with a hoe.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, 230.

<sup>27</sup> CDME 188–189.

<sup>28</sup> Quirke, *The Cult of Ra*, 25–26.

<sup>29</sup> Maya Müller, “Re and Re-Harakhty,” *OEA* 3, 123.

<sup>30</sup> Edmund Meltzer, “Horus,” *OEA* 2, 119.

<sup>31</sup> Jeffrey Spencer, *Early Egypt: The Rise of Civilisation in the Nile Valley* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 52–54, 56.



FIGURE 1.3 Re-Harakhty (Louvre Stela). Photo James K. Hoffmeier.

The solar deities are brought together in a number of texts as early as the Pyramid Texts (PT). “I shine in the East like Re,” says PT Spell 467, and then continues, “I travel in the West like Khoperer, I live on what Horus Lord of the sky lives on by the decree of Horus Lord of the sky” (PT§ 888).<sup>32</sup> Similarly, PT Spell 606: “O King, they (the gods of the Ennead) make you live and resemble the seasons of Harakhti when they made his name.” . . . “They will bring you into being like Re’ in this his name of Khoperer; you will draw near to them like Re’ in his name of Re’; you will turn aside from their faces like Re’ in his name of Atum” (PT §1693–1695).<sup>33</sup> The former passage suggests that Re was associated with the rising sun in the east, whereas Khopri was identified with the afternoon sun.

From Dynasty 1 onward, one of the royal names by which the king was known was the Horus name, reflecting the mythic view that the king was the son of Re, that is the incarnation of Horus. The square box or *serekh*, representing the palace façade in

<sup>32</sup> R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 156.

<sup>33</sup> Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 250–251.

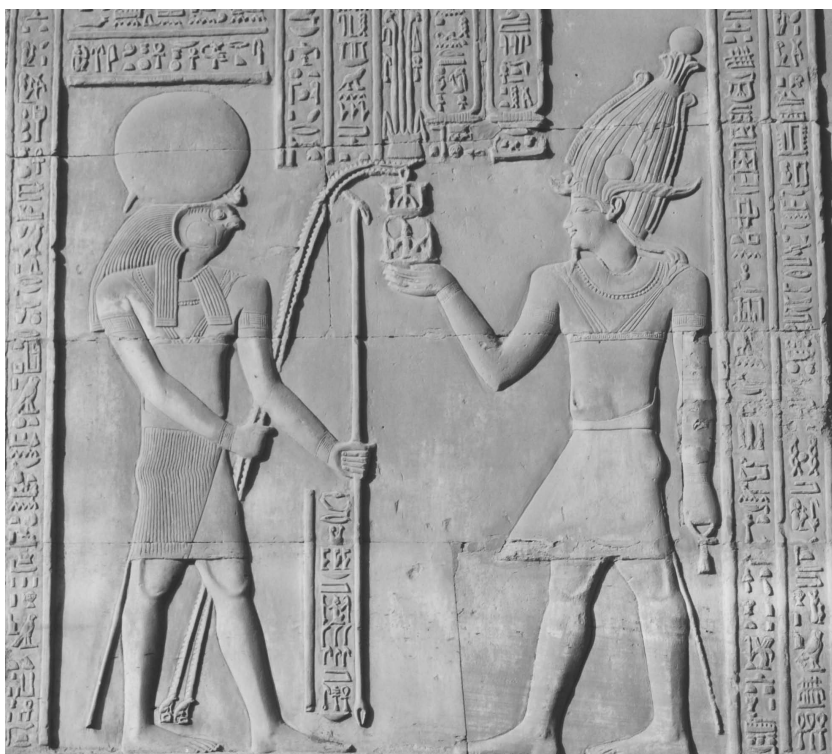


FIGURE 1.4 Horus (Kom Ombo Temple). Photo James K. Hoffmeier.

which the king dwelt, would include the name of Horus king, and above the *serekh* Horus stood (Figure 1.5).

The view that the king in his capacity as Horus was the son of Re or Atum (or Re-Atum) is found in the Old Kingdom PTs. These texts, though first found on the interior of the Pyramid of Unas at Saqqara (ca. 2350 B.C.), are widely believed to have originated toward the end of the 4th Dynasty (2550–2500 B.C.), with some spells possibly going back to pre-dynastic times.<sup>34</sup> The PTs report that when the deceased king was transported to the realm of the gods, he was introduced to them as follows:

O Re-Atum, this King comes to you . . . your son comes to you . . . (PT §158)

O Re-Atum, your son comes to you, the King comes to you . . . for he is the son of your body forever (PT §160).<sup>35</sup>

Like his father Atum who begot him (*ms sw*). He begot (*ms*) the king (PT §395).<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> James Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 4.

<sup>35</sup> R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 45; Jaromír Málek, “The Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2160 B.C.),” in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (ed. Ian Shaw; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 200), 102.

<sup>36</sup> Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 80.



FIGURE 1.5 Serekh of Hor-Aha. Photo James K. Hoffmeier.

The King conceived for Re, he is born for Re; the King is your seed, O Re, you being potent in this your name of “Horus at the head of the spirits . . .” (PT §1508).<sup>37</sup>

As early as Dynasty 2 (ca. 2820 B.C.), kings began to use “Re” in their names. Neb(i)-re, the first ruler to incorporate Re’s name means “(my) lord is Re.” Hermann Kees considered the appearance of “Re” in this royal name as marking the beginnings of Heliopolitan religious influence.<sup>38</sup> Other kings followed Nebre’s lead, namely, Nefer-ka-Re, a name which occurs again in Dynasty 3.<sup>39</sup> Starting in the 4th Dynasty with king Redjedef (ca. 2550 B.C.), and his immediate successors Khafre and Menkaure, the inclusion of “Re” became a regular feature of the throne name or prenomen. It was Redjedef who first introduced the epithet *s3 r* or “son of Re,” perhaps legitimizing his claim to the throne.<sup>40</sup> From the 5th Dynasty kings, the title “Son of Re” was permanently enshrined in the royal titulary.<sup>41</sup> The king of Egypt, then, was the son of Re and the living Horus. This long cherished ideology of kingship is reflected dramatically in texts (e.g., Pyramid Texts), iconography, and architecture of the Old Kingdom.

<sup>37</sup> Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 231.

<sup>38</sup> Hermann Kees, *Ancient Egypt: A Geographical History of the Nile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 154.

<sup>39</sup> J. von Beckerath, *Handbuch der Ägyptischen Königsnamen* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1999), 42–43, 45, 49.

<sup>40</sup> Ellen Morris, “The Pharaoh and Pharaonic Office,” in *A Companion to Ancient Egypt I* (ed. A. B. Lloyd; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 204.

<sup>41</sup> von Beckerath, *Handbuch der Ägyptischen Königsnamen*, 25–26.

## SOLAR DEITIES IN OLD KINGDOM TEXTS

Some texts that identify the king as the son of Re in the PTs have been introduced already. This corpus offers much more on solar theology. Most significant is the dogma that Atum was the original god, the creator of subsequent deities. Solar cosmogony holds that Atum/Khopri is “self-created” (*hpr ds.f*—lit. “created or formed himself”) (PT §1587).<sup>42</sup> One spell announces: “the King was fashioned by his father Atum before the sky existed, before earth existed, before men existed, before the gods were born . . .” (PT §1466).<sup>43</sup> Atum’s mode of creation is described as follows:

Atum is he who (once) came into being [*hpr*], who masturbated in On.  
He took his phallus in his grasp that he might create orgasm by means of it,  
And so were born the twins Shu and Tefnet (PT §1248).<sup>44</sup>

In a different version of the origin of these same deities, PT Utterance 600 records:

Atum-Beetle (Khepri)! You became high, as the hill; you rose as the benben  
in the Benben enclosure in Heliopolis (On). You sneezed Shu and spat Tefnut  
(PT §1652).<sup>45</sup>

Thus, after he created himself, he began to create gods, personifications of nature. Both passages locate the beginnings of creation at On, that is, Heliopolis, and significant too is the inclusion of “the benben in the Benben enclosure in Heliopolis (On).” The *bnbn* stone is the cultic symbol sacred to the temple of Atum in Heliopolis, and its shape is that of the pyramidion ( $\Delta$ ) or a truncated obelisk ( $\text{𐀀}$ ).<sup>46</sup> The conventional thinking is that the word *bnbn* derives from the word *wbn*,<sup>47</sup> which means “to shine”<sup>48</sup> and applies to the sun.

The pyramid shape likely represents the primeval mound of creation.<sup>49</sup> Two different words are associated with this mound or hill, *hr*, determined by the  $\text{☉}$  sign, though it can serve as an ideogram or logogram, depicting a hill with the sun rising

<sup>42</sup> Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 238.

<sup>43</sup> Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 226.

<sup>44</sup> Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 198.

<sup>45</sup> Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 269.

<sup>46</sup> *Wb* 1, 457.

<sup>47</sup> Hermann Kees, *Der Götterglaube im alten Ägypten* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1956), 217. Quirke, *The Cult of Ra*, 27. Elena Tolmatcheva, “A Reconsideration of the Benu-bird in Egyptian Cosmology,” in *Egyptology at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century: Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Egyptologists, Cairo 2000*, Vol. 2 (ed. Zahi Hawass; Cairo: American University Press, 2003), 522.

<sup>48</sup> *Wb* 1, 292–293.

<sup>49</sup> Miroslav Verner, “Pyramid,” in *OEAE* 3, 87. Tolmatcheva, “A Reconsideration of the Benu-bird in Egyptian Cosmology,” 523.

behind it.<sup>50</sup> The verb *hꜣi* means “rise and shine.”<sup>51</sup> The second word for mound is *i3t* and is written with a different mound sign, namely,  $\triangle$ ,<sup>52</sup> a term that has wide application in the Coffin Texts,<sup>53</sup> the next generation of funerary texts that developed from the PTs in the 1st Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom.

In the solar theology of the PTs, the mound first emerged from the primeval waters of Nun.<sup>54</sup> This is why the resurrected king re-enacts the sun’s primal interaction with the emerging mound of earth: “I have cleansed myself upon the earth-hill (*hꜣ*) whereon Re‘ cleansed himself” the king announces in PT Spell 333 (PT §542).<sup>55</sup> Commenting on “the hill” in Spell 600 quoted above, James Allen explains that this “refers to the first mound of earth that appeared from the universal waters at the creation (i.e. Nun).”<sup>56</sup> Not only was the benben of Heliopolis the cult symbol, the name of the temple of the Re/Atum was *Hwt Bnbn*, “The Mansion or Temple of the Benben,” the name by which it would be called throughout history.<sup>57</sup> *Hwt bnbn* was still the name of this temple in the 3rd Intermediate Period. The Kushite king Piankhy visited Heliopolis around 725 B.C., and we are informed that he “proceeded to the High Sands in On, making a great offering on the High Sands of On in the presence of Re when he rises (*wbn.f*) . . . He went up the great stairway to see Re in *hwt bnbn*, . . . breaking the bolt (of the shrine) and opening the doors (of the shrine), seeing his father Re in holy *hwt bnbn*.”<sup>58</sup> Not only is *hwt bnbn* mentioned several times, but twice the “High Sands of On” are mentioned, and on it Piankhy made a great sacrifice. This may be the actual mound on which the temple precinct was built that was meant to represent the primeval hill.<sup>59</sup> Petrie may actually have discovered traces of this feature during his excavations at Heliopolis in 1911–1912. He described the structure “a great enclosure of earth, sand, and bricks, square in form with rounded corner,” although he thought that it was a fortification.<sup>60</sup> More than 75 years ago, Herbert Ricke proposed that this elevated feature at Heliopolis

<sup>50</sup> Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 889 n 27.

<sup>51</sup> *Wb* 3, 239–240.

<sup>52</sup> Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 489 n 31.

<sup>53</sup> van Der Molen, *A Hieroglyphic Dictionary of Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 11–12.

<sup>54</sup> Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 151–152.

<sup>55</sup> Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 107.

<sup>56</sup> The name occurs in PT Spell 600 quoted here, and rendered by Allen (*Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 305, n. 48) as “the Benben enclosure in Heliopolis.”

<sup>57</sup> Faulkner (*The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 246) translated this line as “you rose up as the *bnbn*-stone in the Mansion of the ‘Phoenix in On.” He took *bnw* to refer to the Phoenix bird associated with the solar shrine in Heliopolis. See also Tolmatcheva, “A Reconsideration of the Benu-bird in Egyptian Cosmology,” 522–526.

<sup>58</sup> Translation my own, based on the transcription of Nicolas Grimal, *La Stèle Triomphale de Pi(ankh)y au Musée du Caire* (Cairo: IFAO, 1981), 36\*–37\*.

<sup>59</sup> Kees, *Ancient Egypt*, 155. Quirke, *The Cult of Ra*, 85–88.

<sup>60</sup> W. M. F. Petrie, *Heliopolis, Kafr Ammar, and Shurafa* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1915), 3.

was in fact a foundation platform for a temple.<sup>61</sup> Egyptologists ever since tend to agree with Ricke's thesis.<sup>62</sup>

Similar sand mounds have been discovered at other sites, including one at Hierakonpolis in Upper Egypt from early Dynastic times. There Petrie uncovered a similar stone revetment wall that "ran around in a curved or almost circular form," within which earth was packed that served as the foundation of the temple.<sup>63</sup> At Medamud (near Thebes) a brick enclosure wall was found that surrounded a mound approximately 1.75 meters high.<sup>64</sup> This feature, too, is likely a replica of the primeval mound that had a temple on it. The architectural use of this mythic archetype was extended to other temples.<sup>65</sup> In fact, as I pointed out 30 years ago, "the Holy of Holies where the cult object was placed was called *st dsrt nt sp tpy*, the holy place of creation (lit. the first occurrence),"<sup>66</sup> and the holy of holies of temples was usually the highest point within a temple complex.

As a result of his creative powers, other deities were created; of special significance are the Heliopolitan deities over which Atum was preeminent. This group of nine is frequent called the Heliopolitan, or Great Ennead, consisting of Shu and Tefnut (already encountered in PT §§1248 and 1652), Geb, Nut, Isis, Seth, Nephthys, Thoth, and Horus.<sup>67</sup> Hence Atum is called "father of the gods" (§§1521 and 1546). Spell 601 puts it this way: "O you Great Ennead which is in On . . . the name of Atum . . . presides over the Great Ennead. . . ." (§§1660–1661).<sup>68</sup>

The textual evidence reviewed here demonstrates the prominent position occupied by the creator, in his various manifestations, who was known by different names. As the creator of the forces of nature that were personified in the primeval gods, Re/Atum was supreme. Moreover, as the mound at On emerged from the Abyss or Nun and the sun shone on it, the spot was forever marked as sacred, and the pyramid-shaped *bmbn*-stone was placed in the most holy area of that temple. This solar theology then moved beyond Heliopolis and was central to Egyptian kingship, and Atum's lofty position was reflected in many spheres of culture, foremost of which are the architecture and iconography of that period.

<sup>61</sup> Herbert Ricke, "Der 'Hohe Sand' in Heliopolis," *ZÄS* 71 (1935): 107–111.

<sup>62</sup> Quirke, *The Cult of Ra*, 95.

<sup>63</sup> J. E. Quibell & W. M. F. Petrie, *Hierakonpolis I* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1900), 6.

<sup>64</sup> Alexander Badawy, *A History of Egyptian Architecture I* (Cairo: Misr Studio, 1954), 115.

<sup>65</sup> Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 151–152. Ragnhild Finnestad, *The Image of the World and Symbol of the Creator* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1985), 21–23.

<sup>66</sup> James K. Hoffmeier, "Sacred" in *the Vocabulary of Ancient Egypt* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 59; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1985), 173.

<sup>67</sup> They are listed in Spell 219 and 600. Horus is not included in Spell 600, making eight deities, plus Atum the leader, making nine.

<sup>68</sup> Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 247–248.

ARCHITECTURE AND SOLAR RELIGION IN THE OLD KINGDOM  
*The Pyramid*

The Old Kingdom pyramids are perhaps the most impressive architectural structures from ancient Egypt that have associations with solar religion. Regarding the Step Pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara, the first pyramid, Florence Friedman opines: “Djoser’s complex is located on the highest ground of the Saqqara plateau, suggesting a desire to incorporate into his funerary monument the regenerative notion of the primeval hill, a mythological form manifested in the pyramid.”<sup>69</sup> Most of the architecture in the Djoser Pyramid complex has to do with the performing of the Sed-festival for the renewal of the resurrected king’s vitality;<sup>70</sup> however, there is a frieze showing carved uraei or cobras rearing up and facing the rising sun on the inner courtyard wall in the southwest corner (Figure 1.6).<sup>71</sup> The uraeus (i.e., the cobra associated with the sun), according to one PT, “came forth from Re” (PT §1092), and another passage adds: “this King is the falcon which came forth [from Re] and the uraeus which came from the eye of Re” (PT §2206).<sup>72</sup> So clearly the uraei inside the Djoser complex have solar associations.



FIGURE 1.6 Uraei at Saqqara with Step Pyramid of Djoser in background. Photo James K. Hoffmeier.

<sup>69</sup> Florence Friedman, “Notions of Cosmos in the Step Pyramid Complex,” *Studies in Honor of William Kelly Simpson* (ed. Peter der Manuelian; Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1996), 338.

<sup>70</sup> Jean-Philippe Lauer, *Saqqara: The Royal Cemetery of Memphis* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976), 90–136.  
 W. Stevenson Smith, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1965), 30–38.

<sup>71</sup> Lauer, *Saqqara*, 94.

<sup>72</sup> Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 181, 307.

In the 4th Dynasty the step pyramid of the previous century evolved into the true pyramid so that it looked architecturally like the *bnbn*-stone of Heliopolis. From this century-long epoch come the pyramids of Sneferu and Khufu, which represent the greatest achievement in pyramid building. Interestingly, the names of these pyramids show their connection to solar theology. The northern pyramid at Dahshur is called “Shining (*hr*) Pyramid,” while the Bent Pyramid is called “The Southern Shining (*hr*) Pyramid.”<sup>73</sup> The Great Pyramid of Khufu is “The Pyramid which is in the Place of Sunrise and Sunset” (*shyt mr*).<sup>74</sup>

That the pyramid shape replicates the *bnbn*-stone, the sacred symbol of Heliopolis, was already mentioned above. But what is behind the pyramid shape? Unfortunately, we have no textual evidence to answer this question. Hence we can only speculate. If one looks at the sun when partially obscured by clouds, the sun’s rays break through at angles in the form of a pyramid (Figure 1.7). The solar iconography of the Old and Middle Kingdoms (see next section) never depicts the sun’s rays. In fact, not until the Amarna period are the sun’s rays included, and they are ubiquitous in Akhenaten’s Aten iconography. Viewed in two dimensions, the triangular shape is obvious. It may be, then, that the sun’s rays that are visible in a cloudy sky provide the inspiration for the shape of the *bnbn*-stone and therefore the pyramid.



FIGURE 1.7 Sun rays (Sinai, Egypt). Photo James K. Hoffmeier.

<sup>73</sup> John Baines & Jaromír Málek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Facts on File, 1980), 141.

<sup>74</sup> Baines & Málek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, 140.