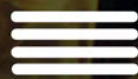
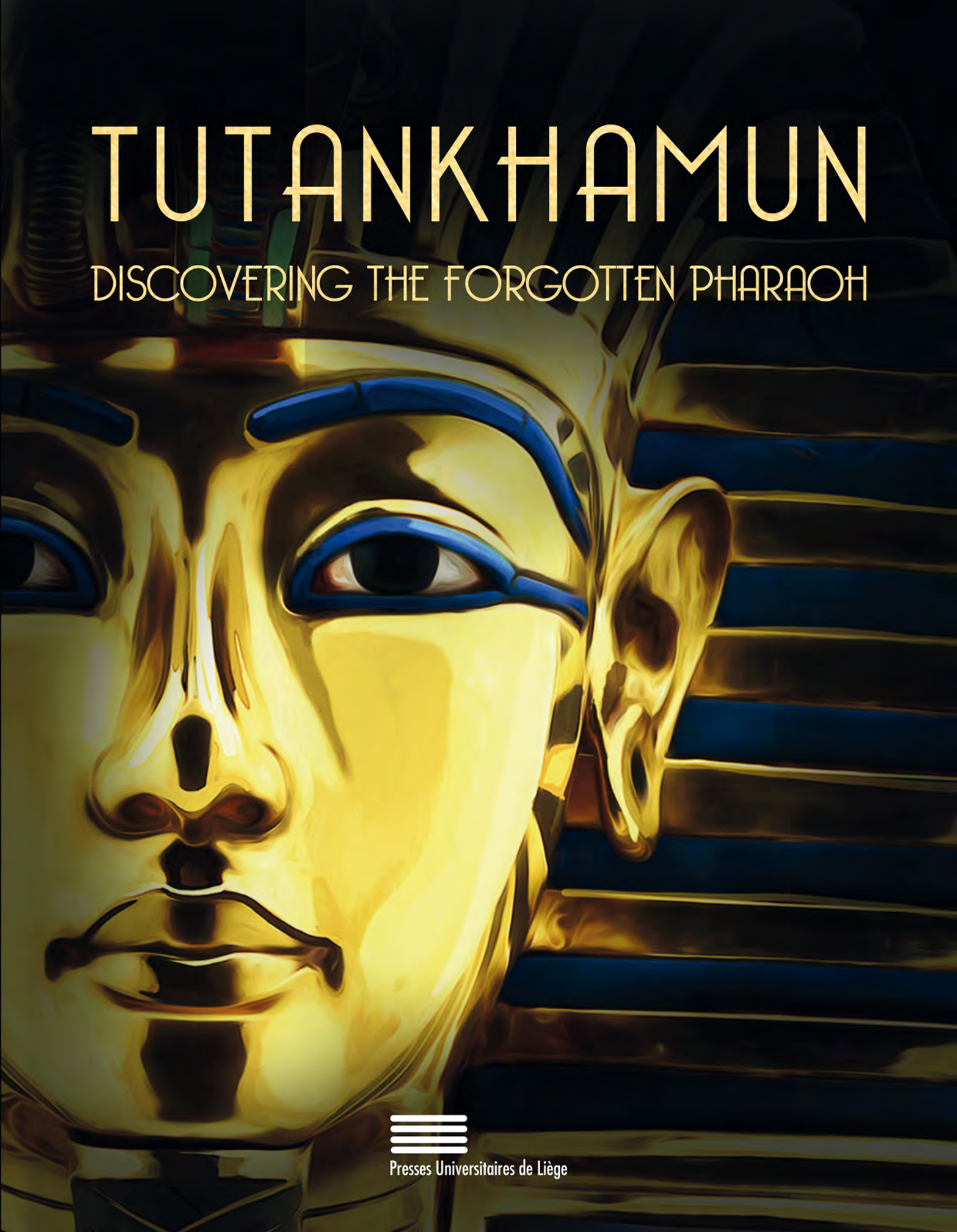


TUTANKHAMUN

DISCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN PHARAOH



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TUTANKHAMUN
DISCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN PHARAOH

Catalogue edited by

Simon CONNOR and Dimitri LABOURY

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Agostinho da Cunha, untimely seized by the Abductor, as ancient Egyptians called it.

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Religion and Politics

Dimitri LABOURY

Aten vs Amun

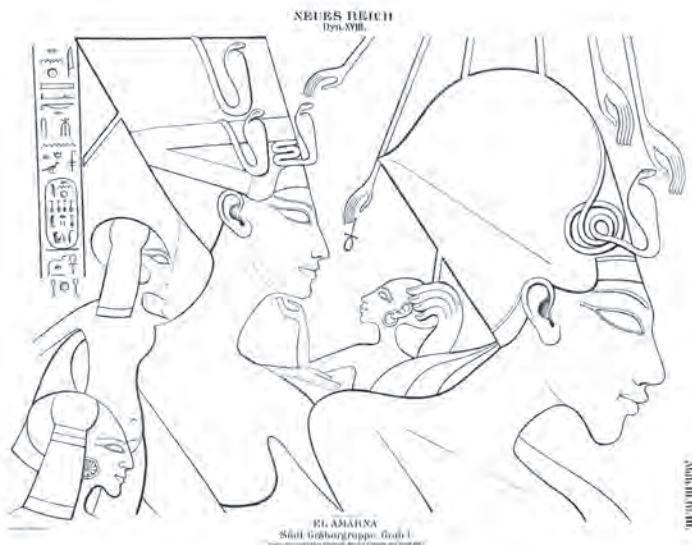
Religious Politics and Political Religion under Tutankhamun and His Father, Akhenaten

Tutankhamun's father, Amenhotep IV, now better known as Akhenaten, a name he adopted in year 5 of his reign, was one of many of those figures banished from history. He then would have to be rediscovered in modern times. His reinstatement in the middle of the 19th century as a historical figure was thanks to Karl Richard Lepsius (1810–1884), the founding father of the German Egyptological tradition. Given that the influence of religion on scientific knowledge remained extremely important at that time, Akhenaten's reign

was immediately viewed from an almost exclusively religious angle, with his commentators seeking to find an early foreshadowing of the monotheism that would later develop in the West. This followed an old Christian idea, dating back to the end of antiquity, that pharaonic polytheism concealed the seeds of or even derived from a primitive monotheism. The myth of Akhenaten was born almost before his archaeological and historical rediscovery had even begun! The 20th century only extended this trend, creating in its recovery of pharaonic Egypt in general, and this king in particular, Akhenaten's that were proto-Catholic, proto-Protestant, proto-Jewish, proto-Muslim, and many others.

Although he certainly instituted a reform of the cult and of what we call religion, Amenhotep IV – Akhenaten was above all a king, that is to say, a political figure. However, with regard to pharaonic culture, it is important always to keep in mind that both the political and the religious are modern categories, which we apply to a culture far removed from our own in time and space. The ancient Egyptian language has no words for either politics or religion, not because this culture would have disregarded such elements, of course, but because distinguishing one and the other from the rest of the world made no sense to the ancient Egyptian mind. In the Egypt of the pharaohs, rulers of divine

Fig. 1: line-drawing of a scene from Ay's tomb at Amarna (TA 25) produced on the occasion of the Prussian expedition led by K.R. Lepsius (1842–1845) and published in his *Denkmäler* (vol. III, pl. 111).



legitimacy, whose function was fundamentally to maintain the cosmic order for the good of humans and of the gods, what we call political or religious was, in a sense, everywhere. Any political action was necessarily anchored in a religious perspective and was expressed, therefore, in materials of an equally religious nature, such as the decoration of temples, for example. To understand his reign and what he sought to do, it is necessary not to see Akhenaten as a monarch “possessed by god” or as a “prophet,” as he has been called, but, rather, to consider him in his own particular cultural context. What do we know about his reign (in brief)?

When he ascended to the throne, Amenhotep, the fourth to bear that name, had not yet taken a wife and was probably still a teenager. He had an older brother (Thutmosis), who was destined for the crown, but who predeceased him. He succeeded his father, Amenhotep III, who ruled Egypt at the height of its power for a little over thirty-six years and devoted his last decade of life to orchestrating his own deification, during his lifetime, as “the dazzling Aten.” Aten refers to the solar star in the ancient Egyptian language, that is to say, the tangible manifestation of the sun god per se, conceived of as the creative, animating, and life-giving force of the cosmos and the divine prototype of the sovereign. In other words, the king emphasized that he represented the physical, visible, and more important, radiant manifestation, or incarnation, of the central deity of the Egyptian pantheon named at the time Amun-Re. His young son thus inherited a kingdom that could not be more flourishing and succeeded a king who had deified himself in this solar form.

The early days of the reign were very clearly marked by continuity in relation to kingship and the theocratic ideology of Amenhotep III. But very quickly, probably before the end of year 1, the young sovereign “chosen of Amun” decided to organize a large, kingdom-wide corvée of labor, which he placed under the responsibility of the “Greats Ones” of the kingdom, to erect in Karnak, the fiefdom of his tutelary deity Amun-Re, a new temple dedicated to a particular aspect of the solar god (the future god Aten), of which he presented himself as “first

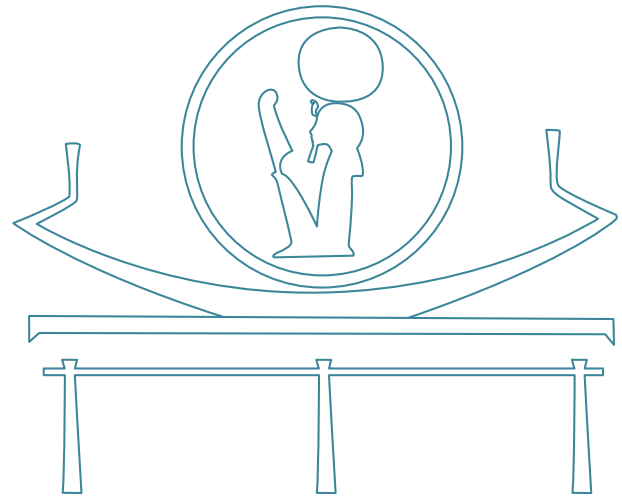




Fig. 2: cryptogram or hieroglyphic composition evoking the throne name of Amenhotep III as the Aten or “solar orb” (in his celestial boat ) “dazzling” (). Drawing S. Connor.

servant” (a title usually translated as “high priest”). This specificity is far from insignificant because, as the rest of the story will confirm, it implies that the relationship with this new protective divinity of kingship is monopolized by the sovereign. The Great Hymn to Aten, a royal composition, clarifies in addressing the god, “there is no one who knows you (truly), except your son, Neferkheperure-waenre (=Akhenaten).” An analysis of its prerogatives and its theological description reveals that this “new” god, which is in reality one, very specific, tangible, and royal aspect of the traditional sun god is a kind of clone of the former protector of kingship, Amun-Re, but in a version entirely controlled by Pharaoh. Moreover, contrary to what has often been believed, or is wanted to be believed, Aten’s theology is poorly inventive and based on simplified versions of conceptions that for the most part had existed for almost a century.

Why such a change of tutelary divinity of kingship, which would very quickly evolve into a monolatry, more and more exclusive? The sources of the time do not provide an explicit explanation, although Amenhotep IV – Akhenaten himself referred to criticisms expressed repeatedly at the



beginning of his reign and which he would no longer tolerate. Equally revealing in the same decree at the beginning of year 5 of his reign, after he had just built a gigantic complex east of Karnak to inaugurate his new ideology of kingship under the auspices of Aten, he decided to build a new royal residence in Middle Egypt on the same model, Akhetaten, a kind of ancient Versailles, where he moved with his court and about forty- to fifty-thousand people. It was built on a site that he was careful to specify had previously belonged to no one: “no king, no queen, no god, no goddess, no man who would do business there.” The surprising need to justify his actions that the monarch displays here, something quite unusual in pharaonic texts, combined with the criticisms mentioned above and the fact that the king claims that no one will change his mind, not even his queen, Nefertiti, suggests that an opposition had spoken against his actions and decisions, an opposition that could only have come from a power capable of countering his own. On the model of the quarrels between Popes and princes from the Middle Ages to the Modern period in the West, it has generally been suggested that this opposition came from a staunchly traditionalist clergy of Amun, hostile to the innovations advocated by a mystic king ahead of his time, but this is highly unlikely. Besides the appointment of the chief priests by the king, a list of taxes intended to finance the cult of Aten reveals that all the temples of Egypt made a contribution to the new projects of the sovereign, a fact that implies they were still functional and active. Moreover, the same list shows that the royal treasury provided most of the financial outlay.

All indications, then, are that the young monarch embarked on a very costly reform of the system that justified his royal authority, presumably in opposition to some of the elite. Atenism also appears as a cult of the royal figure at a kingdom-wide level, targeting the elite in particular, whose adoration of the sovereign was to be equal to that which the king showed his protective and increasingly exclusive deity.

This reform of the cult and, above all, of the ideology of kingship would soon prove to be a failure. An epidemic, or even a pandemic, of plague, and perhaps also of malaria, marked the end of Akhenaten’s reign, severely affecting the royal family itself. This tragedy was also accompanied by a military defeat at the hands of the Hittites in the north of the Syro-Palestinian corridor, in an area where Egypt had not suffered defeat for nearly a century, and which threatened all its possessions in the region, not to mention its control over the trade of several raw materials essential to the production of bronze. It is precisely at this disastrous moment that the king who claimed to have been the perfect and beloved child of Aten died, after only a seventeen-year reign. His son, Tutankhaten, who was about six years old, seemed incapable of dealing with such a situation, and it was his sister, Meritaten, the eldest of the surviving siblings, who, though still a teenager, would take matters into her own hands and be crowned pharaoh. If she began her reign of less than three years by continuing her father’s Atenist ideology, we now know that she quickly abandoned this system and returned to tradition, most likely under the influence of a powerful elite. Her unexpected death, however, would eclipse her efforts. They were subsequently picked up in the name of her younger brother, whom she had pushed aside from the throne and who was renamed Tutankhamun.

The decree of the young king known as the Restoration Decree conveys the difficult situation that Egypt was undergoing, perceived as divine punishment: “If one entreats a god to ask for something of his own, he does not come at all. If one entreats a goddess in the same way, she does not come either.” As a good ruler who oversees the maintenance of the cosmic order, and probably also impelled by an influential and older circle of advisors, the child-king promises to restore the statues and processional barks of the gods, especially of Amun-Re, in the temple in which the three known examples of this decree were found, but also to create priests

Fig. 3: the god Amun-Re crowning the sovereign Hatshepsut, on one of her obelisks in Karnak. Note the traces of hammering of the figure and the mention of the god during the reign of Akhenaten and their re-engraving in the post-Amarna period. Photograph D. Laboury.

“taken from the children of the nobles of their city, sons of famous men, with famous names” and “to multiply the incomes of the temples.” The text also explicitly states that all this will be financed by the royal treasury, as if to redeem the previous missteps of the monarchy.

The royal line, which seems decidedly cursed, was quickly extinguished. After the end of the short reign of Tutankhamun, his two successors, first Ay, then Horemheb, represented themselves as pious and effective restorers of an Egypt fallen into disrepair, following, actually, a cliché of pharaonic phraseology. The latter, Horemheb, made the decision to relegate to the dustbin of history Akhenaten and all those associated with Amarna, including Ay. Tutankhamun’s decree, like all accessible monuments of the child-king who effected the return to

tradition, was recarved in the name of the general-turned-pharaoh. Meanwhile, his father, Akhenaten, was judged to be a failed ruler and thenceforth referred to as “the vile criminal of Akhetaten.”

The opposition that Egyptology has perceived between Aten and Amun is not a mere squabble over religion or deities, but a story where politics and religion are inextricably entangled. It reminds us, that in Egypt of the pharaohs, as with all examples of kingship, no sovereign lacked an ideology behind his (or her) power or an elite to propagate it and render it effective.

FURTHER READING

Laboury 2010; Gabolde 2015.

Fig. 4: reliefs from the tomb of Horemheb pharaoh (KV 57), showing the king interacting with the deities of the traditional polytheistic pantheon. Photograph D. Laboury.



The Name of the God



Fig. 5: the double cartouche of Akhenaten's deity's name: "Long live Re-Horakhty, who rejoices in the horizon in his name of Shou who is none other than Aton." Quartzite. Private collection, UK.

Aten, the tutelary divinity of Akhenaten, is an "aniconic" deity in the sense that, unlike the other divine figures of the Egyptian pantheon, it would be represented not according to a semi-anthropomorphic iconography that symbolically signified its deep nature, but according to the form it took every day in the eyes of mortals, the radiant solar star, as the Great Hymn to the god attests: "Any eye can look upon you before it, when you are the solar star of the day above the earth!" Thus "disembodied," and, moreover, mute, the new divine protector of kingship is reduced to a kind of motif that systematically accompanies and identifies the pharaoh (as well as members of his nuclear family). Texts of the period state that "the rays of

Aten are on him alive and powerful, rejuvenating his flesh each day," as the images of the period show again and again. This process of reducing the iconography of the deity to a simple representation of its phenomenological manifestation is, however, accompanied by the emergence, or maintenance, of an abstract Egyptian form of evocation of its essence and presence: its name. It is written everywhere. Its mere mention has a talismanic value and is enough to signify the divinity, to the point that Akhenaten presents it as an offering to his subjects [see article by Marsha Hill] and to the god himself. This name also reveals to us the particular aspect of the solar god on which Akhenaten focused: "May Re-Horakhty," the traditional solar god, "live, who rejoices (or is manifested in joy) in the horizon (namely, the point of contact between the sky, or the divine world, and the earth, where humans reside), in his name of Shu (or light) that is in (or is none other than) the Aten," namely, the solar disk. It is therefore the solar god in his luminous manifestation, as can be perceived in and by means of the daytime star, to which the king of Egypt has always been assimilated. How better to evoke this light, perceived as creator, animator, and life-giver of the cosmos, than by representing it as the phenomenological manifestation of its source on earth, the solar star, or by naming it?

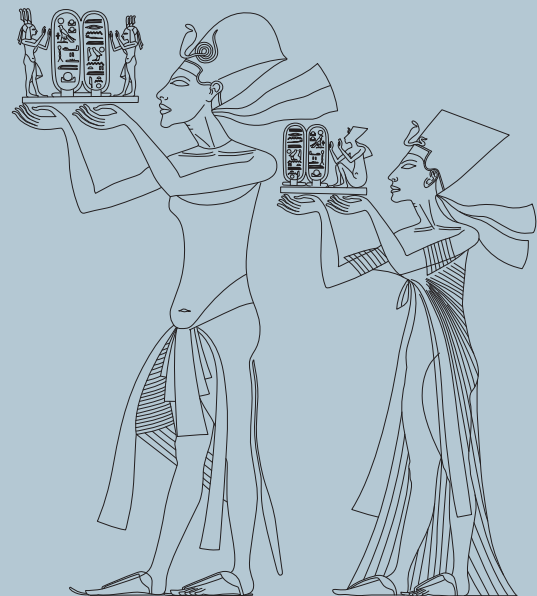


Fig. 6: Akhenaten and Nefertiti offering the double cartouche of the name of Aten to Aten, after a scene from the tomb of Ipy at Amarna (TA 10). Drawing S. Connor.