NEFERTITI’S FACE

THE CREATION OF AN ICON

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PROFILE BOOKS
For all my students, past, present and future.
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements vii
Nefertiti’s Egypt ix
Map of Amarna x
Plan: Thutmose’s House/Workshop xi

Introduction: Seeking Nefertiti 1
Background to the Amarna Age 7

PART I: Creating Nefertiti
 1 Thutmose 27
 2 Chief of Works 51
 3 Taught by the King 70
 4 The Beautiful Woman 88

PART II: Recreating Nefertiti
 5 The Colourful Queen 119
 6 The German Queen 137
 7 Multiple Nefertitis 156
 8 Looking for Nefertiti 175

Notes 187
Bibliography and Further Reading 204
List of Illustrations 217
Index 219
I always worry when I start a new book. Is my subject of interest to a wide readership or – horrible thought – is it simply my own, self-indulgent obsession? With this book, all worries soon evaporated. The ‘Berlin bust’ which is believed to depict Queen Nefertiti is clearly a subject of interest to many people, and from the outset I have been overwhelmed by the support that I have received from friends, colleagues, students and complete strangers too numerous to mention individually. Thank you all.

The themes developed in this book were first presented in a lecture given to the Egypt Exploration Society in 2010, and refined for a lecture given for the Showcase Seminar series in the Manchester Museum in 2011. I would like to thank both organisations for their support. The delay in writing was caused by an unfortunate series of personal circumstances. I would like to thank all my editors at Profile Books – the late Peter Carson, Daniel Crewe, Penny Daniel and Cecily Gayford – as well as my copy-editor, Trevor Horwood, for their patience with what must, at times, have seemed like a never-ending project.

Campbell Price, Curator of Egypt and Sudan at the Manchester Museum, never allowed me to give up on Nefertiti. Carolyn Routledge and Angela Thomas, both former Curators of Egyptology and
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Amarna

- Thutmose's House/Workshop
- Plaster Workshops
- Core House
- Granaries
- Stables
- Secondary House
- Southern Extension (Sculptors' Workshops and Housing)
- Courtyard Well
- Well
- Maru-Aten South Tombs
- Workmen's Village
- To Royal Tomb
- Ancient quarries
- North City
- North Palace
- North Tombs
- North Suburb
- Central City
- South Suburb
- River Nile
- Main City
- M.tu-Aten
- North Suburb
- North Tombs
- Cultivated lands
- Rock-cut tombs
- Boundary stelae
- 1 mile
- 2 kilometres
Thutmose’s House/Workshop

- Plaster Workshops
- Core House
- Stables
- Granaries
- Southern Extension (Sculptors’ Workshops and Housing)
- Secondary House
- Courtyard
- Well
- Maru-Aten South Tombs
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- North Suburb
- South Suburb
- River Nile

1 mile
2 kilometres
One of the most interesting features of modern historical work is the attempt of the historian, not only to construct a complete and reliable skeleton of fact about particular peoples and periods, but also, when that has been done, to clothe the dry bones with flesh and blood, and to inspire them with life and movement. The dry catalogues of events and dynasties which served as histories in the past no longer satisfy us. We wish to know how people lived, acted, thought, in ancient days, to see them as they wrought their day’s work, to follow them into the intimacies of their homes, to know what they believed in and hoped for, even what amused them in their hours of relaxation. Perhaps even more keenly do we desire to realise individual personality, where such a thing is possible, and to be able to form in our own minds an actual conception of the men who made history in the past.

James Baikie (1929)¹

As a child, I loved the gloomy Egyptian gallery in Bolton Museum.
Here, hidden amongst the countless dusty pots, could be found a whole treasury of wonders: the Rosetta Stone, a partially unwrapped female mummy lying in a decorated coffin, a squat Peruvian mummy sewn into what looked like a sack, and the sculpted head of a beautiful woman named Nefertiti. I don’t know how old I was when I realised that not everything on display was quite what it seemed. The Rosetta Stone was – much to my indignation – a reproduction of the original, which has long been a key piece in the British Museum’s collection. The Egyptian mummy was genuinely ancient, but would later be reclassified as a man while its decorated coffin remained that of a woman; a useful reminder that not every dead Egyptian made the long journey to Lancashire with his or her own accessories. Nefertiti’s head was less than a century old; a plaster copy of a bust then on display in West Berlin, and just one of a host of identical plaster Nefertitis confusing children and their parents in museums throughout the Western world. Only the Peruvian mummy – the inexplicable and, to me, sinister intruder in the Egyptian gallery – was exactly what it appeared to be.

The Bolton Nefertiti, then, was a fake or, as the museum would probably prefer to classify it, a replica. Fake or real: this did not matter to the young me. The bust was a beautiful object in its own right, and my fascination with Nefertiti had been born. Twenty-five years later this fascination led me to write a book about Nefertiti. I set out full of enthusiasm to create a fat, fact-packed biography of Egypt’s sun queen, but soon realised that this would never be possible. Nefertiti’s life is preserved in pictures rather than words, and the undisputed facts can be condensed into a very short list. We know that she was the consort of the Eighteenth Dynasty king Akhenaten (formerly known as Amenhotep IV), who ruled Egypt at a time of unprecedented wealth and empire. We know that she lived most of her adult life at the new royal city of Amarna, and that she bore her husband at least six daughters. We know that she was
allocated a prominent role in Akhenaten's solar cult, and that she often wore a unique flat-topped crown while performing her religious and political duties. We know that she fades from our view at the end of her husband’s reign. And that is more or less it. Alongside these facts, we have many areas of conjecture. Who were Nefertiti’s parents? Was she worshipped as a living goddess? Did her son inherit the Egyptian throne? We are particularly intrigued by her disappearance, which seems somehow inappropriate and unconvincing for such a prominent woman. Could she really have died and been buried during her husband’s reign? Or could she have moved on, perhaps changing her name and role to continue her career trajectory?

This lack of personal information is far from unusual. Three thousand years of dynastic history have yielded the names of many hundreds of queens, but we know very little about the private lives of any of these remote ladies. Births, marriages and deaths were not routinely commemorated in the monumental inscriptions that would have made them accessible to us today and, although we may have a splendid if empty tomb to stand as testament to a magnificent funeral and – maybe – a loving husband or son, death for the most part went unrecorded too. The best-recorded queens are those who were born into the royal family and who outlived their husbands to become the mothers of kings, but even these women are frustratingly ill documented. So it is not sinister, mysterious or meaningful that we know so little about Nefertiti’s life and, in particular, about her death and burial. The deafening silence does not necessarily conceal a plot twist, however much we might hope for one.

However, it does leave us wanting to know more about Nefertiti, and her role in the Amarna drama. This is a relatively recent development. At the turn of the last century no account of the Amarna Period would have cast Nefertiti in the central female role. Her
name and her awkward gawkiness survived in imagery and sculpture, but she was a minor character in comparison to her formidable mother-in-law, Queen Tiy. Tiy, it was accepted, developed the role of the politically active consort and queen mother, with Nefertiti merely following her lead. Few, in fact, would have been interested in either Tiy or Nefertiti. The Amarna Period was very much a niche subject, of interest mainly to biblical scholars vainly seeking a means of linking the ‘heretic’ Akhenaten to Moses. This started to change when, in 1911, a German expedition directed by Ludwig Borchardt began to excavate the ruined city of Amarna. The first exhibition of finds from the site drew large crowds to Berlin’s Neues Museum and sparked an excitement which only increased when, in 1922, Howard Carter discovered Tutankhamen’s near-intact tomb in the Valley of the Kings.³

Tutankhamen was a British archaeological triumph that caused the other excavating nations to grind their teeth in frustration. It is perhaps no coincidence that, within months of the discovery, a colourfully painted life-sized portrait bust was unveiled in the Neues Museum. The bust depicted a beautiful and startlingly lifelike Egyptian queen with a smooth pink-brown skin, deeper red-brown lips, a straight nose and arched black brows. She was unlabelled, but wore the flat-topped blue crown which was unique to Nefertiti, mother-in-law – and possibly also mother – of the celebrity of the day. Nefertiti’s bust fitted perfectly with the colourful, geometric art deco style that was starting to represent post-war opulence and glamour. It could easily have been sculpted by Demètre Chiparus or Ferdinand Preiss, yet it was the creation of a sculptor who had lived and died several thousands of years earlier. Ample publicity ensured that long queues of admirers arrived daily at the Neues Museum. This, of course, resulted in yet more publicity and even longer queues until, like many modern celebrities, the Berlin bust and, by extension, Nefertiti herself had become famous simply for being
famous. Germany, a land so recently stripped of its royalty, had acquired a new queen and, as Nefertiti’s fame was extrapolated backwards, Tiy was forced to abdicate her role as the foremost queen of the Amarna court.

All other portraits forgotten, the Berlin bust quickly became the one and only version of Nefertiti. While Tutankhamen remained frustratingly invisible, sealed in his nest of coffins in the Valley of the Kings, replica Nefertitis travelled the Western world. Soon she existed, simultaneously, in increasing numbers of museum galleries and – executed with varying degrees of accuracy, as copies were made of the official replicas, only to be themselves copied – was available from increasing numbers of outlets. By 1925 a replica Nefertiti bust had reached Bolton, where she was (and still is) featured alongside a mixture of genuine and reproduction artefacts recovered from Amarna. It was entirely predictable that the bust would quickly become the subject of highest-level diplomatic discussion, with the Egyptian authorities demanding that their ‘stolen property’ be repatriated and the German authorities defending their ownership of a ‘legally acquired artefact’. It was equally predictable that it would become the subject of many and varied conspiracy theories: exactly when, where and by whom had it been made?

Ancient Egypt has yielded more than its fair share of artistic masterpieces, but it is difficult to think of another sculpture that has so successfully bridged the gap between the ancient and modern worlds. The timeless beauty of the Berlin Nefertiti both attracts us and sparks our imagination, but in so doing it obscures our view of the past, shifting attention not only from the other members of the Amarna court, but also from other, equally valid, representations of Nefertiti herself. At the same time, the bust’s very familiarity clouds our view, making it difficult for us to see what is actually before our eyes. In this book I set out to explore the creation of a cultural icon. I have divided the book into two parts. The first, ‘Creating
Nefertiti’, returns the bust to its original context by considering the evidence for its creator, its manufacture and its purpose. Part II, ‘Recreating Nefertiti’, sets the bust in its modern context by discussing its discovery, its display and its dual role as a political pawn and artistic inspiration. In order to make sense of the Egyptian history underpinning the story of the bust, I begin with a brief introduction to Nefertiti’s life and times. To bring things up to date, I end by considering the most recent attempts to trace Nefertiti’s remains. The endnotes numbered throughout the text will allow the more curious reader to discover further details about Nefertiti and her images.
The Tel el-Amarna period has had more nonsense written about it than any other period in Egyptian history.

Margaret Murray (1949)¹

More than 3,000 years ago an Egyptian sculptor created an artistic masterpiece. This book focuses on the conception, creation, replication and dissemination of that masterpiece: a plastered and colourfully painted bust of Queen Nefertiti, which is currently on display in the Neues Museum, home of Berlin’s Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection.² However, no artefact should be studied in isolation. This brief section provides the background information necessary to view the bust, its creator(s) and its subject in their proper context.³ If it seems to focus on Akhenaten rather than on the bust, its creator, or Nefertiti herself, this is unavoidable. Akhenaten was the king of Egypt and, as such, had no living equal. His word was law, and his decision to worship one particular god had a major impact on everything and everyone – queen, art and artists included.
– around him. It is only by understanding this that we can start to gain an understanding of Amarna life and art.

Nefertiti was the consort of the king, or pharaoh, Akhenaten, who came to the throne as Amenhotep IV. Akhenaten ruled Late Bronze Age Egypt towards the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty. The kings of the later Eighteenth Dynasty, and their reign lengths, are conventionally listed as follows:

Tuthmosis IV 1400–1390 BCE

Amenhotep III 1390–1352 BCE

Amenhotep IV, who subsequently changed his name to Akhenaten, 1352–1336 BCE

Smenkhkare 1338–1336 BCE

Tutankhaten, who subsequently changed his name to Tutankhamen, 1336–1327 BCE

Ay 1327–1323 BCE

Horemheb 1323–1295 BCE.

All these dates are approximate. Although the Egyptians maintained long chronological lists of their kings, they did not use a linear calendar to date events. They saw time as an endlessly repeating cycle of reigns and so, when a king died, time began again with a new king – the continuation of all kings who had gone before – and a new year 1. This system has been adopted by Egyptologists because, although it is by no means perfect, it is the most accurate means that we have of dating specific events. When we state that
Nefertiti’s husband swore an oath of dedication to establish the limits of a new royal city in his regnal year 6, we know exactly what we mean. We struggle, however, to tie this dedication to a specific calendar year. Unfortunately this traditional Egyptocentric dating method can appear baffling to non-Egyptologists and, as it isolates Egypt from the rest of the ancient world, has added to the air of mystery that is so often, and so unnecessarily, associated with the dynastic age.

Nefertiti’s own timeline is best documented with reference to her husband’s regnal years as follows:

**Year 1:** Nefertiti becomes Akhenaten’s consort. The date of their marriage is unknown. Nefertiti’s parentage is unexplained. Daughter Meritaten is born by the end of year 1.

**Year 2:** New building works at Thebes include the Benben Temple (\(Hwt\ bnbn\)), a temple that features Nefertiti in the role of priest. Nefertiti receives an extended name, becoming Neferneferuaten – Nefertiti ‘Exquisite Beauty of the Aten. A Beautiful Woman has Come’.

**Year 3:** Akhenaten’s heb-sed jubilee is celebrated at Thebes. Nefertiti plays an obvious role in the celebrations.

**Year 4:** Daughter Meketaten probably born this year.

**Year 5:** Building works start at Amarna.

**Year 7:** Daughter Ankhesenpaaten born before or during this year.

**Year 8:** Daughter Neferneferuaten-the-Younger born before or during this year.

**Year 9:** The royal family has made a permanent move to Amarna. Daughters Neferneferure and Setepenre are born before the end of this year.

**Year 12:** Nefertiti’s bust is carved this year or later, in
Thutmose’s workshop. Nefertiti, Akhenaten and all six daughters attend an international festival at Amarna.

**Year 13(?):** A scene in the royal tomb depicts Nefertiti mourning the death of Meketaten.

**Year 16:** A graffito in a quarry near Amarna refers to Nefertiti as Akhenaten’s consort. Our last contemporary sighting of the queen.

Nefertiti was not her husband’s only wife. Like all of Egypt’s kings, Akhenaten maintained a harem of secondary queens of varying status. Traditionally the royal wives might include the daughters of Egyptian kings and the daughters of brother-kings and foreign vessels sent to Egypt to participate in the diplomatic marriages which linked the Egyptian empire together. Living alongside his wives, although not necessarily permanent harem residents, were Akhenaten’s unmarried female dependants, his widowed mother, sisters, aunts, and the wives inherited from his dead father, plus their children, servants and attendants. Together they formed a strong, economically independent, female-based community.

As consort, or ‘King’s Great Wife’, Nefertiti enjoyed a very different life from her co-wives. She lived in the palace, not the harem, where she was recognised as the mother in the nuclear royal family. She was the queen who, bearing the appropriate titles, crowns and regalia, was represented in all official writings and artwork. If all went to plan her son would eventually inherit his father’s crown, allowing Nefertiti to progress to the highly respected role of King’s Mother. The consort was, however, far more than a baby machine. She was an essential element in the monarchy and, like any good Egyptian wife, she was expected to support her husband in all his endeavours. Her political role is fairly clear to us; she was effectively the king’s deputy. In a time of crisis – a dead husband, for example – she would rule Egypt until the next king was able to take his