

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

## Introduction

The Amarna period, a late Eighteenth Dynasty phase, is defined by the radical reforms of Amenhotep IV, later 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 light of the sun.<sup>1</sup> Atenist ideology intensified the king's divine status by removing the role of the priesthood, placing ritual activity in a direct relationship between the Aten and the king alone. (ref) As a result, the religious roles of royal women expanded dramatically in scope, visibility, and ideological weight. **[REF: duality / necessity of female principle]**

Since most of the surviving Amarna evidence derives from royal contexts, there is limited information about the religious roles of non-royal women.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the present study focuses on royal women, whose participation in Atenist religion is the most securely attested.<sup>3</sup> 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, it demonstrates that queens and princesses assumed expanded religious functions that were unprecedented in earlier Egyptian tradition.

Nefertiti, Akhenaten's principal wife, stands at the centre of the surviving evidence for the religious roles of royal women during the Amarna period;<sup>4</sup> 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 are prominent in the religious imagery of the period.<sup>5</sup> Tiye was in fact the earliest queen to receive representations comparable to those later granted to Nefertiti;

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

<sup>2</sup> Katharina Zinn, 'Women in Amarna: Legendary Royals, Forgotten Elite, Unknown Populace?', in *Women in Antiquity* (Routledge, 2016), p. 255.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, pp. 53–55.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

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. Because royal women's positions were always relative to the king, I will begin by briefly explaining the religious aspects of the offices of kingship and queenship pre-Amarna to provide context for the women's elevated roles. I will then examine the expanded religious roles of royal women thematically: first, their representation as counterparts to the king; second, the elevation of the royal family as the cultic focus of Atenism; third, their participation as ritual agents; and finally, their assumption of divine and regenerative functions.

## The office of Kingship & Queenship in ancient Egypt

Religion was at the core of Egyptian society, with no distinction between the sacred and secular.<sup>6</sup> The divine office of kingship was fundamental to the functioning and stability of the Egyptian state.<sup>7</sup> In this capacity, the king, as a living manifestation of the supreme god Re, served as intermediary between gods and the people of Egypt. He performed essential life-preserving rituals and governed in accordance with *maat*, the concept of divine order and balance.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

Royal women in ancient Egypt derived their importance from their relationship with the king,<sup>10</sup> as evidenced by the lack of an ancient Egyptian word for 'queen'.<sup>11</sup> Queens' titles were most often a reflection of their relationship with the king, such as "wife/mother of the king". Women within the royal family held important political and religious roles, serving as essential female elements of the monarchy and as representatives of the divine feminine alongside the king's

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<sup>6</sup> Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, p. 132.

<sup>7</sup> Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, pp. 14–15.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Silke Roth, 'Queen', *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, 1.1 (2009), p. 1  
<<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3416c82m>> [accessed 26 November 2025].

masculine aspect.<sup>12</sup> Queens held recognised religious functions, including participation in religious ceremonies and holding titles such as “priestess of the god/goddess NN”.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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, but were significantly expanded during the religious upheaval of the Amarna period. This is reflected in the distinctive Amarna visual programme, 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.<sup>15</sup> In large Year 12 tribute scenes, Nefertiti appears at equal scale to 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.<sup>16</sup> Other compositions show Nefertiti mirroring the king’s gestures in ritual scenes, using the same ceremonial implements. Chapot argues that these actions “would indicate that both Akhenaten and Nefertiti’s actions have the same ritual purpose and efficacy.”<sup>17</sup> Nefertiti is also shown wearing crowns and headdresses such as the *khat* headcloth or *atef* crown, previously reserved for male rulers.<sup>18</sup>

Most notably, both Tiye and Nefertiti appear in smiting scenes that visualise the enforcement of *maat*, a typical expression of kingly cosmic duty. Tiye’s example in Kheruef’s Theban tomb (TT

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<sup>12</sup> Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Roth, ‘Queen’, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Roth, ‘Queen’, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, p. 52.

<sup>16</sup> (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.

<sup>17</sup> Chapot, ‘Divine Worship and Action: Representations of the Amarna Royal Family’, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, p. 132.

192), show her in the form of a sphinx trampling two female enemies.<sup>19</sup> Wall relief *talatat* from both Karnak and Amarna contain images of Nefertiti executing a female prisoner<sup>20</sup> Taken together, these representational strategies collapse the usual visual hierarchy between king and queen and situate royal women within the same sphere of ritual and ideological power, preparing the ground for their enhanced religious roles within the Aten cult.

## The Royal Family as the Cultic Focus of Atenism

Under Atenism, the royal family became the exclusive locus of divine access, and this central theological role elevated the religious status of royal women. A stela from the altar at Akhetaten (Berlin, SMPK, Ägyptisches 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 the bearer (or in this case, recipient) outside the mortal sphere.<sup>21</sup> This is typical of the art of the period, which depicts the Aten giving life to the royal family alone.<sup>22</sup>



According to Arnold, private monuments do not depict the beneficiary before the god, as they did previously. Instead, they show the royal family itself as intermediary between the Aten and people of Egypt. This iconography elevates the status not only of the King but also of all royal women as divine and singular high priestesses in the sun religion.

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<sup>19</sup> Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, p. 119.

<sup>20</sup> Kloska, 'The role of Nefertiti in the religion and the politics of the Amarna period', p. 156.

<sup>21</sup> Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Arnold, *The Royal Women of Amarna*, p. 4.

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### Ritual Agency and Priestly Roles

Royal women appear prominently in ritual scenes across the later 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, beginning with Tiye under Amenhotep III<sup>23</sup> and continuing with Nefertiti. Nefertiti appears at an unprecedented level<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup> This evidence demonstrates Nefertiti's ubiquitous presence as co-worshipper with the king and central participant within the state cult.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 1: Column fragment showing Nefertiti and Princess Meretaten offering to the Aten. Limestone, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

<sup>23</sup> Zinn, 'Women in Amarna', p. 256.

<sup>24</sup> Arnold, *The Royal Women of Amarna*, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Chapot, 'Divine Worship and Action: Representations of the Amarna Royal Family', p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, p. 130.

<sup>27</sup> Arnold, *The Royal Women of Amarna*, pp. 85–86.

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*,<sup>28</sup> underscoring her heightened ritual authority within the sun religion.

The prominence of royal women in state ritual is mirrored in private religious practice, where the people of Amarna prayed before Akhenaten and Nefertiti rather than directly to the Aten.<sup>29</sup> Stone statues and household shrines from Amarna depict the royal family within private gardens and living spaces, indicating that everyday religious devotion centred on the king and queen.

According to Robins, this evidence Nefertiti shows that played a fundamental religious role, filling the gap left by the proscription of traditional goddesses.<sup>30</sup>

### **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 eliminated 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 cult.

The sacred positioning of the Great Wife as a substitute for a goddess appears before Akhenaten's reign.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> Because Hathor was traditionally the consort of Re,<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> In this context, Troy argues that Nefertiti may be understood as

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<sup>28</sup> Kloska, 'The role of Nefertiti in the religion and the politics of the Amarna period', p. 154.

<sup>29</sup> Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, p. 131.

<sup>30</sup> Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, p. 54.

<sup>31</sup> 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.

<sup>32</sup> 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].

<sup>33</sup> Roth, 'Queen', p. 3.

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

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.

## **ANDROGONOUS QUALITIES**

Amarna art frequently renders Akhenaten and Nefertiti with nearly identical bodily forms at times making the two visually indistinguishable. Chapot argues that this androgyny forms part of a deliberate iconographic identity that constructs a shared “deified” style for the royal couple.<sup>35</sup> Nefertiti and sometimes the princesses were portrayed with the red-brown skin tone typically reserved for males, further collapsing gendered artistic conventions.<sup>36</sup> These choices create an image of the king and queen as a single divine unit, embodying the male–female complement required within Atenist theology.

## **2.3 Sunshades**

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.<sup>37</sup> Two such complexes are Kom el-Nana, built for Nefertiti, and Meru Aten, initially built for Kiya and later inherited by princess Meretaten.<sup>38</sup> Williamson argues that these spaces functioned as settings as settings for the Aten’s daily rejuvenation as well as for mortuary commemoration, allowing the dead to remain within reach of the sun disk’s regenerative power.<sup>39</sup> Their close association with royal women suggests that, while 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.<sup>40</sup>

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>35</sup> Chapot, ‘Divine Worship and Action: Representations of the Amarna Royal Family’, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Tyldesley, *Chronicle of the Queens of Egypt*, p. 127.

<sup>37</sup> Arnold, *The Royal Women of Amarna*, p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> 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.

<sup>39</sup> Williamson, ‘Death and the Sun Temple’, p. 121.

<sup>40</sup> Kloska, ‘The role of Nefertiti in the religion and the politics of the Amarna period’, p. 165.

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 a representative of the divine feminine within royal ideology. In the Amarna period, these existing roles were not replaced but expanded, so that royal women became indispensable to the functioning of the new solar religion.

Representationally, royal women are shown as counterparts to the king rather than as merely supporting figures. Nefertiti, and at times Kiya or Meretaten, appear at the same scale as Akhenaten, share his formal poses, and adopt crowns and titulary previously reserved for male rulers. Smiting scenes of Tiye and Nefertiti further insert royal women into imagery of enforcing maat, a domain traditionally monopolised by the king. Taken together, these visual strategies collapse the usual hierarchy between king and queen and prepare the ground for their heightened ritual and theological roles.

Within Atenism the royal family itself becomes the cultic focus. The Aten gives life only to Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and their daughters, while private monuments show the populace directing prayer to the royal family rather than directly to the god. The same pattern appears in temple reliefs, where Nefertiti frequently repeats the king's ritual actions or substitutes for him entirely, with Meretaten providing the necessary feminine complement. Her titles, including "High Priestess-Musician" and the one who causes the Aten to rest through her voice and hands, confirm that she exercised active priestly authority rather than merely accompanying the king.

Finally, the divine and regenerative aspects of queenship are brought to the forefront. Tiye's identification with Hathor at Sedeinga and Nefertiti's use of the Hathor crown show royal women occupying the position of the goddess who embodied the creative "Eye of Re". Androgynous representations of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, together with the adoption of male skin tones for royal women, construct them as a single, deified unit that contains both male and female principles. Sunshade temples associated with Nefertiti, Kiya, and Meretaten, and Nefertiti's substitution for traditional goddesses on Akhenaten's sarcophagus, further indicate that royal women assumed protective and nurturing functions once held by the old pantheon. As Arnold suggests, it was not simply Nefertiti's personal ambition that brought her into spheres previously dominated by the king; rather, the Aten religion itself required the inclusion of a

female principle, with the presence of the royal daughters completing a vision of cosmic wholeness and perpetual renewal.

Although the evidence is heavily weighted towards royal and elite contexts and leaves non-royal women largely invisible, it nonetheless shows that in the sun religion of Amarna, royal women were not peripheral. They were visual, ritual, and theological counterparts to the king, whose participation was essential to mediating between Aten and humanity and to sustaining creation within the new religious order.

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#### Image references

Figure 2: USA, Mary Harrsch from Springfield, Oregon, *Photographed at the <a Href="https://www.Ashmolean.Org/" Rel="nofollow">Ashmolean Museum</A> in Oxford, England.*, 7 June 2016, Fragment of a limestone column depicting Queen Nefertiti offering a bouquet to the Aten followed by Princess Merataten shaking a sistrum from the Great Palace at Tell el-Amarna Egypt 18th dynasty  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fragment\\_of\\_a\\_limestone\\_column\\_depicting\\_Queen\\_Nefertiti\\_offering\\_a\\_bouquet\\_to\\_the\\_Aten\\_followed\\_by\\_Princess\\_Merataten\\_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_Merataten_shaking_a_sistrum_from_the_Great_Palace_at_Tell_el-Amarna_Egypt_18th_dynasty_(43983917494).jpg)> [accessed 2 December 2025]

Figure 3: <https://www.meretsegerbooks.com/gallery/728/sarcophagus-of-akhenaten>