

Royal Women and the Sun Religion of Amarna: Ritual Agents and Ideological Power

Introduction

The Amarna period, a late Eighteenth Dynasty phase, is characterised by the radical reforms of Amenhotep IV, later known as Akhenaten (r. 1351-1334 BC). Akhenaten dismantled Egypt's polytheistic religion and its vast pantheon of gods and goddesses, instead promoting the exclusive worship of the Aten, the sun's light, represented by a sun disk.¹ Atenist ideology strengthened the king's divine authority by removing the role of the priesthood, placing ritual activity in a direct relationship between the Aten and the king, and by extension, the royal women.² This essay argues that Atenism transformed the role of royal women by positioning them as the king's ritual, ideological, and divine counterparts. Using surviving iconographic, textual, and architectural evidence, I will demonstrate that queens and princesses, as part of the royal family unit, assumed religious responsibilities and divine roles previously unseen in earlier Egyptian tradition.

Since most of the surviving Amarna evidence derives from royal contexts, there is limited information about the religious roles of non-royal women.³ For this reason, this study focuses on royal women, whose participation in the sun religion is the most well-documented. Nefertiti, Akhenaten's principal wife, stands at the centre of the surviving evidence for the religious roles of royal women during the Amarna period;⁴ however, she forms only one part of a wider female royal cohort that also includes Tiye: the king's mother, Kiya, a minor wife, and the royal daughters, all of whom feature in the religious imagery of the period.⁵ Tiye was, in fact, the earliest queen to receive representations

¹ Joyce Ann Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt: From Early Dynastic Times to the Death of Cleopatra* (Thames & Hudson, 2006), p. 125.

² Gay Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt* (British Museum Press, 1993), p. 52.

³ Katharina Zinn, 'Women in Amarna: Legendary Royals, Forgotten Elite, Unknown Populace?', in *Women in Antiquity* (Routledge, 2016), p. 255.

⁴ Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, pp. 53–55.

⁵ Dorothea Arnold, *The Royal Women of Amarna: Images of Beauty from Ancient Egypt* [Catalogue for the Exhibition, 'Queen Nefertiti and the Royal Women : Images of Beauty from Ancient Egypt' Oct. 8, 1996 - Feb. 2, 1997, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art] (The metropolitan museum of art, 1996), p. 7.

comparable to those later granted to Nefertiti; however, due to the constraints of this essay, direct discussion of her iconography has been omitted.

To understand the religious roles these women performed, the surviving evidence is approached thematically, as their depictions frequently overlap and position them within the same ritual and ideological contexts. I will begin by briefly explaining the religious aspects of the offices of kingship and queenship pre-Amarna, in order to provide context for the women's elevated roles within the sun religion. I will then examine the expanded religious roles of royal women thematically: first, their representation as counterparts to the king; second, their participation as ritual agents; third, their assumption of divine and regenerative functions; and finally, the elevation of the royal family as a divine unit.

The office of Kingship & Queenship in ancient Egypt

Religion was at the core of Egyptian society, with no distinction between the sacred and secular.⁶ The divine office of kingship was fundamental to the functioning and stability of the Egyptian state.⁷ In this capacity, the king, as the physical embodiment of the god Re, was the intermediary between the divine and mortal spheres. As the highest religious official, the king delegated his authority to a vast hierarchy of priests, who oversaw daily rituals and temple business on his behalf.⁸

The significance of Egyptian royal women stemmed from their connection with the king,⁹ as evidenced by the lack of an ancient Egyptian word for 'queen'.¹⁰ Queens' titles were most often a reflection of their relationship with the king, such as "wife/mother of the king". Queens held recognised religious functions, including participation in religious ceremonies and holding titles such as "priestess of the god/goddess NN".¹¹

⁶ Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, p. 132.

⁷ Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, p. 21.

⁸ Suzanne Onstine, 'Women's Participation in the Religious Hierarchy of Ancient Egypt', in *Women in Antiquity: Real Women Across the Ancient World*, ed. by Stephanie Lynn Budin and Jean MacIntosh Turfa (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), p. 218.

⁹ Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, p. 21.

¹⁰ Silke Roth, 'Queen', *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, 1.1 (2009), p. 1
<<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3416c82m>> [accessed 26 November 2025].

¹¹ Roth, 'Queen', p. 2.

Royal women were an essential female element of the monarchy and representatives of the divine feminine alongside the king's masculine aspect.¹²

The king's wife played a key role in the ruler's regeneration. Her ability to produce an heir gave theological significance to her biological function, since the new king was understood as a renewed form of his father in his mortal aspect of Re.¹³ Through this capacity, the queen could assume the highly venerated position of King's Mother, a role that, as Roth notes, ideologically combined the functions of both wife and mother as a single "mother-consort" to the king. In this dual role, she ensured both the continuity of the royal line and the renewal of kingship itself.

The religious roles of royal women remained largely consistent throughout ancient Egyptian history; however, these roles were significantly expanded during the religious upheaval of the Amarna period. This is reflected in the iconographic and textual displays, where royal women adopt modes of representation once exclusive to male kingship.

Royal Women Represented as Counterparts to the King

Royal women in Amarna were represented as both political and ideological counterparts to the king, adopting visual, textual, and ceremonial features previously restricted to male kingship. This is evident across a range of contexts: Nefertiti, and at times Kiya or eldest daughter Meretaten, are sometimes depicted beside Akhenaten rather than in the traditional subordinate position.¹⁴ In large Year 12 tribute scenes, Nefertiti appears at the same scale as the king, such as in the tomb of Meryre II, which Kloska argues demonstrates her unusually high status and prominent public role within the Atenist court.¹⁵ Other compositions show Nefertiti mirroring the king's gestures in ritual scenes, using the same ceremonial implements (see fig1). Chapot argues that these actions "would indicate that both Akhenaten and Nefertiti's actions have the

¹² Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, p. 16.

¹³ Roth, 'Queen', p. 5.

¹⁴ Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, p. 52.

¹⁵ (Additional examples occur in the tombs of Huya and other Amarna officials, see Kloska for more details.) Maria Kloska, 'The role of Nefertiti in the religion and the politics of the Amarna period', *Folia Praehistorica Posnaniensia*, 21 (2016), pp. 149–75 (p. 157), doi:10.14746/fpp.2016.21.06.

same ritual purpose and efficacy.”¹⁶ Nefertiti is also shown wearing crowns and headdresses such as the *khat* headcloth or *atef* crown, previously reserved for male rulers.¹⁷



Figure 1 A painted limestone relief depicts king Akhenaten and his family adoring the sun god Aten. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. TR 10.11.26.4

This parity is also represented textually through cartouches. After the religious reformation, Nefertiti’s name was changed to Neferneferuaten-Nefetiti, meaning ‘*Beautiful is the Beauty of Aten. A Beautiful Woman has Come.*’¹⁸ It was occasionally

¹⁶ Gizela Chapot, ‘Divine Worship and Action: Representations of the Amarna Royal Family’, in *Perspectives on Materiality in Ancient Egypt: Agency, Cultural Reproduction and Change* (Archaeopress, 2018), pp. 1–9 (p. 3), doi:10.2307/j.ctv1zcm0m4.

¹⁷ Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, p. 132.

¹⁸ Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, pp. 129–30.

written in two cartouches, a convention typically reserved for the royal titulary.¹⁹ In addition, her name was written with the hieroglyph for Aten facing the determinative symbol for her queenly status, allowing the queen to face the god, a highly symbolic honour emphasising her status.²⁰

This development is taken even further in the use of body cartouches: usually reserved for the king, they appear increasingly associated with Nefertiti at Amarna.²¹ Chapot notes that in earlier Theban contexts, as Williamson has shown, the queen did not bear body cartouches when standing beside the king; she only received them when depicted alone, marking her as the chief officiant of the ritual space. At Amarna, however, body cartouches become far more common and no longer limited to temple settings, with Nefertiti shown wearing them even when positioned beside the king. This shift reflects her increasingly active and public role within the Aten cult, and further underscores the extension of kingly visual conventions to the queen.

Most notably, both Tiye and Nefertiti appear in smiting scenes that visualise the enforcement of *maat*, a typical expression of kingly cosmic duty.²² Tiye's example in Kheruef's Theban tomb (TT 192), displays her trampling female enemies in the form of a sphinx.²³ Wall relief *talatat* from both Karnak and Amarna contain images of Nefertiti wielding a *khepesh* sword, executing a female prisoner.²⁴ These representational strategies blur the usual visual hierarchy between king and queen and place royal women within the same sphere of ritual and ideological power, paving the way for their expanded religious roles within the Aten cult.

Ritual Agency and Priestly Roles

Royal women appear prominently in ritual scenes across the later 18th Dynasty, beginning with Tiye under Amenhotep III²⁵ and continuing with Nefertiti. Nefertiti

¹⁹ Kloska, 'The role of Nefertiti in the religion and the politics of the Armana period', p. 154.

²⁰ Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, p. 130.

²¹ Chapot, 'Divine Worship and Action: Representations of the Amarna Royal Family', pp. 2–3.

²² Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, pp. 14–15.

²³ Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, p. 119.

²⁴ Kloska, 'The role of Nefertiti in the religion and the politics of the Armana period', p. 156.

²⁵ Zinn, 'Women in Amarna', p. 256.

appears at an unprecedented level²⁶ and acts as Akhenaten's equal in some religious contexts. For example, a series of balustrade reliefs at religious and royal buildings in Akhetaten depict the royal family in various ritual scenes, with Nefertiti repeating Akhenaten's gestures and using the same ceremonial devices.²⁷



Figure 2: Column fragment showing Nefertiti and Princess Meretaten offering to the Aten.
Limestone, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

Blocks originally from *Hwt-Benben* temple show Nefertiti offering prayers to the Aten in place of the king. These scenes place her in the king's exclusive ritual role, carrying out functions ordinarily performed only by the ruler. Meretaten accompanies her, shaking the sistrum (a musical instrument reserved for female religious officiants), fulfilling the queen's functional role in providing the duality required to complete the ritual.²⁸ This

²⁶ Arnold, *The Royal Women of Amarna*, p. 7.

²⁷ Chapot, 'Divine Worship and Action: Representations of the Amarna Royal Family', p. 1.

²⁸ Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, p. 130.

evidence demonstrates Nefertiti's ubiquitous presence as a co-worshipper with the king and a central participant in the state cult.²⁹

Nefertiti also carried the title of *The High Priestess-Musician* and *The One, who makes that Aten rests through the sweetness of her voice and beautiful hands in which she keeps sistra*,³⁰ underscoring her heightened ritual authority within the sun religion.

Divine and Regenerative Roles of Royal Women

The divine status of royal women in the Amarna period cannot be separated from long-standing Egyptian concepts of duality, regeneration, and the need for a feminine counterpart within kingship. Although Atenism eradicated the traditional gods, it did not abandon the theological structure in which creation was generated through complementary male and female forces. This framework shaped the elevated status of royal women under Akhenaten, who required a divine female partner to complete the Atenist religious framework.

The sacred positioning of the Great Wife as a substitute for a goddess appears before Akhenaten's reign.³¹ Tiye was identified with the goddess Hathor; at Sedeinga, the queen's face was carved over Hathor's own, complete with the deity's characteristic cow ears.³² Because Hathor was traditionally the consort of Re,³³ this association positioned the queen as the divine counterpart of the king. Under Akhenaten, this tradition is intensified with Nefertiti inheriting and expanding upon Tiye's earlier role. Her identification with Hathor is symbolised by her wearing the Hathor crown.³⁴ In this context, Troy argues that Nefertiti may be understood as embodying the "Eye of Re", the feminine creative force through which the world was given form and continually renewed, making her role essential within the king's theological framework.

²⁹ Arnold, *The Royal Women of Amarna*, pp. 85–86.

³⁰ Kloska, 'The role of Nefertiti in the religion and the politics of the Amarna period', p. 154.

³¹ Lana Troy, 'The Ancient Egyptian Queenship as an Icon of the State', *NIN*, 3.1 (2001), pp. 1–24 (pp. 14–15), doi:10.1163/157077602100416878.

³² Claude Rilly, 'The QSAP Programme on the Temple of Queen Tiye in Sedeinga', p. 56
<<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-QSAP-Programme-on-the-Temple-of-Queen-Tiye-in-Rilly/49d2e20d021a6776b6195dc8c198e53442203da5>> [accessed 26 November 2025].

³³ Roth, 'Queen', p. 3.

³⁴ Chapot, 'Divine Worship and Action: Representations of the Amarna Royal Family', p. 3.

The Sunshade temples in Amarna provide further evidence into the heightened religious prominence of royal women. Inscriptions and excavated remains indicate that these park-like sanctuaries were closely connected with female members of the royal family.³⁵ Two such complexes are Kom el-Nana, built for Nefertiti, and Meru Aten, initially built for Kiya and later inherited by princess Meretaten.³⁶ Williamson argues that these spaces served as settings for the Aten's daily rejuvenation and for mortuary commemoration, allowing the dead to remain within reach of the sun disk's regenerative power.³⁷ Their close association with royal women suggests that, while



Figure 3 The sarcophagus of Akhenaten, showing the figure of Nefertiti in a protective gesture. Cairo Museum

³⁵ Arnold, *The Royal Women of Amarna*, p. 27.

³⁶ Jacquelyn Williamson, 'Death and the Sun Temple: New Evidence for Private Mortuary Cults at Amarna', *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 103.1 (2017), pp. 117–23 (p. 119), doi:10.1177/0307513317714419.

³⁷ Williamson, 'Death and the Sun Temple', p. 121.

serving as the feminine generative presence within Atenism, these women assumed protective and nurturing roles once performed by former goddesses. This interpretation is reinforced by the sarcophagus of Akhenaten, on which Nefertiti replaces the traditional protective goddesses Isis, Nephthys, Neith and Selket at the four corners, embracing the king's body in a gesture of divine guardianship.³⁸

The Royal Family as a Divine Unit

Under Atenism, the royal family became the exclusive focus of divine access, and this central theological role elevated the religious status of royal women. A shrine stela from Akhetaten (Berlin, SMPK, Agyptisches Museum, 1415) depicts an intimate scene of Akhenaten and Nefertiti with three of their daughters beneath the Aten, in his typical form as a sun disk with extended arms. Aten presents two ankhs to the royal couple. Robins argues that the ankh may have been used to signify that the bearer (or in this



Figure 4 Shrine Stelae featuring the royal family under the Aten sundisk. Cairo

³⁸ Kloska, 'The role of Nefertiti in the religion and the politics of the Amarna period', p. 165.

case, recipient) was outside the mortal sphere.³⁹ This is typical of the art of the period, which depicts the Aten giving life to the royal family alone.⁴⁰ This iconography reinforces the royal women's position as the king's religious counterparts, providing the essential female aspect. Arnold argues that the imagery on the shrine stelae reflects Atenist ideas about creation.⁴¹ By uniting the Aten with Akhenaten and Nefertiti, the compositions echo the divine triad known in earlier cosmologies. In the Heliopolitan tradition, creation began with the god Atum, who, being androgynous, produced the first divine pair: the male Shu and his female counterpart Tefnut. From them came the next generation of gods and, ultimately, the multitude of beings in the world. On the stelae, the presence of the princesses reinforces this theme, as they represent the many descendants of the primordial pair. At times, the equation is unambiguous, as in a gold stirrup ring depicting Akhenaten and Nefertiti as Shu and Tefnut.⁴² Their divine attributes: the feather of Maat and the double plumes, make the identification explicit.

The Amarna period developed a distinctive iconography for depicting the royal family, characterised by exaggerated facial features, elongated skulls, extended limbs, and prominent bellies.⁴³ Amarna art frequently renders Akhenaten and Nefertiti with nearly identical bodily forms, at times making the two visually indistinguishable.⁴⁴ Chapot argues that this androgyny forms part of a deliberate iconographic identity that constructs a shared “deified” style for the royal family. Royal women were portrayed with the red-brown skin tone typically reserved for males, further collapsing gendered artistic conventions.⁴⁵ These choices presented the royal family as divine beings, reinforcing their assertion that they were divine agents of creation and that only they could commune with the Aten.

³⁹ Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, p. 29.

⁴⁰ Arnold, *The Royal Women of Amarna*, p. 4.

⁴¹ Arnold, *The Royal Women of Amarna*, p. 99.

⁴² Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, p. 131.

⁴³ Arnold, *The Royal Women of Amarna*, pp. 17–20.

⁴⁴ Chapot, ‘Divine Worship and Action: Representations of the Amarna Royal Family’, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, p. 127.

Conclusion

The evidence from Amarna allows us to characterise the religious role of royal women as both continuous with earlier Egyptian tradition and radically intensified within Atenism. Pre-Amarna concepts of kingship and queenship already framed the queen as the king's regenerative partner and as the embodiment of the divine feminine. Under Akhenaten, these long-standing roles were expanded, making royal women structurally indispensable to the functioning of the new solar religion.

Representationally, they appear not as subordinate figures but as counterparts to the king, sharing his scale, actions, cartouche formats, crowns, and even kingly prerogatives such as smiting. These strategies collapse the usual hierarchy between king and queen. Within Atenism, the royal family became the cultic focus, and reliefs showing Nefertiti repeating or substituting for the king's priestly actions confirm her active ritual authority rather than simply accompanying him.

The divine and regenerative dimensions of queenship were similarly amplified. Associations with Hathor, the protective imagery on Akhenaten's sarcophagus, and the prominence of women in Sunshade temples all reflect their incorporation into roles previously filled by goddesses. Finally, the Amarna emphasis on the royal family as a unified divine unit, a composite entity integrating male and female principles and embodied in Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and their daughters, completed the theological framework of Atenism.

Although the surviving evidence mainly reflects elite and royal contexts, it demonstrates that in the sun religion of Amarna, royal women were not peripheral. They were visual, ritual, and theological agents whose participation was essential to mediating between Aten and humanity and to sustaining creation within the new religious order.

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⁴⁶List of Figures

⁴⁶ Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, p. 52.

Figure 1

Museum, Egypt, 'Great Hymn to the Aten', *Egypt Museum*, 5 August 2022 <https://egypt-museum.com/great-hymn-to-the-god-aten/> [accessed 5 December 2025].

Figure 2

Mary Harrsch, photograph of a fragment of a limestone column depicting Queen Nefertiti offering a bouquet to the Aten, followed by Princess Meretaten shaking a sistrum, Great Palace at Tell el-Amarna, 18th Dynasty, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 7 June 2016

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fragment_of_a_limestone_column_depicting_Queen Nefertiti offering a bouquet to the Aten followed by Princess Meretaten shaking a sistrum from the Great Palace at Tell el-Amarna_Egypt_18th_dynasty_\(43983917494\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fragment_of_a_limestone_column_depicting_Queen_Nefertiti_offering_a_bouquet_to_the_Aten_followed_by_Princess_Meretaten_shaking_a_sistrum_from_the_Great_Palace_at_Tell_el-Amarna_Egypt_18th_dynasty_(43983917494).jpg) [accessed 2 December 2025].

Figure 3

Sarcophagus of Akhenaten, Meretseger Books Gallery

<https://www.meretsegerbooks.com/gallery/728/sarcophagus-of-akhenaten> [accessed 5 December 2025].

Figure 4

House Altar of Akhenaten and His Family, Egypt Museum <https://egypt-museum.com/house-altar-of-akhenaten-and-his-family/> [accessed 5 December 2025].