

THE AMARNA ROYAL TOMBS AT AMARNA

BARRY KEMP

The final places of burial of members of the Amarna royal family remain obscure although much discussed. It does, however, seem that none of them ended where they had planned to be, rather as if, in death, they had become refugees. The discussion that follows is one of several ways of explaining the evidence at Amarna, one permutation of a relatively small but ambiguous set of facts that may never be elucidated with greater certainty. Where it was originally intended that at least some of them were to be buried is stated in the text of the first set of Boundary Stelae. Akhenaten speaks in the first person:

'Let a tomb be made for me in the eastern mountain [of Akhetaten]. Let my burial be made in it, in the millions of jubilees which the Aten, my father, decreed for me. Let the burial for the Great King's Wife Nefertiti be made in it, in the millions of years [which the Aten, my father, decreed for her. Let the burial of] the King's Daughter, Meritaten, [be made] in it, in these millions of years.'

The word he uses for 'tomb', *kher*, was, at Thebes, commonly applied to the Valley of the Kings generally and specifically to the current royal tomb. The text can be interpreted as saying, therefore, that the tomb which Akhenaten planned for himself would also contain a place of burial for Nefertiti and another for Meritaten: three tombs in one. As the text continues, however, ambiguity appears. A 'cemetery' (using the word *semet* which implies something more extensive than a single tomb) is to be made in the eastern mountain of Akhetaten for the Mnevis Bull; along with 'tomb chapels' (*a'ha'ut*) for the 'chiefs of seers', the 'god's fathers' and perhaps the 'senior priests' (the text is damaged here). In each case the intended occupants are to be buried 'in it'. Does the 'it' refer to the tombs (even when the noun, 'tomb chapels', is plural) or to the 'eastern mountain'? Translators differ, although perhaps the most definitive of the translations, that of W.J. Murnane and C.C. Van Siclen, opts for 'eastern mountain'.

The Amarna royal tomb (no. 26) does actually contain three separate places of burial (here designated 26A, 26B and 26C): Akhenaten's burial chamber at the end of a long descending corridor (26A), and two supplementary tombs (26B, 26C) opening from one side of the corridor (Figure 1). In terms just of the architecture we might see the literal translation of the text exactly reflected in the tomb plan. Thus one of the supplementary tombs would have been for Meritaten and one for Nefertiti. The quasi-royal design of one of them (26C) points to Nefertiti as the more likely of the intended owners. The group of chambers labelled alpha, beta and gamma (26B) thus become the tomb intended for Meritaten.

How tomb 26B looks now is a result of the curtailment of the original intention, made following the unexpected death of Meritaten's younger sister, Meketaten. It is not easy to visualise the original scheme. All three chambers have their ceilings set at almost the same level in contrast to the floors, reflecting the way that the Egyptians quarried stone, starting with a narrow gallery at the top and working downwards (Figure 2). One now steps down (about 50 cm) into chamber alpha, then up again into beta, and up further into gamma the height of which is thus less than other spaces in the royal tomb. The floor of chamber beta is at two levels, separated by a low step, and the ceiling has been cut in two separate operations along the same line. Each of the two sections has its own doorway, and the differences in the levels of floors and ceilings, which correspond to a mid-line between the doorways, suggest that, by having two doors, two sets of workmen could cut and remove surplus stone at the same time. (There is no sign that the doors were subsequently blocked and the decoration carried across the blocking.) It seems that two doors were also started for chamber gamma but work on the left-hand door (as one looks towards it from chamber beta) was prematurely stopped and the space filled in, allowing the decorated plaster surface on the inside of the room to be carried across. The start on the second door, however, implies (on

arrows mark downwards directions or steps

in chamber alpha (α) the symbol \wedge
points to the location of a niche in the wall

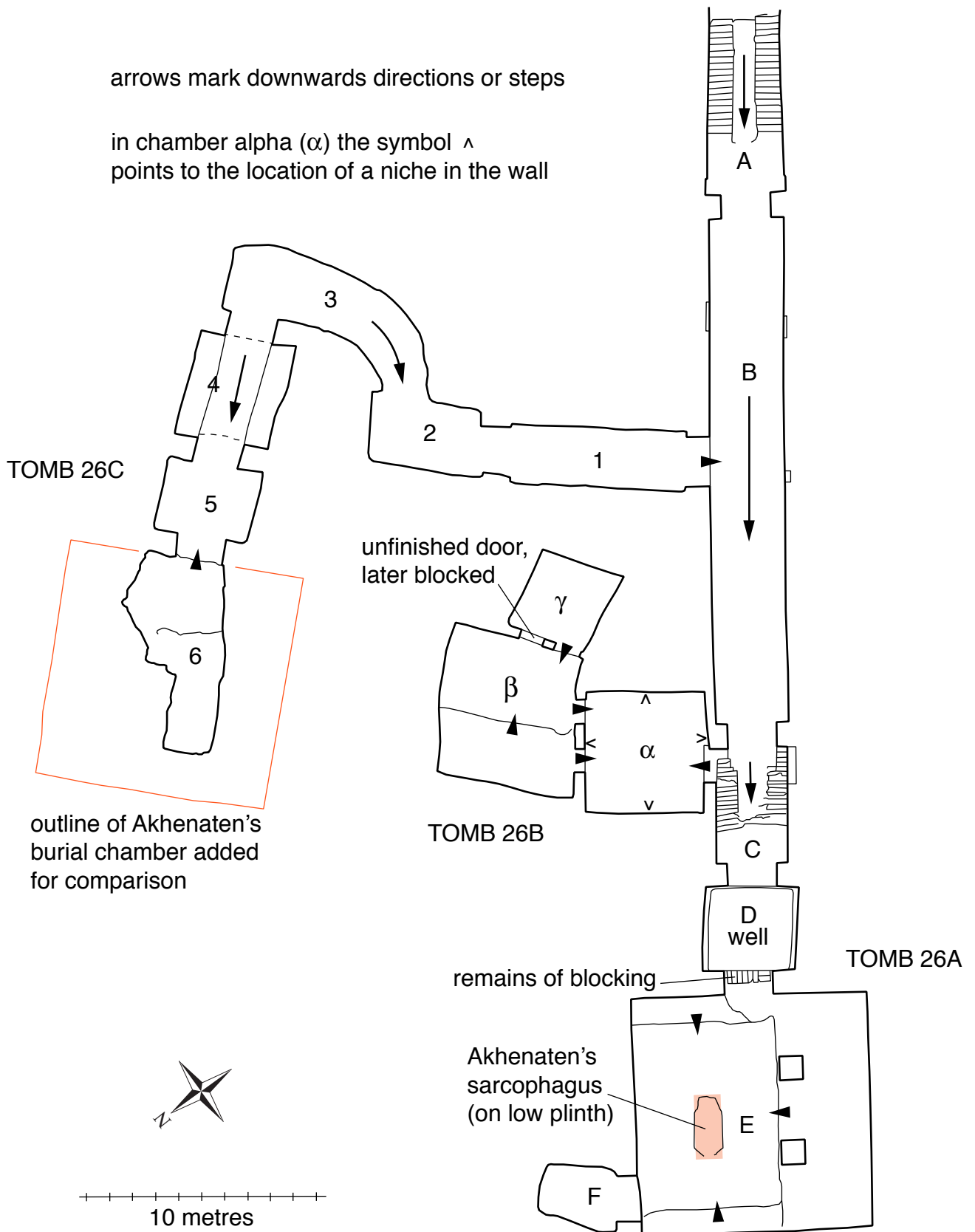


Figure 1. Plan of the royal tomb, no. 26, and its three sets of chambers. After the plan by Mark Lehner, in G.T. Martin, *The Royal Tomb at El-Amarna II. The Reliefs, Inscriptions and Architecture*. London, Egypt Exploration Society 1989, Pl. II.



Figure 2. The inside of room beta in tomb 26B, looking towards room alpha. Note the differences in the levels of the floor and ceiling between the left and right halves of the room, corresponding to the two access doorways. Photo B. Kemp, 2015.

the parallel provided by chamber beta) that the intention was to make chamber gamma wider, perhaps as wide as chamber beta.

We might at this point note that no provision for burial is mentioned on the Boundary Stelae for Meritaten's future husband, nor for further daughters, nor for any other member of the royal family. The group of three – Akhenaten, Nefertiti and Meritaten – appear as, in effect, the complete royal family, supported by ranks of men with titles linking them to the gods.

If this was the starting configuration for burial, the premature death of the second daughter, Meketaten, thwarted the plan. With no tomb prepared for her, parental grief prompted the conversion of the still unfinished chambers intended for Meritaten into a burial place for Meketaten (Figure 3).

Chamber gamma was hastily made usable and decorated, and so became the place where her burial was put. Chamber beta was left unfinished, its walls rough and unplastered. Chamber alpha, the outermost, was, however, also completed. The carved and painted surfaces mainly depicted the cult of the Aten at the Great Aten Temple and the large entourage that accompanied the royal family when they led the ceremonies. Part of one wall, however, was given over to small-scale copies of the scenes of mourning in chamber gamma. Was chamber alpha, at least initially, intended to serve as a memorial place for Meketaten, remaining accessible for a time? This would imply that the place where access to her tomb was closed was at the doors into chamber gamma.

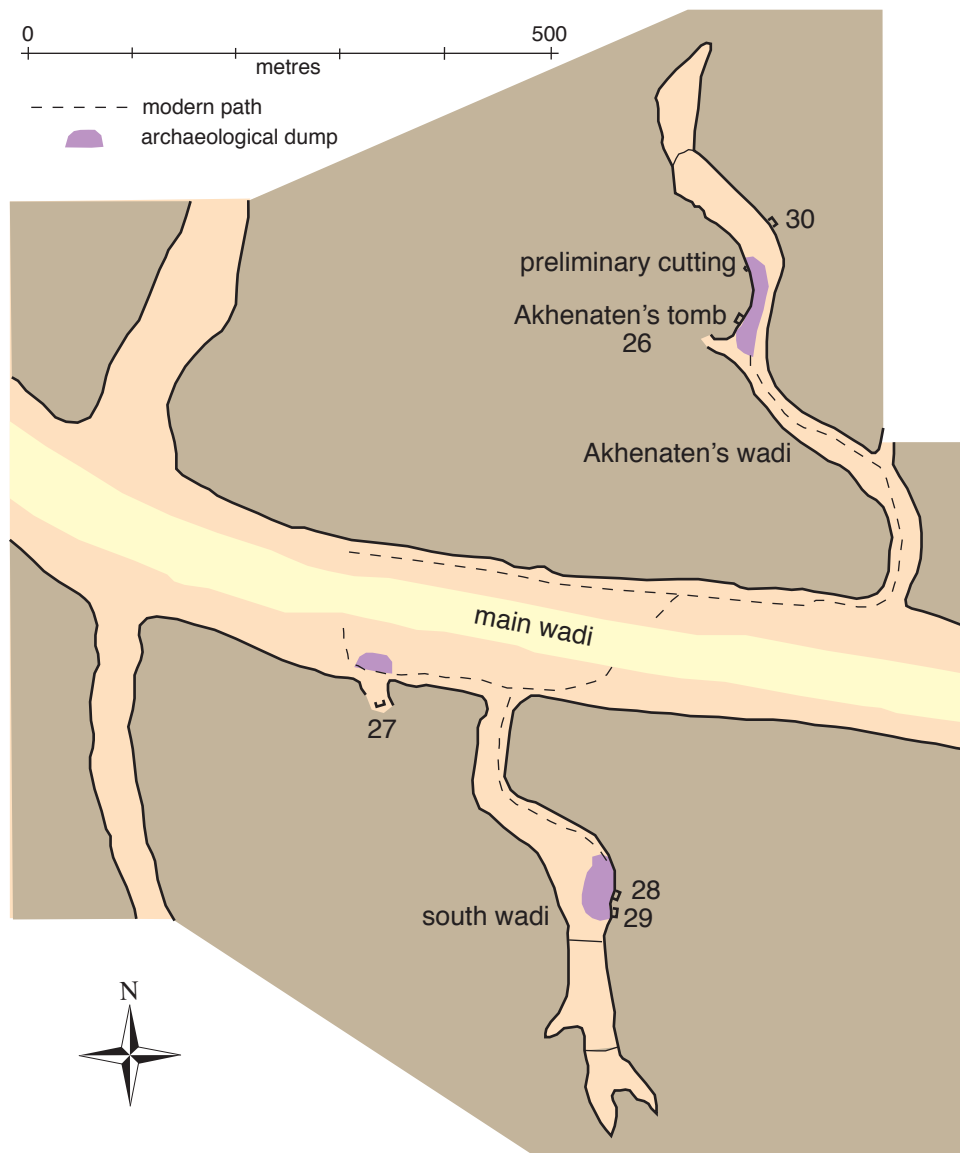
After the decoration of each wall of chamber alpha had been completed, a rectangular niche, on average 25 cm high, was cut into each wall but was (to judge from traces on one of them) subsequently plastered over although the scene itself was not recarved. Martin, in his detailed description of the tomb, identified them as niches 'to receive



Figure 3. The royal family grieve over the death of Meketaten. The princess stands within a festive pavilion, her name clearly written above. Her family express their anguish in front of her (left to right): Akhenaten, Nefertiti, Meritaten, Ankhnesneferibre. Scene in room gamma of tomb 26B. Photo B. Kemp, 2007.



Figure 4. View, to the south-west, of the junction of the main wadi and the narrow south wadi, which rises up the middle of the opposite hillside. The entrance to tomb 29 is hidden in a fold in the ground, below the black arrow on the right. Photo B. Kemp, 1979.



*Figure 5. Sketch plan of the area of the royal tombs at Amarna, after a drawing made by Hilary Waddington in 1931, and published in G.T. Martin, *The Royal Tomb at El-Amarna I. The Objects*. Egypt Exploration Society 1974, Pl. 3; cf. also Gabolde and Dunsmore, contoured map on p. 31. No. 30 is a small chamber that is thought might have been a burial place for embalming material, reflecting a practice known in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes.*

protective or ritualistic magical bricks and associated amulets'. This is a practice known from examples in both royal and private tombs in the New Kingdom. This could be consistent with Meketaten's own burial or with the burial of another person actually placed within chamber alpha (as has been sometimes supposed). Akhenaten's own magical bricks (in which he is addressed as Osiris) were found in tomb 55 in the Valley of the Kings, though not in niches but placed on the floor.

The further in time one moves from the starting point of this narrative the more speculative it becomes. In this version, the change of plan prompted a realisation that the original scheme of a single tomb for the burials of the three leading members of the royal family was impractical. A new tomb for Meritaten was needed, and we can surmise that it was realised that, supposing Akhenaten predeceased Nefertiti (as probably did happen), the closing of the royal tomb, now with a complete royal burial inside (in chamber E), would have hindered work to complete Nefertiti's chambers (26C).

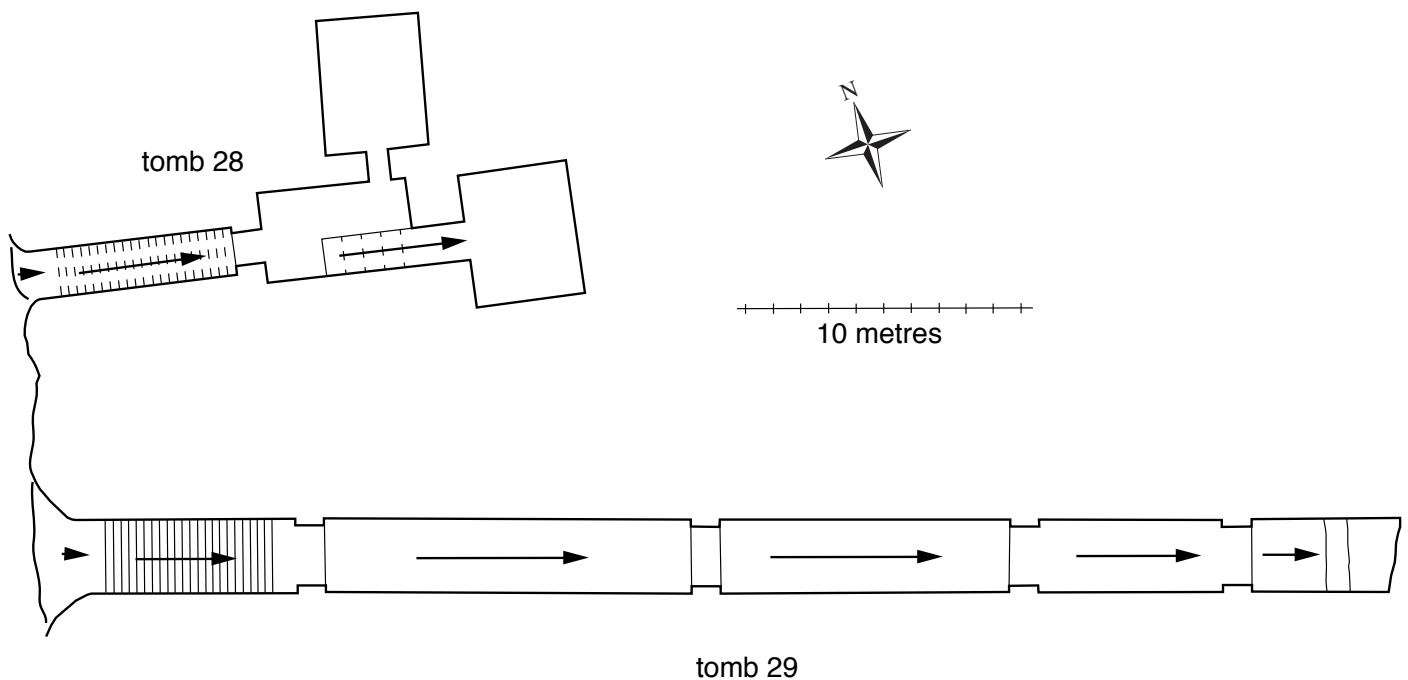


Figure 6. Plans of tombs 28 and 29, after Aly el-Khouly and G.T. Martin, Excavations in the Royal Necropolis at El-Amarna 1984. Cairo, Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'Archéologie orientale 1987, Pls. 5, 7.

The solution was to start again, in a new location (Figures 4 and 5). Akhenaten's tomb is situated on the left-hand side of a narrow side wadi that runs northwards from the long, winding access wadi that leads to the royal necropolis from the edge of the Amarna plain. The new location was almost a mirror image, a short side wadi that runs southwards from a point almost opposite its northern counterpart, the new tomb location also on the left-hand side. Here a start was made on cutting two new tombs within a short distance of one another (Figure 6). The more southerly, no. 29, was, according to this interpretation, the replacement for tomb 26C, thus a new tomb for Nefertiti (Figure 7). It descended in a straight line, via four rock-cut doorways and slight changes of the angle of descent, to a point where the work stopped with still no sign of a burial chamber. Its length, from the first doorway, is almost 40 m. This is approximately the same length of corridor in Akhenaten's tomb ahead of the deep well, the total length of his tomb, to the rear of the burial chamber, being 53 m. The stone cutters were relatively fortunate in their choice of location. Aside from deep fissures the stone is firm throughout apart from an area behind the first entrance, where a weakness and a cavity at the level of the ceiling led to the insertion of a false roof of circular wooden beams thickly plastered with gypsum.

The cutters of tomb 28, a short distance to the north and set slightly lower, were less fortunate. They at first encountered a bed of hard limestone, which could be worked with chisels, at a level just below the intended ceiling (Figure 8). Below this, however, it was replaced by many thin beds of rock separated by softer layers which readily crumble, the whole set suddenly folding downwards where the second doorway begins. In its present condition, the ceilings of the various spaces in the tomb are neatly squared off and still retain much gypsum plastering. The plan published by El-Khouly and Martin is essentially a plan of the ceilings. Below the top band of hard limestone the rock has fallen away, in places alarmingly, so that a ground plan now would consist of a series of rounded lines. It is difficult, at first sight, to imagine it being used as a tomb. It is necessary to assume that the stone cutters, as they worked downwards to create vertical faces in this soft crumbly material, immediately afterwards spread gypsum thickly over it, pressing it into the gaps, to create a surface which was, at least for a time, firm and vertical. We can accept that the tomb was finished and could have been used for a burial. The wall



Figure 7. The descent into tomb 29. Large areas of gypsum plaster remain on the walls and ceiling. Photo B. Kemp, 2015.



Figure 8. The ceiling in tomb 28, where the entrance corridor meets the descent to the rear chamber. The hard stone layer beneath the ceiling preserves areas of the original gypsum coating to all surfaces, which, for a time, would have concealed and helped to support the unstable rock surface below. Photo B. Kemp, 2015.

at the rear of the final chamber is preserved to a sufficient depth to suggest that no further corridors or chambers were intended. Subsequently, over the centuries, the gypsum detached itself in the dry atmosphere (it can shrink in these conditions), fell away and gradually the weak rock behind disintegrated to create the present unfavourable appearance.

The decoration of Akhenaten's tomb proper began only on the walls surrounding the 'well' at the foot of the long access corridor. Tomb 29 seems to have followed the same design; at least there is no sign of preparation of the walls of the long corridor for decoration. In tomb 28 the upper parts of the walls of the interior, including the final, deep chamber, are fairly well preserved and include areas of white plaster. In the burial chamber in the royal tomb and in the Meketaten chambers the decoration rises to close to the level of the ceiling, above the point at which some of the plaster in tomb 28 is preserved. This suggests that no decoration was begun. The decoration of Meketaten's chambers seems to have been exceptional.

My suggestion, therefore, is that tombs 28 and 29 replaced the two tomb annexes (26B and 26C) in Akhenaten's tomb, following the death of Meketaten. Each one is a straightened-out version of its predecessor. Tombs 28 and 29 would thus have been for Meritaten and Nefertiti, respectively. To increase the labour needed (Akhenaten's own tomb being still unfinished) the Workmen's Village was extended, and the Stone Village was created, the latter drawing upon a different set of people to provide labour.

At first sight we can introduce a date here. Meketaten appears as one of the complete set of six daughters in the scene of the reception of foreign tribute on the east wall of the tomb of Meryra II (no. 2) where the date 'regal year 12' is given as a heading. Her death, one can conclude, occurred after this event. This is the only date written in any of the tombs at Amarna. In recent years it has been given even greater significance. The year 12 scene occupies the east side of the main hall of the tomb. On the rear, north wall, at right angles, one or more draughtsmen had begun to lay out a new scene in red painted lines, featuring a king and a queen, their names Ankh-kheperura Smenkhkara and Meritaten, her name now in a cartouche. The temptation is to conclude that this unfinished scene was started (and abandoned) not long after completion of the year 12 scene of the reception of foreign tribute on the neighbouring wall. Logic then compels one to make Smenkhkara a co-regent of Akhenaten, his brief reign beginning after year 12 (year 13 perhaps) and thus entirely within Akhenaten's reign. This argument assumes that, either by very good planning or by coincidence, the east wall of Meryra II's tomb had just reached the stage where decoration was to be added in the very same year that the reception of foreign tribute took place. The rock tombs at Amarna show a wide and interesting range of ways in which they were left unfinished. It has long seemed to me that the unskilled and skilled labour that was needed was insufficient to allow an official to see orderly progress towards the completion of his tomb, to the extent that he might have been lucky to obtain the services of a particular group of workers or artists for short intervals only (perhaps periods of days). Interrupted progress was normal.

For Meryra II himself (as for Huy, owner of the adjacent tomb (no. 1)), the reception of foreign tribute was a key moment in his life. Perhaps both men were responsible for organising the event. They held similar positions, as stewards of the households of, respectively, Nefertiti and Tiy. Maybe they were related to one another. We can really form no idea of the rate at which Meryra II's tomb progressed, how far the workmen and artists had got beyond the doorway by year 12. Perhaps three years more were needed before the east wall and the full team of artists were ready for the decoration (which never received its final stage, that of being painted). The facing wall, that on the west, was smoothed but received no decoration at all. By two years later still, so we can pursue the story in our imagination, the rear (north) wall had also been smoothed and prepared for decoration. At this point Akhenaten died, Smenkhkara became king, and one or more artists were brought in to commemorate the new reign. Davies considered that the 'cartouches seem somewhat large and clumsy in comparison with the rest of the inscription, but the execution of the whole also is very different from that of the other walls'. In the end,

imagination aside, we have no firm basis for the chronology of the tomb, and thus should be careful in adopting a literal interpretation. The year 12 date is the date of the event and not the date when its commemoration was carved. It is not like the date in a quarry or on a papyrus legal document.

Meryra II's colleague, Huya, in celebrating his service in the household of Queen Tiy, depicted her husband, Amenhotep III, at a banquet with Tiy. It is very likely that Amenhotep III had been dead for some years by this time. His appearance is a tribute to his memory by a man who probably owed his position to him. Meryra II had served the household of Nefertiti. We cannot exclude the possibility that, in a similar way, he had all six of his mistress's daughters shown, irrespective of whether they were all alive at the time of the reception of foreign tribute. Tomb pictures are not photographs. They are compositions intended to reflect, in part, something suited to eternal contemplation.

Year 12 is not a strong point in the chronology of Amarna. All we can reasonably deduce is that a ceremony, of great personal importance to the two tomb owners but of uncertain wider significance, took place at this time. The decoration of Meketaten's burial chamber (room gamma of 26B) does itself contain a potential piece of dating evidence. One set of cartouches of the Aten is preserved, and shows the later form of the name. There is still, however, no agreement as to when the new form appeared, although the moment seems to be bracketed between years 8 and 12.

Returning to the royal tombs, the what-if story continues. The death of Akhenaten brought Smenkhkara (who also adopted the nomen Nefernefru-aten) to the throne, married to Meritaten. Unlike successful officials who could begin work on their tombs at a time of their own choosing, kings had to wait until their coronation had taken place. It is reasonable to think that a start would have been made on a tomb for Smenkhkara. If we follow logic (not necessarily the right course in dealing with history) this latest tomb would be the one on which least progress had been made by the time work was abandoned. This is tomb no. 27, which was given a grand, wide entrance very similar to that for Akhenaten's tomb (Figures 9 and 10). The separate location perhaps reflects a



Figure 9. Looking up the entrance ramp at tomb 29. Photo B. Kemp, 2015.



Figure 10. Looking up the entrance ramp at Akhenaten's tomb (no. 26). Photo Egypt Exploration Society 34/5, no. 26/1.

more determined attempt to find a good bed of limestone, which was successful, at least to the depth at which the cutting stopped.

The process of abandoning Amarna was relatively long drawn out (it is possible that the two main Aten temples continued in use during Horemheb's reign although the demolition of palaces had already begun). Smenkhkara's death (at the earliest in his third regnal year) must, however, have brought the Amarna royal tombs project to an abrupt end.

A further intriguing question is how many of the underground spaces were used for burials. If we consider the whole group of rock-cut tombs (a convenient but not exact figure is twenty-nine, nos 1–25 being in the northern and southern groups of tombs for officials), hardly anything has been found of burial equipment other than in the valleys where the royal tombs lay. In the case of the royal scribe Any, owner of tomb no. 23, we can be reasonably sure that he died and was buried in his tomb in view of the memorial stela left in the entrance by his colleagues. Davies saw in the completeness of the tomb of Huya (no.1) a sign that he had died and been buried within it. But nothing survived into modern times of burial equipment for either of them. Two factors would have worked against this: the likely removal of prestigious and accessible burials by relatives when the city was abandoned, and the fact that the tombs (including the royal tombs) were, at various times or continuously, open. The northern tombs were re-used by Christian monks; the South Tombs were, in later dynastic times, used for burials and also for large-scale storage which left huge quantities of pottery behind. It is no surprise that so little, mostly nothing at all, is left of any original burials made in the two groups of private rock tombs.

In the case of the royal tombs, much pottery and a considerable number of objects have been recovered by excavation, from within the original royal tomb (no. 26) and particularly from dumps that covered the ground outside, and from dumps in the south valley. Some of this material (e.g. two ostraca depicting the god Bes) and perhaps much of the pottery are likely to have been left by the workmen who made the tombs and who could have used the tomb corridors as places for shelter. But there seems to be sufficient material to suggest that the burials of Akhenaten, Meketaten and (from fragments of her sarcophagus) Queen Tiy took place within the royal tomb (26).

The dumps in the south valley also produced one kind of telltale object in several locations. These are pieces of blue or green faience, some with inwardly bevelled edges and traces of plaster on the underside. Thirty-three pieces were found in the dump outside tomb 28 (object groups 21, 23 in the Aly el-Khouly and Martin catalogue), with two more (object group 22) actually inside the tomb (in the rear room, room no. 3); four (object group 74) were found in the dump outside tomb 29, and four more (object group 88) on the bed of the wadi. Faience inlays (for this is what they are), of simple shapes, were used in the decoration of stone architecture at Amarna, but this seems an unlikely explanation for these specimens. They were also used as decorative inlays in wooden objects, often accompanied by the use of gold leaf to cover the intervening spaces. An example is the outer shrine from the tomb of Tutankhamun. Apart from faience pieces of complex outline that filled the spaces between the gold-leaf covered symbols, the border around the edges of the two door panels was a simple block pattern where each block was a rectangular inlay of turquoise-coloured faience. An appropriate explanation for the pieces found in the south valley, therefore, is that they had fallen from a large wooden object otherwise covered with gold leaf. Nothing more dramatic is required than that the item was knocked either as it was brought to the burial or as it was subsequently removed, causing it to shed some of its inlays. Another item (object no. 73) from the dump outside tomb 29 is described as: 'Lower part of a shabti coffin of wood, traces of blue on wig'; and Marc Gabolde reports the finding of five small fragments of polished red granite (from a sarcophagus?) outside tomb 29.

There is far more evidence for burials having taken place in the royal valleys than at the north and south tombs of officials. It does not necessarily follow, however, that the individuals who might have been buried in the royal tombs were necessarily those for whom the tombs were intended, excepting Akhenaten himself. Meketaten and Queen Tiy illustrate this. The Boundary Stelae present a plan for what was to be done with the three leading members of the royal family when they died (and with some of the prominent men of Amarna also, although in practice they had to compete for resources to complete their individual tombs). Otherwise, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that when other members of the royal family and household died, an *ad hoc* approach was adopted for their burials, as if no advanced preparations had been made. In the case of Meketaten she was given a rapidly converted portion of the royal tomb. Only during the reign of Rameses II was a comprehensive solution sought, in the creation of the huge communal family tomb in the Valley of the Kings that is KV5 and is estimated to contain at least 130 rooms.

The fragments of burial objects found in the south valley probably cannot take us further in identifying for whom any burial was intended, although the faience inlays, once their likely context is realised, point to burial furnishings of some grandeur. But still there can be no answer to the question, was Nefertiti for a time buried within one of the tombs, most likely the still unfinished tomb 29? If she managed to outlive Smenkhkara the answer is no.

In writing this account I have followed a simple history of succession at the end of the Amarna period, with one royal couple only between Akhenaten and Tutankhamun. I will explain my reasons in a future piece. I have relied heavily on the detailed work of Geoffrey Martin and his co-workers, Ali el-Khouly and Mark Lehner, whose published accounts are given below.

Sources

The relevant passages in the boundary Stelae are translated in W.J. Murnane, *Texts from the Amarna Period in Egypt*. Atlanta (GA), Scholars Press 1995. pp. 77–8; and W.J. Murnane and C.C. Van Siclen III, *The Boundary Stelae of Akhenaten*. London and New York, Kegan Paul International 1993, p.41.

For the tombs themselves, see G.T. Martin, *The Royal Tomb at El-Amarna*. 2 vols. London, Egypt Exploration Society 1974, 1989. The quote concerning magical bricks placed in niches is from volume II, p. 27; Aly el-Khouly

and G.T. Martin, *Excavations in the Royal Necropolis at El-Amarna 1984*. Cairo, Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'Archéologie orientale 1987.

Marc Gabolde re-excavated the royal valleys during 1999–2006. See M. Gabolde and A. Dunsmore, 'The royal necropolis at Tell el-Amarna.' *Egyptian Archaeology* 25 (2004), 30–3; M. Gabolde, 'Travaux dans la nécropole royale de Tell el-Amarna.' In J.-C. Goyon and C. Cardin, eds., *Proceedings of the 9th International Congress of Egyptologists*, Grenoble, 6–12 September 2004. Leuven, Peeters 2007. Vol. 1, pp. 763–6.

The tombs of Meryra II and of Huya are published in N. de G. Davies, *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna*. 6 vols. London, Egypt Exploration Fund 1903–08, reprinted as 3 vols 2004. Davies' quote on the style of the Smenkhkara scene in the tomb of Meryra II comes from volume II, p. 44.

I wrote this piece initially for the January 2016 issue of the *Akhetaten Sun*, the newsletter of the Amarna Research Foundation of Denver, Colorado.