

AUGUST 16, 2015

IS NEFERTITI IN TUT'S TOMB?

BY AMY DAVIDSON

A sculpture of Nefertiti at the Egyptian Museum in Berlin.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARKUS SCHREIBER / AP

On the north wall of the burial chamber of a tomb known as KV-62, in Egypt's Valley of the Kings, there is a mural in which a dead pharaoh is depicted with a living one, who is performing a ceremony known as the Opening of the Mouth, meant to revive the pharaoh in the afterlife. The pharaohs' names are painted in cartouches above the images—they are Tutankhamun, who reigned from about 1332 to 1323 B.C., and his successor, Ay. Tut was laid to rest in a sarcophagus placed in a gold-masked coffin next to the mural. (Ay, whose brief reign brought about the effective end of the eighteenth dynasty, is elsewhere.) But, last week, Nicholas Reeves, an Egyptologist at the University of Arizona, published a paper (http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=10&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CEQQFjAJahUOeBKV2FJMWBkpg&sig2=ec8Nngur28P47N_2MyWGCFQ&bvm=bv.99804247,d.e) arguing that the north wall is, in more than one sense, false. Reeves believes that it is a blind, hiding a secret chamber, and that the painting on it was altered in ancient times to tell a lie about whose tomb this really is. There is, he writes, “powerful evidence that the original owner of Tutankhamun's tomb had in fact been a royal woman.” He thinks that he knows which one: Nefertiti, and he suspects that her body is still lying behind the wall.



“The reason I come to Nefertiti is not by chance,” Reeves told me by phone from the United Kingdom. The tomb of Nefertiti, who is known throughout the world on account of the transfixingly beautiful sculpture of her head in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, has never been found, despite some embarrassingly hyped claims. Reeves says that he discovered its location on a computer screen. A few years ago, Factum Arte (<http://www.factum-arte.com/pag/21/The-Facsimile-of-Tutankhamun-apos-s-tomb>), a Spanish architectural design firm, took ultra-high-resolution scans of its every surface of Tutankhamun's tomb, as part of a project to build a facsimile of the space for tourists, and put them online. You can see each flake of paint—more clearly, really, than if you stood inches away. You can also view it in pure black and white, without distracting colors. Reeves stared at the scans for months. He became convinced that he saw the outlines of two doors—“ghosts” emerging from the plaster, which had previously been believed to hide only bare stone. One outline, in the west wall—“very neat and tidy, a nice little doorway”—was the same size as and located symmetrically in relation to a known door in the tomb, which seemed too much to

ascribe to coincidence. The other was in the painted north wall. (If you look hard, you can see them, which may be a testament to suggestibility, or to our capacity to miss the obvious.)

The door in the north wall, Reeves believes, leads to Nefertiti's burial chamber, and the other to a storeroom, possibly holding treasures. He offers, in support of this theory, evidence drawn from what is known about tomb architecture, iconography, stratigraphy, and contemporary records. But he also relies—and this is the most intriguing, and most problematic, part of Reeves's theory—on ideas about dynastic politics, gender confusion, power, and what it would have meant for a woman, in Egypt, to be not just a queen but a pharaoh.

There are oddities about Tutankhamun's tomb that Reeves's new theory would explain. In 1922, when Howard Carter first descended the stairway to the tomb, the set-up did not, to him, seem very kingly. The first room, though crowded with fine things, was small, and the tomb's orientation was odd—to the right of the stairs, not to the left, as was more often the case with pharaohs of that time. Some side rooms, normally placed in a symmetrical array, seemed to be missing. "The unfamiliar plan of [the] tomb repeatedly caused us to ask ourselves in our perplexity whether it was really a tomb or a Royal Cache?" Carter wrote in his journal (<http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/discoveringTut/journals-and-diaries/>). But the goods in the room were excellent, and many of them were marked with the name Tutankhamun. "The mystery gradually dawned upon us," Carter wrote. "We had found that monarch's burial place." Carter was convinced, even before he opened the sealed door leading to what his team registered as the "final" chamber, housing the sarcophagus. The tomb belonged to Tutankhamun, "in all his magnificent panoply of death."

And yet even as various lords, Egyptian officials, and the Princess of Abyssinia rushed to the valley to witness the discovery, Carter couldn't shake the sense that something was off. He and his colleagues noted insets of vultures put in backward ("the tails w[h]ere the heads should be") and shrines oriented the wrong way. The whole thing still struck him as "semi-royal ... In fact in plan & size what might be termed demi-royal." Or, perhaps, co-royal. Carter and others since have offered an explanation that does not involve secret rooms: Tutankhamun died young, and unexpectedly, at a time of political chaos. There wasn't time for something better. Still, the revised floor plan Reeves proposes would have made more sense to Carter. Whether there are rooms behind the walls is one question, and should be fairly easy to resolve, with ground-penetrating radar equipment. Indeed, given the evidence that Reeves has assembled, it would be madness for the Egyptian antiquities authorities not to at least check. (On Friday, the Luxor (<http://luxortimesmagazine.blogspot.com/2015/08/minister-of-antiquities-responds-to.html?m=1>) *Times* (<http://luxortimesmagazine.blogspot.com/2015/08/minister-of-antiquities-responds-to.html?m=1>) reported, the minister of antiquities said that the ministry would conduct

studies to examine the theory.) What or who might be in those rooms is another question, and involves, as Reeves is the first to concede, more degrees of speculation. “There’s a lot of ‘I think’ in this article, I’m afraid,” he said.

Why would Nefertiti, of all people, be in King Tut’s tomb? Or, to state Reeves’s thesis more correctly, why would he be in hers? They were part of the same family, and also part of an extraordinary attempt on the part of Pharaoh Akhenaten—Nefertiti’s husband and almost certainly Tutankhamun’s father—to turn Egypt into a monotheocracy, built around the worship of a single God, Aten, the sun. Akhenaten and Nefertiti moved their court from Thebes to Amarna; the period of religious upheaval he instigated is known as the Amarna interlude, or the Amarna heresy. Depictions of the family in the art of this time look like something from a nineteen-sixties commune, with Akhenaten, with his distinctive elongated features, Nefertiti, and their daughters (there were likely six, though counts vary) turned toward the divine sun, which is represented as a disc with rays that end in hands holding ankhs, like some Egyptological octopus; a boy, then called Tutankhaten, younger than most of the girls, eventually joins them.

Completing the vibe, no one is quite sure who Tut’s mother was. Recent DNA tests suggest she was a full sister of his father

(<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2010/02/100216-king-tut-malaria-bones-inbred-tutankhamun/>), Akhenaten, but there are disputes about that, because of the age of the mummies, the possibility of cross-contamination, and the way that royal incest blurs genetic profiles. One counter-theory is that Nefertiti was his mother, and that she and Akhenaten, though not siblings, appeared to be so in the DNA tests because they were the product of generations of cousin-marriage

([http://www.google.com/url?](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rcrt=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=14&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CG0QFjANah)

[sa=t&rcrt=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=14&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CG0QFjANah](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rcrt=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=14&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CG0QFjANah) different-take-on-tut%2F&ei=abjQVf_hLIb3-

[QGiz4DQBA&usg=AFQjCNHN6wJRDladNac2hfWBbnYbqLJzkw&sig2=BttJhAk](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rcrt=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=14&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CG0QFjANah)

(Reeves is agnostic on this point; he was frustrated, though, with the headlines referring to Nefertiti as “Tut’s Mom.”) Other theories hold that the mother was a woman named Kiya, or even Meketaten, one of the six princesses—that is, that Akhenaten had a child with his daughter. His father, Amenhotep III, had married one and perhaps two of his daughters; this family pushed borders, even by pharaonic standards.

All the sunshine is deceptive: this was a time of intense conflict, as one might imagine when a ruler forcibly casts a popular religion aside. If you look at the edges of the royal scenes from Amarna, Reeves said, “there are all these rows of running soldiers, all carrying billy clubs.” It begins to sound less like Woodstock, and more like Pyongyang. (Reeves: “It was a really scary period to live.”) The end appears to have been slow and ugly. The inscriptions that date to the last years of Akhenaten’s life include two new names, Neferneferuaten and Smenkhkare, with titles that would normally belong to someone who is a co-regent or, in inscriptions immediately after Akhenaten’s death, a pharaoh. After what seems to have been a brief power struggle, Tutankhaten, who was

eight or nine, was put on the throne. He married another of the princesses, his probable half sister Ankhesenpaaten (who may have previously had a child with her father). He was prevailed upon to restore the old gods. He changed his name to Tutankhamun. Later generations of Egyptians referred to Akhenaten as “the criminal.”

Very little is known about Tutankhamun’s predecessors, Neferneferuaten and Smenkhkare, or, rather, there is no agreement on anything about them—or him, or her. For a long time, they were assumed to be male, because they clearly wielded political power, and the question was whether they were one man, who changed his name when he became pharaoh, or two. But the epithets associated with Neferneferuaten, it gradually became clear, indicated that she was a woman—likely Nefertiti or one of her daughters. Where that left Smenkhkare is a trickier question. The evidence is confusing enough to accommodate theories that Smenkhkare was Akhenaten’s brother, son, son-in-law, gay lover, or wife. Again, given the level of incest in Egyptian royal families, more than one of these could be true. Reeves is of the school of thought (a minority one) that both Neferneferuaten and Smenkhkare are one person and that this person is Nefertiti. She took the name Smenkhkare, he believes, when, finding herself the “last man standing” in the family, she succeeded her husband as pharaoh.

One stumbling block in the Nefertiti-as-Smenkhkare theory is that Smenkhare is believed to have had a Great Royal Wife: Meritaten, another of the six princesses. And, indeed, Reeves believes that Nefertiti ritualistically made her daughter her wife, to fulfill an important ceremonial role. (“It doesn’t mean that they were sleeping with each other.”) Perhaps this should not be more disconcerting than Akhenaten’s marrying one of them, but it is still surprising. But it has always been the case that to think about Amarna is to think about extremism, and where it leads.

To recap, Reeves’s argument goes like this: in the hurried days after Tutankhamun’s death, with no tomb yet quarried for him in the Valley of the Kings, what had been the antechambers to the tomb of his predecessor, Smenkhkare, were repurposed as the main chambers of his tomb. Smenkhkare was Nefertiti. Thus, this is Nefertiti’s tomb. Tutankhamun, in effect, has been sleeping on the couch in his mother-in-law’s living room.

“Nefertiti was loathed and hated, I’m sure,” Reeves said. “But she was still pharaoh.”

This is where the painting of the dead and living pharaohs on the north wall becomes, for Reeves, a key to it all. All four walls in the room have decorations painted on a backdrop of yellow—it is known as the “House of Gold.” But a recent study by scholars at the Getty Conservation Institute found that the north wall is different: the human figures have proportions indicating an earlier artistic period, and the layers of paint and plaster do not match the other three walls; its background was once white. And there is something very strange about the portraits that are supposedly of Tutankhamun and Ay:



Ay was a court official, not a member of the royal family, though he may have been Akhenaten's maternal uncle or Nefertiti's father (or both). He seized power thanks to the political and genetic collapse of the main branch of the family. He was, by all accounts, elderly by Egyptian standards. And yet in the painting on the north wall, Tutankhamun, the dead teen-ager, has an aged face, and Ay, the old man, looks like a teen-ager, with a leopard skin draped over his bare chest. The discrepancy has been explained in the past as regal vanity. Reeves, though, argues that the figure labelled Tutankhamun is actually Nefertiti—that she is the dead Pharaoh being prepared for the underworld. As evidence, he points to the lines at the corner of the figure's mouth, which are something of a trademark in pictures of Nefertiti. The one labelled Ay is actually Tutankhamun; here, the tell-tale sign for Reeves is that “Ay” has the same double-chin one sees in portraits of Tut —“It's the face of a child, an Amarna child,” he told me. The original hieroglyphics properly identifying them were, he believes, painted over, erasing Nefertiti's reign.

The mural on the north wall raises another set of questions: if a radar does show a void behind it, what then? “You can't sacrifice those paintings,” Reeves said. Instead, he believes there needs to be a careful discussion about how to learn as much as possible from a space that has been sealed for more than three thousand years (“Can we get samples of the air?”), while causing the least harm. Perhaps there would be a way to tunnel around. “We shouldn't thoughtlessly break through, the way Carter did,” he said.

In November, 1922, when Carter entered the first room, he was joined by the Earl of Carnarvon (<http://blog.griffith.ox.ac.uk/my-dear-gardiner/>), his financial backer. Carnarvon, who died of pneumonia a few months later, wrote to a friend, Sir Alan Gardiner, describing the tomb's contents—wood statues (“wonderful”), inlaid chairs (“marvellous”), clothing (“rotten but gorgeous”). “Then there is a bricked up room which we have not yet opened,” he wrote. “Probably containing the mummies I should not be surprised to find therein Tut & his wife & Smenkara & his, but so far it[']s all Tut.”

So far, it still is. But the most useful thing about Reeves's theory may be the way it forces one to really look at the images. Is that how Ay saw himself? Why would we assume, based on a queen's beauty, that she was loved? Does the final picture of Nefertiti, known now for little other than her looks, show her dressed as a man, wearing a Pharaoh's false beard? Who gets to be the Boy King?



Amy Davidson is a *New Yorker* staff writer. She is a regular Comment contributor for the magazine and writes a Web column (<http://www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson>), in which she covers war, sports, and everything in between.
