

African Queens: The Unknown Voices of the Archaeological Record

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Introduction

The perspectives of Black/African women are marginalized throughout the archaeological record. To help with this gap, I analyzed 3 African Queens, Iyoba Idia of Benin, Kandake Amanishakheto of Kush, & Queen Nefertiti of Egypt and how their artifacts demonstrate their status.

Theory

Black Feminist Theory, or the methodology that combines anthropological theory, ethnohistory, oral history, material culture, Black/African descendant feminisms, critical race, & African Diaspora theories (Battle-Baptiste 2011:29) was the primary theory for this project. Other theories like gender & feminist theories exclude female & women of color perspectives. *BFM* allows the narratives of Black/African women to be brought to light. African studies was also highlighted since researchers disregard African history outside of evolution & Egypt



Figure 1.1: Commemorative Head of Queen Mother (The British Museum 2021)

Left: Metal heads were known to represent Benin monarchs exclusively. Another unique aspect of the headdress is the coral beading wrapped around the entire piece. Elite figures who wed their ties to the palace with the beads. Coral beads also symbolize royalty, authority, wealth, & prestige (Fadipe 2021)

Left & Right: The 4 marks (ikharos) serve as identity markers for sculptures depicting women & foreigners (Preston 2010). The 2 scars between her eyes allude to medicine-filled incisions that were the source of Idia's supernatural power (Bortolot 2003).



Figure 1.2: Queen Mother Pendant Mask: Iyoba (The Met 2022)

Left: The color & shape of her crown indicates that it was the female version of the Kheprsh, the blue leather war crown worn by Egyptian pharaohs (Abraham 2007:10). Due to the similarity with a crown worn by pharaohs, this implies Nefertiti's authority is the same as her male counterpart.

Nefertiti is also the only one of Akhenaten's wives to be depicted wearing a crown, indicating that she was more of a co-regent with Akhenaten, rather than another wife (Middleton 2004:875).



Figure 1.5: Bust of Queen Nefertiti (Egyptian Museum Berlin 2021)

Left: Ivory symbolizes ritual purity & is associated with Olukun, god of the sea, and the Oba's counterpart (The Met 2021). Olukun acts as the 2nd half to the Oba. It reveals that the people recognize her as an equal to Olukun & the Oba.

Right: The smiter was exclusive to the king (Abram 2007:10), but here a woman is committing the act. These scenes do not depict actual events but shows her as an ever-triumphing pharaoh (Carney & Muller 2020:38).



Figure 1.3: Close-up of Figure 4.3a - with Nefertiti smiting an enemy (Museum of Fine Arts Boston 2021)



Figure 1.6: Stela of Kandake Amanishakheto (State Museum of Egyptian Art 2021)

Left: Amanishakheto stands between the goddess Amesem and the lion god Apedemak. The iconography further suggests that the citizens perceived her as a divine ruler since Amanishakheto is the same height as Apedemak, & Amesem (Asante & Mazana 2004:302).

Her crown has 2 long, curling ram horns, reminiscent of the ram god Khnum, 2 feathered crowns of Amun, & 2 uraei (Eltze 2017:74). These elements are royal & deific icons that associate the queen wearing them with the legitimacy & power of the gods/rulers who came before (Eltze 2017:74).

Right: Depicts the god Amun, the supreme god of Nubia with the head of a ram; the ram also symbolizes power & prestige (Putnam 1994:53). In Kush culture, the public display of adornment on one's body is as an indicator of one's social status (Eltze 2017:62). Kandake Amanishakheto wearing jewelry that displays a powerful image reveals her elite standing. A tiny uraeus on top of the ram's head also displays authority because a uraeus symbolizes royalty (The Met 2022)



Figure 1.4: Shield ring with a ram's head on a wide collar, c. 200 B.C.E. Gold, Munich Ant. 2446b (State Museum of Egyptian Art, 2021)

Conclusion

Artifacts from Iyoba Idia, Kandake Amanishakheto, & Queen Nefertiti demonstrate the power these queens held during their reigns. From the analysis of these items and their design choices, including choice of material, and added symbols, it is unmistakable that these artifacts illustrate that these queens had tremendous authority and were more than the wives of pharaohs and kings. However, due to the marginalization of Black/African women's perspectives throughout archaeological and historical research, their stories get lost, which is why Black Feminist Theory and African studies are important to allow the narratives of African history and Black/African women to be seen.