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REFLECTIONS ON THE SACRAL ROLE
OF EGYPTIAN ROYAL WOMEN OF THE NEW KINGDOM ¹

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Abstract: *The article deals with a controversial question on the character of royal women's sacral role in the context of the divine queenship concept. As queenship is seen in contemporary Egyptology as an essential constituent element of the kingship ideology, the sacral role of the royal women is frequently determined as similar or even parallel to that of the king. In particular, sacral scenes with the images of the royal women performing the rites together with a king or alone are sometimes considered an illustration to this interpretation. As the author of the present article suggests, this approach needs re-evaluation, which should be based on a careful examination of all surviving scenes depicting cult activity of the royal women. Among other issues, the author discusses the sacral role played by Nefertiti, whose official position differs considerably of that of other royal women.*

A preliminary study of figurative and epigraphical sources, especially with scenes showcasing the royal women, allowed the author to assume that in the majority of cases they played an auxiliary and secondary role. Indeed, since the Ramesside period, the royal women have been most frequently depicted shaking the sistrum/sistra – an auxiliary action in the divine cult. Thus, the thesis about the great king's wife (or the king's mother)'s role as a counterpart of the king in his cult functions should be revised, if not rejected.

Keywords: ideology of kingship, queenship, royal women, iconography, New Kingdom, Ancient Egyptian rituals, offering scenes.

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The main object of this article is a critical study of the sacral role of principal representatives of the royal family of the New Kingdom period. Since the king's great wives and mothers (*hmt nswt wrt/mwt nswt*) were the chief figures of the king's female entourage, the issues concerning the ritual functions of the princesses will be omitted. Before proceeding to the subject, it is necessary to note that under the term «sacral» we consider two closely related facets of the role played by the royal women: the theological aspect and the ritual functions in the context of the divine cult. First of all, we will concentrate on the second aspect of the sacral role of the royal women, although the first one is also discussed.

From the very beginning of the New Kingdom, the increased emphasis on the significance of the royal women finds its visible expression in the development of both their titulary and iconography. Notably, by the middle of the 18th dynasty, the prominent position of king's mothers and great wives is accentuated by the introduction of new iconographic elements, which associate

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them with the principal goddesses of the pantheon – Hathor, Isis, Maat, Mut, Nekhbet, Wadjet and, possibly, Tefnut – in a more explicit form than before. Furthermore, the changes in the official position of the royal women of the New Kingdom are expressed in the sporadic inclusion of their representations in official scenes of divine cult and royal ceremonies.

For a long time, the more or less prominent status of the royal women alongside the reigning king during the New Kingdom posed the question of their dynastic and sacral role in Egyptology. Since the publication of L. Troy's fundamental work [Troy, 1986], which for the first time formulated the explanatory model of the royal women's sacral role, modern Egyptology has widely adopted the idea of the existence of «queenship» interpreted as a constituent element in the concept of kingship². The basic idea of this model is that the women of the king's close entourage – his mother, his «great» wife and sometimes princesses – were «bearers of divine queenship» [Robins, 2002, p. 25–26], which manifested itself symbolically in their iconographies, titles, and epithets. For example, according to L. Troy's model, it is stated in one of the publications that «royal women, who were envisioned as the feminine half of the androgynous totality of kingship, were, by their sex and roles, the *complementary (and necessary)* (italics – V.B.) opposite of the king... The queens' most important roles were as protectors and supporters of the male aspect of kingship, performers of religious ritual, and agents for the sexual arousal and generative potential of kings and male deities» [McCarthy, 2008, p. 85–86]³. In accordance with this idea, the ritual functions of the royal women explained mainly in the context of sexual symbolism were aimed at regeneration of the creative forces of the demiurge. At the theological level, the sacral role of the royal women is considered as equivalent to that of the goddesses-companions of the supreme solar god (Atum, Re, Amun-Re) [Troy, 1986, p. 64, 68–72, 102–103, 107]. Consequently, the relationships between members of a divine family are projected directly onto the royal family. So, if the king is the terrestrial manifestation of the divine masculine element, his counterpart is that of the feminine one. Thus, the queenship is generally perceived as a mortal “manifestation of a feminine prototype” and a “source of sacral power in the performance of ritual” [Troy, 1986, p. 3, 53, 73ff].

The presence of the king's wife alongside her husband in official scenes, whether he performs the rites or exercises power is interpreted as a manifestation of an elaborate theology; the royal bride and pharaoh together guaranteed the equilibrium of the world [Ziegler, 2002, p. 245]. In other words, cult and ceremonial scenes with royal women accompanying the king, or even officiating alone, are considered as one of the most evident signs of the supposed existence of divine queenship. The participation of a great king's wife in worship also gave reasons to regard her as a kind of high priestess, a female equivalent of the king as a high priest [Blackman, 1921, p. 12, 20; Troy, 1986, p. 140, 149, 132; Colin, 2002, p. 116; Gautron, 2003, p. 184, 223; Onstine, 2016, p. 223]. Furthermore, the idea of the great king's wife as a female counterpart of the king-ritualist is also linked to her perception as a representative of the harem collective and all Egyptian women [Troy, 1986, p. 73, 76].

In general, it can be stated that the model proposed by L. Troy still remains decisive in interpreting the sacral role of the royal women. Nevertheless, despite the publication of numerous works on royal women in Ancient Egypt (including unpublished theses⁴), plenty of controversial issues have no unambiguous answers yet. For instance: how should one explain the episodic presence of the royal women in some cult scenes and their absence in others? Was the royal

² See, for instance [Robins, 1993, p. 23–25, 40–43; Arnold, 1996, p. 85–119; Lohwasser, 2001, p. 70–74; Manniche, 2001, p. 157; Robins, 2001, p. 105–106; Robins, 2002, p. 26; Ziegler, 2002, p. 245; Robins, 2008, p. 118–130; McCarthy, 2008, p. 85–88; Roth, 2009, p. 4–5; Nuzzolo, 2009, p. 420–421, 423; Graves-Brown, 2010, p. 129–130].

³ With references on Troy and Robins (notes 17–20, p. 105).

⁴ Among them are [Robins, 1980; Green, 1988; Gautron, 2003].

woman's participation in the cult alongside the officiating king indispensable indeed? Were these scenes an idealistic and conventional image of worship or the reflection of real liturgical moments in the temple cult? Of course, there is no doubt that the royal women were always integrated into the Ancient Egyptian ideology of kingship. Still, the recognition of this fact cannot serve as a reliable (and even more a direct) proof of *the necessity* of participation of the female element in performing the rites by the king. However, the interpretation of the sacral role of women from the king's entourage (royal wives, priestesses and even harem ladies) within the framework of the divine queenship concept seems in many respects speculative and contains a number of vulnerable points.

Taking into account that the royal women appear relatively often in ritual scenes, one can assume that it is only possible to define the true nature of their sacral role (as a presumed king's counterpart as well) after careful analysis of their iconography. The scenes depicting the royal women performing rites that traditionally constituted a royal privilege are of special interest: in particular, the scenes of presentation and consecration of offerings, fumigation and libation before the deity. Thus, the necessity to verify the importance of the female element in the performing of the cult by the king requires us to turn to a thorough study of the surviving iconographic and epigraphic evidence.

Generally, all monuments with the scenes in question can be divided into several main groups according to their original setting: 1. scenes in temples and shrines; 2. scenes in royal tombs; 3. scenes in private tomb chapels and tombs; 4. scenes on royal stelae; 5. scenes on private stelae; 6. scenes on various objects (elements of jewelry, furniture and so on). This grouping allows us, among other things, to establish the original location of scenes as much as possible. Initially, these representations had not only been a part of the different pictorial context but had an unequal degree of visual accessibility by people from diverse social strata. The scenes, which have been the most accessible to everyone, were those depicted on royal stelae and the outer walls of temples and shrines. Consequently, in addition to religious and commemorative purposes, these scenes also played an important social function.

The analysis of more than 350 scenes with representations of the royal women involved in ritual and ceremonial activities, allowed us to make the following classification according to the main subject:

1. offering of various objects;
2. standing in front of a deity;

3. performance of various rites and ceremonies, some of which are attested in figurative sources only once. For example, these are certain episodes of the Sed jubilee, the smiting of enemies, the rite of «stretching of the cord» (*pd-šs*), the rite of «shaking of papyrus» (*sšš w3d*), the carrying of a deity's processional bark, the feast of Min etc.⁵

In its turn, our analysis of scenes was organized according to the following principles: a. type of monument; b. general character of the scene; c. titles and epithets of a royal woman; d. sacral and status attributes; e. gestures of a royal woman; f. accompanying inscriptions that specify the action of a royal woman.

Out of the total number of cases, most scenes demonstrate an offering, which was the key moment of the cult, that is the ritual feeding of a deity. Since the representation of the offering as a central act of the cult is the main subject in the decoration patterns of temples and tombs, we will focus our attention primarily on this category of scenes. Regarding composition, the offering scenes follow the same canonical pattern: the king facing the deity (or a group of gods) presents him/her a certain object – food, drink, ointment, fabric, etc. Inscriptions are placed between

⁵ In some ritual scenes a royal woman appears only once; for instance, the scene depicting Thutmose IV's mother Tiaa who attends the «stretching of the cord» rite [Bryan, 1991, p. 128].



Fig. 3. Nefertary Merytnemout offering to Mut. Relief in the Small Temple at Abu Simbel
[Kuentz, Desrohes Noblecourt, 1968, pl. LVIII].

the figures of the protagonists containing their names, titles, honorific epithets and the legends specifying the character of activities, the names of objects offered, and the formulae pronounced on behalf of the king and the deity⁶.

The first category of offering scenes (1) with the representation of royal women can be divided into three subgroups:

- a) scenes where the royal woman is depicted as a *passive* participant in the rites performed by the king (fig. 1)⁷.
- b) scenes where the royal woman is shown with the king as an *active* participant in the rites (fig. 2).
- c) scenes where the king is absent and the royal woman (usually his principal wife) is represented officiating (sometimes accompanied by her daughter) before the deity (fig. 3).

⁶ For example, the most common response of a deity to a king is the following formula: "I have given to thee all life, all health, all joy, like Re, forever" (*di.n.i n.k ʕnh nb snb nb 3wt-ib nb mi Rʕ dt*).

⁷ Fig. 1–2, 6–8 see on the color sticker.

In the first two subgroups (a–b), the king is the protagonist, while his companion always stands in the background. The scenes of the third subgroup (c) are shown on royal monuments much more rarely⁸, and in most cases, date back to the reign of Hatshepsut and Akhenaten.

In general, the study of all available offering scenes allowed us to conclude that the role of the royal women is essentially limited to that of a simple companion or *assistant* to the officiating king. In sacral scenes of the first half of the 18th Dynasty, the female members of the king's family are always placed behind his figure and are usually represented in a static manner; that is, with their arms along the body, or grasping their insignia – the so-called floral scepter, the *ḥd*-mace, the *ḥts*-scepter, the flower and/or the *ḥnh*-sign. The static posture of a royal woman in the scenes of this type suggests that she plays the role of a privileged attendant rather than an actual participant in the rites. Considering the scenes where the king's companion, on the contrary, is represented as an active participant – presenting offerings to the deity or shaking the sistrum – she takes a secondary position anyway. However, if we take into account the conventional rendering of space in mural representations, the real position of the king's companion should be understood not as standing behind, but next to his figure. Such a compositional arrangement of characters corresponded to the ancient Egyptian art rules of rendering social and gender difference: that is, the owner of the monument (or a more important person) is always shown first, while a less important person is shown at the secondary place. The same principle is also applied in private representations of non-royal couples, revealed by the paintings and reliefs of the New Kingdom – the male character takes precedence over his wife or mother [Robins, 1994, p. 33–34].

The analysis of the corpus of cultic scenes dating back to the pre- and post-Amarna periods allowed us to conclude that compared with the representations of the king officiating before the gods, the repertoire of the gestures performed by the royal women shows little diversity. So, the typical gestures of the royal women in the context of offering scenes are 1. presentation of various objects (conical bread (*t-ḥd*), *nw*-vessels, *md^ct*-vases, bouquets or flowers, *mnit*-necklace); 2. shaking the sistrum or two sistra (arched or naos-shaped); 3. purification of offerings (fumigation or libation); 4. gestures of adoration (with arms raised).

Except for the cult scenes of the Amarna period, a detailed study of which goes far beyond the scope of this article⁹, the set of objects held by the royal women is relatively limited. Generally, these are the following products and utensils:

1. bread of conical shape (*t-ḥd*);
2. globular *nw*-vessels;
3. ointment *md^ct*-vases;
4. *nmst*-vessels;
5. censer/brazier;
6. arched or naos-shaped sistrum/sistra;
7. bouquets of flowers or separate flowers (lotus and papyrus);

The possible reasons for such a limited set of objects have yet to be explained. Still, it can be assumed that most of them were to some extent related to the ideas of fecundity, feeding and rebirth and were perfectly suited to the biological nature of the royal women and, perhaps, to their ritual functions. However, the scenes of the Ramesside period showing the presentation of *mnḥt*-fabric or consecration of offerings by the *shḥm*-sceptre¹⁰ occur only in the funerary context,

⁸ In the Ramesside Period such scenes are mainly found in royal women's tombs of the Valley of the Queens. In these tomb scenes, the royal women are shown officiating alone. This can be explained by the nature of the decorative pattern itself, in which the figure of the intermediary king is absent.

⁹ The study of offering scenes under the reign of Akhenaten was done by C. Speiser [Speiser, 2010]. See also [Smith, Redford, 1976, p. 24–27].

¹⁰ According to the alternative reading, this scepter is known as «*ḥb*» [Wb I, p. 176].

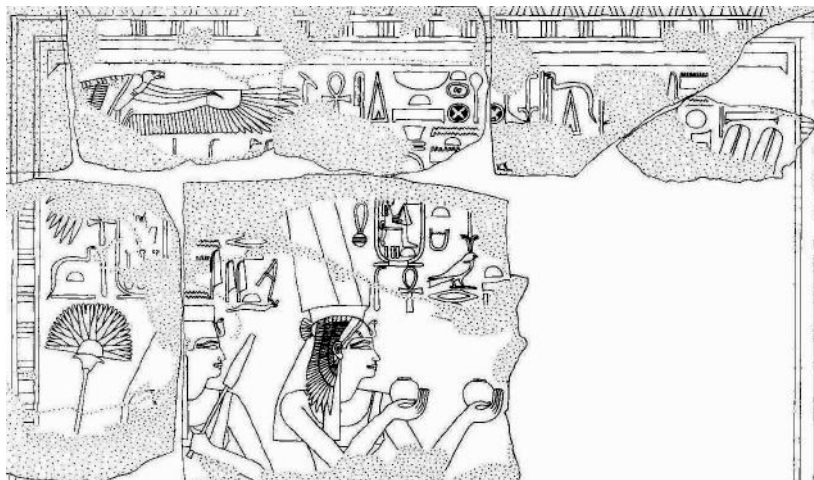


Fig. 4. Hatshepsut and Neferure officiating in front of Amun. Sanctuary *ntry-mnw* at Karnak [Gabolde, 2005, pls XI–XI*].

i.e., only in several tombs of the Valley of the Queens¹¹. Some presented objects, such as Maat figurines and cartouches, are found only in the scenes of the Amarna period.

The earliest attested image which depicts a royal woman officiating alone before the deity, without the mediation of a king, is a scene engraved on the stela of Nebukhaes [*Queens of Egypt*, 2008, p. 327, cat. 156]. The double scene on this stela shows the king's wife making the offering (presenting a conical bread)¹² to Osiris and Hathor. Similar scenes of cult rituals performed by a royal woman have started to appear on monuments again only at the time of Hatshepsut's regency. In particular, it is both her images and depictions of princess Neferure from the *ntry mnw*-sanctuary at Karnak (fig. 4). Nevertheless, the adoption of some of the royal prerogatives by Hatshepsut and Neferure is not typical for the «normal» iconography of female members of the royal family. The study of cultic and ceremonial scenes containing the representation of the royal women allows us to state that the dominance of the officiating king over his female companion remained unchangeable up to the reign of Amenhotep III inclusive, though under this ruler the importance of the great king's wife became markedly more pronounced than ever before.

At the beginning of Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten)'s reign, the sacral role of a king's principal consort reached its highest degree. For instance, the unusual position of Nefertiti occurs on numerous scenes of worship from the Aten temple at Karnak: in some cases, she is shown officiating before the solar god as the chief protagonist. At the Hut-benben Aten temple at Karnak and, probably in other buildings as well, Nefertiti is depicted alone or almost equal in size to that of the king in several cult scenes¹⁴ (fig. 5). Furthermore, sometimes Nefertiti assumes iconography and functions that were usually reserved only for the reigning king: particularly famous are the scenes of the smiting of enemies and her representation as a sphinx [Tawfik, 1975, p. 163, fig. 1,

¹¹ Nefertary-Merytenmut (QV 66) [Leblanc, 1989, pl. CLXIV A]; Nebettauy (QV 60) [Leblanc, 1989, pl. CLI A]; Duatentipet (QV 74) [Leblanc, 1989, pl. CXC V B].

¹² A gesture that means the notion of offering in general [Wilkinson, 1992, p. 207].

¹³ For details see [Bolshakov, 2014].

¹⁴ At the time when the results of the project headed by Smith and Redford were published, the total number of Akhenaten's occurrences on Karnak talatat was 329, while Nefertiti has been shown 564 times [Smith, Redford, 1976, p. 78, 80].

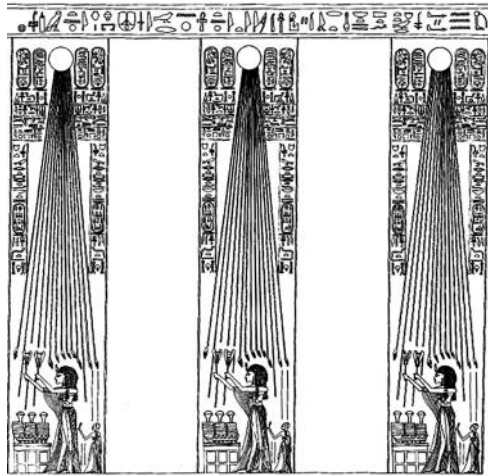


Fig. 5. Nefertiti offering to Aten. “The Collonade of Nefertiti” in the temple of Aten at Karnak (reconstruction) [Redford, 1984, p. 77, fig. 7].

pl. 52a]. This iconography gave rise to an assumption about Nefertiti’s quasi-royal status and even her co-regency with Akhenaten [Wilson, 1973, p. 235–241; Samson, 1977, p. 88–97; Samson, 1990, p. 25–26].

The other innovative feature of Nefertiti’s iconography is that unlike the royal women of the first half of the 18th Dynasty, who usually assisted at the cult as *passive* participants, she is often shown in an *active* role (fig. 6). In this respect, all known scenes of Aten’s worship with the participation of Nefertiti can be divided into two main groups: 1. the royal couple is worshipping Aten together (accompanied by princess/es, or alone), but the king always remains the main actor; 2. Nefertiti is officiating alone before Aten accompanied by one or two eldest princesses. As a whole, these scenes are frequently regarded as direct evidence of the Nefertiti’s quasi-equal cultic status to that of Akhenaten, as the high priestess of Aten. However, in the inscriptions accompanying the scenes where Nefertiti is officiating alone, she is not called a priestess anywhere; unlike the king who held the title «the first prophet of the god (Aten)» (*hm-ntr ty*) [Smith, Redford, 1976, p. 73, pl. 90: Nos. 6–7], Nefertiti never bears any such title. Even in other scenes showing the royal couple together, Akhenaten’s dominance over Nefertiti remains: she is always depicted *behind* the king or hidden under his figure [Smith, Redford, 1976, p. 57].

As Nefertiti’s omnipresence beside the king has been commented on many times, we will not ponder on this phenomenon in detail. In our opinion, the official position of Nefertiti, which some researchers consider almost equal to the royal one (in divinity, in status, and in actions during the offerings to Aten [Foster, 1999, p. 107]), was not only caused by the general strengthening of the sacral role of the great king’s wife¹⁵ but especially by Akhenaten’s *personal will*, aimed at emphasizing Nefertiti’s importance in the context of the new demythologized solar religion.

Nevertheless, despite the prominence of Nefertiti’s position in the new ideological system, Akhenaten declares himself the sole son of Aten who knows his father’s intentions and who can transmit his will to humanity [Redford, 1980, p. 25–26, 28, 30]. Thus, according to the Great Hymn to Aten and the texts of the Amarna boundary stelae, the sacral power and the supreme right to serve Aten belong exclusively to the king: «No one else knows you except your son,

¹⁵ See [Smith, Redford, 1976, p. 82].

Neferkheprure-Waenre, whom you teach about your intentions and your power» (*nn wn ky rh(w) tw wpw-hr s3.k (Nfr-hprw-r^c W^c-n-r^c)*), *di.k sš3.f m šhrw.k m phty.k*) [Grandet, 1995, p. 30]; «I am (the only) one who makes [offerings to my father Aten] in his house at Akhetaten. No offerings will be made for him [in any way] when I am (staying) in any (other) city (or) any (other) town...» (*ink irr(w) [wdnw n it.i] n p3 [itn] m 3ht-itn, n wdnw n.f im iw.i m niwt nbt m dmi nb*)¹⁶. It would, therefore, be prudent not to overestimate the degree of Nefertiti's ritual independence as a specific female counterpart of Akhenaten in Aten's cult.

The question of the interpretation of Nefertiti's role in Amarna theology is no less complicated. Despite arguments in favour of the existence of the theological construction assimilating Akhenaten and Nefertiti to the children of Aten – Shu and Tefnut, the vision of Nefertiti's theological role as a terrestrial manifestation of Tefnut seems dubious and requires additional evidence. In this respect, we are sharing M. Gabolde's opinion that Amarna proper iconographic and textual sources do not allow to establish the assimilation of Nefertiti with the goddess Tefnut as well-defined [Gabolde, 2015, p. 165]. Therefore, the question of Nefertiti's hypothetical assimilation with Tefnut should at least be left open.

No matter what theological role Nefertiti had in the Amarna religion, her laudatory epithets, on the contrary, quite clearly reveal her ritual duties in the temple cult as a songstress: «pure of hands» (*w^cbt w^y*) [Martin, 1989, p. 22, pl. 22]¹⁷, «the one who pacifies Aten with her sweet voice (with) her beautiful hands carrying the sistra» (*šhtpt p3 itn m hrw ndm mn3y.s drty nw hr sššwt*)¹⁸. The similar epithets or their variations, related to musical and vocal accompaniment in the temple cult, were also used in relation to other royal women of the post-Amarna period and, particularly, of the Ramesside period: «the one with pure hands carrying sistra, the one who pacifies the god with her voice» (*w3b w^y hr sššty, šhtpt ntr m hrw.s* – Ankhesenamun) [Gitton, 1978, p. 392–93], «radiant of hands, the one who pacifies the gods, the one who pacifies Horus with her voice, beautiful with hands carrying sistra» (*wb^h w^y, šhtpt ntrw, šhtpt Hr m hrw.s, nt drty hr sššty* – Nefertary Merytenmut) [Troy, 1986, p. 169, No. 19.5; Schmidt, Willeitner, 1994, p. 21; fig. 23b; p. 44, fig. 56], «the one who pacifies the gods» (*šhtpt ntrw* – Isisnefret (I)) [Troy, 1986, p. 169, No. 19.6], «the one with pure hands» (*w^cbt w^y* – Isis (III)) [Troy, 1986, p. 171, No. 20.4], *w^cbt w^y n Imn-r^c nswt ntrw* – Isis (IV)) [Gosselin, 2007, p. 162, fig. 7].

Indeed, since the reign of Amenhotep III and especially during the Ramesside period, the most widespread iconography of a royal woman has included shaking the sistrum/sistra [Sander-Hansen, 1940, p. 24ff; Troy, 1986, p. 86]. In the cult scenes, the great king's wife is often shown shaking the sistra, while the king performs various rituals before the deity (figs 7–8). The accompanying legends for these scenes are more or less stereotypical: «shaking the sistrum before your beautiful face» (*irt sššty n hr.k nfr*), «shaking the sistra before Amun-Re's face» (*irt sššty n hr n Imn-r^c*), «shaking the sistra before your beautiful face, Amun-Re» (*irt sššty n hr.k nfr Imn-r^c*). Hence, it is commonly accepted that the principal function of the royal woman (great king's wife or mother) in the cult was that of a priestess, who recited sacred formulae or sang hymns accompanied by the sound of sistra [Bleeker, 1959, p. 267; Troy, 1986, p. 86; Ziegler, 2002, p. 250]. In this regard, it is necessary to dwell a little more on the interpretation of this activity. As a liturgical object, the sistrum, which has profound Hathoric implications, is often associated with ritual activities of

¹⁶ The boundary stelae of the first proclamation K, X, M [Murnane, Van Siclen III, 1993, p. 29,43; K:34, X:33, M:33, pls 2–8].

¹⁷ Block from Hermopolis, Brooklyn Museum. Inv. No. MMA 219.49, 573, 597, 604. See [James, 1974, pl. 76, n 306].

¹⁸ Tomb of Ay [Davies, 1908 (2), pl. XXV]. In this context, some variants of Nefertiti's laudatory epithets occur on the boundary stelae U and S (lines 4) and in the tomb of May (south thickness, column 1): «she who is kindly of face, lady of love, she who is beautiful in the two feathers, united with praise, one rejoices at hearing her voice» (*nfrt hr nt m šwt nbt mrwt hmt hzw h^c.tw n sdm hrw.s*), «she who is kindly of face, she who is beautiful in the two feathers, beloved by the living Aten» (*nfrt hr nt m šwt šrrt p3 itn nh*) [Davies, 1908 (1), pls IV, XXV–XXVI].

the «god's wife /god's hand». According to L. Troy and the followers of her concept, the royal woman functioning as the god's wife played the ritual role of «daughter» and «wife» of the solar god as an indispensable agent in the act of cosmic renewal. Thus, the use of sistra by the royal women is generally explained in the context of ritual awakening or stimulation of the «sexual/creative energy» of the demiurge with the ultimate goal of the renewal and maintenance of world order [Troy, 1986, p. 89, 92ff; Ziegler, 2002, p. 252; Manniche, 2010, p. 14, 16; Picton, 2016, p. 238]. Nevertheless, the idea of «erotic stimulation» of the god by a royal woman playing the role of his wife/daughter through music and chants is not compatible with scenes in which the object of veneration is not a god but a *goddess* (for instance, Hathor, Isis, Mut).

Moreover, as a liturgical object, the sistrum did not have exclusively erotic connotations; its use implied par excellence the appeasement of a deity and the inspiration of its benevolence¹⁹. An episode from «The Tale of Sinuhe», in which the royal daughters presented their sistra to the king to divert his anger and awake his benevolence for his escaped courtesan, can serve in favour of this interpretation: «Your hands upon the beauty, enduring king, these insignia of the Lady of Heaven! May the Golden One give life to your nostrils, the Lady of Stars enfolds you! (...) Slacken your bow, withdraw your shaft! Give breath to him who suffocates!»²⁰. Another important value given to the use of the sistrum was the Egyptians' belief in its ability to make the gods appear, especially in the context of the Hathoric rituals²¹. Besides this, it is well known that the Egyptians considered musical performance in the cult context indispensable for apotropaic purposes as well. Supposedly, the sound of the sistrum dispelled all evil and harmful things, all that could disturb the religious ceremonies [Blackman, 1921, p. 21–22; Vandier, 1962, p. 132; *The Life of Meresamun*, 2009, p. 30]. Therefore, this ritual activity indeed cannot be reduced to the symbolic excitement of the demiurge's sexual desire and must be recognized as greatly exaggerated.

Despite some scenes of worship where the royal woman is shown officiating *de facto* as a priestess, her titulary is often devoid of the corresponding priestly title «god's wife», though this one can be seen on other monuments²². Even if the official titulary of a royal woman contains the title «god's wife» it is not always possible to draw direct parallels between the subject of a particular scene and this title²³.

Hence, we tend to conclude that the scenes depicting the officiating royal women are rather a generalized ideal image than a faithful illustration of the real event. Except for the Amarna representations, in most cases, these scenes do not reflect real (and indispensable) duties of the king's wife and king's mother in performing the cult, but rather demonstrate her *right* to accomplish the rites. To sum up, the interpretation of the royal wife's participation in worship as *a necessary condition* for the perpetuation of the creation seems to be inconsistent. In particular, the analysis of postures, attributes, titles and prerogatives of the royal women of the pre- and post-Amarna period in cultic context does not allow us to consider the king's consort his true *counterpart*. As a result, the idea of the equivalence between male and female roles of the royal couple [Troy, 1986, p. 139] and their interaction in the cultic sphere fails to withstand scrutiny. We would like to stress that in the majority of official and cultic scenes, the only protagonist is almost always the king and the women of his entourage appear alongside him only occasionally. Except for certain historical episodes, such as the reigns of Hatshepsut, Tawosret and the Amarna

¹⁹ It should be mentioned that the sistrum was not exclusively a feminine attribute. For discussion see [Bolshakov, 2021].

²⁰ English translation is given after [Parkinson, 2009, p. 41].

²¹ In the Late Period this object was specific to the cult of the goddesses Hathor and Isis [Speiser, 2010, p. 9].

²² For example, Thutmose IV's mother Tiaa held some priestly titles, some of which (very archaic by that time) were, undoubtedly, purely honorary: *hmt ntr, M33t Hr Stb, hrp[t] sšmtyw pr im3t* [Zivie, 1976, p. 161].

²³ Presumably, the idea of a royal wife's functions in the temple cult acting as «god's wife» is based on sources dating back to the 22–25th dynasties, when the high priestesses of Amun fully adopted the iconography and partially the titulary of the royal women of the New Kingdom period [Gitton, 1978, p. 402].

period, which are a cardinal deviation from the established tradition, in most cases, the female members of the royal family had a secondary/subordinate position to the king. For example, this is confirmed by the iconography of the Ramesside royal women, who are usually depicted shaking sistra, which meant an auxiliary role in the cultic activity [Green, 1988, p. 246].

The study of cultic scenes with the royal women as active participants showed that the accompanying inscriptions always describe the king's gestures and rarely those of his female companion. As a rule, explanatory legends which refer to the images of the royal women contain their cartouches, titles and epithets, and only sometimes describe their ritual actions or gestures²⁴. As we see in most of the cultic scenes of the Ramesside period, these inscriptions denote mostly shaking the sistra, not mentioning other gestures. Moreover, even the scenes, where a royal woman is officiating alone before a deity, cannot serve as indisputable proof that she possessed a sacred status equal to that of the king. In any case, none of the women of the New Kingdom royal house held the epithet indicating the important privilege of the ruling king – «lord of performing the rite» (*nb ir(t) ht*). In this regard, an essential detail should be pointed out: it is well known that in exchange for offerings the king received gifts from the gods who promised him in return long years of life and rule, protection, prosperity and other favours. But unlike the scenes of the king's worship, most representations of royal women making offerings are devoid of inscriptions with the traditional formulae of exchange between the king and the deity «I have given to thee» (*di.n(i) n.k*). In such scenes, royal women never address the gods, like the king, as their parents in first person – «my father/my mother» (*it.i/mwt.i*). Although we can cite a few examples of designating a deity as the father or mother of a royal woman, named in third person – her father/her mother (*it.s/mwt.s*)²⁵. Since this direct verbal «dialogue» between the officiating royal woman and the god is absent, the discourse of the offering scene remains essentially visual.

Thus, the study of cultic scenes with the representations of royal women gives enough convincing arguments against the idea of the equivalence of their sacral role to that of the king. In our opinion, the appearance of royal women in official scenes during the New Kingdom era served principally to emphasize their importance as guarantors of the legitimate continuation of the dynastic lineage. Besides, we believe that the inclusion of mothers, wives and sometimes daughters of the king in cultic and ceremonial scenes was not determined by the supposed existence of the institutionalized conception of queenship. From our point of view, this phenomenon was related to the changes in the royal ideology closely intertwined with the development of the theological thought of the New Kingdom – the more or less explicit tendency of assimilation of the royal couple to the divine couple. If the images and texts reveal the proximity between the king and the gods and play on different degrees of assimilation and integration of the sovereign in the divine world, the same principle is applied, though less pronounced, to the ruler's wife. In this respect, it is not a coincidence that the culmination of the tendency of the royal consort's assimilation to the goddesses corresponds to the growing solarization and divinization of the king's person. For instance, the most explicit examples of this divinization of the royal couple are: Amenhotep III and Tiye, Akhenaten and Nefertiti, Ramesses II and Nefertari. Nevertheless, whatever the specific circumstances of the importance accorded to a certain female representative of the royal house who enjoyed certain royal privileges, her image was ultimately used to accentuate the divine nature of *the king* and to reinforce the idea of his divine origin. It may be added that only through the union of a woman with the king she was provided with attributes of divine sovereignty and associated with royal

²⁴ Usually, such an accompanying inscription relates to sistrum/sistra shaking.

²⁵ Mut-Tuy – *it.s Imm* [Schmidt, Willeitner, 1994, p. 57, fig. 72]; Nefertari Merytenmut – *it.s Imm*; *it.s Mnw* [Gitton, 1978, p. 397; Schmidt, Willeitner, 1994, p. 52–53. figs. 68a, 69]; *mwt.s Hwt-Hr* [Leblanc, 1999, p. 70, fig. 22]; Tiye – *it.s Imm* [KRI VI, 732ff].

ceremonies and rites. On the basis of the fact that the prominent position of the royal women depended mainly on their relations with the ruling king, we can assume that exactly the same reason justified their presence in official scenes. Therefore, the idea about the sacral role of the royal spouse/mother as a counterpart of the king whose assistance in the cult was indispensable seems to us highly doubtful and requires further reassessment.

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Fig. 1. Thutmose III accompanied by the anonymous royal woman offers to Amun. Lintel from Karnak. Open Air Museum at Karnak. Photo by V. Bolshakov.



Fig. 2. Thutmose III and Satiah offering to Ptah. Stela from Karnak. The Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Photo by V. Bolshakov.



*Fig. 6. Akhenaten and Nefertiti offering to Aten. Relief from the temple of Aten at Karnak (fragment).
The Luxor Museum. Photo by V. Bolshakov.*



*Fig. 7. Ramesses II accompanied by Tuya offers to Amun. The Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
Photo by V. Bolshakov.*



*Fig. 8. Ramesses III and the anonymous king's wife (Isis?). The Temple at Medinet Habu.
Photo by V. Bolshakov.*