

# The Aten is the “Energy of Light”: New Evidence from the Script

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## Abstract

The study of the classifier  which is the miniature pictorial representation of the Amarna god, explicitly confirms the assumption that this image which reigns over all Amarna monuments as the sole representation of the god, is rather the depiction of the “energy of light” than the depiction of any form of the sun. The  classifier, known only in the Amarna period corpus, “breaks into words” the pictorial representation of the god of Amarna. The words that form the category it classifies are: rays, illuminate, rise, shine, “appear in glory.”

Since the early days of Egyptology it was accepted that the god of Amarna is not literally the sun-disk, but the “energy of the sun” as it was already proposed by Petrie in 1894.<sup>1</sup> The studies of Assmann in the 80s and 90s confirmed that the god of the Amarna period is not simply the “divine sun disk,” but a complex construct described by the divine names written in cartouches.<sup>2</sup> However, in most cases, when approached in prayers the Amarna god is called, in short *p3-Itn*, *p3-Itn ʿnh*, *Itn ʿnh*, but rarely also *Itn* alone.<sup>3</sup> In a few publications during the last decade I have argued that the strict avoidance of any [DIVINE] classifier by the word *Itn* in all Amarna combinations carries a theological weight.

The word  during this period, in hundreds of occurrences in various constructs in hieroglyphic inscriptions, consistently shows a single spelling with one classifier alone—that of the ☉ [SUN].<sup>4</sup> The sun ☉ hieroglyph serves since ancient times as a classifier for many words which describe the sun, its various activities, as well as different notions related to time. Thus the sign ☉ does not classify the word Aten in any way into the category [DIVINE].

<sup>1</sup> I would like to dedicate this article for David Silverman, a longtime colleague and friend with whom I share many interests, one of them being the Amarna Period, its texts and beliefs. Petrie’s “energy of the sun” was cited in Erik Hornung, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light* (Ithaca–London, 1999), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Assmann, “Aton,” *LdÄ* I, 526–39, and idem, “Akhanyati’s Theology of Light and Time,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 7/4 (Jerusalem, 1992), with references to earlier studies.

<sup>3</sup> There are cases where the name *Itn* (without article!) alternates with *p3-Itn* and *Itn ʿnh*, e.g., Maj Sandman, *Texts from Akhenaten*, 72, lines 4, 10, 13 (tomb of Tutu), also 2, line 6; also 3, lines 15–16 (tomb of Meryra), against the sharp definition of Assmann, “Akhanyati,” 165, that suggests it would be a “grave mistake.”

<sup>4</sup> For the few exceptions see Orly Goldwasser, *Prophets, Lovers and Giraffes: Wor(l)d Classification in Ancient Egypt*, GOF IV (Wiesbaden, 2002), 111–31.

The word *Itn*  originated in a noun that carried the original meaning “disk” in the Old Kingdom, and slowly moved into the meaning of “sun-disk” in the Coffin Texts.<sup>5</sup> Since the Hyksos times the word *Itn* is known also with [DIVINE] classifier, and during the 18th dynasty it is already established as the divine sun disk.<sup>6</sup>

I suggested that the consistent spelling  is a result of the cancellation of the option of a *category* [DIVINE] or [GOD] by Akhenaten when it concerns the Aten. A category entails *ipso facto* members and membership. Once you have a single god, a category [GOD] that is open to other members, becomes logically impossible. Putting a [DIVINE] classifier after the Aten’s names would present him as one option, one example of the category [DIVINE]—as “one of the many.” It should be noted that the very common shortened names of the god, such as *p3-itn* or *Itn*   avoid a [DIVINE] classifier as well.<sup>7</sup>

This deliberate, canonical avoidance of the classifier in the word Aten, on all its variations and combinations is a clear proof that Akhenaten reached a solid monotheistic perception of the essence of the divine, even if he did not attain a full formulation of this great intellectual revolution. As the Aten appears with a divine classifier since the Hyksos Period,<sup>8</sup> it should be a member of the Egyptian pantheon of gods at least from this period onwards. This absence becomes more conspicuous when one realizes that the divine classifier  is not at all absent from the Amarna corpus and appears in other words and phrases in the Amarna texts, even in those that are clearly situated at the center of the period’s repertoire.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the spelling of the Amarna period texts raises another question, which is the topic of the present study. Since the fourth year<sup>10</sup> of Akhenaten, along with the maturing of the Amarna doctrine, the god of Amarna appears in the pictorial strictly in one representation: a sun disk with rays ending with human hands. Hundreds of such representations are known in Amarna art. The “ray-hands” enable the disk to act as other Egyptian gods,<sup>11</sup> e.g. to offer different symbols to the royals (e.g., mostly *ḥnh* but also *w3s*<sup>12</sup> and *ḥb-sd*) or to embrace them (fig. 1), both of which are divine acts with a long tradition in Egyptian iconography (fig. 2). The ray-hands engage in contact acts: endorsing the king’s hands from below, endorsing the king’s hand and body in the window of appearances, or supporting the king’s and queen’s crown.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Donald Redford, “The Sun-Disk in Akhenaten’s Program: Its Worship and Antecedents I,” *JARCE* 13 (1976), 47–61, and idem, “The Sun-Disk in Akhenaten’s Program: Its Worship and Antecedents II,” *JARCE* 17 (1980), 21–38.

<sup>6</sup> Alexandra von Lieven, “Scheiben am Himmel—Zur Bedeutung von *itn* und *itn.t*,” *SAK* 29 (2001), 277–82, and Goldwasser, *Prophets*, and Goldwasser, “Amarna Monotheism,” 275–76, and there notes 42–43 with bibliography.

<sup>7</sup> Since the Pyramid Texts, compound divine names may take a divine classifier, e.g., Christian Leitz et al., *LGG*, OLA 116 (Leuven, 2002), II, 631 (*wḏ mrwt*). The classifier may also appear in the midst of a combination, see idem, *LGG* I–VII, passim. See the *Itn wr* in the Coffin Texts, Goldwasser, *Prophets*, 116.

<sup>8</sup> On Apophis and the sun-god see, Orly Goldwasser, “King Apophis of Avaris and the Emergence of Monotheism,” in Ernst Czerny et al., eds., *Timelines: Studies in the Honor of Manfred Bietak* (Leuven, 2006), 129–34.

<sup>9</sup> See Goldwasser, *Prophets*, 126–28.

<sup>10</sup> James Allen, “The Natural Philosophy of Akhenaten,” in Kelly Simpson, ed., *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt* (New Haven, 1989), 92; Robert Bianchi, “New Light on the Aton,” *GM*, 114 (1990), 39.

<sup>11</sup> Since the Old Kingdom gods embrace and hold the hands of the king, see Dagmar Stockfish, *Untersuchungen zum Totenkult des ägyptischen Königs im Alten Reich Band II* (Hamburg, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> E.g., David Silverman, Josef Wegner, and Jennifer Houser Wegner, *Akhenaten and Tutankhamun: Revolution and Restoration* (Philadelphia, 2006), 32, fig. 26. Christian Tietze, ed., *Amarna: Lebensräume-Lebensbilder-Weltbilder* (Potsdam, 2008), 28, abb. 12. On a talatat from the early period the Aten gives millions of *ḥb sd*, *ḥnh* and *w3s*, see *Akhénaton et Néfertiti. Soleil et ombres des pharaons* (Geneva, 2008), 80, fig. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Some examples: Davies, *Amarna* IV, pls. 22, 31; *Amarna* V, pl. 26 Stela S; *Amarna* VI, pls. 16 and 17 holding king’s body. Davies, *Amarna* VI, pl. 29 (tomb of Ay) is the most attractive example. In a scene of the “window of appearances” the Aten supports with his ray-hands the king’s body and the queen’s crown.

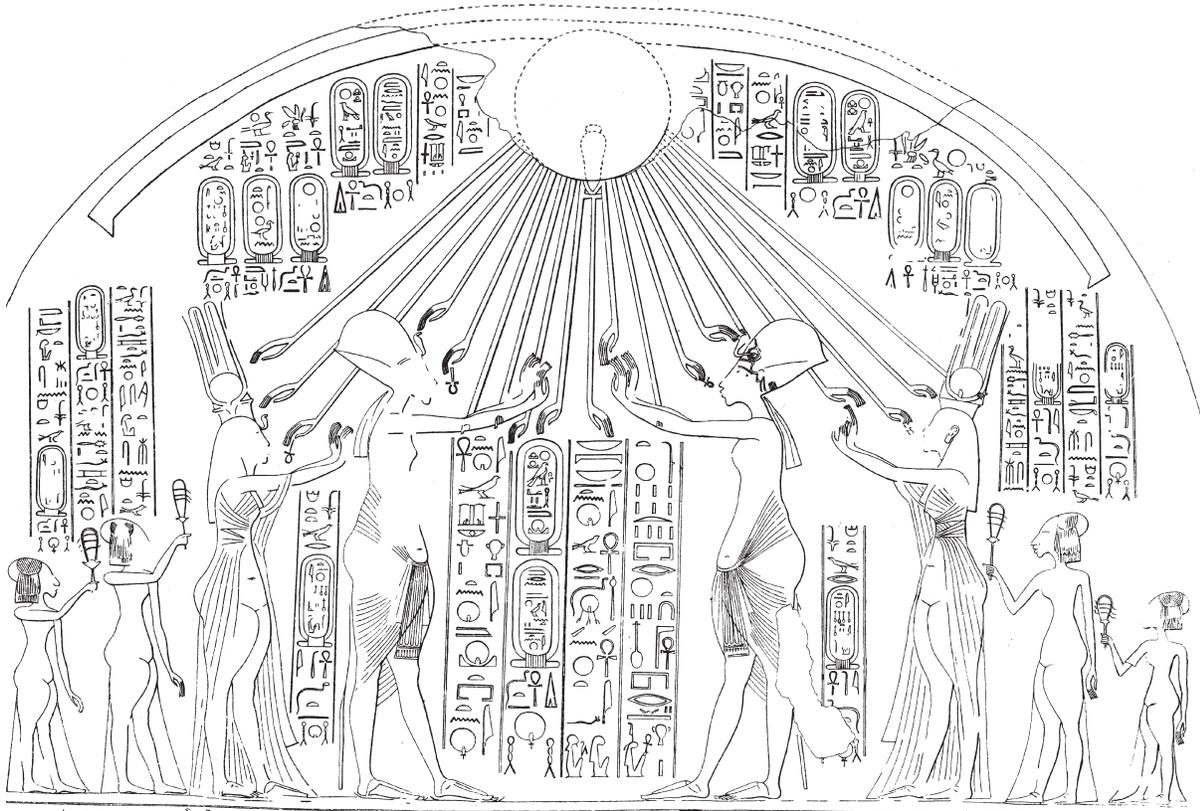


Fig. 1. *The Aten embraces the king* (after Davies, *Amarna V*, pl. 26).

During the Amarna period, a new hieroglyph is introduced into the script——the specific image of the Amarna god, which is well known from all representations of the god since the fourth year of Akhenaten. The new hieroglyph appears in Amarna texts fairly frequently. Yet, it is never used as a logogram for the god, even though it looks exactly like a miniature picture of the Amarna god. The innovative Amarna hieroglyph is strictly used only as a *classifier*. And here another surprise awaits us: it never classifies the word *Itn* itself,<sup>14</sup> or any combination of his names.

If we examine the texts looking for the use of the classifier , we find this miniature image of the Aten as an alternating use, instead of the traditional hieroglyph  [RAYS]. It appears as classifier with the noun *stwt*  'rays', and the verbs *wbn*  'break out with light',<sup>15</sup> *shd*  'illuminate' and rarely also *psd*  'shine' and *h'i*  'raise in glory'. Most of occurrences, are

<sup>14</sup> In this case the classifier would serve as a repeater. A repeater is a classifier which repeats the information given by the word. In the case of the hieroglyphic system the repeater is a grapheme, in classifier languages the same role is played by morphemes, see Goldwasser, *Prophets*, 15, and idem, "A Comparison Between Classifier Languages and Classifier Script: the Case of Ancient Egyptian," in Gideon Goldenberg, ed., *A Festschrift for Hans Jakob Polotsky* (Jerusalem, 2006), 16–39.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion of the verb *wbn* in solar context, see Orly Goldwasser, "Itn—the 'Golden Egg' (CT IV, 292b–c)," in J. van Dijk, ed., *Essays on Ancient Egypt in the Honour of Herman te Velde* (Groningen, 1997), 80–82, with bibliography.



Fig. 2. Horus embraces the king and supports his hand (after Stockfish, *Untersuchungen*, 6.5.5.).

and appearing in glory, all activities of the sun rays, altogether creating the effect of *light* (fig. 3).

When discussing the name and essence of the Amarna god, Egyptologists usually turn to the discussion of the complex names of the god in his different cartouches.<sup>17</sup> However, if we check all the *pictorial* representations of the Aten in the Amarna texts, and look for the *minimal text* attached to it, we realize that the minimum textual representation does not include only the royal names that appear in the cartouches, but also the repetitive combination

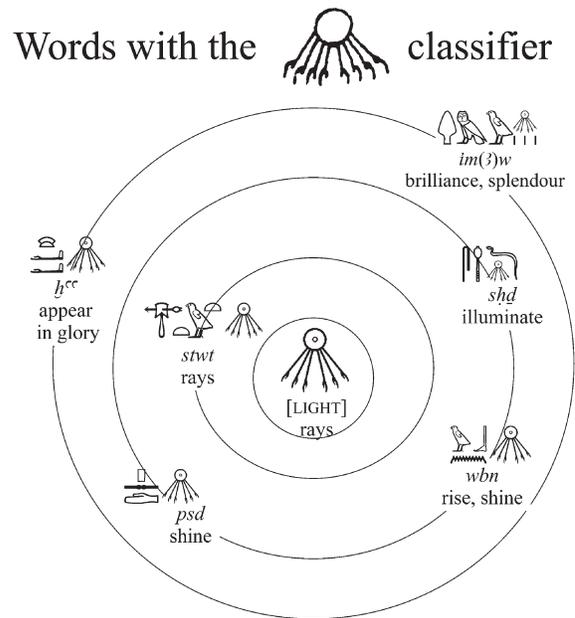


Fig. 3. Visual reconstruction of the category [LIGHT].

found with the noun *stwt* ‘rays’, but the verbs *wnb* and *shd* are also rather common representation of the category (see Appendix I below for references).

At first glance, the  looks no more than a small “sportive” variation on the usual classifier of these words. Yet, in my previous studies I have shown that words that take the same classifier share a *category* which reflects a knowledge structure in the mind of the script users.<sup>16</sup> If we look for the connection between the words *stwt*, *wnb*, *shd*, *psd* and *h'c*, we observe immediately a clear knowledge structure—the noun ‘rays’ and its predicates. The noun takes as predicates the verbs overflowing (with light), illuminating, shining,

<sup>16</sup> Already in Orly Goldwasser, *From Icon to Metaphor. Studies in the Semiotics of the Hieroglyphs*, OBO 114 (Fribourg, 1995). On the structure of categories in the mind, see for example Friedrich Ungerer and Hans-Jörg Schmid, *An Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics* (London-New York, 1996), 77–78.

<sup>17</sup> Recently Dimitri Laboury, *Akhénaton* (Paris, 2010), 206–8.

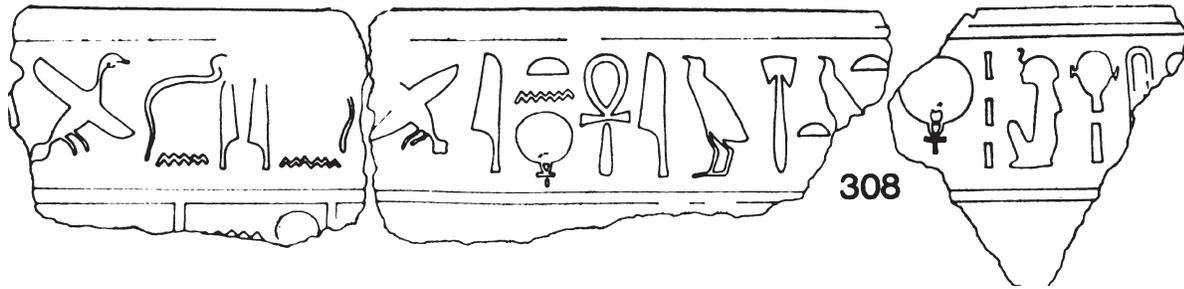


Fig. 4. *Speech of the Aten* (after Martin, Royal Tomb, 307-8, pl. 13).

*Itn ʿnh wr (imy) ḥb-sd nb šnn(t) nb Itn nb pt nb t3 ḥr ib m 3ḥt Itn*

“The *living Aten* great of Sed festivals! Master of all that the Aten encircles! Lord of heaven lord of earth in the midst of Akhetaten”

The older divine sun disk, *Itn*, is an essential part of the concept “energy of light” or “power of light.” It is *included* in the “whole” larger Amarna divine concept. The activities of the two entities are somewhat different, yet complementary. The sun disk makes his daily journey, while his energy, through his rays, constantly illuminates all parts of the universe encircled by the disk, the *Itn*. This understanding clarifies nicely the old phraseology which continues to appear in the title of the divine

*Itn ʿnh*   *nb šnn.(t) nb Itn*

“The ‘*Energy of Light*’ the lord of ‘all that is encircled’ by the *Disk*.”

Until now only one sentence is known from a direct speech of the Aten.<sup>18</sup> It comes from one of the sarcophagi in the Amarna Royal Tombs and indeed *p3-Itn ʿnh* opens his speech by talking about the energy of his rays (fig. 4):

*dd in p3-Itn ʿnh iw stwt.i ḥr sh(d). . .*

“said by the ‘Living Aten’: my rays illuminate . . .”

The rest is lost.

The history of the new hieroglyph  does not end with the fall of the Amarna regime. A few examples are known from the time of Horemheb. Two examples come from the tomb of Horemheb himself (fig. 5)<sup>19</sup> and two others from the tomb of Pay and Raia (fig. 6). In most these post-Amarna examples, the hieroglyph  classifies the word *stwt* “rays.” This phenomenon points again to this word as being the center of the knowledge structure categorized by the hieroglyph .

To sum up, the script classifier system distills the differentiation between two divine elements in the Amarna period:

<sup>18</sup> This unique sentence appears on a broken fragment of one of the sarcophagi published by Geoffrey Martin, *The Royal Tomb at El-Amarna. Vol. I, The Objects* (London, 1974). Assmann claims that the Aten never speaks (cited by Allen, “Natural Philosophy,” 92, n. 17).

<sup>19</sup> In the same relief, there is a mention of a military unit *mr.t p3-Itn* “the one which the Aten favors,” Geoffrey Martin, *The Memphite Tomb of Horemheb Commander-in-Chief of Tut’ankhamun* (London, 1989), 98–99, pl. 115, E. Berlin 22663 and Brooklyn 32.103. See also his plate 110.



Fig. 5. stwt in the tomb of Horemheb (after Martin Horemheb, 76, pl. 115, E. Berlin 22663).

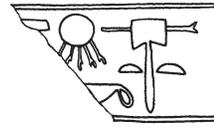


Fig. 6. stwt in the tomb of Pay and Raia (after Maarten Raven, *The Tomb of Pay and Raia at Saqqara* (Leiden-London, 2005), 4, pl. 73).

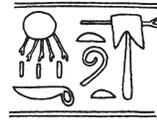


Fig. 7. stwt in the tomb of Pay and Raia (after Raven, *Pay and Raia*, 10, pl. 73).

1. Aten, the divine sun disk , written strictly with the sun disk classifier alone. This divine element is part of the complex divine entity of the Amarna period. It probably corresponds to what Assmann and Allen call “the physical medium of the sun.” Still, as part of the essence of the god of Amarna, the “one and the only,” it can naturally never take a [DIVINE] classifier, it can never be “an example of” a god.
2. The image , known mainly from the pictorial representations of the god, is the image of “Energy of Light,” the *whole* divine entity of the Amarna period. This divine entity does not have a simple, stable “name.” It is mostly called in short *ʾtn*  $\epsilon nh$    or *pʾʾtn*  $\epsilon nh$  the “Living Aten.” It can also be referred to by the cartouche names. The hieroglyph 

resents not a one-word name, or even a phrase, but a complex notion presented by the different “explanatory sentence” constructions of the Amarna ideology (the cartouche names and the titles). This is the reason why the hieroglyph  can never function as a logogram of a word. *The conceptualization of the god of Amarna has no one stable referent in the world.*

The hieroglyphic script system, via its mechanism of classification and category presentation, provides a new proof that the Amarna god is “more than the disk itself”—a conclusion already reached very early on by Egyptologists in the 19th century through an intuitive reading of the Amarna texts, and later by others, mainly through the careful study of the cartouche names of the Aten.

The classifier  and the words it harbors (fig. 8), “breaks down” for us into *words* the ancient Egyptian understanding of the famous *image* of the Aten.

## Appendix I

List of examples of the hieroglyph  in Amarna texts

- Amarna I** pl. 41: *stwt*—west side, col. 6—*wbn* col.1, *wbn*—east side col. 3
- Amarna II** pl. 5 *shd*—east architrave  
pl. 7 *wbn*—second line hymn, lower part; *wbn*—third line  
pl. 21 *wbn*—ceiling inscription, upper part, hymn, second line
- Amarna III** pl. 29 left column (word lost)
- Amarna V** pl. 2 *stwt*—lines 3–4. *stwt*—forth line  
pl. 4 *stwt*—left jamb, second line  
pl. 26 *shd*—stela S in upper royal scene, second line below king's hand  
pl. 33 *stwt*—stela A, last line
- Amarna VI** pl. 15 *wbn*—forth line 4  
pl. 19 *stwt*—second line of speech from right to left  
pl. 25 *wbn shd stwt*—(prayer of Ay) second part, three exx. (see above fig. 8)  
pl. 27 *psd.*—(the Great Hymn to the Aten) line 11.  
pl. 32 *shd*—west architrave (the sun disk has a clear hanging *nh* sign)  
pl. 33 *h<sup>c</sup>*—column E  
pl. 34 *stwt*—col.2 (now lost) copies from Mariette

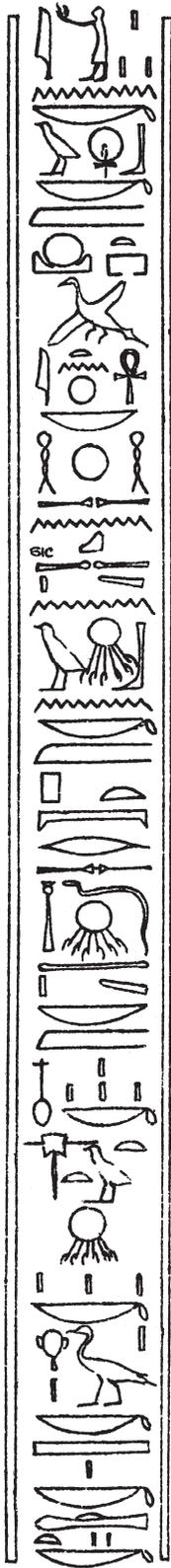


Fig. 8. Three examples of the hieroglyph  in one line (after Davies, Amarna VI, pl. 25)

