

Grim secrets of Pharaoh's city

By John Hayes-Fisher

BBC Timewatch

Bones reveal the darker side to building Ancient Egypt

Bone discovery

Evidence of the brutal lives endured by some ancient Egyptians to build the monuments of the Pharaohs has been uncovered by archaeologists.

Skeletal remains from a lost city in the middle of Egypt suggest many ordinary people died in their teenage years and lived a punishing lifestyle.

Many suffered from spinal injuries, poor nutrition and stunted growth.

The remains were found at Amarna, a new capital built on the orders of the Pharaoh Akhenaten, 3,500 years ago.

Hieroglyphs written at the time record that the Pharaoh, who was father of Tutankhamun, was driven to create a new city in honour of his favoured god, the Aten, with elaborate temples, palaces and tombs.

Along with his wife Nefertiti, he abandoned the capital Thebes, leaving the old gods and their priests behind and marched his people 200 miles (320km) north to an inhospitable desert plain beside the River Nile.

The city, housing up to 50,000 people, was built in 15 years; but within a few years of the Pharaoh's death, the city was abandoned, left to the wind and the sand.

The bones reveal a darker side to life, a striking reversal of the image that Akhenaten promoted

Professor Barry Kemp

Disease found

For more than a century archaeologists looked in vain for any trace of Amarna's dead.

But recently archaeologists from a British-based team made a breakthrough when they found human bones in the desert, which had been washed out by floods.

These were the first bones clearly identifiable as the workers who lived in the city; and they reveal the terrible price they paid to fulfil the Pharaoh's dream.

"The bones reveal a darker side to life, a striking reversal of the image that Akhenaten promoted, of an escape to sunlight and nature" says Professor Barry Kemp who is leading the excavations.

Painted murals found in the tombs of high officials from the time show offering-tables piled high with food. But the bones of the ordinary people who lived in the city reveal a different picture.

"The skeletons that we see are certainly not participating in that form of life," says Professor Jerry Rose, of the University of Arkansas, US, whose anthropological team has been analysing the Amarna bones.

"Food is not abundant and certainly food is not of high nutritional quality. This is not the city of being-taken-care-of."

The population of Amarna had the shortest stature ever recorded from Egypt's past, but they would also have been worked hard on the Pharaoh's ambitious plans for his new capital.

The temples and palaces required thousands of large stone blocks. Working in summer temperatures of 40C (104F), the workers would have had to chisel these out of the rock and transport them 1.5 miles (2.5 km) from the quarries to the city.

Reconstruction of Amarna which was six miles (10km) across
[City scale revealed](#)

The bone remains show many workers suffered spinal and other injuries. "These people were working very hard at very young ages, carrying heavy loads," says Professor Rose.

"The incidence of youthful death amongst the Amarna population was shockingly high by any standard." Not many lived beyond 35. Two-thirds were dead by 20.

But even this backbreaking schedule may not be enough to explain the extreme death pattern at Amarna.

Even Akhanaten's son, Tutankhamen, died aged just 20; and archaeologists are now beginning to believe that there might also have been an epidemic here.

This corroborates the historical records of Egypt's principal enemy, the Hittites, which tell of the devastation of an epidemic caught from Egyptians captured in battle around the time of Tutankhamen's reign. It appears this epidemic may also have been the final blow to the people of Amarna.

Timewatch: The Pharaoh's Lost City is on BBC Two on Saturday, 26 January at 2010 GMT

Story from BBC NEWS:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/sci/tech/7209472.stm>

Published: 2008/01/25 17:11:21 GMT

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