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## How Low Did the Once-Great Egyptian Eighteenth Dynasty Sink?

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### Abstract:

After 158 years of empire-building, Egypt's Eighteenth Dynasty entered a bizarre, sixty-year period of implosion, seemingly slow at first, but ever-accelerating toward ultimate collapse. It is my contention that the demise of the once-powerful Eighteenth Dynasty was largely, if not entirely, due to the events surrounding the Israelite Exodus from Egypt.



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# How Low Did the Once-Great Egyptian Eighteenth Dynasty Sink?

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***Q.* Can we legitimately blame the decline and fall of the Tuthmosid Empire on the biblical Exodus events?...and...Just how low did the once-great Eighteenth Dynasty sink?**

***A.* Yes...and...Things couldn't have gotten any worse for the "Boys from Thebes."**

At its height, the Egyptian Empire of the Eighteenth Dynasty was without peer in the ancient world. Egypt had never before attained such wealth and influence, and it would never again reach that level of regional domination for the balance of its history. Amosis had driven the hated Hyksos out of Lower Egypt and re-unified the kingdom under Theban rule. Amenhotep I, Tuthmosis I, Tuthmosis II and the intriguing Hatshepsut had successively orchestrated the internal stability that allowed Egypt to flex its muscles both southward into Nubia and northward into Canaan and Syria. During the reigns of the next three Pharaohs—the mighty father-son-grandson dynasts, Tuthmosis III, Amenhotep II, and Tuthmosis IV—the Egyptian realm surged to its greatest expanse, from far south in Nubian Africa northward to the River Euphrates in the hinterlands of western Asia.

But after 158 years of empire-building, the Eighteenth Dynasty entered a bizarre, sixty-year period of implosion, seemingly slow at first, but ever-accelerating toward ultimate collapse. After the untimely death of Tuthmosis IV, who ruled only about eight to ten years,<sup>1</sup> the two ensuing kings—Amenhotep III and Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten)—allowed Egyptian hegemony in Asia to slip away, and the loss of Egypt's Levantine territories seems not to have been gradual. There is little doubt among Egyptological scholars that the last significant Eighteenth Dynasty military foray into Canaan and Syria was during the reign of Tuthmosis IV. We have clear evidence from the last quarter of Amenhotep III's reign—recorded in the Amarna Correspondence—that pro-Egyptian Canaanite and Syrian princes in the Levant were deeply concerned about upheaval in the region and were crying out for at least a minimal level of military support from their once-formidable Nilotic overlords, which, interestingly, never materialized. Additionally, Hittite aggression was mounting against the Mesopotamian kingdom of Mittani, whose rulers had been, since the days of Tuthmosis IV, the "brother" of Pharaoh. Things got even worse in Canaan and Syria during the shaky reign of Akhenaten (as I have documented in the body of this monograph). The fact remains that Egypt either would not, or could not, respond with military assistance to the rapidly deteriorating situation in its now-former Asian provinces.

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<sup>1</sup> K. A. Kitchen, "Ancient Egyptian Chronology for Aegeanists," *MAA*, 2/2 (2002) 9. Professor Kitchen has consistently argued for a short reign (no more than ten years) for Tuthmosis IV. This is a recent exclamation point on the issue. Of course, he is absolutely correct. There are, he states, "no solid grounds whatever for more!" Those who like to "pad" the Eighteenth Dynasty by adding years (even decades!) to the reign of Tuthmosis IV are simply fooling themselves.

How did this scenario come about? We are all familiar with the rise and fall of nations and empires—indeed, they all meet their ruin sooner or later for a variety of reasons. So why should we be surprised at the collapse of Egypt’s Eighteenth Dynasty? *The oddity is in the timing*. From the days of Tuthmosis III, through the reigns of Amenhotep II and Tuthmosis IV, it is difficult to find any chinks whatsoever in the Egyptian armor. When Tuthmosis IV’s son, Amenhotep III, ascended to the throne, he was a little too young to assume full responsibilities, but his mother, Mutemwiya, and possibly others in the royal family, were there to ensure stability (this was not uncommon—remember Hatshepsut!). The Egyptian-Mittanian brotherhood alliance was firmly intact, keeping Hittite aggression in check. The empire was wildly wealthy and unchallenged militarily. Three generations of powerful and extremely able pharaohs had given Amenhotep III every opportunity to carry on with the Eighteenth Dynasty program of Nubian and Levantine domination. It is unimaginable that both Amenhotep III and his son, Akhenaten, would not have done everything within the capabilities of Egyptian power and influence to maintain the empire.

But in spite of immediate outward appearances and inherited expectations, the disintegration of Egypt’s position in the Near East *did* begin during the reign of Amenhotep III and continued unchecked until the collapse of the Tuthmosid Eighteenth Dynasty shortly after the reign of Akhenaten (see Chapter Five). For reasons not visible to the modern observer, Egypt became strangely powerless to retain its traditional Levantine holdings. It allowed its critically important Mittani alliance to erode for lack of attention. It watched helplessly as Suppiluliuma, the Hittite warrior-king, advanced into what had long been Egyptian territory in Syria. It stood by as the Hittites obliterated the Mittani Kingdom (Pharaoh’s “brother”!), resulting in the independence and rise to power of Assyria (a former Mittanian province in central Mesopotamia). Egypt exercised an out-of-character non-involvement as Canaan foamed into chaos. By the time of Tuthmosis IV’s death, Egypt had been the ancient Near East’s dominant power for well over a century. By the end of Akhenaten’s reign, Egypt had slipped to a distant third position behind Hatti and Assyria.

This period of Egyptian history, from the death of Tuthmosis IV to the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty when Horemheb usurped the throne, is generally known as the Amarna Age (named for the royal archive discovered at Tell el-Amarna in Egypt). While many scholars have mistakenly presented the era as one of Egypt’s finest hours, there is simply no evidence to support such a conception.<sup>2</sup> Quite the contrary is true. Although Egypt tried to present its best face to the world in typical propagandistic fashion, things were actually going very, very badly. Just how bad did it get? There are many indicators that reveal the lamentable state of affairs in Egypt during the Amarna Age,<sup>3</sup> but there is one astoundingly bizarre event demonstrating that Egypt—regardless of its Spartan posturing—had slipped dangerously close to complete internal collapse and possible foreign domination. The story is complicated, but I will do my best to summarize the essential elements.

Pharaoh Akhenaten died after a seventeen-year reign, the last two years of which his protégé, Smenkhkare (a cousin, nephew, or bastard son of Akhenaten?<sup>4</sup>), served as co-regent.

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<sup>2</sup> See D. B. Redford, *Akhenaten: the Heretic King* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> See my detailed discussions in S. Collins, "Using Historical Synchronisms to Identify the Pharaoh of the Exodus," *Biblical Research Bulletin* V.8 (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Redford, *Akhenaten* 192-193.

Smenkhkare died shortly thereafter, leaving the kingdom to another Tuthmosid relative, Tutankhamun, who inherited the throne at only nine years of age. Tutankhamun was likely “bewildered”<sup>5</sup> by the prospect of ruling a faltering Egypt. In the background, two military leaders were closely eyeing the situation: the old general, Ay, and a young, aggressive lieutenant-general named Horemheb.<sup>6</sup> It is entirely probable that the power-base in Egypt, for all intents and purposes, had already passed into the hands of the military. That was certainly the case when Tutankhamun died after a short reign of only nine years. At that point, events took a remarkable twist and turn.

General Ay immediately seized the Egyptian throne. Or did he? Tutankhamun’s widow, Ankhesenamun, certainly had other designs. D. B. Redford observes that

...Ankhesenamun...did not approve of the new configuration of power. In spite of Ay’s formal assumption of pharaonic rule, the bereaved queen seems not to have been suppressed and continued to enjoy a certain freedom of action. In fact, in a formal sense only, graphic art at times even united her with Ay as his consort, a union belied by the gross disparity in their ages, perhaps as much as forty years! There can be no doubt that Ankhesenamun had little use for Ay...Clearly Ankhesenamun had not in any way relinquished the rights to political power she felt was hers. But now she lacked a party of support within her own country, so thoroughly had the [Tuthmosid Eighteenth] dynasty to which she belonged been discredited; and any assistance would have to come from abroad.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Ankhesenamun pursued a course of action unprecedented in Egyptian history: she invited a foreign power to assume the throne of Egypt! But not just *any* foreign power.

Recall that during the reigns of the principal Amarna Period pharaohs, Amenhotep III and Akhenaten, Egypt had lost control of its Asiatic territories in Canaan and Syria, allowing its relationship with, and support of, the Mittani Kingdom—guardian of Egypt’s traditional Euphrates border and Syrian interests—to slip into oblivion. Amenhotep III’s and Akhenaten’s failures<sup>8</sup> had opened the door to Hittite aggression against Mittani and throughout Syria. Well before the time of Tutankhamun’s death, the Hittites had crushed Mittani into the dust and had pressed their interests southward to the mountains of Lebanon. Because of Egypt’s “brotherhood” alliance with Mittani, which had effectively prevented Hatti from acquiring important Mediterranean access through Syrian coastal cities, the Hittites had become the sworn enemy of both Egypt and Mittani. But now that Mittani was essentially nonexistent and Egypt’s Eighteenth Dynasty was teetering on collapse, the Hittite Empire was sitting pretty.

As Ankhesenamun viewed her situation, she concluded that Ay’s attempt to wrest the throne of Egypt from the Tuthmosid bloodline—an action no doubt supported by Horemheb who, we find out later, loathed the Amarna pharaohs—was intolerable. And so she appealed to the Hittite king, Suppiluliuma. Her amazing correspondence is recorded in Hittite records:

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 215.

<sup>6</sup> See N. Grimal, *A History of Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1992) 241-244.

<sup>7</sup> Redford, *Akhenaten* 217.

<sup>8</sup> The failure may not rest entirely, or even partly, on their shoulders. They simply may have been the unfortunate heirs of trouble: the aftermath of what I call the Exodus core events. See Collins, “Historical Synchronisms.”

My husband has died. I do not have a son. But they say you have many sons. If you would give me one of your sons, he would become my husband. I shall never pick out a servant of mine and make him my husband...I am afraid!<sup>9</sup>

Suppiluliuma was flabbergasted and suspicious. Upon reading the letter from Ankhesenamun, he exclaimed, “Such a thing has never happened before in my whole life!”<sup>10</sup> Indeed. He had just been invited to place one of his sons on the Egyptian throne, which would have made Egypt a vassal state in the Hittite Empire! Was it a trick? Was it for real? More than a little intrigued, he sent a representative to Egypt to find out if the offer was legitimate. His emissary soon returned with one of Ankhesenamun’s ambassadors in tow, along with another letter from the Egyptian queen, revealing her irritation in the face of Suppiluliuma’s skepticism:

Why did you say, “They may deceive me” in that way? If I had had a son, would I have written about my own and my country’s shame to a foreign land? You did not believe me...He who was my husband had died. I do not have a son. Never shall I take a servant of mine and make him my husband. I have written to no other country...so give me one of your sons: he will be a husband to me, but in Egypt he shall be king!<sup>11</sup>

Finally, Suppiluliuma granted Ankhesenamun her wish, and sent one of his sons, Zidanza, to Egypt. But as soon as the Hittite prince crossed the border into Egypt, he was murdered. The deed was probably carried out at the order of Ay or Horemheb, or both, but the Egyptian records are mute as to the perpetrators. Ankhesenamun also disappeared from the scene.

Needless to say, Suppiluliuma was enraged when the news reached him. Immediately he signaled a military action against Egypt, initially against Egyptian footholds in anti-Lebanon<sup>12</sup> and then, no doubt, against Egypt itself. But suddenly, another bizarre twist entered the picture. Evidently, Egypt had been suffering from some sort of plague off and on throughout the Amarna Period.<sup>13</sup> The plague was possibly transmitted to the Hittites by the Egyptian entourage sent earlier to Hatti by Ankhesenamun. Or perhaps the Hittite army contracted it through their encounters with Egyptian troops. No one really knows. But what the Egyptian army could not do in the face of the Hittite onslaught, the plague accomplished with great effect: the Hittite hordes were stopped dead in their tracks before they could traverse Canaan en route to Egypt. So, as far as the Hittite/Egyptian conflict was concerned, Egypt, on the one hand, had been neutralized by its internal difficulties, and now Hatti, on the other hand, succumbed to an invisible foe—a plague—that not only neutralized its armies, but even threatened to decimate the Hittite homeland in eastern Asia Minor. It was a virtual stalemate that would eventually result in a treaty between Egypt and Hatti during the Nineteenth Dynasty.

And now back to my original questions: What circumstances converged to create such a scenario? Why did the powerful Tuthmosid Dynasty crumble into oblivion? What would cause

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<sup>9</sup> H. G. Güterbock, “The Deeds of Suppiluliuma as told by his son Mursilis II,” *JCS* 10 (1956) 93. I have contemporized somewhat the language from Güterbock’s translation.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> The Egyptian military had re-established a presence in Canaan during the reign of Tutankhamun, under the leadership of generals Ay and Horemheb.

<sup>13</sup> T. Bryce, *The Kingdom of the Hittites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 198; See also F. J. Giles, *The Amarna Age: Western Asia, ACES 5* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1997) 347-348.

the internal affairs of Egypt to deteriorate so completely that a sonless, widowed queen would invite a foreign (enemy!) king to make his son Pharaoh of the Black Land?<sup>14</sup> Bizarre? Yes; but reality nonetheless. Yet, I think there is a perfect explanation for the demise of the Eighteenth Dynasty: the five core events of the Exodus narrative that, according to the biblical accounts, wreaked havoc in Lower Egypt—plagues, plundering, huge labor losses, severe military losses, and the death of Pharaoh himself (Tuthmosis IV).<sup>15</sup> Regardless of its level of power and wealth, such occurrences would have sent Egypt into the kind of crisis situation described in the ancient records. And is it possible that the plagues suffered by Egypt during the Amarna Age (a strain of “plague”? influenza? smallpox?), and subsequently contracted by the Hittites, were the epidemic result of lingering and/or mutating pathogens carried over from the plagues of the Exodus story? Not only is it possible, but I think it is highly probable.

Only in the most dire circumstances possible would the widowed queen of a once-mighty Egyptian dynasty offer Egypt’s throne to its most formidable enemy. But it happened—and the Bible tells us why. The Exodus eyewitness, Moses, knew all along the severity of Yahweh’s hand against Pharaoh and all his house.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it should not surprise us that the Tuthmosid Dynasty ultimately met its end as a result of collateral damage from the wrath of God delivered in the final days of Tuthmosis IV’s reign.

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<sup>14</sup> The “Black Land” was ancient Egypt’s name for itself.

<sup>15</sup> See Collins, “Historical Synchronisms” for a comprehensive treatment of Tuthmosis IV as Pharaoh of the Exodus.

<sup>16</sup> The term “pharaoh” means “great house.”