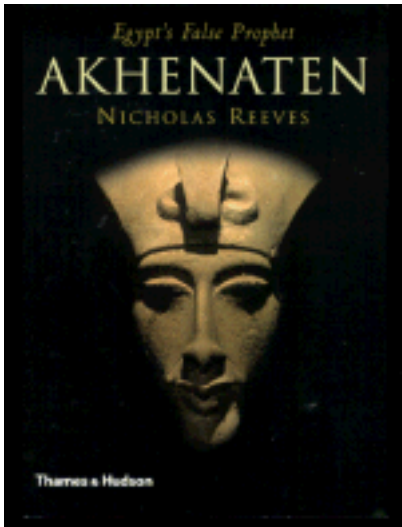


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Reeves, Nicholas

Akhenaten: Egypt's False Prophet

London: Thames & Hudson, 2001. Pp. 208. Cloth.
\$29.95. ISBN 0500051062.

John Walsh

University Of Wales, Lampeter

Despite some weaknesses, this book is without question the best biography available on Akhenaten (Amenophis IV). My review will discuss presentation, writing style, and textual content.

The superb presentation is one of the strongest elements recommending the work. The illustrations, design scheme, font selections, text layout, picture placement, paper, and binding are simply beautiful. The illustrations are generally superior in both quantity and quality to what appears in other major biographies on Akhenaten, such as Aldred, Hornung, and Redford. This superiority is most apparent when comparing illustrations that are found in both Reeves and Aldred. The use of illustrations in Redford and Hornung is more limited, much to their detriment.

Some examples demonstrate my point. First, Aldred uses low-resolution black and white photographs that obscure the fine detail of the subject. Reeves uses high-resolution photographs, often in color, that amplify all the features. For examples, see Opening the Mouth (Reeves, 184; Aldred, 255); Nefertiti (Reeves, 24; Aldred, 75); and Ay and Tiy (Reeves, 88; Aldred, 35). Second, Aldred does not capture the most important parts of the subject, while Reeves usually displays the most significant aspects. For example, Reeves (56) gives us a dramatic frontal view of the mummy of Yuya, while Aldred (104) gives an unremarkable side

view. Also, while Aldred (101) shows Akhenaten's Karnak colossus at peer level, Reeves (95) shows it from the angle that a visitor would see in person, helping the reader to see the imposing, majestic nature of the statue. From this perspective, the physical distortions of Akhenaten are much less pronounced, adding subtle clues to the philosophy behind Amarna art. Thus, Reeves's illustrations are better on a consistent basis. Since illustrations are a major primary source material for interpreting the Amarna period, I cannot say too much about the outstanding work done in this regard. In addition to physical attractiveness, the top-notch layout and materials actually improve reader accessibility and efficiency.

The writing style Reeves uses is concise, though more provincial than commonly used in a scholarly work. Reeves's approach tends to make the reading less dry and is a major point in its favor. Reeves is a more enjoyable and easier read than either Aldred, Hornung, or Redford.

However, Reeves occasionally tends toward the bombastic, which gives a misperception that the work is not a product of serious scholarship. The best example of this critique is Reeves's overemphasis on Egyptian royal sexual practices. He discusses vulgar graffiti (35), political marriages (44), the "twilight world of the royal harem" (60), "Amenophis III's evident fondness for female flesh" (60), as well as the sexual proclivities of some individual members of the royal harem (61). His language seems more titillating than informing. Reeves's approach reaches a crescendo with his discussion of Akhenaten's "unhealthy sexual interest in his children" (161). While the sexual activities of the Egyptian royal court are interesting, how are they significant in the context of other contemporaneous royals, such as the Hittite, Mitanni, Assyrian, and Babylonian courts? Reeves does not make this comparison. Furthermore, Reeves never establishes the relevance of these matters to the arguments in his work, though he may have been trying to slowly construct a pattern of evidence for his incest theory, which has important theological overtones for Akhenaten, if true.

Reeves also uses language that seems anachronistic to modernity. First, his referral to Kiya as "this creature" (159) seems to evidence an objectifying view of women. Second, Reeves's use of Pendlebury's statement concerning "the sloth which overtakes the Oriental who is born to the purple" (53) bespeaks an earlier, uglier time, hearkening back to the twentieth-century master-race theories that were widely held contemporaneously with Pendlebury. While suggesting that "sloth" is a character trait seen in many of those born to privilege may be

appropriate, singling out Orientals and implicitly excluding Occidentals seems out of touch with enlightened viewpoints on race.

Despite the limitations just noted, Reeves's textual content is actually quite good and compares well with Aldred, Hornung, and Redford. Unlike Redford and Aldred, Reeves does not fall into the trap of going into excessive detail about the archaeological process and other tangential background material. Neither does Hornung, for that matter. While Redford and Aldred are billed as full biographies of Akhenaten, they both could be more properly titled "My days digging in the sands at Amarna, with a few short concluding comments about Akhenaten." Redford, in particular, seems cognizant of this issue as he freely admits postponing discussion of Akhenaten the man until the last third of the book (beginning on page 157 of 235 pages). While Reeves presents necessary background material, he is concise and jumps directly to Akhenaten much more quickly than either Aldred or Redford. Hornung is more focused on the religious aspects of Akhenaten instead of being a comprehensive biography.

While most of Reeves's text summarizes arguments and evidence presented elsewhere and are not unique contributions, several arguments are worth mentioning. Reeves's main thesis is that Akhenaten was not a religious fanatic, as commonly viewed, but a king who sought to restore absolute royal power at the expense of the priesthood. Akhenaten's main strategy was to merge the societal kingly and priesthood roles within the royal family. This proposal is absolutely correct. Certainly king-priest conflict was a major theme in most ancient societies. Other biographers of Akhenaten focus too much on religion (or digging) and ignore other cultural influences. Thus, Reeves's insight is keen, well documented, and makes the book an overall excellent work.

However, while Reeves is right suggesting that Akhenaten's major thrust was to maximize royal power, he underestimates the pharaoh's sincere religious sentiment. It seems more probable that Akhenaten was motivated by a combination of cold secular politics and true religious feeling. It is important to remember that Akhenaten's father, Amenophis III, was considered to have departed corporeality at death to merge with the Aten. Thus, Akhenaten's worship of the Aten was also the religious worship of his sire. Certainly it is not beyond the mark to suggest that Akhenaten had true affection toward his father. In fact, the Amarna theology tended to encourage feelings of devotion toward the entire royal family. It is quite possible that as Akhenaten spent countless hours worshipping the Aten he was really contemplating his ancestors and his posterity, who all would one day merge with the Aten. Thus, it seems most

unlikely that Akhenaten had no true religious sympathy, though Reeves is right when he suggests that the major energizing factor for the Amarna revolution was political in nature.

A secondary thesis of Reeves is that Smenkhkare was Nefertiti in disguise. Reeves also suggests that Nefertiti, not Ankhesenamun, wrote the famous marriage proposal to the Hittites. While these arguments have been made before, Reeves readdresses the issues with new evidence that seems convincing, though not conclusive.

Reeves's proposals on these three issues greatly clarify the historical picture and make this work an important contribution.