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Ellen Hickmann / Ingo Laufs /
Ricardo Eichmann (Hrsg.)

**Studien zur
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Musical Practices at the Court of Akhnaten and Nefertiti

Lise Manniche

For nearly two decades in the 14th century BC, Egypt was ruled by the heretic pharaoh Akhnaten and his wife Nefertiti – a king with an elongated face, projecting cranium and feminine body features, who was called the world's first monotheist; and a queen depicted in the most famous portrait of all times: the bust in Berlin.

Ancient Egyptian society as we know it, traditionally crowded with pyramids or other funerary monuments, gigantic temple buildings, a society whose main preoccupation appears to have been with bureaucracy and the business of death, was before Akhnaten a country where the pharaoh was generally of divine nature. His role was, in a nutshell, to maintain the equilibrium in the universe by offering to and pleasing the gods, who would in turn confirm his divine right to rule the country according to age-old tradition.

Contrary to his predecessors, Akhnaten acknowledged but one deity, a god who did not appear in the conventional guise of a human figure with or without an animal head. His god was the circular shape of the sun disc, admittedly with rays ending in human hands. But the real human aspect of the deity was the king himself, for he was the manifestation of the sun disc on earth, the god's representative, his son, the only one who knew and understood the god. This relationship is carefully explained in words in the famous hymn to the sun which has been compared to the Song of Songs of the Bible (Simpson 1973, 289–295).¹

What is unique about this precise interlude in Egyptian history is not the fact that one god was promoted as the most important (this happened to different gods in different districts), but the fact that all other gods were actively persecuted. The theological basis for society was changed and centred around the king's own person more than ever before. He became the specific representative of the creator of the universe, assisted by the necessary feminine counterpart, his wife Nefertiti, in order to achieve

the miracle of creation – creation of all things and all beings.

This new aspect of a divine king was widely publicized in the media of the day, especially in the wall decoration of tombs and temples, in so-called house altars and in sculpture. What we now know as 'art' reflected the new theological focal point, the king and his family, depicted under the protective rays of the sun disc. Amarna art – named after the modern designation for the ancient city, where Akhnaten and Nefertiti made their headquarters after some five years in the traditional strongholds of Thebes and Memphis – has as its main subject representations of the king and his family, but it also opened up the possibility of depicting all the ancillary activities around the royal couple, representations which make Amarna art so particularly vivid and varied. Paintings and reliefs in temples, tombs and palaces, which had until then been quite distinct in subject matter, now merged in subjects which, however varied, had but one focal point: the king – and his family. Among the subjects depicted in connection with the king is music.

Before Akhnaten, representations of private, secular music and temple music were quite distinct. In a religious temple context we see for example a harpist or a small group of people clapping their hands while singing, or in religious processions perhaps a trumpet or two, for this was a military instrument that was allowed into a sacred context because of the presence of the army on such occasions (Manniche 1991a, ch. 4). Private functions, however, appear to have cultivated the musical ensemble, consisting of instruments such as harps of different shapes and sizes, lutes, lyres, wind instruments and perhaps a tambourine (Manniche 1991a, ch. 2 and 3). These musical ensembles appear above all to have supported the performance of song: the words are frequently written above the groups.

¹ Translated into English in Simpson *et al.* (ed.) 1973.

In the 18th dynasty just before Akhnaten and Nefertiti's Amarna Period, we have dozens of such ensembles depicted on the walls of tombs of private individuals, especially at Thebes. But although the music here takes place in a private context, it has strong religious undertones, for the occasion depicted can usually be related to the so-called Feast of the Valley (Schott 1952), where people communicated with on the one hand deceased relatives, on the other hand the gods of the necropolis. Music was above all a means of communication, and it underlined the words which mention various deities or episodes of the feast itself, including drinking to excess.

We do, however, almost always have this distinction between the types of players seen on the occasions on which music was performed: clean-shaven performers in the seclusion of the temple for the benefit of the resident deity (mostly but not exclusively men), and the musicians in full festive attire for the kind of music performed on these seemingly private occasions away from the temple (mostly but not exclusively women), where the recipients or the audience are the living, the dead, as well as to some extent the relevant gods. The sources are almost totally silent as to the kind of music used to entertain a king in his palace.

Not so in the Amarna period (Manniche 1989, 24–32; 1991a, ch. 6; 1991b, 62–65). Here we find the musical ensembles from the private functions, the so-called banquet musicians, everywhere. The ensembles with harpist, lute and lyre players and reed instruments are depicted not only on the walls of private tombs, where by tradition they belonged, but also on the walls of temples. In Egyptian temple art in general, the wall decoration usually reflects the use of the room in which the scenes are placed (that is how we know the temple functioned). This is not the case at el-Amarna, for the entire scheme of decoration encompasses a variety of subjects which had never before been seen in a temple.

Because of the fact that the temples of Akhnaten were built of small blocks, and that they were totally dismantled and re-used as filling in later buildings, the context in which the players performed is not immediately obvious unless we can fit loose blocks together. But we may compare them with the wall decoration in the rock cut tombs, where the context is less fragmentary. This tells us that the banquet ensembles which we meet, physically, on the walls of the temples do not in fact perform in the temple, but in the palace. Akhnaten personally instructed his artists in the way in which to depict the world. The main person in temple decoration was to be the king, and he is shown in various situations, including different locations apart from the temple itself: for

example inside his palace, or commuting between his residence and a temple building.

The musicians in the temple looked different. Like their predecessors they have shaven heads and pleated garments. And like many of them they were blind. Their eyes are clearly deformed. They perform near the altars of the sun god inside the temple.

It is evident that music played a major part in Akhnaten's universe because it is represented so frequently. It was an important part, for the musicians perform their task in close proximity to the king or to the god.

The role of the banquet musicians, however, is not quite straightforward. On the walls of the tombs they appear to entertain the king. But on the loose blocks from the temples they play to the sun god as well, directly in front of and to his name, or to what looks to all intents and purposes like a pile of food offerings (Figs. 1 and 4).

In the Amarna period men and women play in separate groups, but in close proximity and in the same context. In the male groups two features are unusual. One is that some of the participants are obviously foreigners. This is evident from their dress and headgear and also in their choice of instruments (including a giant lyre, one instrument played by two players, a unique feature in Egypt, Fig. 2). Some of the women in the female ensembles may also be foreigners, for we know that ladies came to the Egyptian court from all over the Near East around this time, especially from Naharina, or Mitanni as it was known, beyond the Euphrates. Perhaps some of the ladies depicted in the harem at el-Amarna with their musical instruments come from foreign parts.

Foreign musicians must have brought foreign music. In the Amarna hymn to the sun god the king makes special reference to people outside Egypt. Listening to their exotic music perhaps made him feel that he was indeed master of the universe. Perhaps the depiction of these foreign musicians is a visual reference to a passage in the hymn to the sun that the sun god created people who speak in different tongues.

Apart from their foreign hats and garments the male musicians wear a blindfold, a white band over their eyes. This is also the case with the Egyptian male musicians. Only in the Amarna Period do we find such blindfolds. The function of a blindfold is to provide or suggest temporary blindness (Manniche 1978, 13–21). Only men wear the blindfold, and it is interesting that it only covers their eyes while they are engaged in playing. Once their performance is over, they push the blindfold up and bow to the king. The blindness thus has to do with their performance, not with

whoever may be present, for other men in the scene do not cover their eyes.

The blindfolded musicians play next to heaps of food arranged as in a temple offering scene or at a funeral (Fig. 3). Offering was one of the most crucial parts of a ritual. In a temple only the king or the priests in his stead performed this act, which brought the king and the god into close contact. We are thus in a highly sensitive, secret situation here, not in the temple, but in the palace. To depict the king eating has almost become parallel to presenting food offerings to the god. (Eating is in any case a rare subject in Egyptian art, so here at Amarna it must have a special significance). The musicians entertaining at his meal thus take part in a ritual, and to mirror what happened in the temple with the blind musicians, they have been temporarily blinded. Their eyes are not allowed to contemplate the sun nor his son and manifestation on earth, the king. Such intimacy would damage their eyesight.

This situation does not apply to women. Hence they can play directly opposite the god (in the form of his name: hieroglyphs in a cartouche, Fig. 1). In Egyptian ritual, women are generally allowed a closer contact with the deity, for they were able to pacify the potentially dangerous forces of a god or goddess. At Amarna, Nefertiti and the couple's six daughters sit happily under the rays of the sun, and the female musicians are never required to cover their eyes while performing.

In a scene from the temple, pieced together from several loose blocks, Nefertiti presides over such a musical offering. Unfortunately it is on a rather small scale, and it is impossible to see who wears a blindfold. But we have here in one and the same scene Egyptian women, Egyptian men and foreign men with their giant lyre, and in the bottom right corner a group of men clapping their hands (Fig. 2). From the same context comes another block also with all the different groups included. Here the clappers are joined by a barrel shaped drum, an instrument of sub-Saharan African origin. Some 16 men all clap their hands and no doubt sing (Fig. 5). Such an ensemble of male choir and clappers and one drum is not known at any other time in Egyptian history. The men also have their eyes blindfolded. They are not

Nubians or foreign looking, but perhaps the instrument is yet another reference to the cosmopolitan aspect of Akhnaten's universe.

The scene is on a very small scale, and there is hardly room for any hieroglyphs which would suggest the words they chanted. At Amarna we have all these clappers and singers, blindfolded in the palace and with deformed eyes in the temple. Also we have at this very time a significant contribution to world literature, the great hymn to the sun disc. It may not be going too far to suggest that this hymn was performed by the musicians mentioned here. After all, literature in ancient Egypt was meant to be heard, not read in a book. To imagine the phrases chanted by a male choir with the accompaniment of hand clapping and a drum adds a dimension to universal phrases such as the following in praise of the creator sun god:

*How many are your deeds,
Though hidden from sight,
O Sole God beside whom there is none!
You made the earth as you wished, you alone,
All people, herds and flocks,
All upon earth that walk on legs,
All on high that fly on wings,
The lands of Syria and Nubia,
The land of Egypt.
You set every man in his place.
You supply their needs,
Everyone has his food,
His lifetime is counted.
Their tongues differ in speech,
Their characters likewise,
Their skins are distinct,
For you distinguished the peoples.*

Yet, Akhnaten, in his 17 years on the throne of Egypt some 3400 years ago, when apparently no wars were fought, emphasised the cosmopolitan nature of Egyptian society in the New Kingdom by introducing foreign musicians into the most sacred corridors of the palace. The palace itself became like the temple for the divine king, and when the mysterious consumption of food took place the men's chant helped the transformation into divine nourishment.

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Fig. 1 Female ensemble playing to the names of Aten, the sun god, and king Akhnaten. A male ensemble is visible above, performing just inside a palace door. All the blocks illustrated here are made of sandstone with decoration in relief, once painted. They were part of the chapels of the Aten at Karnak and were found re-used as core material in later structures.



Fig. 2 Foreign musicians (right) playing the lyre and giant lyre and a female ensemble with lute, double pipes and lyres.

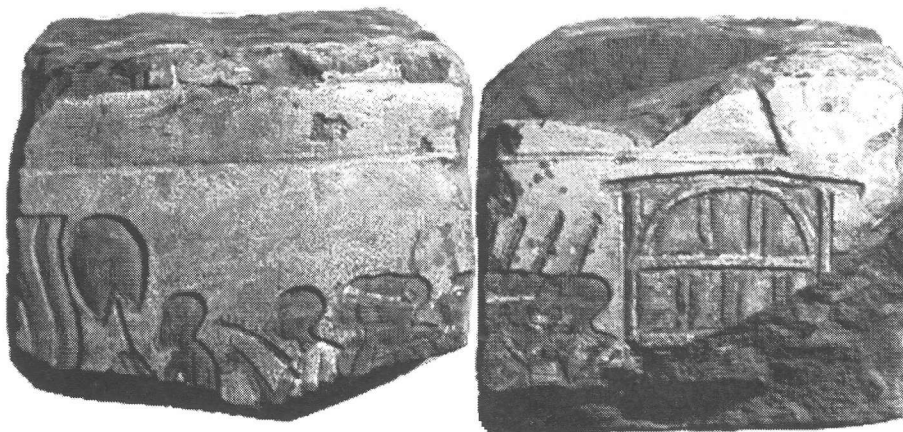


Fig. 3 Male musicians wearing a blindfold, playing in front of jars of food or drink.



Fig. 4 Female musicians playing in front of heaps of food.

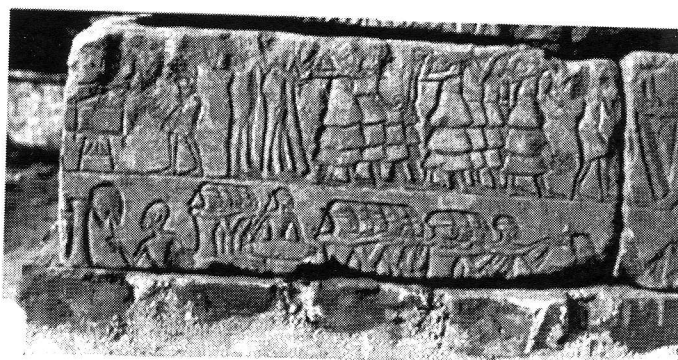


Fig. 5 Block showing in the upper register two female musicians preceded by a group of foreign male musicians, and below a large group of blindfolded male musicians clapping their hands while one plays a barrel-shaped drum.