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THE TELL EL AMARNA PERIOD

THE RELATIONS OF EGYPT AND WESTERN
ASIA IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY B.C.
ACCORDING TO
THE TELL EL AMARNA TABLETS

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LONDON: DAVID NUTT

57-59 LONG ACRE

1903

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THE TELL EL AMARNA PERIOD

I. THE TABLETS, AND HOW THEY WERE FOUND.

As early as 1820 it was known in Europe that in Middle Egypt, on the east bank of the Nile, in the district between Minieh and Siut, there lay the remains of a great city of Ancient Egypt. The Prussian exploration expedition of 1842-45 gave special attention to this site, where indeed were found, about sixty miles south of Minieh, extensive ruins, beginning at the village of Haggi Kandil and covering the floor of a rock-bound valley named after the fellahin village, El Amarna. At that time the ground-plan of the city was still easy to distinguish; the regular lines of the streets could be traced, and enough could be seen of the great design of the principal temple to excite the admiration of the discoverers. This example of the laying out of an ancient Egyptian town still remains almost unique, for of old, as now, private buildings were constructed of flimsy material. That the

Tell el Amarna remains have escaped rapid destruction is due entirely to the sudden and violent downfall of the original splendour of the city and the complete desolation which succeeded. The importance of the place was revealed on examination of the surrounding cliffs. Here were found, sculptured and inscribed in a new and peculiar style, the rock-cut tombs of the most distinguished inhabitants of Akhet-haten, the royal city built for himself about 1380 B.C. by Amenophis IV., and destroyed soon after his early death.

In the beginning of 1888 some fellahin digging for marl not far from the ruins came upon a number of crumbling wooden chests, filled with clay tablets closely covered on both sides with writing. The dusky fellows must have been not a little delighted at finding themselves owners of hundreds of these marketable antiquities, for which a European purchaser would doubtless give plenty of good gold coins. To multiply their gains they broke up the largest tablets into three or four separate pieces, often to the grievous hindrance of the future decipherer. But very soon the matter was bruited abroad; the Government at once intervened, almost all the find was in due time secured, and a stop was put to any further dispersal of separate tablets and of fragments. The political situation in Egypt is pretty accurately indicated by the fact that about eighty of

the best preserved of the Tell el Amarna tablets at once found their way to the British Museum. Some sixty were left in the museum at Boulak, and about one hundred and eighty were secured for the Berlin Museum, many of them tiny fragments, but mostly containing important records. Few have remained in private hands.

Some alabaster slabs came to light at Tell el Amarna bearing the hieroglyphic names of King Amenophis IV. and his father, Amenophis III. These had evidently served as lids to the chests. Some tablets also were inscribed with notes in hieratic, written in red ink. But in spite of these exceptions, it was at once recognised that all the documents were written in Babylonian cuneiform. The reading of the introductory lines on various tablets served to show that the find consisted of part of the Egyptian state archives in the times of the two kings Amenophis III. and IV. Thus the first of the many startling discoveries that were to follow in such rapid succession was made in the recognition that about 1400 B.C. the Semitic speech of Babylon served as the language of diplomacy in the East.

Apart from a few tablets dealing with mythological subjects and written in Babylonian, and two which contain inventories, all the tablets were letters. Most of them were from Egyptian officials in Syria and Canaan, and usually they were

addressed to the king. Among them were found many long letters from Asiatic kings to the Egyptian monarch, and also a few communications from the Foreign Office of "Pharaoh" himself. We must note, however, that this title of Egyptian kings, so commonly used in the Old Testament, is apparently never once employed in the Tell el Amarna documents. It is interesting to observe how difficulties of the script and of a language not entirely familiar to most of the scribes were overcome. Even the learned scribes of the royal "House of the Sun" in Egypt had obviously their own troubles in the matter, and made use of the Babylonian mythological texts already mentioned as a means of improving their fluency. Of this we have evidence in the thin red lines by which, on these tablets alone, the words have been separated from each other. The governors and officials must not be classified as educated or uneducated on the evidence of their letters; all alike employed professional scribes, of whom one might be skilful and the next a bungler whose communications must be guessed at rather than read. Occasionally a Babylonian word is followed by the corresponding Canaanite word, also in cuneiform, but marked as a translation. Like the Egyptian kings, so the Asiatic sovereigns had each his staff of scribes. One of the petty chiefs, Tarkhundarash of Arsapi, was

evidently so unhappy as to have none in his Court who could read or write a letter in Babylonian, for letters to him were written in his own tongue. The scribe of the Hittite king produced only a species of dog Latin, while the scribe of the king of Alashia trots out his whole vocabulary unhampered by grammar. On the other hand, the letters of the king of Mitani are drawn up in the characters known as Assyrian; and it is probable that the Assyrian system of cuneiform may have originated in Mitani. If so, for the Mitani scribe there could be no question of any special difficulty in using the acknowledged language of diplomacy in the Ancient East.

It is evident that the Babylonian royal scribes at length showed some consideration for their unfortunate Egyptian correspondents by writing as a rule in phonograms which could be easily spelt out, since strange ideograms might have brought the reader to a standstill. The sources of the letters may be distinguished also by the colour and consistency of the material of the tablets, which are of all shades of clay, from pale yellow to red or dark brown. Side by side, too, with hard and legible pieces, lie broken and crumbling fragments which have suffered sadly during the few years that have elapsed since they were again exposed to the air.

II. THE EGYPTIAN COURT AND ADMINISTRATION.

The two Pharaohs of the Tell el Amarna Period belong to the XVIIIth Dynasty, which about 1560 B.C. had freed the land from the yoke of certain Asiatic invaders known as the Shasu. The new dynasty soon began to encroach upon Asia. King Thutmosis III. (1503 to 1449 B.C.) after many chequered campaigns conquered Syria as far as the Gulf of Iskanderun. On the African side he extended the bounds of his kingdom to the confluence of the Nile and the Atbara, so that the greater part of Nubia owned his sway. The terror of his name did not die with him, but for long did good service to his successors, the first of whom, Amenophis II., seems moreover himself to have maintained energetically the fame of Egyptian arms. To this influence our clay tablets bear witness by twice making emphatic reference to the days of the powerful "Manakhbiria"—the prenomen of King Thutmosis III. With the accession of Amenophis III. the warlike spirit ceased to prevail at the Court of Thebes. Nothing more was to be gained by Egypt in Western Asia, and the tastes of the new king lay in other directions than war. The two celebrated Colossi of Memnon (statues of himself), many great buildings, the important part played by his favourite wife Teye, the well-filled harem, the cultivation of "wisdom"

(which practically, no doubt, was tantamount to what we should call "preciosity"); last, but not least, the solemn adoration of his own divine image—all these facts combine to indicate the altered condition of things which came about under Amenophis III. He reigned thirty-six years, long enough to allow the movement introduced by him to run its course. His son, Amenophis IV., was, however, just as little inclined as his father to walk in the steps of his warlike ancestors. Hampered apparently by bodily defects, this Son of the Sun tried his strength in a field often far more dangerous than the battlefield. He began a reform of the Egyptian religion, apparently in the direction of a kind of monotheism in which the chief worship was reserved for the disk of the sun, the symbol under which the god Ra was adored at Heliopolis in the Delta.

Nothing being known of the life of this king as heir-apparent, probably we shall never understand what led him to take this new departure. From his conduct during the early years of his reign it may be concluded that he intended to proceed gradually, but was roused to more aggressive measures by the resistance of the powerful priests of Amun in Thebes. These men acted, of course, for their own interests in promptly resisting even mild attempts at reform. Perhaps also the king's aim had been from the outset to

