THE COMPLEXION OF QUEEN AHMOSI NEFERTERE*

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The posthumous iconography of Queen Ahmosi Nefertere became broadly established sometime during the XVIIIth dynasty. The earliest representation of her in a funerary context is in Theban tomb no. 15, probably decorated around the time of her death.¹ This painting shows a woman of yellow complexion, wearing a simple dress and a cylindrical coronet adorned with uraei. During the latter half of the dynasty she was represented on stelae, generally seated, often with a headdress incorporating tall feathers, and holding a flail and/or *ankh*.² In one representation, possibly earlier than the reign of Amenophis III when she was to become much worshipped, her iconography is particularly interesting in that she is shown black, whereas Amenophis I and Satkamose who accompany her on the stela have their usual red and yellow complexions.³

* I am indebted to J. R. Harris for discussing the subject with me over the years and for suggesting additional references.

¹ N. de G. Davies in *JEA*, XI (1925), p. 14, pl. II, cf. also Carnarvon and H. Carter, *Five Years' Explorations at Thebes* (1912), pl. VI, 1. M. Gitton, *L'épouse du dieu Ahmes Néfertari* (1975) dates the tomb to the reign of Ahmose.

² E.g. Cairo CG 34029, 34034, 34037, 34081; B. Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh 1935-40*, fasc. ii (1952), pl. VI, fig. 129, p. 45 (no. 164); BM 277, 291, 598, 1347, and possibly also 448, 811; Brooklyn 37.1485 E; Manchester 2938: D. Randall-MacIver and A. C. Mace, *El-Amrah and Abydos* (1902), p. 84, pl. XXXII; also a stela now in Lisbon: A. H. Gardiner in *JEA*, IV (1917), pp. 188-89, pl. XXXVII. For the dates cf. Gitton, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

³ BM 297: *Hieroglyphic Texts from Egyptian Stelae & c. in the British Museum*, VI (1922), pl. XXXIII; for a colour photograph cf. V. Ions, *Egyptian Mythology* (1968), p. 125, where the skin of Ahmosi Nefertere wrongly appears as green.

During the reign of Amenophis III this particular aspect is emphasized in four representations,⁴ and, during the reigns of Ay (?) and Horemheb, she is twice represented as black.⁵ At the beginning of the XIXth dynasty she appears as yellow⁶ as well as black.⁷ Taking into consideration the number of figurines made of dark wood or stone, or painted black,⁸ which can be added to the documentation in the Ramessid period, the black complexion predominates.⁹ Yellow comes second,¹⁰ followed by red;¹¹

⁴ Theban tomb no. 181: N. de G. Davies, *The Tomb of Two Sculptors at Thebes* (1925), pl. X (colour); cf. also UNI-DIA 39028. Although this has not been noted, there can be no doubt that the scene is identical with Hannover, Kestner Museum 1962.70: I. Woldering, *Kestner Museum 1889-1964*, p. 49 with fig. Parts of this tomb have unfortunately been removed and sold outside Egypt. Turin 1450: M. Tosi and A. Roccati, *Stele e altre epigrafi di Deir el Medina* (1972), no. 50050.

⁵ Theban tomb no. 49: N. de G. Davies, *The Tomb of Nefer-hotep at Thebes* (1933), I, pl. LI; for a comment on the skin cf. Davies, *Two Sculptors*, p. 33, n. 1. Theban tomb no. 255: M. Baud and E. Drioton, 'Le tombeau de Roÿ', in *MIFAO*, LVII (1928), fasc. 1, fig. 13 and p. 18 (the scene is now destroyed).

⁶ Theban tomb no. 153 (sketch): M. Baud, *Les dessins ébauchés de la nécropole thébaine* = *MIFAO*, LXIII (1935), fig. 82 (the name has disappeared, but the figure is undoubtedly that of Ahmosi Nefertere).

⁷ Theban tomb no. 54: Davies in *MMA Bulletin*, pt. II, Dec. 1922, p. 54, fig. 5; for the colour cf. Davies, *Two Sculptors*, p. 33, n. 1.

Theban tomb no. 106; J. F. Champollion, *Monuments de l'Égypte et de la Nubie* (1835-45), II, pl. CLXX, 1; for the colour cf. also G. Maspero, *Histoire ancienne des peuples de l'Orient classique* (1898), II, p. 98, n. 10 (wrongly called tomb of Nibnoutifrou).

Turin 1449: Tosi and Roccati, *Stele*, no. 50037; Turin 1452: *ibid.*, no. 50034.

⁸ Painted black: Turin, suppl. no. 6128: E. Scamuzzi, *Museo Egizio di Torino* (1963), pl. XXI; cf. J. F. Champollion, *Lettres à M. le duc de Blacas d'Aulps* (1834), pp. 21-22: 'Les chairs . . . sont peintes en noir.'

Another example which may be Ahmosi Nefertere is UCL 8842: A. Page, *Egyptian Sculpture* (1976), p. 118 (no. 163).

Dark wood: Louvre N 470: J. Vandier, *La statuaire égyptienne* (1958), pl. CXXXV, 3.

Dark stone: Turin 1370: P. Reuterswärd, *Studien zur Polychromie der Plastik. Ägypten* (1958), pl. XIb.

Cf. also Durham, Gulbenkian Museum, N. 495: S. Birch, *Catalogue of the Collection of Egyptian Antiquities at Alnwick Castle* (1880), pp. 55-6.

⁹ Theban tomb no. 23: C. R. Lepsius, *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien* (1849-59), III, 199e.

Theban tomb no. 113 = BM 37994: E. A. W. Budge, *Wall Decorations of*

figurines made of faience or green stone are probably incidental.¹² In many cases the colour has disappeared or is not indicated in the publication. Blue, however, seems not to occur.

Egyptian Tombs (1914), pl. 8 (centre); cf. A. Lhote and Hassia, *Les chefs-d'oeuvre de la peinture égyptienne* (1954), pl. 113.

Theban tomb no. 178: B. Porter and R. L. B. Moss, *Topographical Bibliography* I², 1 (1970), p. 284 (2); cf. UNI-DIA 38941 and fig. 1. The colour of the skin of the queen is bared to the mud plaster, but in that red and yellow survive on the wall and black has almost entirely disappeared, the complexion of Ahmosi Nefertere was undoubtedly dark. I have in fact detected particles of black colour on her arm.

Theban tomb no. 219: J. Černý in *BIFAO*, XXVII (1927), p. 175, pl. VII.

Theban tomb no. 277: J. Vandier d'Abbadie, *Deux tombes ramessides à Gournel-Mourraï* = *MIFAO*, LXXXVII (1954), pp. 21–2, pls. XIV–XV.

Theban tomb no. 296: Porter and Moss, *Top. Bibl.*, I², 1, pp. 377–8 (2); cf. fig. 2.

Theban tomb no. 359 (wrongly called 299 by Černý in *BIFAO*, XXVII (1927), p. 203, no. 82): Bruyère, *Rapport 1930*, (1933), p. 38, pl. VIII; cf. Lepsius, *Denkmäler*, III, 2d and fig. 3.

Another from the same tomb = Berlin (E.) 2060: W. Wreszinski, *Atlas zur altägyptischen Kulturgeschichte*, I (1923), 29b; cf. DEFA-Color-Dia-Serie 71, no. 11.

Theban tomb no. A12: J. F. Champollion, *Notices descriptives*, I (1844), p. 534.

Theban tomb no. A18: Hay MSS 29824, 1 verso ('a black lady').

Cairo CG 34081: P. Lacau, *Stèles du Nouvel Empire*, I (1926), p. 130, pl. XLI.

Cf. also Theban tomb no. 10: Lepsius, *Denkmäler*, III, 173c; Maspero (*Histoire*, II, p. 90, n. 10) says that the skin of Ahmosi Nefertere is blue in this tomb, but in that the representation occurs in a tomb with monochrome decoration (i.e., with no blue or green) it is far more likely that the queen is black. Gitton's statement (*L'épouse du dieu*, pp. 74–75) that the skin of the queen is 'bleu foncé' in Theban tomb no. 277 as well seems doubtful.

¹⁰ Theban tomb no. 2: B. Bruyère, *Tombes thébaines de Deir el Médineh à décoration monochrome* = *MIFAO*, LXXXVI (1952), pp. 36–37, pl. VIII (lower) = Černý in *BIFAO*, XXVII (1927), pl. I, 1.

Theban tomb no. 16: M. Baud and E. Drioton, 'Le tombeau de Panehsy', in *MIFAO*, LVII, fasc. ii (1932), pp. 22–23, fig. 11; cf. UNI-DIA 37081. For possible yellow skin cf. also Theban tomb no. 4; Černý in *BIFAO*, XXVII (1927), p. 174, pl. IV; Theban tomb no. 23: Lepsius, *Denkmäler*, III, 199d (Lepsius usually indicates black skin); Theban tomb no. A18: I. Rosellini: *Monumenti storici* (1832–44), pl. XXIX.

¹¹ BM 1515: *Hieroglyphic Texts*, VIII (1939), pp. 53–54, pl. XLV. For the connection between Tuthmosis IV and Ahmosi Nefertere cf. J. R. Harris in *SAK*, 2 (1975), pp. 95–98. Cf. also BM 317: *Hieroglyphic Texts*, IX (1970), pp. 20–21, pl. XVI: 'traces of red paint on the bodies of the figures'.

Berlin (E.) 6908: J. Vandier, *La sculpture égyptienne* (1954), fig. on p. 80 (right); when seen during a visit to East Berlin in 1975 the figurine showed definite traces of red paint on the exposed parts of the body.

¹² Turin 1371: J. Vandier, *Manuel d'archéologie égyptienne*, III (1958), p. 426, n. 7.

Various suggestions have been made as to the origin of the dark colour of Ahmosi Nefertere. The idea that she was a negress or an Ethiopian¹³ was soon discarded,¹⁴ particularly since the body contained in a coffin with her name attached to it appeared to indicate that her skin had been pale.¹⁵ Because of her function as 'god's wife of Amun' she was supposed by some to have shared the blue of Amun,¹⁶ while black was explained in terms of her connection with the nether world or, more specifically, with Anubis.¹⁷ The idea that the blackness relates to a cult image of ebony or one coated with resin¹⁸ seems possible, but does not answer the basic question. Why in turn was the cult image black—and what do the other colours imply?

The conventional way of representing human skin allows various shades of red for men, and yellow for women. There are, however, exceptions. In Old Kingdom statuary, or representations of statues, men are sometimes given a yellow skin. This yellow, which may occur on one among several statues of the same individual, and

Louvre figurine: C. Boreux, *Antiquités égyptiennes* (1932), II, p. 480 = Vandier, *Sculpture*, p. 80 (left)?

¹³ A. Wiedemann, *Ägyptische Geschichte* (1884), p. 309; E. Meyer, *Geschichte des alten Aegyptens* (1887), II, p. 224, n. 1.

¹⁴ Maspero, *Histoire*, II, pp. 98–99, n. 10.

¹⁵ Two mummies were found in the coffin. One (thought by Maspero to be that of Ahmosi Nefertere) was opened and discarded soon after the discovery because of its foul smell (G. Maspero, *Les momies royales de Déir el Bahari* = *Mém. miss.*, I, 4 (1889), pp. 535–36). The other has recently been x-rayed (J. E. Harris and K. R. Weeks, *X-raying the Pharaohs* (1973), pp. 127–28 and x-ray photograph on p. 31). The authors take this mummy to be that of Ahmosi Nefertere. Cf. also Gitton, *L'épouse du dieu*, p. 23. Apart from any uncertainty as to which body was that of the queen, the apparent paleness of the skin may well have been the result of embalming, or a cosmetic application: cf. A. Lucas, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries*⁴ (1962), p. 85.

¹⁶ C. E. Sander-Hansen, *Das Gottesweib des Amun (Det kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filologiske Skrifter, Bind I, nr. 1 (1940), p. 18, n. 6; cf. also H. Bonnet, Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte (1952/1971), p. 21; H. Kees, 'Farbensymbolik in ägyptischen religiösen Texten', Nachrichten . . . Akad. Wiss. in Göttingen, Phil.-Hist. Klasse, no. 11, p. 422. The blue of Amun, however, was not generally interchangeable with black, and the suggestion is thus of doubtful relevance.*

¹⁷ Davies, *Two Sculptors*, p. 33, n. 1; Černý in *BIFAO*, XXVII (1927), p. 162.

¹⁸ Gitton, *L'épouse du dieu*, pp. 78, 88–89; *id.* in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, I (1972), col. 105.

more especially with portly men, is generally taken to be a conventional indication of status,¹⁹ although it is also explained as representing the vivifying gold of which the gods' limbs were made, a privilege then transferred to kings and private persons.²⁰ The occasional use of red for women is at two different levels. It occurs, for artistic reasons, in alternation with yellow in groups of women,²¹ but is also applied to royal ladies, particularly in the Amarna period.²² Black skin occurs naturally in representations of negroes,²³ but is also a feature of statuary and representations of statues in the Old Kingdom (private persons),²⁴ the Middle Kingdom (royal persons),²⁵ and later (see below). Any anomaly in the conventional use of colour will indicate that an encoded message is to be looked for, whereas most naturalistic colouring may be explained quite easily, and is of far less interest.

In the case of representations of Ahmosi Nefertere, it is once or twice evident that what is depicted is actually a portable figure (Theban tomb no. 19, twice;²⁶ Theban tomb no. 65,²⁷ cf. fig. 4). In tomb no. 19 the figure is certainly black, whereas in tomb no. 65 it is too much damaged for one to distinguish the colour. The remaining published representations cannot be said to show actual statues, in that they may represent the queen as divinised in a more abstract sense. There seems, however, to have been

¹⁹ H. G. Fischer, 'Yellow-skinned Representations of Men in the Old Kingdom, *JARCE*, II (1963), pp. 17-22.

²⁰ F. Daumas, 'La valeur de l'or dans la pensée égyptienne', *RHR*, 149 (1956), pp. 1-17.

²¹ E.g., A. Mekhitarian, *Egyptian Painting* (1954), pl. on p. 35; N. M. Davies, *Ancient Egyptian Paintings* (1936), pl. LXIII.

²² C. Desroches Noblecourt, *Vie et mort d'un pharaon. Toutankhamon* (1963), pl. VI; Davies, *Anc. Eg. Paintings*, pl. LXXIV. Nefertere, queen of Ramesses II, is light red in her tomb (G. Thausing, *Nofretari* (1971), *passim*).

²³ E.g. N. M. Davies and A. H. Gardiner, *The Tomb of Huy* (1926), pl. XXII; Mekhitarian, *Eg. Painting*, pl. on p. 51.

²⁴ M. Eaton-Krauss, 'Two Representations of Black-skinned Statues in Ancient Egyptian Painting', *JARCE*, XIII (1976), pp. 21-24; cf. also Fischer, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

²⁵ Nebhepetrē-Mentuhotpe, Cairo JE 36195: K. Lange and M. Hirmer, *Ägypten* (1978), pl. XI.

²⁶ G. Foucart, 'Le tombeau d'Amonmos' in *MIFAO*, LVII (1935), pl. XI; cf. UNI-DIA 37136 and *ibid.*, pl. IV (from drawing by Hay).

²⁷ Photograph taken by the author; cf. Lepsius, *Denkmäler*, III, 236a.

Fig. 2. Tomb 296

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Fig. 3. Tomb 359

Fig. 4 Tomb 65

double cartouche-shaped receptacle from the tomb of Tutankhamun incorporating four representations of the king.³² On the front (where the knobs for closure are) he is identical in the two cartouches, appearing as a child with a pale orange-red complexion. On the back he is shown as mature, wearing the blue crown, and with his face in one case red and in the other black.³³ The cartouches are 'cryptograms' of the king's prenomen, *Nb-hprw-r*, with the royal figure standing for *hprw*, and the entire scheme thus represents the king in four different *hprw* (hypostases): royal child, adult king, dead king, and child who will be reborn.³⁴ The latter child figure may be compared to representations of the deceased in the judgement scene: he is often shown in a childlike posture, and sometimes also is black, as if combining two stages of transformation.³⁵

As patroness of the Theban necropolis, Ahmosi Nefertere is a mediator. She is herself a human being who has gone through the ritual and achieved an ideal status. One of the stages in her cycle of transformation was to be black, and this is the aspect emphasized in the representations of her as black. The reason why this particular stage was so frequently chosen may in fact be explained. As noted above (no. 28), kings may be represented black in various contexts, but when the queen is depicted together with other royal persons she is the only one who is black.³⁶ This presumably means that, in otherwise similar circumstances, she had some quality which the others did not have, and which was relevant to this part of the cycle. What springs to mind is

³² Carter obj. no. 240 *bis*. Front: C. Desroches-Noblecourt, *Vie et mort*, pl. XIII. The flesh is of either translucent calcite or quartz backed with a pigment resembling the colour of carnelian, see the following ref. Back: *Treasures of Tutankhamun*. U.S.A. 1976, no. 19, with colour pl. For other black figures of the king cf. C. Aldred, *Jewels of the Pharaohs* (1971), figs. 99–100.

³³ Cf. J. R. Harris, 'Et nyt bevis på kongeparrets ligestilling i Amarna-tiden', in *Meddelelser fra Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*, 33. årgang, 1976, p. 84, n. 13.

³⁴ The cyclical birth-rebirth relationship between different generations is neatly explained by P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), pp. 154–55.

³⁵ Cf. C. Seeber, *Untersuchungen zur Darstellung des Totengerichts* (MÄS 35, 1976), pp. 101–6, and fig. 20 on p. 73.

³⁶ G. Foucart, 'Le tombeau d'Amonmos' in *MIFAO*, LVII, fasc. iv (1935), pl. XII (from Champollion, *Monuments*, pl. CCC); cf. also Theban tomb no. 359 (detail of queen fig. 3).

that she was the wife of Ahmose, the founder of the new dynasty, and the mother not only of Amenophis I, but in a sense of the whole dynastic line.³⁷ She was thus the perfect embodiment of the idea of regeneration: the black fertile *ḥprw* out of which the living red *ḥprw* was to emerge. In retrospect this was perhaps her principal function, and may explain why, in a group of royalty, she is distinguished specifically by her black complexion.

The dark representations of Ahmosi Nefertere have been considered *en bloc* in order to simplify the issue. Representations of her as black are indeed the most numerous and variations are insignificant. Blue was from an early period used as a substitute for black,³⁸ but Ahmosi Nefertere seems never to have been represented with dark blue skin³⁹—nor was she given the light blue skin of certain goddesses, which is a thing apart.⁴⁰ The colouring of her complexion had, it appears, a symbolic significance which precluded any conventional use of the blue alternative, which may be of wider relevance to the question of colour interchange.

The association of green with Ahmosi Nefertere is documented only in two unimportant instances.⁴¹ One is a figure of pale green stone, the other of green glazed stone, and in neither case is it clear that there was deliberate intent in the choice of material. Interchange between green and black does occur,⁴² but these are not major, 'authorized' representations, and they may not have been meant to be green as such. If, however, the green was intentional, it may have been influenced by the popular concept of green as the colour of growth and freshness,⁴³ but is unlikely in any event to represent a real alternation of colour.

³⁷ Cf. H. Jacobsohn, *Die dogmatische Stellung des Königes in der Theologie der alten Ägypter* (1939), p. 59.

³⁸ C. R. Williams, *The Decoration of the Tomb of Per-Nēb* (1932), pp. 38 ff. For interchange between blue and black, cf. pp. 53–62, and for blue/green pp. 62–65; cf. also W. S. Smith, *A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom* (1949), pp. 257–63, and J. R. Baines, *Egyptian Religious Personifications: A Study of Representational Evidence* (in press), Appendix.

³⁹ For one possible exception, cf. n. 9, end.

⁴⁰ E.g. Aldred, *Jewels*, figs. 94, 95, 97, 98, and 100.

⁴¹ Cf. n. 12.

⁴² Williams, *Per-Nēb*, p. 63.

⁴³ Kees, *op. cit.*, pp. 425–36; cf. J. R. Harris, *Lexicographical Studies in Ancient Egyptian Minerals* (1961), pp. 224–25.

It may therefore be said that the dominant colour of the queen's skin is black, and that blue and green 'variants' are doubtful.

The conventional yellow, and the odd instances of red are not to be taken as mere interchangeable variants either. They stem from entirely different concepts of the rôle and status of the queen, perhaps exemplified in cult statues of different appearance,⁴⁴ which were then copied in wall paintings and for statuettes.

⁴⁴ According to Černý (*BIFAO*, XXVII (1927), p. 166), Amenophis I may also have had two different cult statues.

Torben Holm-Rasmussen, *On the Statue Cult of Nektanebos II*
Courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York