

Nefertiti's Sun Temple - Queenship and Death at Amarna - Dr Jacquelyn Williamson

In August Dr Jacquelyn Williamson gave us a talk via Zoom about the Sunshade Temples of Nefertiti and Meritaten. To set the scene, she outlined the relevant **historical background**: Amenhotep III had reigned at the height of Egypt's wealth. His extensive building projects included the Sun Court at Luxor Temple, dedicated to the solar deity Ra, but also to a hitherto obscure deity - the Aten (the sun disk).

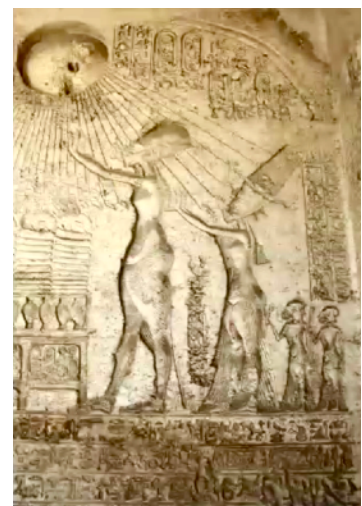


Sun Court of Amenhotep III at Luxor Temple

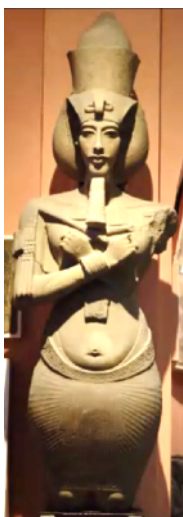
In a country where 95% were illiterate, art/architecture was the means of communication. Following Amenhotep III's death, his younger son succeeded him, initially as Amenhotep IV. He was heavily influenced by his father's solar theology and believed that offerings to the Aten for the daily 'rebirth' of the sun ensured the continued existence and prosperity of Egypt.

At first, Amenhotep built a temple to the Aten at the rear of the Karnak complex, which was dedicated to the composite state deity, Amun-Ra. However, due to theological and political conflicts, the king changed his name to Akhenaten and developed his solar theology to the exclusion of competing deities, especially Amun. Although Amun was the main deity proscribed during Akhenaten's reign, others associated with the sun such as Ra and Hathor were exempted from this purge. To ensure the break with traditional religion, Akhenaten relocated the court to a newly built capital that he named Akhetaten (Amarna).

Whereas the name Amenhotep means 'Amun is satisfied', Akhenaten translates as 'one who is effective for the Aten'. The Aten was a deity visible to all, but one that was accessible exclusively to Akhenaten. On Boundary stela A at Amarna, the Aten only extends its sun-ray hands to a limited elite few, not everyone.



Boundary Stela A



The presentation of this king - the exaggeration of the royal physique, the elongation and distension of the form - is intentional, but it does not denote deformity, illness or physical hermaphroditism. Rather, it emphasises the divine otherness of the king and this extends to Nefertiti and their daughters. Conceptually, the colossi of Akhenaten show both his divine male and female aspects. This is essentially propaganda about his religious ideology and autocratic control. Later Amarna art scenes are more realistic but still focus on the royal couple worshipping the Aten, appearing in public or in intimate domestic scenes.

Egyptian queenship was concerned with assisting & supporting the king, but it was also associated with Ma'at - the harmonious balance without which creation would cease to exist. Queens had a semi-divine status - they were goddess-like. Until the Amarna period, the traditional divine triad consisted of Atum: the creator god, the first created male: the god Shu, and the first created female: the goddess Tefnut. These were appropriated by Akhenaten so that the Aten became the creator god, and Akhenaten and Nefertiti took the places of Shu and Tefnut. The traditional balance of male deities with their female counterparts was thus reinvented and maintained. The Aten was considered to be either male or gender neutral, therefore creation deities such as Shu and Tefnut were adopted to provide some counter-balance.

Hathor, goddess of rebirth was also the 'Lady of drunkenness' - a sex goddess in her own right. A sarcophagus showing Isis' role in creating Horus, shows her as the medium through which the king is reborn. Nefertiti was therefore equated with both Isis & Hathor for their roles in the theory of solar rebirth.

Whereas the Great and Small Aten Temples at Amarna were devoted to the king's worship of the Aten, the sunshade temples were given by Akhenaten to all the female royals. The first archaeological evidence for Sunshades occurs at Deir el-Bahri where there is a sunshade court and altar in Hatshepsut's Mortuary Temple. The Mortuary Temple of Amenhotep III at Kom el-Hettan also has a prominent sun court.

Identification of Kom el-Nana as Nefertiti's Sunshade of Re Temple

Originally, there were 7 'Sunshade of Re Temples' built by Akhenaten, though there are only surviving archaeological fragments for two of them. These were likely dedicated to Nefertiti (at Kom el-Nana) and her eldest daughter Meritaten (at Maru-Aten), though there is evidence that the latter had previously belonged to Akhenaten's secondary wife Kiya before her death or fall from favour.



Maru-Aten Sunshade Temple complex

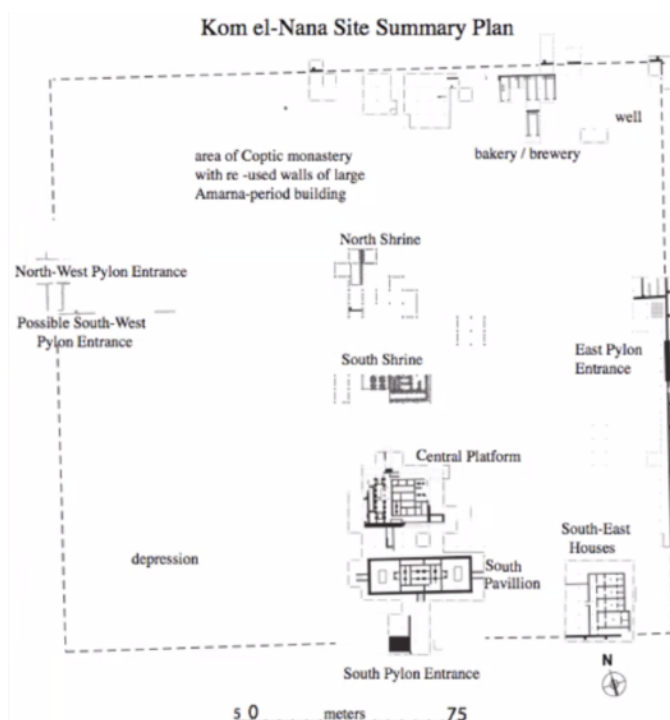
The Maru-Aten complex, situated south of Kom el-Nana, was large - around the size of 5 football fields. Within its enclosure, a huge pool that contained a very large amount of standing water, would have required a considerable ongoing effort to maintain it.

Regenerative aspects of queenship

These sunshade temples and their royal occupants had an important offering role to play in Akhenaten's solar theology for the daily rebirth of the sun. They provided the female offering counterpart to the king's function at the Great Aten and Small Aten Temples to enable the daily renewal of life through the rebirth of the sun.

The Kom el-Nana site is a Sunshade Temple of Re, occupying around 220 square metres and the likely domain of Queen Nefertiti. It had a square enclosure wall and pylon entrances on its north-west, east and south walls. The complex was sub-divided near the north-west and east entrances with an interior wall. In the northern sector, there was a North Shrine near the dividing wall, and a bakery / brewery and well near the north enclosure wall.

The southern sector accommodated a South Shrine near the dividing wall, a Central Platform and a South Pavilion near the South Pylon entrance. Towards the south-east corner, there was a block of houses. There is evidence that there would also have been several garden plots, so the complex would have been lush in comparison to the surrounding arid terrain.



Funerary aspects of the Sunshade of Re at Kom el-Nana

A stone fragment (S-2570) with part of a head wearing a single uraeus on the forehead also bears part of a larger hieroglyphic inscription that includes *šwt r* ('sunshade of Ra'). The figure wearing a single uraeus could only be Akhenaten or Nefertiti.

Conical bread moulds have been found at Kom el-Nana. These have also been found at the Great & Small Aten Temples. Large temple bakeries have been discovered at the Great Aten Temple, the Small Aten Temple, and at Kom el-Nana. Akhenaten's Boundary Stela makes specific reference to these three temples - the only areas along the Amarna Royal Road equipped for festival celebrations.



Dr Williamson believes that the inverted loop on the S-2570 fragment may be the determinative of the word *rwḏ* which would make the text *t3 šwt r m rwḏ ḥnw* - the full title of the sun temple. A combination of the reconstructed fragment numbers S-2640 and 58 (Ashmunein) gives *rwḏ ḥnw itm* - 'The living Aten endures' - which is part of a similar inscription in the Amarna tomb of Ay. Also, a stela inscription in the tomb of Hatshepsut's 'Overseer of Treasury' Senemiah (TT127 at

Sheikh Abd al-Qurna), gives a prayer for the dead: "May you eat the offering-bread to the side of the stairs in front of Ptah, Lord of the Ennead. May you take half to the place where he is upon the altar of the Sunshade of Re".

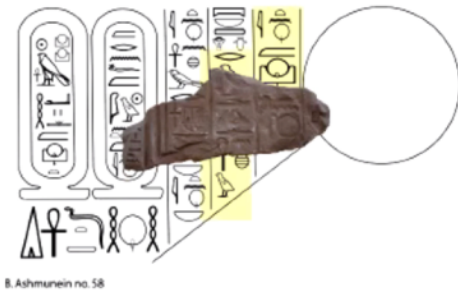
This provides evidence that the Sunshades of Re were associated with mortuary cults, and that within mortuary temples, there were areas where the non-royal dead were able to give and receive offerings. As with the standard offering formula *ḥtp di nsw*, the offerings to the deceased were associated with and were supported by the king.

A living person could also come to the shrine in spirit form to eat the offerings left on the stairs. So the function of the Amarna temples, including the sunshades, was about regeneration - the daily rebirth of the solar cycle, but also to provide a channel for the non-royal Amarna dead to benefit.

Dr Williamson concluded her presentation by saying that the Amarna Project has launched a 'Future Fund' to raise a matching £36,000 to secure a pledge to that same amount by an anonymous donor in order to further this research. Support in reaching this goal is most welcome. email address: theamarnatrust@gmail.com



The Sunshade of Re in the *rwd nhw itn*



Q&A

Q: Janet - Did Nefertiti take over the kingship ?

A: King Neferneferuaten - no definitive proof, but a possible regent for Tutankhamun.

Q: Tanya - the style of the Akhenaten colossi?

A: Colossi - not literal but representation communicating religious concepts & ideas as propaganda - a radical re-imagination of the kingship role.

Q: Claire - what was the Amarna art style aiming for?

A: A new way to set the king apart - more divine, god-like, not like ordinary people.

Q: Michelle - How does the Maru-Aten compare with Kom el-Nana viz the status of Kiya?

A: it doesn't. It was all about Akhenaten as the sole prophet of the Aten - in complete control. All about Akhenaten's view of religion.

Q: Tanya - Do you think we have found or will find Nefertiti's mummy?

Q: Pippa - Where is the evidence of Akhenaten telling people what to do?

A: Boundary stelae.

Michael Tweddle
14/8/25