

G. A Final Anchor Fact for Archaic Egypt

1. In 1922, British archeologist Howard Carter made a discovery that captured the imagination of everyone in the world. It was an intact pharaonic tomb, hidden in the “Valley of the Kings” in Upper Egypt.
2. It was a tomb from the last half of ancient Egyptian history when the pharaohs went to greater and greater lengths to hide their tombs. In this case, the effort had paid off. The tomb had been untouched for over three thousand years!
3. It was the tomb of the soon-to-be famous “King Tut,” whose golden death mask became the most recognizable symbol of ancient Egypt, second only to the pyramids.
4. Because of the famous death mask and sarcophagus of King Tut, a new interest arose in the archaic culture of ancient Egypt.

H. King Tut and the Failed Egyptian Reformation

1. As it turns out, King Tut is connected to the most interesting episode in the religious history of Egypt after the Age of the Pyramids.
2. With the worship of the god-kings having essentially died off, the people of Egypt now more concerned with their belief in their own personal afterlife. Normal people had more and more elaborate tombs, and a newly popular text known as “The Book of the Dead” promoted the idea that the common man could navigate the afterlife.
3. King Tut’s father, Amenhotep IV, decided to revive the idea of the pharaoh as the leader of Egyptian religion for all. To accomplish this he decided to rid Egyptian religion of all its many gods, and insist in the worship of the sun god, Aten, alone.
4. To bring about this change, he changed his name from Amenhotep (which includes the god name “Amen”) to Akhenaten, which means “he who acts on behalf of the Aten”.
5. He also moved his family to a new capital city, Akhetaten, stopped supporting the priests of the traditional religion in the previous capital city Thebes (in Upper Egypt), made all religious festivals other than those involving the Aten illegal, and ordered the army to seek out temples throughout the country and scratch out all references to unauthorized gods.
6. Akhenaten's changes angered the priests, and must have caused fear and confusion for the people (who must have sensed a danger in abandoning their trusted gods).
7. After he died, his religious changes were abandoned, which is shown by the fact that his son Tutankhaten is not known to us by that name. Instead we know his as Tutankhamen (which shows the reversal of the switch in god names).
8. King Tut died at only nineteen years of age, leading to much speculation about his death, especially because of the strange conflict of religion involving his father.

II. Archaic Mesopotamia and Persia

Although far less famous in terms of monuments and mystique, ancient Mesopotamia (today Iraq) and neighboring Persia (today Iran) were long ago home to cultures similar to archaic Egypt. Studying these archaic cultures is useful in order to compare them to Egypt—and to prepare for the arrival of classical Greece. The greatest empire of the archaic world, the Persian Empire, collided with Greece in the most important war in human history: the Greco-Persian War!

A. Basic Orientation

1. The term “Mesopotamia” means “the land between two rivers”. The two rivers in question are the Tigris and Euphrates. (Many historical events from Ancient history do not happen literally between the two rivers, but the term Mesopotamia is still the term used for the history of the general area.)
2. Before the rivers were dammed, they flowed more quickly and flooded regularly in the spring, much like the Nile.
3. The people of Mesopotamia did not create lasting stone monuments the way the Egyptians did. Mesopotamian structures were made from mud brick, which is far more fragile.
4. The various empires of Mesopotamia and Persia did build impressive structures called “ziggurats.” They served as religious temples, but were not tombs. (No complete ziggurat remains, so historians are not sure of their exact, shape, size and purpose.)

B. A Lost World Brought Back to Life

1. The story of Ancient Mesopotamia, like that of Egypt, was once lost. The people who have lived in the region for over a thousand years exclusively follow the religion of Islam.
2. The religion of Islam preaches that pre-Islamic history is not important, and thus Muslims almost completely ignored even the ruins of pharaonic Egypt. Since nothing even nearly as impressive survived in Mesopotamia and Persia, their ancient history was completely buried until it was revived by European historians.

C. Rediscovery of the Region's Ancient Past

1. When Napoleon invaded Egypt, his aim was to strike at the British empire in India. The British realized Napoleon's plan, and began to try to forge alliances in the Middle East.

2. The written records of Mesopotamia were created using a form of writing called “cuneiform”, which means “wedge-shaped.” (A scribe pressed the wedge-shaped end of a reed into a wet tablet, making an imprint. Then the tablet was baked to harden it.)
3. Based on earlier studies of Persia, historians had a basic grasp of a language written in cuneiform called Old Persian.
4. A British army officer named Henry Rawlinson used this knowledge to decipher a great carving on the side of a mountain in Persia called the “Behistun Inscription.”
5. Since it contained writing in Old Persian and two other archaic languages (Elamite and Akkadian) it became the Rosetta Stone of Mesopotamian history. Rawlinson deciphered it in 1843, and the study of the archaic history of the region became possible.

D. Earliest Kingdoms: Sumer and Akkad

1. Ancient cuneiform records indicate the presence of two groups of cities in Mesopotamia, named Sumer and Akkad. Their history stretches back nearly as far as Egypt’s.
2. Each city was ruled by a “patesi,” but occasionally one city would dominate the others under the leadership of a ruler who took the title “Lugal” (“great man”).
3. Then, at the earliest point in Mesopotamian history that is considered valid, a ruler called Sargon of Akkad unified the whole area, forging the Akkadian Empire c. 2250 BC.
4. This makes Sargon of Akkad a similar figure in Mesopotamian history to Menes-Narmer in Egyptian history. He is a great unifier at the beginning of history.
5. However, Sargon’s empire did not last. Nomads called the Gutti destroyed it, and delayed the real start of Mesopotamian history for another 400 years, until the rise of the Babylonian Empire.