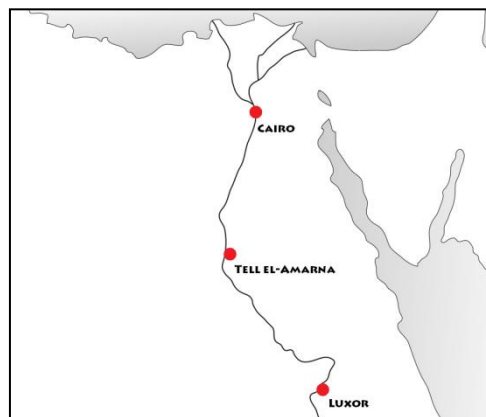


# Akhenaten and the people of Amarna: interview with Professor Barry Kemp

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By Rennan de Souza Lemos (Egito-Lab/UFF)

Amarna is one of the best preserved archaeological sites in Egypt. Mainly, this is because of the work of the team directed by the prominent Egyptologist Barry J. Kemp since 1977. Now, in the Amarna Project, different sub-projects are being developed with the aim of reconstructing the life of the people that lived at Akhetaten and the history of Akhenaten, Nefertiti and their court.



The major parts of the ancient city have been excavated, from the long-known Workmen's Village to the recently discovered popular cemetery near the South Tombs and the Stone Village. The work of Barry Kemp's team has resulted in numerous publications, obligatory reading for anyone who wants to study Amarna. Much of the material is available at [www.amarnaproject.com](http://www.amarnaproject.com).

The site has been the focus of traditional archaeological excavations, but also of the application of different archaeological methodologies of survey. Examples are the aerial photography survey conducted by Gwil Owen, the survey with total station by Hans Barnard and the application of geophysical methods in various parts of the site by a team from the University of Arkansas, led by Jason Hermann.



Barry J. Kemp is Emeritus Professor of Egyptology at the University of Cambridge, UK and a Senior Fellow of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research. He is the Director of the Amarna Project and the author of many books and articles on Egyptology and Amarna, including the standard *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization* (Routledge, 1989; updated in 2006) and the new *The city of Akhenaten and Nefertiti: Amarna and its people* (Thames and Hudson/American University in Cairo Press, 2012). Today, Barry Kemp is one of the world's authorities on the Amarna Period and one of the most important Egyptologists we have noted.

This interview was carried out at Amarna, in the excavation house of the Amarna Project, during the season of October and November 2012 when we were participating in survey and excavation activities at the Great Aten Temple and the South Tombs Cemetery.

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**Rennan de Souza Lemos:** Firstly, Professor, could you tell us a little about how you decided to be an Egyptologist and about your specific interest in the site of Amarna?

**Barry J. Kemp:** I was born in 1940, and shortly afterwards my father joined the British army and became a lorry driver for the British army in Egypt. When he was there, the army encouraged the soldiers to visit the ancient sites and monuments, so he made the trip to Luxor, the Valley of the Kings, and he also visited the Cairo Museum, and sent back home photographs he took. I was brought up with those photographs in the house, they were part of my childhood. So, from a very early age, I became familiar with 'Tutankhamun's treasures as shown on postcards he bought, and with Deir el-Bahri, the Valley of the Kings, and such places. Then, much later, when I was at school – I must have been about 14 or 15, I suppose – we had to do history projects. I cannot remember whose idea it was, whether it was mine or somebody else's, maybe my mother's, but I chose to do a project on ancient Egypt, using those photographs, and I started to read about the subject. That is how I became interested in Egyptology.

Almost at the same time, I became interested in field archaeology and museums, and joined some digs as a volunteer on archaeological sites, mainly of the Medieval period in the part of England where I was brought up. I enjoyed the process of excavating, touching the soil; it did not matter if anything was found, just contact with the ancient past was enough. I also did volunteer work in the museum in Birmingham – it was the nearest city. I also started to learn hieroglyphs – the University of Birmingham had an extramural department with hieroglyph classes for anyone who paid some tiny amount of money. By the time I went to Liverpool University, I already had a grounding in hieroglyphs.

About how I started to be interested in Amarna. I had already worked in the palace-city of Amehotep III in Malkata (mainly in 1973, and for the University Museum of Pennsylvania), so I was familiar with the archaeology of that period. I had by then also become interested in how Egyptian towns and cities worked, particularly as seen through archaeology. I felt that archaeology could do more than how it had been used in the past to answer some of the basic questions about Egyptian cities and how they worked. And so it seemed to me that Amarna was

the best place to pursue such work. This was in the 1970s, when no foreigner could visit Amarna. In the aftermath of the war with Israel foreigners were not allowed to leave the area of Cairo, Luxor and Aswan. But as soon as that restriction was lifted, I applied to the Egypt Exploration Society to see if they would support a survey at Amarna, and they did. That is how I became involved. It was not because I was particularly interested in Akhenaten, it was because I saw a fine opportunity to understand Egyptian cities and city life better through archaeology at Amarna, and it remains an unrivalled place for that kind of study.

**RSL:** Over a long time Amarna has been a focus of archaeological excavations. The interest of Petrie in Amarna, for example, was due to the circumstances of the site in being a single period settlement, so it could be the base for the understanding of the life of its people. It is true, but one can distinguish at least three different historical phases at Amarna, the construction of the city, its occupation and its destruction and abandonment. Could you tell us more about these phases of the history of the site?

**BJK:** In terms of small finds – the bulk of the material – you cannot distinguish phases. That comes only through building periods. The whole period from the foundation of the city to its abandonment is too short to have seen changes in material culture; so the pottery, for example, must be the same throughout, and some of the types present before the Amarna Period continued in use afterwards. It is only through building phases that change is apparent, and for much of the city there are no other building phases. The North Palace, for example, seems to be a single piece, even though we know, from hieroglyphic texts on door frames, that it went through a change of owner. As a building, there is only one period, and the same is true for the most of the houses in the city. It is unusual to find a house where you can see clearly that there is more than one period. The house of Ranefer is unusual in that respect: it was built over the demolished remains of an earlier smaller house, but it is quite exceptional. This is also true for the Central City, where most of the buildings belong to one building phase. In the case of the King's House, an early building phase is present in the area of the magazines; but the residential part does not seem to have been altered in this way. The Great and Small Aten Temples are the most obvious examples of major constructional alterations where the remains of earlier and more modest layouts have been recovered.

It is not true that the city was completely abandoned. A population remained at the very southern end of the site, where the city disappears under the modern village of El-Hagg Qandil.

A small portion of it was excavated firstly by Borchardt and then by the second season of the Egypt Exploration Society expedition under Leonard Woolley. He called the site the River Temple, but that is a misleading name. It was the part of the city that continued to be occupied at least until the late 20th dynasty, because one of the houses had a reused block from the time of Ramses III, which raises the interesting question: where did that come from? Was there a building of Ramses III of a fairly formal kind? That is a quite exceptional part of the site. Over the rest of the site, demolition is apparent from the loss of the stones and the way they were removed. Those who did the work had difficulty removing the lowest layer, and so they chipped holes down the sides of the blocks into the gypsum foundations to help lever the last blocks up. It shows they were determined to remove as far as possible every block, leaving very few behind. Across the river, at El-Ashmuneim, a few thousand blocks have been found, and it is assumed that they came from Amarna (figure 1). But unlike at Karnak, they have been transported across the river and used in several constructions. It is not possible to reconstruct whole areas of scenes from the blocks and to determine from which building they came. There are some who think that a portion came from the Great Aten Temple, but the evidence is not really very secure.



Figure 1: *talatat* block with the name of the Aten at El-Ashmuneim. In a simple walk through the place, one can see various examples of these blocks scattered through the ground (RSL). Photo taken in November 1st 2012 by Rennan de Souza Lemos.

As for the people who did the demolition, you cannot really distinguish archaeologically anything they left behind; apart, that is, from a single *ostracon* that was found in 1923 by the Egypt Exploration Society. It is still not published, and maybe will not be since I think the original does not survive. It contained the cartouches of Horemheb and Sety I. What was it doing there? You cannot tell. It is not far from the Central City, just found in debris. Horemheb is himself commemorated from a few fragments from a construction at the Great Aten Temple – at least one block was found by Petrie and parts of at least one sphinx were found by the Egypt

Exploration Society and are now in the British Museum. But where it stood and how big it was you cannot tell.

**RSL:** The Amarna Project is one of the biggest and most important archaeological projects in Egypt nowadays. How to maintain a project of this magnitude during all that time? How can people help you to continue for, who knows, more 35 years?

**BJK:** We are one of the larger expeditions, but there are several others that must be easily as big; the Austrian Expedition at Tell el-Dab'a, for example; the German-Swiss Expedition at Elephantine is another. They benefit from continuous funding from established sources, in the case of the German Institute from the German government, in the case of the Swiss Institute, which works alongside them, from its own board of a charitable foundation. The Austrian Institute at Tell el-Dab'a also works with money from the government. The British government does not have a policy of direct funding for overseas field archaeology. They did for a while, in the case of Egypt through the Egypt Exploration Society. But then the government decided to change its priorities and withdrew its funding, which was never very great. To fill the gap, together with some friends I set up a charity, a non-governmental organization, the Amarna Trust, which is registered in Britain. We invite people to donate, communicating through lectures, our websites, and from sending out a twice-yearly newsletter. We raise enough to cover our costs each year, but we have no foundation that brings a regular income. If people want to support, it is easy to do so. There are various ways through which people can make donations to the Amarna Trust.

**RSL:** Archaeology is not only excavation. It requires all the subsequent work of planning, mapping and storage. Beyond excavation at recently discovered sites, particularly the South Tombs Cemetery, one of the goals of the Amarna Project is the planning and mapping of the remains of ancient Akhetaten, to understand it better, and another is to preserve the city. One example of recent fieldwork at Amarna is the reclaiming of the Great Aten Temple, excavated before by Pendlebury and 2012 onwards by you. Could you explain this project for our readers?

**BJK:** The Great Aten Temple is a modern name for the 'House of the Aten', which was the first building that Akhenaten gave in his list on the Boundary Stelae of the constructions he intended

to make at Amarna. The 'House of the Aten' was the first one, and it appears in very detailed pictures in some of the tombs, in particular the ones of senior priests, Meryra and Panehsy. So it is fair to say that it was the most important building at Amarna. It was the spiritual heart of the city. It was largely, in its various parts, built of stone, and suffered almost total demolition at the end of the Amarna Period, leaving large expanses of the foundation layer of gypsum concrete still present. The area of the foundation layer was exposed again by the Egypt Exploration Society expedition directed by John Pendlebury in the early 1930s. He worked very quickly and had to move a huge amount of covering debris to reveal the foundations, which have the outlines of the building marked on them. His architect, Ralph Lavers, made a generalized plan.<sup>7</sup> It is not inaccurate, but it is at quite a small scale and lacks details. The general account that was given in the publication is brief, even for the 1930s. It is a very schematic presentation of the building, and in some respects is incorrect. In particular, Pendlebury and his architect misunderstood the way the foundations related to the final floor of the building. So, there are good academic reasons for looking at it again, to get a better and more detailed idea of its appearance. It was a building which went through a major change of plan and enlargement, and it is also important to find out more about that. It is briefly covered in Pendlebury's report, but he did not complete the examination of the earlier phases.

The Great Aten Temple lies beside the modern village of el-Till, and more particularly its cemetery. The northern half of the temple was already covered by the cemetery by the middle of the 19th century. Maps made at that time show the northern part of the enclosure already under the cemetery. In recent years the cemetery has started to expand at the expense of the Great Aten Temple ground, encouraged in part by the transfer of a part of its land from ownership by the Egyptian government antiquities organization to the village to allow a further expansion. Also the way the site was left by Pendlebury has encouraged neglect. It has remained a flat, featureless, dusty place, where rubbish is tipped, encouraging the feeling that it was a place of no particular importance. The village cemetery has, in recent years, started to expand even more and to approach the very edges of the main stone building that lay in the enclosure (figure 2). It has become an urgent priority to do something to hold back further loss of land to the village. It can only be done effectively by exposing parts of the temple and, after recording them, building up the foundations with fresh stones, not very high but sufficiently so that the edges of the building are clearly visible. This will then act as a boundary wall.

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<sup>7</sup> J. D. S. Pendlebury (1951), *The city of Akhenaten III: the Central City and the Official Quarters*, London, Egypt Exploration Society, pl. III.



It is a large and expensive project which is pushing our resources to the very limits. It will take several years to make significant progress. But at the end I hope we will have a more detailed record of the building that will be better protected from further loss of its land. The temple will also be available for visitors to inspect and see the unusual design it had, filled with offering tables (figures 3), which tell a lot about how Akhenaten saw the needs of the Aten and its cult. And, of course, visitors will be able to make a comparison for themselves between what they see on the ground and the pictures they can see in the tombs.



Figure 2: aerial photography showing the frontal part of the Great Aten Temple and the nearest tombs of the modern cemetery (north to the right). Photo by Miriam Bertram and Sue Kelly, courtesy of the Amarna Project. Figure 3: foundations of the offering tables at the Great Aten Temple (Oct. and Nov. 2012 fieldwork). Photo by Rennan de Souza Lemos.

**RSL:** Related to the planning and mapping of Amarna is another big project, the Amarna Digital Atlas. What does this project consist of?

**BJK:** The aim of the Digital Atlas is to bring together two datasets: one is the plan of the city suitably digitised. A lot of work on that was done a few years ago, mainly by myself, but then enhanced by a surveyor who worked here for a number of years in the 2000s, Helen Fenwick of the University of Hull. The other part is information on the huge quantity of objects and other kinds of material that have been excavated. A lot of it is unpublished and unprocessed. We have a huge amount in the storage rooms here at the expedition house, but it also extends to the old Egypt Exploration Society material and to the material found by the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft during Borchardt's excavations. The most important of the Egypt Exploration Society's object records were put into a spreadsheet by the Assistant Director, Anna Stevens, a few years ago.<sup>8</sup> The aim now is to extend that, to take in the many thousands of objects (maybe

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<sup>8</sup> (*Interviewer's note*) The database made by Anna Steves is available for download in the site of the Amarna Project: [http://amarnaproject.com/pages/recent\\_projects/material\\_culture/small\\_finds/](http://amarnaproject.com/pages/recent_projects/material_culture/small_finds/).

20 thousand), many of them very small, that have come from the excavations that began in 1979 and are mostly in the storerooms at the expedition house.

The overall aim is to satisfy a vision that, for Amarna, a one-period city, you will be able to relate things found to the buildings in which they were discovered – something that is quite difficult to do at present, in part because so many of the objects are actually unpublished – and to set the files within a GIS framework. The software exists to enable this to be done, and it is a matter of compiling the individual layers though this involves a huge amount of data inputting. At the moment, the emphasis is on getting the information about the objects into a standard format, so that just on their own they can be indexed, and then, as a second stage, they can be displayed as to where they were found. It should be possible finally to display particular categories of objects in automatically generated distribution maps. This opens the way to major exercises in analysis.

There is another huge amount of data that exists only in a very simply processed form. The contents of hieratic jar labels – many hundreds have been found – are very often included in a simple form in the publications of the Egypt Exploration Society, whilst those from Borchardt's excavations have not been published. But there is more to be documented than the hieratic texts, namely, the shape and fabric of the original vessels themselves. They have mostly been treated as of interest to philologists or to people interested in the regnal dates they contain or in the commodities they mention. But they have never been properly studied with a view to seeing how they are distributed across the site and it is currently difficult to do that from the way they are published. Another large category of objects that is being studied at the moment comprises the broken stone fragments from statues and, to some extent, architectural pieces. We have hundreds and hundreds of those in our stores, which come not so much from our own excavations, as from recovering material left behind by Pendlebury's excavations. They found so many of these pieces, they were not able to take them all back to England for division, only a small selection. Many of them remained on the surface of the site, and they have been collected and recorded. In the end they should provide a much better picture of the sculpture programme that Akhenaten followed, especially at the Great Palace, something that is not easily apparent from the publications. So the Digital Atlas is an envelope into which a lot of different kinds of information can be inserted and collated, so that different kinds of information can be studied together.



**RSL:** Changing the subject a little, but not completely. Your new book is what people who study the Amarna Period (myself included) were in need of. Even you say you do not have new insights about Akhenaten, you open new windows of research in this major text. In your opinion, nowadays, what are the most fruitful research subjects to be developed about Akhenaten, his city and its people?

**BJK:** I think, concerning Akhenaten, everybody has to decide for themselves what they think religion is actually about, and what is the nature of spirituality. Until you decide that, I think you will be one step removed from what Akhenaten was doing. A large part of the world still has religious faith and personal faith is bound to influence the way that Akhenaten is interpreted, not least because the surviving sources are fairly limited in their content and sometimes opaque in their style. A great deal, in the end, depends upon personal intuition, a personal feeling as to what one person could accomplish within the time that he was living; what kinds of things such a person could think about. Research is governed by processes within the mind of the individual researcher.

For the city and its people, more can be learned by excavation. Not at a big scale – there is no point in returning to the pattern of the first half of the 20th century, when excavating houses became such a routine matter that in individual cases it often raised very little interest. You can read, for example, through the Egypt Exploration Society's volume, *The city of Akhenaten II* (largely devoted to the North Suburb) and find few houses that triggered an interest on the part of the excavators. They felt they were doing a job of recording things as they became available, but they had little sense of research themes, of interesting things you could do with the data, not at least because much of the material that was coming out from the ground they did not observe, did not record.

So, future excavation, in places that have not been excavated before, should be undertaken only when research themes have been thought out beforehand. For the present, for us, this means primarily the excavation at the cemetery behind the South Tombs, where we started excavation in 2006. It has suddenly made available to us the skeletal remains and the evidence for burial customs from a cemetery of the people who must have lived in the small houses of the city. That is something new. The newness of it will become exhausted fairly soon, and then perhaps it will be time to let it rest for a while. And then in the future I am sure people will go back to it with fresh minds. In the housing areas, further excavation is justified if done on a small scale, but very

intensively, with experts who come in order to advance their own research themes through materials that are coming from the excavations, and with very clear questions in mind.

We know already a great deal about Amarna. It is an intensively studied site. This does not mean, however, that it is not open to new interpretations. In general in the study of the arts and humanities, new knowledge comes as much from the perceptions that new generations of people have as from new evidence. Think of the study of Shakespeare and the Classics, and the Old Testament. These studies are still alive with people making their careers in what are essentially closed bodies of material. There are always new ways of looking at things, fresh comparative material to use. It is the same with Amarna. Others will come after me and see things differently.

**RSL:** Thank you very much for this interview, Professor Kemp. To finish, could you let a message for the new students that want to follow a career in Egyptology, especially those who wish to excavate in Egypt?

**BJK:** Do not give up hope! I suppose that is the message... And do not think that archaeological research is only about excavation. There is so much to learn just from looking at sites, from surveying them with a questioning eye. Digging should be the last resort, because it is destructive, and also needs a time-consuming and sometimes expensive operation of preservation, as well as a greater commitment of time to working on the results than people often allow. Do not think archaeology is only about digging things up.

The Amarna Project is financed by the Amarna Trust, a UK-registered charity. People who wish to support the archaeological projects developed at Amarna are invited to visit the Trust website at **[www.amarnatrust.com](http://www.amarnatrust.com)**.