

The Death of Meketaten

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Back in 1979, Bill Murnane was one of the first Egyptologists I met in the field, if the bar of the old Luxor Hotel can be counted as such. We kept in regular contact over the years and his premature death came as a great shock. Bill's epigraphic acumen and the lucid style of his brilliant writings on the history of New Kingdom Egypt have always been an inspiration to me, and I gratefully dedicate the following article to his memory.

Among the many controversial problems of the Amarna Period is the interpretation of the so-called birth scene in Room γ in the Royal Tomb at Amarna. In fact, there is a second, very similar scene in Room α , but for the time being we shall concentrate here on Room γ . The scene (Fig. 1) occupies the East wall (A) of a room in the Amarna royal tomb which appears to have been specially designed for the burial of Akhenaten and Nefertiti's second daughter Meketaten.¹ On the left a chamber is depicted; inside, Meketaten, identified by an inscription, is lying on a bed. Her parents are standing at the head end of the bed and although the scene is very damaged here it is clear from the parallel in Room α (Fig. 2) that they are mourning the death of their daughter. Two other unidentified, but nonroyal, persons are mourning at the foot end of the bed. Outside the chamber are two registers with further figures, both male and female, all displaying various gestures of mourning; among them is the vizier. All of these figures face the entrance to the chamber, except three females in the lower register. The first of these is a woman holding a newborn baby in her arms and breast-feeding it. She is followed by two other females, each of whom holds a *bht* fan or sunshade. The whole context of this scene strongly suggests that there is a connection between the events inside the bedchamber of Meketaten and this group of three women with the baby; the logical conclusion seems to be that Meketaten has just given birth to a child, but has died in the process, and this is indeed the almost universally accepted interpretation.

Although the inscription above the body of Meketaten on her deathbed is clear enough, the text inscribed in two columns in front of the woman holding the child has only partly survived, that is, it did until 1934, when what was left of the text and indeed

¹ Granite fragments belonging to her sarcophagus or perhaps her canopic chest have been found within the royal tomb, see G. Daressy, "Tombeaux et stèles-limites de Hagi-Qandil," *RecTrav* 15 (1893), p. 62; G. T. Martin, *The Royal Tomb at El-Amarna I: The Objects* (London: EES, 1974), p. 29 (no. 103), p. 104; M. J. Raven, "A sarcophagus for Queen Tiy and other fragments from the Royal Tomb at el-Amarna," *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum van het Oudheden* 74 (1994), p. 8. Of the four additional fragments (Martin nos. 251, 303, 592, and 699) mentioning an unidentified princess which Martin tentatively assigned to Meketaten, only nos. 303 (joined to the named fragments by Raven) and 592 probably belonged to her. No. 592 writes the *mr*-sign with N36, like the Meketaten fragments, whereas nos. 251 and 699 use the Amarna form N37, as does the fragment no. 218 which is inscribed for Merytaten.

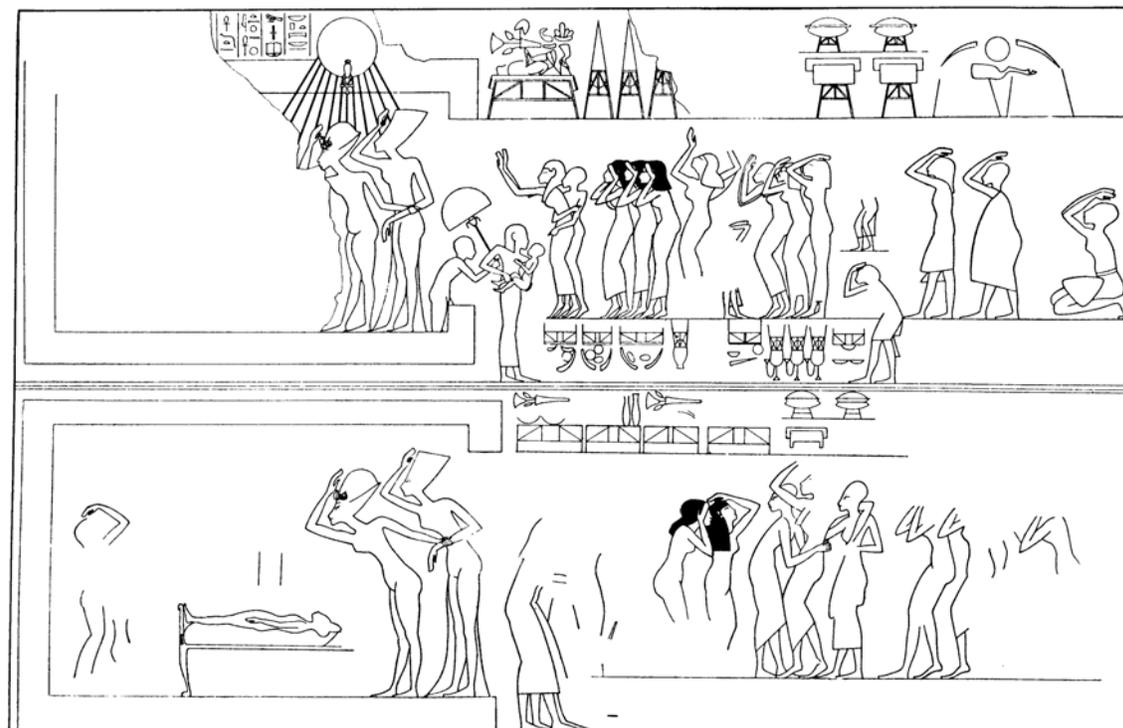


Fig. 1. The so-called birth scene in Room γ of the Royal Tomb at Amarna.

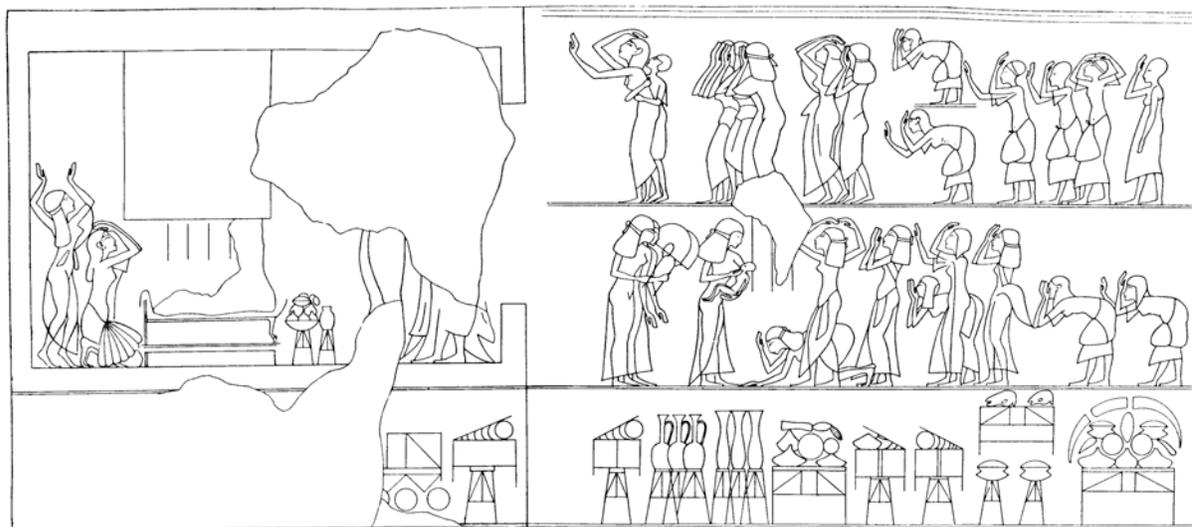


Fig. 2. A parallel scene in Room α of the Royal Tomb at Amarna.

of much of the decoration was almost entirely destroyed by vandals. This means that we have to rely on old photographs and handcopies, foremost of which is the photograph taken in 1893/94 by Gustave Jéquier and published by Bouriant, Legrain and Jéquier in their *Monuments pour servir à l'étude du culte d'Atonou en Égypte*.² The traces visible on this photograph include a seated person determinative followed by what looks like a *ms*-sign at the end of the first column and the cartouche of Queen Nefertiti followed by the usual 'may she live for ever and ever' in the second column. This leaves us Egyptologists literally with room for speculation. What was in the missing portion of the text? And to whom does it refer?

In the drawing of the scene³ the inscription is omitted, but in the letterpress of the volume Legrain, who was responsible for the description of the scenes and the commentary on the inscriptions,⁴ provides it in printed hieroglyphs together with his reconstruction of the missing parts (Fig. 3, reversed):

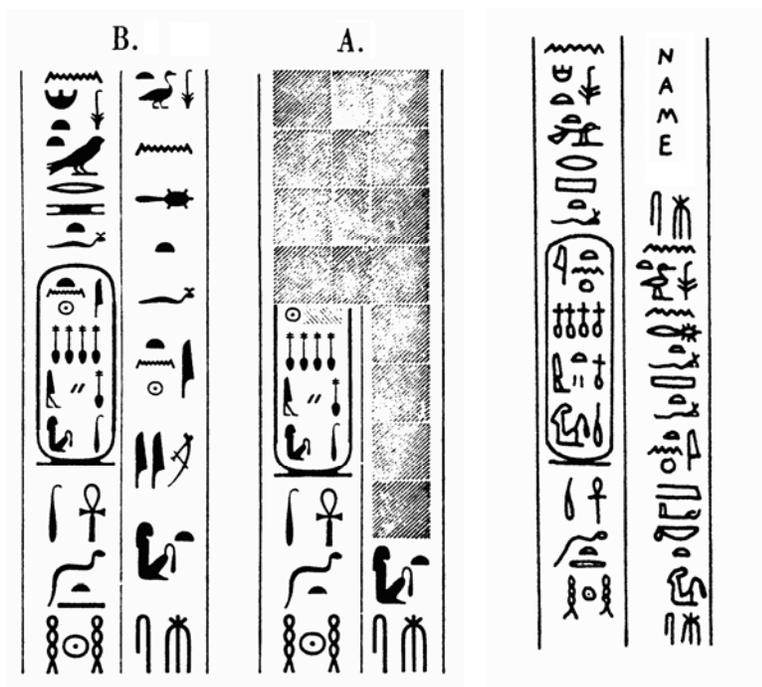


Fig. 3 A reconstruction by Legrain of the two columns of text inscribed in front of the woman holding the child in Room γ

Fig. 4 G. T. Martin's reconstruction of the same columns of text

² U. Bouriant, G. Legrain and G. Jéquier, *Monuments pour servir à l'étude du culte d'Atonou en Égypte*, MIFAO 8 (Cairo: IFAO, 1903), Pl. IX.

³ *Ibid.*, pl. VII (Fig. 1 above).

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. iii and 23 n. 1.

Legrain rightly remarks that the orientation of the text conforms to the orientation of the woman holding the child and not to that of the child itself, and he therefore bases his restoration on the assumption that the text identifies the nurse, not the child. Because of the fact that Nefertiti is mentioned in col. 2 Legrain concludes that this nurse has to be a princess. The group preceding the *ms*-sign at the end of col. 1 he identifies as a *t* plus a seated woman determinative; the presence of the *t*, about which he expresses no doubt whatsoever, leads him to suggest that the name is either that of Merytaten, the eldest daughter, or Baketaten. Since Baketaten had clearly not yet been born at this stage, Merytaten is left as the only possibility (and of course we now know that Baketaten was not a daughter of Nefertiti⁵). However, looking at Legrain's reconstruction of the text, one cannot help feeling that the damaged area is simply too large for just the signs he wants to read in it. Even if we insert *mrt=f* between *s3t nsw n ht=f* and the name, as one would expect, the text is still not long enough to fill the available space. Legrain's restoration is therefore problematic.

This was also the opinion of Geoffrey Martin, whose seminal publication of the Royal Tomb contains an alternative reconstruction of the inscription.⁶ Unlike Legrain, he thinks that the text refers to the child, although he does so on the erroneous assumption that the signs in the text face left, like the child, which is clearly not the case. He then rightly says that

“in Bouriant's [*i.e. Legrain's, JvD*] reconstruction the signs in the second [*actually the first*] column are very widely spaced, and there is clearly room in the area available to accommodate the customary titulary of Meketaten as well as the name of the child.”

He gives his own reconstruction in a handcopy, which, however, is marred by an unfortunate reversal of both the hieroglyphic signs and the order of the columns. In corrected form, Martin's reconstruction appears as shown in fig. 4 above.

However, when one actually tries to insert the signs of Martin's proposed reconstruction in the available space on his drawing⁷ (Fig. 5), one soon discovers that his reconstruction is far too long. Here even shortening the phrases by taking out *mrt=f* does not help. I have tried several possibilities, but the text simply will not fit the available space. Martin does not suggest a name for the child, although he briefly considers the idea, also suggested by Rolf Krauss,⁸ that the child is male and that it is

⁵ M. Gabolde, “Baketaten fille de Kiya?,” *BSEG* 16 (1992), pp. 27–40.

⁶ G. T. Martin, *The Royal Tomb at El-'Amarna II: The Reliefs, Inscriptions, and Architecture* (London: EES, 1989), p. 44, fig. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pl. 63.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45. Cf. R. Krauss, in *Tutanchamun*, eds., R. Krauss and R. Wagner (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp

Tutankhaten whose birth is shown here. Whatever the merits of Martin's reconstruction, however, it is important to note that he does not question the *t* plus seated female which Legrain saw at the end of col. 1; in fact, those are the only signs beside the group *ms* (or *ms.n*) which appear in col. 1 on his drawing.



Fig. 5 Martin's drawing of the scene, including the two columns of text

More recently, Marc Gabolde has come up with an entirely new and startling solution.⁹ After identifying the elements in the text which he considers to be beyond doubt, i.e. the group 'born of' at the end of col. 1 and the cartouche of Nefertiti in col. 2, he rightly remarks that the text therefore must have contained the customary phrase 'king's son/daughter of his body, his beloved' and that the usual titles 'great king's wife, his beloved' must have preceded the cartouche of Nefertiti in col. 2. He also correctly states that in col. 1 there is room for one name only, not for the two suggested by Martin. Here, however, Gabolde unfortunately leaves the field of epigraphy and turns to hypothetical historical arguments. The child, he says, because it is depicted in a

von Zabern, 1980), pp. 51–2.

⁹ First published in popular form in "La postérité d'Aménophis III," *Égyptes Histoires et Cultures* 1 (1993), pp. 29–34 (reprinted in *Akhénaton et l'époque amarnienne*, eds. T.-L. Bergerot and B. Mathieu [Paris: Éditions Khéops / Centre d'Égyptologie, 2005], pp. 13–33), then in more detailed form in his *D'Akhenaton à Toutânkhamon* (Lyon: Université Lumière – Lyon II, Institut d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'Antiquité; Paris: Bocard, 1998), pp. 118–24. See also his "Das Ende der Amarnazeit," in *Das Geheimnis des goldenen Sarges: Echnaton und das Ende der Amarnazeit*, eds. A. Grimm and S. Schoske (München: Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, 2001), pp. 9–41 (especially pp. 24–7).

scene showing the death of Meketaten, must have been born before Meketaten's death. Three of her sisters, Meryaten, Ankhesenpaaten and Neferneferuaten-ta-sheryt, are depicted elsewhere in Room γ and can therefore be ruled out. The youngest two daughters of Nefertiti, although not shown in Room γ , must also be ruled out because they were already old enough to participate in ritual events in Akhenaten's Year 12, when Meketaten was still alive. This, according to Gabolde, leaves only one other possibility: the infant is a seventh child of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, and since we do not know of a seventh daughter but we do know of a king's son called Tutankhaten, the child in Room γ must be Tutankhaten, son of Akhenaten and Nefertiti.

Before we return to the epigraphy, it is as well to ask ourselves what the reason might be for showing a newborn baby in the arms of its nurse in a scene depicting the death of a princess. If this child is Tutankhaten, why are not the other surviving children of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, Meketaten's sisters, depicted in this scene?¹⁰ After all, the daughters are virtually omnipresent in Amarna tomb and temple scenes, whereas Tutankhaten is almost never depicted. And why is the group of the nurse with child and the two women holding the fans orientated facing all the other figures shown in the two registers outside the death chamber of Meketaten, as if they have just left that room? That this is indeed what they have just done is evident from the parallel in Room α , where the nurse and child are shown just outside the door of the death chamber, while the attendant holding the open fan over the child is still inside the chamber.¹¹ Surely these facts must have some significance. Nefertiti herself is present in the scene in both Rooms α and γ , and in both scenes her purported child is shown as a newborn baby. In Gabolde's reconstruction of the events this would mean that two or even three¹² of Nefertiti's daughters died within very short succession of each other shortly after Nefertiti herself had given birth to a male heir to the throne. This is not in itself impossible, but the presence of the child in the actual death chamber of his purported sisters is inexplicable.

¹⁰ C. Vandersleyen, "Les scènes de lamentation des chambres *alpha* et *gamma* dans la tombe d'Akhénaton," *RdE* 44 (1993), pp. 192–4.

¹¹ Bouriant *et al.*, *Monuments*, pl. VI (Fig. 2 above); Martin, *Royal Tomb* II, pls. 58–59.

¹² Gabolde believes that the newly born Tutankhaten is depicted in *both* Rooms α and γ , and that the scene in Room α depicts the demise of Neferneferure and Setepenre, *D'Akhenaton à Toutânkhamon*, pp. 107–10. Vandersleyen also assigns Room α to Akhenaten and Nefertiti's two youngest daughters.



Fig. 6 M. Gabolde's reconstruction of the same columns of text

In my opinion, a close scrutiny of the remains of the inscription in Room γ makes Gabolde's reconstruction of the text (Fig. 6) highly questionable, and serious doubts have also been expressed by C. Vandersleyen, although the latter did not suggest an alternative reading.¹³ Gabolde gives the sign preceding the group *ms* in col. 1 as a seated man holding a flail; the traces in front of the face of this sign he interprets as the feet of a quail *w*. On the photograph published by Bouriant c.s., however, this latter sign is clearly a *t*, as expressly stated by Legrain and confirmed by Martin. The seated man with flail as given by Gabolde has a form that is unattested before the Ramesside period, i.e. with knees pulled up instead of squatting on the ground (A52) or seated on a chair (A51). Seated king signs (A42) have their knees pulled up like Gabolde's hieroglyph, but they wear a royal headdress with uraeus; moreover, the child was not a king, and princes, even crown princes, were not depicted with royal regalia. The published photograph would appear to confirm the seated female sign (B1) read by Legrain and by Martin and Vandersleyen. These two crucial signs are in my opinion beyond reasonable doubt and are a clear indication that the child held by the nurse is female, not male. Further confirmation of this comes from the fact that male children who are depicted nude are almost without exception shown with a clear indication of

¹³ Vandersleyen, *RdE* 44 (1993), p. 193; cf. also M. Eaton-Krauss and R. Krauss, Review of *D'Akhenaton à Toutânkhamon*, by Marc Gabolde, *BiOr* 58, no. 1-2 (2001), p. 93, who call Gabolde's reconstruction 'methodically unsound.'

their male genitalia, and these are absent in this relief, also in Gabolde's drawing of it. Perhaps it is also worth pointing out that in the only instance we have of the name of Tutankhaten as a prince, the famous block from Hermopolis, his name is spelled *Twt-^hn^hw-itn*, with an additional *w* not found in later spellings of his name as king, and, incidentally, with the elements *twt*, ^h*n^hw*, and *itn* in a different order than in the form used in Gabolde's drawing. Because we do not have any other occurrences of Tutankhaten's name from Amarna we do not know whether the form *Twt-^hn^hw-itn* was an exception rather than the rule, but if it was the normal form of the name at Amarna, it would no longer fit in Gabolde's reconstruction.



Fig. 7 (left) New reconstruction of the same columns of text

So, if the child is a daughter of Nefertiti, as seems clear from the remains of the inscription, who can she be? Here we can return to Legrain's original discussion of the text. The only names of princesses which fit, he stated, were those of Merytaten and Baketaten, but neither of these two can be meant here for reasons which have already been discussed. This leaves us with only one option: the missing name is that of Meketaten herself. Inevitably this means that the newborn baby which is shown leaving the death chamber in the arms of a nurse is the reborn Meketaten herself. This conclusion may seem just as startling as the one we have just rejected, but, unlike all the other options we have discussed, the name Meketaten fits both the traces and the available space exactly (Fig. 7). In fact, although I do not want to stress this point too much, enlarging a high-resolution scan of the inscription in the published photograph on the computer reveals not only the indisputable presence of the *t*, but also appears to suggest the contours of a *k* above the *t* and the seated female sign (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8 (right) Detail of G. Jéquier's photograph of the scene reconstructed in Fig. 7

Further arguments in favor of the hypothesis that the child is the reborn Meketaten may be found in the nature of the scene itself. In a burial chamber the death and resurrection of the occupant is the main subject to be expected in the decoration, which is much more likely to be of a symbolic nature rather than depicting an historical event. An indication of the symbolic nature of the scenes in the burial chamber is provided by the scene on the adjacent wall in Room γ , which shows a statue of the deceased Meketaten in a shrine entwined with plants usually found in connection with birth and rebirth. In a footnote in his *Royal Tomb at El-'Amarna*, Geoffrey Martin recorded a suggestion made by Lanny Bell in connection with the death chamber scene in Room α , that "the presence of a child in connection with the fan might symbolize the *rebirth* of the deceased ruler," adding that "this does not seem to be the correct interpretation here."¹⁴ I am sure Lanny Bell's suggestion is correct, however, although it is not the rebirth of the deceased king here, but the rebirth of a princess. In an essay in the book accompanying the exhibition on *The Royal Women of Amarna* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1996, Dorothea Arnold commented on the scene in Room γ as follows:

"It has been suggested that she [i.e. Meketaten] died in childbirth, but she seems too young — ten years old at most — to have borne a child, even at a time when women matured early. Considering her youth and the well-known unwillingness of Egyptians to depict anything like the cause of death, this scene probably

¹⁴ Martin, *Royal Tomb II*, p. 39 n. 6. For the significance of the fan and its association with the royal *ka* see now L. Bell, "Aspects of the Cult of the Deified Tutankhamun," in *Mélanges Gamal Eddin Mokhtar I*, ed. P. Posener-Kriéger (Cairo: IFAO, 1985), pp. 31–59.

expresses, in symbolic terms, a wish for her rebirth rather than the fact that she died in childbirth.”¹⁵

Such an interpretation would also explain why this scene is depicted not once, in Room γ , but again in Room α .

Of course one might object that there is no parallel elsewhere in Egyptian tomb representations for this kind of scene, but this applies equally to any alternative explanation of the scene, including a historical one. Amarna iconography is unique in many other respects and the absence of a parallel from more traditional Egyptian funerary scenes is not in itself surprising. On the other hand, we know that the traditional Osirian beliefs about the underworld were no longer adhered to at Amarna and that the deceased were thought to live again on earth under the beneficial rays of the Aten in whose temple they received their daily food offerings. An instant rebirth at the moment of death, as appears to be depicted in the scenes in Rooms α and γ does not seem at all inconceivable within the new Atenist religion. In fact, one wonders whether the child may not actually be a representation of the deceased princess's *ka*. It is the *ka*, often depicted as a person's double, which lives on and which receives food offerings in the deceased's renewed co-existence with the Aten on earth.¹⁶ Whatever the exact nature of the newborn child, however, I would propose that the scene in Room α is a symbolic representation of the death and rebirth of Meketaten and that neither this scene nor its parallel in Room γ have anything to do with the actual birth of a royal child, let alone that of Tutankhaten.

Postscript

The above article is a slightly expanded version of the paper I read during the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists in Grenoble, 6–12 September 2004. Not long after the congress, Dr. Lise Manniche wrote to me informing me that Prof. John Harris was about to publish an article with much the same interpretation as the one I had suggested in the Grenoble paper. The article, entitled “En sag om forveksling,” has now been published in the Danish Ægyptologisk Tidsskrift *Papyrus* 24 no. 2 (December 2004), pp. 4–13. Harris too reads the name of Meketaten in the scene in Room γ and identifies the child as one of the stages of transformation (*hprw*) in the renewal of life of the deceased princess.

¹⁵ Do. Arnold, “Aspects of the Royal Female Image during the Amarna Period,” in *The Royal Women of Amarna: Images of Beauty from Ancient Egypt* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), pp. 85–119. The quote is on p. 115. See for a rare depiction of a deceased mother feeding a baby on a funerary stela D. Wildung and S. Schoske, *Nofret, die Schöne. Die Frau im Alten Ägypten* (Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern, 1984), No. 9, and F. Dunand, “Les enfants et la mort en Égypte,” in *Naissance et petite enfance dans l'Antiquité*, ed. V. Dasen (Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2004), pp. 13–32, esp. pp. 13–6.

¹⁶ In Akhenaten's religion ‘the living Aten’ and at least the royal *ka* were identical, see the texts quoted by L. Bell, *Mélanges Mokhtar I*, p. 50 n. 122.