

Report of March 21 Meeting 2013
Royal Society
Southern Highlands Branch

Speaker: Dr Michael Birrell

Topic: King Akhenaten: Pharaoh, fanatic or freak?

Dr Birrell has lectured for the last 15 years in Archaeology at Macquarie University and Sydney University. He has given at least 15-20 public lectures and since 1986 has been involved in archaeological fieldwork in Egypt and Israel. In the last month, he returned from Amarna with new footage and information on Akhenaten. The sixty person audience at Chevalier College was privileged to be the first to hear him lecture after his return.

Michael Birrell described King Akhenaten as the most enigmatic figure from Egyptian history. Akhenaten, son of Amenhotep III, ruled Egypt for just 17 years in the mid-14th century BC, and was married to the beautiful Queen Nefertiti. One of the features of Akhenaten that is particularly puzzling is his peculiar physiology as depicted in representational art. These strange and eccentric portrayals show Akhenaten with a sagging stomach, thick thighs, large breasts and a long, thin face.

On the basis of his longer jaw and feminine appearance in numerous depictions, it has been suggested that Akhenaten may have suffered from Froelich's Syndrome. However this seems unlikely because this disorder results in sterility, and Akhenaten is known to have fathered numerous children, including at least six daughters by Nefertiti. Another possibility is that the king may have suffered from Marfan's syndrome, which unlike Froelich's syndrome, does not result in any lack of intelligence or sterility. It is associated however with symptoms arguably observed in depictions of the king and his children, such as a long thin face and enlarged thighs. Genetic diseases such as these are now the subject of new DNA studies. King Akhenaten has long been considered the father of Tutankhamun, but new DNA analysis has suggested that this might not be the case.

There are many explanations possible for the strange depictions of Akhenaten. As well as genetic diseases such as Marfan's syndrome and others, there exists at all times in these Egyptian family trees the high likelihood of genetic abnormalities due to frequent intermarriage through the generations. Another possibility is that the extraordinary bodily depictions result from artistic presentation only, not medical causes, and are not to be read literally. Since the sun god Aten was referred to as the mother and father of all humankind, artwork may have depicted Akhenaten with androgenous features as a symbol of the androgeny of the god. There is logic in this suggestion since Akhenaten

himself had abandoned Egypt's traditional religion for the worship of the sun god Aten, and moved the capital to Amarna. He destroyed images of the main state god Amun.

Throughout the lecture, Michael Birrell showed beautiful images of his most recent visit to this ancient land. Every point he made in this fascinating lecture was amply supported by recent photography on site. The large audience was well rewarded by his insights into King Akhenaten, who although Pharaoh for just 17 years, had an enormous impact on Egypt's history.

Anne Wood