

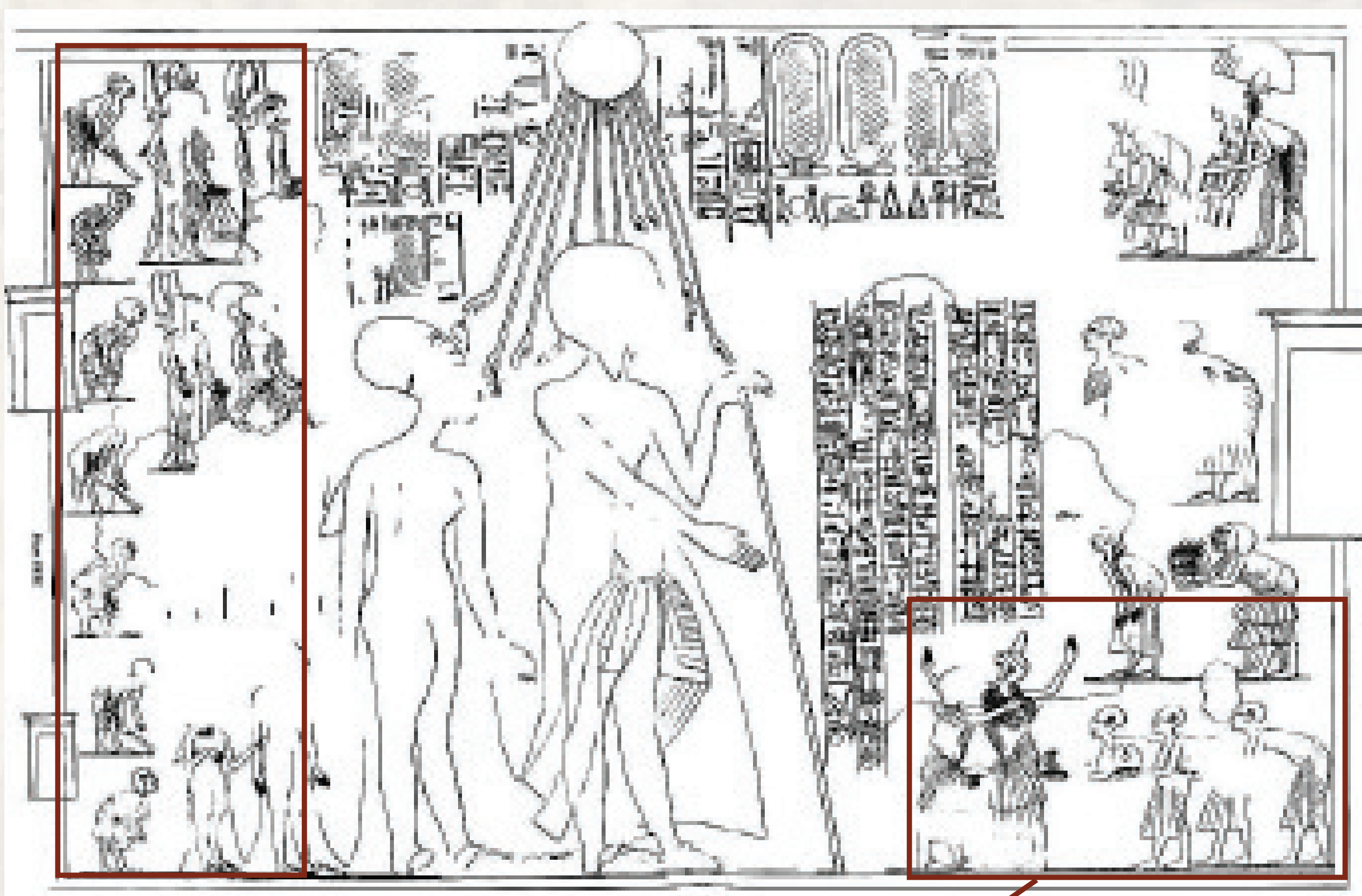


Representation or Reality?

Comparing depictions in the tomb of Meryra to non-elite skeletal remains in the South Tombs Cemetery: Tel el-Amarna.

Introduction

The ancient city known as Tel el-Amarna was occupied during the reign of heretic Pharaoh, Akhenaten. He reformed the ancient Egyptian belief system from a monotheistic one to a polytheistic religion in favour of the new God 'Aten'. In examining artistic material evidence remaining at Amarna, it is possible to see why many academics initially considered Amarna to be a 'utopia', a city where all members of society were celebrated and treated well. However, the excavation reports from the South Tombs Cemetery suggest a darker side to this idealized image (1).



Figures 1 & 2 - 'Meryra rewarded' situated on the East part of North wall (lower register).

Hypothesis

In considering both data sets, tomb reliefs and skeletal remains, it is possible to construe that the reliefs in the tomb of Meryra are unrealistic representations of the citizens buried in the South Tombs Cemetery at Tel el-Amarna.

Data Set 1: The Depictions

The tomb of Meryra (High Priest of the Aten) is rich in reliefs that illustrate the societal groups within Amarna during the 18th Dynasty. These are; the royals, nobles/ officials, scribes and commoners. The scene 'Meryra rewarded' shows the royal couple as the central figures being considerably larger in proportion than the distinguished Meryra (see figs.1 & 2). On the right, the courtiers are also depicted smaller but equally well nourished. The servants to the left – again smaller than the courtiers according to their status as lower elite and lesser social rank – bow their backs to demonstrate their being subordinate to king and courtiers. Their curved backs are expression of subservience and not ill health as shown by evidence of fatty tissue deposited around their midsection and being appropriately clothed (2).

Data Set 2: The Skeletal Remains

Excavations of the South Tombs Cemetery unearthed the missing fraction of Amarna society: the commoners. Although there had been considerable disruption to the area because of extensive, flooding and tomb robbing, what remains of the skeletal remains has proved useful in examining the realities of the the realities of this 'utopia' (3). For example, the skeletal remains of five males each display evidence of trauma to at least one of their scapula (see table 1). It is therefore likely that the reoccurrence of this injury was inflicted as a form of punishment both because of the positioning and size of the injury and because such a wound would have enabled the individual to continue with his work shortly after. This evidence therefore suggests that the treatment of this societal group was poor, contrasting to the representations in the tomb relief 'Meryra rewarded' (4).

Gender	Age Bracket (Approx.)	Injury Sustained
Male	40>	Right Scapular
	35-45	Left Scapular
	35-50	
	35-60	
	30-60	Right Scapular

Table 1 (above) - Information regarding the five males who had sustained trauma to at least one of their scapula.

Overview

In comparing 'Meryra rewarded' with the skeletal remains of the South Tombs Cemetery is possible to deduce that the representations of the Amarna commoners are unrealistic as the reality of the remains are starkly different.

References

- (1) Kemp, B. (1989). *Anatomy of a Civilization*. New York: Routledge.
(2) Osiris.net. 2006. Meryra: Tomb No.4, North Group. Available from: http://www.osirisnet.net/e_centrale.htm [Accessed on 29th October 2015]
(3) The Amarna Project. 2000. South Tombs Cemetery: Background. Available /recent_projects/excavation/south_tombs_cemetery/index.shtml [Accessed on 29th October 2015]
(4) Watson, T. 2015. News Network Archaeology: Spear Injuries Show Worker Life in Ancient Egypt. Available from: <http://10/spear-injuries-show-worker-life-in.html#.VorB4jZdKki> [Accessed on 5th December 2015]