

**“Were the Ancient Egyptians Black or White?”**  
**By Frank Yurco (BAR magazine, Sept./Oct. 1989)**

A recent letter to the editor in BAR (May/June, p. 18) objected to an advertisement for a doll of Queen Nefertiti that portrayed her as white-skinned. According to the letter writer, Nefertiti was "a beautiful black Egyptian Queen." Moreover, "The Egyptians are a black race of people," the reader asserted. . .

Queen Nefertiti was the principal wife of Pharaoh Akhenaten (1350-1334 B.C.E.) the famous heretic pharaoh who some claim held monotheistic beliefs. The doll advertised in BAR was, at least in part, based on the well-known head of Nefertiti in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin. There she is depicted with a blue, caplike crown and with light-colored skin. The color on the statue head is ancient, as originally applied by the sculptor in whose studio the head was excavated. So this is how Nefertiti was actually represented in ancient times.

Was Nefertiti "black" or "white"?

The ancient Egyptians did not think in these terms.

The whole matter of black or white Egyptians is a chimera, cultural baggage from our own society that can only be imposed artificially on ancient Egyptian society. The ancient Egyptians, like their modern descendants, were of varying complexions of color, from the light Mediterranean type (like Nefertiti), to the light brown of Middle Egypt, to the darker brown of Upper Egypt, to the darkest shade around Aswan and the First Cataract region, where even today, the population shifts to Nubian.

Ancient and modern Egyptian hair ranges from straight to wavy to woolly; in color, it varies from reddish brown to dark brown to black. Lips range thin to full. Many Egyptians possess a protrusive jaw. Noses vary from high-bridged—straight to arched or even hooked—to flat-bridged, with bulbous to broad nostrils. In short, ancient Egypt, like modern Egypt, consisted of a very heterogeneous population.

The evidence regarding these features of ancient Egyptians comes from literature, anthropology, mummies, sculptures, paintings and inscriptions—all left by the ancient Egyptians themselves.

For example, the mummies and skeletons of ancient Egyptians indicate they were Africans of the Afro-Asiatic ethnic grouping (the term “Afro-Asiatic” has displaced the less accurate designation “Hamitic”). This is the population of northern Africa, the Shara and sub-Sahara regions. Their physical features vary as described above. No doubt, many darker-colored Egyptians would be called black in our modern race conscious terminology.

Unfortunately, we don’t have Nefertiti’s mummy. But we do have the mummy of Pharaoh Rameses II who reigned from 1279 to 1212 B.C.E. He is a typical northern Egyptian; he came from the northeasternmost nome (governate) of Egypt. He had fine, wavy hair, a prominent hooked nose and moderately thin lips.

This mummy may be contrasted with the mummy of Sequen-Re Tao, who died on the battlefield about 1580 B.C.E. He was from Thebes, much farther south. He had tightly curled, woolly hair, a slight build and strongly Nubian features. Incidentally, he was an ancestor of Nefertiti, although quite distantly related.

Closer to Nefertiti is the mummy of Thutmose IV, who reigned from 1419 to 1386 B.C.E. He had wavy hair and Egypto-Nubian facial features.

The mummy of Yuya, probably Nefertiti’s grandfather, is dramatically well preserved; we can see his high-bridged nose, thin lips and straight hair (now turned reddish blond, perhaps from the patron used in mummification). Thuya, probably Nefertiti's grandmother, had more regular Egyptian features, wavy reddish blond hair, an aquiline nose and fuller lips. Yuya and Thuya were Queen Tiy's parents and Queen Tiy was probably Nefertiti's aunt. Queen Tiy's mummy, recently so identified, has long, wavy brown hair, a high-bridged, arched nose and moderately thin lips, much like her father Yuya. In short, Nefertiti's ancestors seem to be a disparate group.

It is true that the Egyptians regularly distinguished themselves from foreigners living around them. But they did so in political terms, not in racial terms. Foreigners were labeled by their regional or political names, and were depicted with distinctive features and dress.

Nubians, Kushites and, during the New Kingdom (c. 1570-1085 B.C.E.), Central Africans are all shown with realistic negroid features and distinctive dress. Asiatics were also depicted realistically in the New Kingdom Mitanni with blond hair, blue eyes and Caucasoid features; Syro-Palestinians with dark hair, brown complexions and Semitic features. Even Minoans appear in New Kingdom tomb

paintings with olive complexions, dark hair carefully styled and narrow waists-very similar to the way they are depicted in Minoan paintings in Crete itself. All these details show that the Egyptian painters and sculptors were careful observers, and all these foreigners are quite distinct from the Egyptians.

Among the foreigners, the Nubians were closest ethnically to the Egyptians. In the late predynastic period (c. 3700-3150 B.C.E.), the Nubians shared the same culture as the Egyptians and even evolved the same pharaonic political structure. The Libyans were also closely related to the Egyptians, living in the oases west of Egypt; ethnically the Libyans were Berbers. In the historic periods, both Nubians and Libyans readily moved into Egypt and were integrated into the Egyptian populace.

During the Middle Kingdom (c. 2020-1786 B.C.E.), many Semitic peoples were brought to, or settled in, Egypt. In the New Kingdom period (c. 1570-1085 B.C.E.), many other foreign groups found Egypt hospitable. Many came as a result of military operations. Sea Peoples (of Aegean and northern Mediterranean origin) captured in warring operations were conscripted into the Egyptian army, and later, upon retirement, were settled as veterans onto Egyptian farms granted by the pharaoh as bonuses; many of these Sea People warriors married Egyptian women and in the next generation produced mixed Egypto-Sea People children. Nubians and Libyans also served in Egypt's army and upon retirement received farms as bonuses, and they likewise married Egyptian women and produced mixed children. At least in part, such reception and free intermingling of foreign and Egyptian populations must have added to the heterogeneous nature of the Egyptian populace. Nubians as mercenaries in Egyptian armies are documented pictorially and in inscriptions from the First Intermediate period (c. 2230-2020 B.C.E.), from the Middle Kingdom (2020-1786 B.C.E.) and from the New Kingdom.

In the post-New Kingdom period (1085-712 B.C.E.), large contingents of Libyans, many with families, settled in Egypt; many joined the military classes, and some even rose in rank to become the pharaohs of the XXII<sup>nd</sup>, XXIII<sup>rd</sup> and XXIV<sup>th</sup> Dynasties.

When members of the royal family were descended from such foreign populations or from border areas, pharaonic sculpture and reliefs clearly display their ethnic features. For example, the XII<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (1991-1786 B.C.E.) originated from the Aswan region.<sup>4</sup> As expected, strong Nubian features and dark coloring are seen in their sculpture and relief work. This dynasty ranks as among the greatest, whose fame far outlived its actual tenure on the throne. Especially interesting, it was a member of this dynasty- that decreed that no Nubian (riverine Nubian of the principality of Kush), except such as came for trade or diplomatic reasons, should pass by the Egyptian fortress at the southern end of the Second Nile Cataract. Why would this royal family of Nubian ancestry ban other Nubians from coming into Egyptian territory? Because the Egyptian rulers of Nubian ancestry had become Egyptians culturally; as pharaohs, they exhibited typical Egyptian attitudes and adopted typical Egyptian policies.

A few hundred years later, in the XVII<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (c. 1600-1580 B.C.E.), the princes of Thebes, welcomed the Medjay Nubians as allies when the Thebans sought to overthrow their Hyksos (Hurrian-Semitic) overlords, who ruled from Avaris in the northeastern Delta (c. 1674-1566 B.C.E.). The loyal service of the Medjay Nubians was not soon forgotten; many of them settled in Egypt, and some later became the police of the New Kingdom. Thutmose III even granted burial in the royal Valley of the Kings itself to a Nubian who had been his fellow soldier and friend.

As these examples illustrate, Egypt's relations with its neighbors were based upon political concerns; ethnicity had only a coincidental, secondary role, and from all the evidence extant, the Egyptians were not race conscious. Even enemies who fought them were conscripted into the army and thereby integrated into Egyptian society, regardless of their ethnic background.

In utilizing Egyptian reliefs and paintings to assess ethnicity and racial- characteristics, a cautionary note is in order. In the Old Kingdom period (c. 2755-2230 B.C.E.), artistic canons governed the color for people shown in statuary, relief work and painting. Reddish brown was used for men, yellowish white for women. The famous Rahotep-Nofret couple statues (see photo, opposite) from Dahshur, from early IV<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (c. 2680-2544 B.C.E.), are typical of this convention. Their features, however, are typically Egyptian; one might see someone with Rahotep's features, or someone like Nofret, walking in the streets of modern Cairo. In 1860, when Auguste Mariette's local fellahin diggers at Saqqara uncovered the lifelike wooden statue of Kaaper, a V<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (c. 2544-2407 B.C.E.) nobleman, they excitedly exclaimed that this was their Sheikh el-Beled (village headman), the statue's features so much resembled their own village headman at the time.

By the Middle Kingdom, and more certainly in the New Kingdom, the color strictures of this artistic canon partly gave way. Often in these periods, people were depicted with their actual skin color, men and women alike, and with distinctive facial features. Not surprisingly, most tomb owners in the Theban New Kingdom necropolis are depicted with brown complexions, as we see among their modern-day descendants. Foreigners in this period are depicted realistically, in both features and complexion.

In summary, the peoples of the Nile Valley present a continuum, from the lighter northern Egyptians to the browner Upper Egyptians to the still browner Nubians and Kushites and to the ultra-dark brown Nilotic peoples. Millennia of slow, gradual intermingling with

neighboring populations of Nubians and Libyans, and from time to time with foreigners from more distant areas, created this population. In addition, there has been some mingling with Bedouin populations of the desert regions.

Some modern Afro-Americans, particularly those with mixed racial ancestry, will find that they look like some ancient (and modern) Egyptians. Should they travel to Egypt, they may find that in terms of their complexion they resemble people of a particular region of Egypt. This is no accident; there has been racial or ethnic intermingling in both instances. For the Afro-American, it has been relatively recent in Egypt it has been a slow process lasting thousands of years, as far back into prehistory as can be gauged.

In their ability to ignore race and absorb foreigners, ancient Egyptians outshine our own achievements and should serve as our model. They also surpassed us in providing legal and social equality for women, guaranteed by "the Law of Pharaoh." How then can we be so presumptuous as to assign our primitive racial labels onto so wonderful a culture.

### **Reading Questions**

1. Explain what Y means by the following quote: "The whole matter of black and white Egyptians is a chimera, cultural baggage from our society that can only be imposed artificially on ancient Egyptian society."
2. What color, according to Y, were the Egyptians?
3. How and why did the Egyptians "distinguish" themselves from other groups of foreigners?
4. Which group of foreigners were the closest "ethnically" to the Egyptians and why?
5. How were the "Sea Peoples" assimilated by the Egyptians?
6. Give some reasons why Y argues that the Egyptians were a "heterogeneous" group/society.
7. Why can't you use Egyptian relief's (sculptures, etc) and tomb paintings to determine their color?
8. Define "ethnicity" and how does Y deal with it in the article?
9. What is Y's conclusion regarding the color of the Egyptians?
10. Given the evidence presented, does Y make a convincing case for his argument? Do you agree or not? Why or why not?