

City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti: Amarna and its People,
by Barry Kemp, 2012. London: Thames and Hudson;
ISBN 978-0-500-29120-7 paperback £19.95;
320 pp., 287 ills., 53 in colour

Richard Bussmann

Amarna, the ancient Akhetaten and capital of the 'heretic' king Akhenaten, is a hot spot of Egyptian Archaeology and catches the imagination of archaeologists, theologians and enthusiasts alike. Expectations are high when Barry Kemp, a leading Egyptian Archaeologist working at the site since 1977, presents his view on Amarna. The publication of *City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti* coincides with the 100th anniversary of the discovery of the bust of queen Nefertiti celebrated in a special exhibition in Berlin. Nefertiti is, however, not the inspiration for the book although the bust is mentioned in a comment on the unfortunate consequences of find distribution on pages 12–13. Rather, the book is a lavishly illustrated synthesis of the archaeology of Amarna based on the author's first-hand knowledge of the site and a reflection of his long-standing engagement with reconstructing social life at Akhetaten (Kemp 1977). Excavated originally in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, the site still suffers from old reports focusing on architecture and artwork on standing buildings with patchy information on the find context of objects. Due to his work at Amarna, studies on fresh material, museum objects, and digging archives, and thanks to an imaginative archaeological mind Kemp is able to revive what he had called 'Egypt in microcosm' in a previous publication (1989, 261–317).

Readers interested in the conceptual framework of the book will appreciate the summary of major themes on

CAJ 23:3, 557–9 © 2013 McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research
doi:10.1017/S0959774313000590

pages 19 and 20. Perhaps one can try to condense the agenda even further into two essential lines of thoughts. Both arguably define counterintuitive perspectives on Amarna with wider implications for Egyptian Archaeology. The first relates to the urban nature of Akhetaten. While a vast archaeological site running over six kilometres from the South Suburb to the North City and five kilometres from the cultivation to the Eastern desert mountain (not to mention the wider area delineated by the boundary stelae), Kemp argues that Amarna functioned socially like a web of villages each clustering around a large estate of a high official. The estates, he says, developed into nodes of individual neighbourhoods formed over a short period of time according to the standard model of social life in Egypt, i.e. the village community. Kemp takes the argument further and claims that Ancient Egypt as a whole with all its splendid monuments and imperial grandeur is the output of a society whose mind operated throughout the millennia in the village horizon (p. 47). The second dominant idea of the book undermines the notion of Amarna as the built vision of Akhenaten's theological program. Royal initiative is only one part of the story, Kemp argues. He emphasizes the *bricolage* nature of the site and foregrounds the responses of individuals to a loosely defined master plan within the range of resources available. Kemp calls it self-organization and sees the individual villages as the main economic and organizational units. On a wider level, social engineering which can easily impose itself as a dominant feature of pharaonic archaeology on the modern perception of Egyptian architecture and town planning was only superficial and perhaps even not intended or possible beyond a rather limited reach of royal control (pp. 163, 168). This framework comes through especially in Chapters 1 'Building a Vision', 5 'City of People' and 8 'What Kind of City?'

The author departs from an account of the intellectual foundations of the city layout (Chapter 1), sets Akhenaten's vision against the landscape and building materials used (Chapter 2), and then discusses successively different archaeological contexts, from temples and palaces over private houses to shrines and non-royal tombs (Chapters 3–7). In all instances, the primary interest is in people rather than buildings or objects, although text, illustrations and captions offer rich information on archaeological details. To pick some examples, Kemp shows that above-ground quarries and holes in the desert attest to people extracting stone and mud from the desert off the official sources (pp. 62, 69–70). He suggests that the large courts in the Great Aten temple and the palace might have been used by the crowds for picnicking turning their role as both producers and dependent beneficiaries within the royal temple economy into a physical experience (pp. 117, 146). He explains the similar outlook of houses other than state-planned villas as the result of peer observation where people take decisions by imitating the behaviour of their neighbours (pp. 166, 180). Chapter 6, 'The Quality of Life', looks at the sensual experience of material life in houses. Living meant in the first place sitting or working on the ground which explains why surfaces of stools, tables, benches etc. are generally lower than in modern European houses (p. 199). Health issues lie at the heart of life in houses, especially efforts to

avoid bad smells originating from sewage and waste (p. 206). Things, rather than words, are the major currency for displaying status, and the excitement for and management of things led to private object caches being dug beneath house floors (pp. 212–18). The skeletal remains from the recently excavated South Tombs cemetery, the only direct source for bioanthropological analysis of living conditions at Amarna, shows that less-off people were able to, but rarely did achieve the age of fifty years and suffered from a bunch of diseases and injuries, some of which resulting perhaps from penalty (pp. 227–9). Chapter 7, 'Spiritual Life at Amarna', has a long section on family ancestor cults, a blind spot in royal theology labelled Atenism (pp. 245–56). Kemp argues that people might have adhered to old gods because Atenism lacked the kind of imaginative power the established religion provided (p. 256). Old gods and Atenism intermingled in inscriptional and visual evidence of coffins of ordinary people (pp. 256–63). In Chapter 8, 'What Kind of City?', Kemp argues that G. Sjöberg's model of a preindustrial city does not apply to Amarna. Rather, the 20–50,000 inhabitants of Akhetaten lived in an 'urban village' (p. 299), i.e. an accumulation of individual neighbourhoods, with a thin theological superstructure governing the Egyptian empire from comparatively humble mud-brick palaces.

Clearly written and inspiring throughout, the book invites comments and I would like to put two thoughts up for discussion. The Further Reading section concentrates on archaeology and art (add Seyfried 2012) but there are a few titles only on the intellectual difference Amarna theology made (Assmann 1995). Typical of prestigious knowledge, the new theology has a widely visible surface but contents are exclusive and access to content control is limited, a double-edged feature nicely reflected in Amarna's temple architecture with open courts and hidden sanctuaries. From this perspective, only a few individuals at Amarna were allowed access to royal imagery and texts, e.g. in the form of garden shrines, house altars, amulets or private names, while the majority of people was by and large excluded. The inaccessibility of gods for people is typical of the New Kingdom and a result of the royal penetration into local cults starting in the late third millennium. A discussion of Amarna's spiritual life along the lines of knowledge and accessibility in the long term can add to Kemp's thoughts on the exclusive *vs* inclusive nature of the cult of the Aten (p. 105).

I find Kemp's model of Amarna as a city organized through neighbourhoods still compelling. However, it could be argued that the cluster of villages is more than the sum of individual modules. It transforms the overall social texture into an urban milieu creating an awareness of something different from the village horizon. There is closer interaction between the inhabitants of different villages and among their patrons at Amarna than in provincial Egypt. Interaction of higher officials is embedded in daily peer rivalry at court, the latter giving access to resources and networks outside Egypt. Within the Ancient Egyptian settlement tradition, Kahun may also have been devised on the village model but looks very different because the large estates of patrons are not granted comfortable peer distance as in Amarna. Sjöberg's orientalist movie version, as Kemp describes it, of

a preindustrial city may be a useful catalyst for portraying Amarna as something different. However, a comparison to other Ancient Egyptian settlements and a definition of Amarna's potential to explore preindustrial urbanism (e.g. Storey 2006) are perhaps the greater challenge.

Kemp's book is an archaeological version of micro-history in an urban setting. It is easy to picture the inhabitants of Amarna gossiping in their houses, piecing their lives together, and satisfying their spiritual needs in families and neighbourhoods. Atenism and the move to an inhospitable desert city required some adaptation of lifestyles but otherwise did not categorically change the way people related to one another and imagined the world. More than any other contribution to Amarna, *City of Akhenaten and Nefertiti* draws an exciting picture of what an archaeology of people can contribute to the history of the human mind.

Richard Bussmann
Institute of Archaeology
University College London
31–34 Gordon Square
London
WC1H 0PY
UK
Email: r.bussmann@ucl.ac.uk

References

- Assmann, J., 1995. *Egyptian Solar Religion in the New Kingdom: Re, Amun and the Crisis of Polytheism*, trans. A. Alcock. London: Kegan Paul International.
- Kemp, B.J., 1977. The city of El-Amarna as a source for the study of urban society in ancient Egypt. *World Archaeology* 9.2, 123–39.
- Kemp, B.J., 1989. *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*. London: Routledge.
- Seyfried, F. (ed.), 2012. *In the Light of Amarna: 100 Years of the Nefertiti Discovery*. Berlin: Michael Imhof Verlag.
- Storey, G.R. (ed.), 2006. *Urbanism in the Preindustrial World: Cross-cultural Approaches*. Tuscaloosa (AL): University of Alabama Press.
-
-