

Written records from the Thinite period Interpretations and comments on selected examples

Part 2

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3 Other selected product labels

In Part 1 of this paper, I discussed product labels from the tomb of King Scorpion I and the Narmer Palette. In this second part, I will continue with additional examples of product labels from the Thinite period.

The statements under the heading "Hypothesis(es)" are my own speculative considerations,² unless they have a cited source.

3.1 Product labels from the tomb of King Scorpion I

The following three labels again come from the tomb of King Scorpion I at Abydos (Umm el-Qaab, Tomb U-j, c. 3150 BCE). This tomb yielded many such small labels, which are considered the earliest evidence of writing in Egypt.

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² I was not aware of any previously published opinions that coincide with my hypotheses.

3.1.1



These four labels depict a bird on an object that is either triangular or semicircular. This motif appears on a total of 16 labels from the tomb of U-j.³ The horizontal stripes on the tail feathers of the bird on two labels reveal that the bird is supposed to be a falcon.⁴ Rather than sitting upright, it stands ready to fly in a horizontal posture, as was customary in the Predynastic Period. The triangle is the upper part of a standard 𓆎 (R92). The semicircular variant on the far right is the sign 𓆏 (fan or sunshade [S36]), which replaced the standard as a symbol of sovereignty in certain toponyms and nome symbols.⁵ In front of the bird are two lines and a circular area (𓆑).

Since the standard was reserved for the gods, the bird cannot represent an Egyptian king named "Falcon," which G. Dreyer (1998) has postulated.⁶ Dreyer's interpretation of the circular area was that it was an archaic form of the sign 𓆑 (area with crossroads? [O49]). Accordingly, the sign group 𓆑 should be read as 𓆑 *t3.wj*, meaning "the Two Lands" (Upper and Lower Egypt).⁷

Hypotheses:

- 3.1.1-a The bird motif on the labels is reminiscent of the later symbol 𓆏 for the Third Lower Egyptian nome, located in the northwestern delta ("West Nome"). However, I doubt that the god Horus was worshiped in Lower Egypt during the time of King Scorpion I.⁸ A more appropriate clue is provided by a Third Dynasty evidence for the sign 𓆑 [G5+S36+O21], which was used as the nisba adjective *nhn.j* "belonging to *Nekhen*."⁹ *Nekhen* (Hierakonpolis, which means

³ Ref 1, p 127 (labels nos. 111–126).

⁴ Ref 1, pp 126–128; Ref 2, p 1747. However, the identification of the birds as falcons is not without controversy (cf. Ref 3, p 22 [with note 43]).

⁵ Compare the Early Dynastic variants of the signs in Ref 4, pp 535, 704, 888.

⁶ Ref 1, p 178.

⁷ Ref 1, p 172.

⁸ See the „afterthought“ on pages 15–16.

⁹ Ref 4, p 887.

"City of the Falcon") was the capital city of the proto-nome from which the Third Upper Egyptian nome emerged. It was a very important cult site of Horus during the Zero and First Dynasties.

- 3.1.1-b In later texts, the phonogram  (two strips of land [N19]) had the phonetic value *ḥtj*.¹⁰ On a label from the time of King Den,¹¹ the sign  is followed by the sign  (pestle [U33]), which has the phonetic value *tj*. Thus, the phonetic value *ḥtj* is confirmed also for the Thinite period. The phonetic value reflects the image of the sign because *ḥ.tj* it is the dual of the word *ḥ.t* "fertile land." The circular area is the sign  [Aa1], which represents the consonant *h* and also occurs as  without crossbars.¹² It serves as a phonetic complement, as in , the later spelling of *ḥ.t* "fertile land."¹³ The group  may therefore be read as  *ḥ.tj*, which can be translated as "double fertile land." It may refer to an agricultural area stretching on both sides of a navigable Nile branch.
- 3.1.1-c Alternatively, the circular area could be the sign  (sun [N5]) used as a classifier (take a closer look at the label on the far right). In this case,  may be interpreted as the nisba adjective *ḥt.j* "belonging to the inundation season," and could have served as either a tax note or an additional information about a commodity delivered more than once a year. This nisba adjective was later spelled  because  became the ideogram for the inundation season (*ḥ.t*).¹⁴

¹⁰ Ref 5, p 1455.

¹¹ British Museum EA 32650.

¹² Ref 6, p 450.

¹³ Ref 5, p 12 (398). The word *ḥ.t* is highly ambiguous.

¹⁴ Ref 5, p 12 (49221). Hypotheses 3.1.1-a and 3.1.1-b are based on the same word root: *ḥ.t*, which can mean either "fertile land" or "flood season," depending on the spelling. The flood season was responsible for the fertile mud in the fields. The sign  [N18] is the basic form of  [N19] and  [M8].

3.1.2



This label depicts a bird, a circular area, and two lines (𓏏). The bird with a long, slightly concave beak most closely resembles the sign 𓏏 (stork [G29]). G. Dreyer (1998) interpreted it as the royal symbol of a hypothetical king named "Stork."¹⁵ L. D. Morenz interpreted it as an ideogram for the cow-headed goddess *Bꜣ.t* (Bat) or her shrine, because it occurs alongside a cow's head on a bowl from Hierakonpolis.¹⁶ There is no known nome symbol with a stork.

Hypothesis:

As with the previously discussed label bearing the inscription 𓏏 𓏏 *bꜣ-st* (the city of *Bast/Bubastis*),¹⁷ the sign 𓏏 on the present label is also to be regarded as a phonogram with the phonetic value *bꜣ*. Among other things, it served as a lexeme with the basic meaning of "rural district." In this function, it appears in words such as 𓏏 𓏏 *bꜣ-st* (literally: "district of the seat [of the chief]"; 𓏏 𓏏 *bꜣ mr* ("pyramid district"); *bꜣ.w dšr.t* ("red districts," a desert area); 𓏏 𓏏 *bꜣy.t* ("wetland"); 𓏏 𓏏 *bꜣ.t* ("bushland, steppe"); and 𓏏 𓏏 *bꜣ jmn-m-hꜣt* ("manor of King Amenemhet").¹⁸ Predynastic seal impressions and rock inscriptions found on the west coast of the Gulf of Suez (modern-day Ayn Sukhna, about 120 kilometers southeast of Cairo) attest to the toponym 𓏏 or 𓏏 𓏏 *bꜣ.t* in connection with mines.¹⁹ Ayn Sukhna was an important port for shipping to and from the mines on the southern Sinai Peninsula.²⁰ In any case, the label contains a geographical indication that I translate as "Ba district" due to a lack of more precise information. Assuming the group 𓏏 was mistakenly engraved upside down, it would be either 𓏏 or

¹⁵ Ref 1, pp 176–178.

¹⁶ Ref 7, pp 186, 193 (addendum). The Egyptian name of the Seventh Upper Egyptian nome, *bꜣ.t*, also refers to the goddess Bat (Ref 5, p 1213 [41329]). The nome symbol was a sistrum adorned with a cow's head.

¹⁷ See part 1 of this work, label 2.1.1.

¹⁸ Ref 5, p 1134 (41331–41334); Ref 8, p 130, 133; Ref 9, CT I 256c.

¹⁹ Ref 8, pp 132–133; Ref 10, vol 3, pl 42 (no. 145).

²⁰ Ref 11, pp 125–131; Ref 12, pp 148–151.

𓏏, as discussed in the hypotheses for label 3.1.1. Thus, the inscription would read either 𓏏𓏏 *b3 3h.tj* "Ba district of the double fertile land," or 𓏏𓏏𓏏 *b3 3ht.j* "Ba district, [levy/produce] belonging to the inundation season."

3.2 A product label from the reign of King Aha

In the First Dynasty, product labels became more complex. The king is depicted in warlike scenes known as eponymous events. The king's name appears in a *serekh*. These depictions are believed to be "year labels" indicating the year of the king's reign, which makes sense for wine and perishable goods.²¹ Naturally, such labels had to be larger than those of the Predynastic Period. The following label is from the time of King Aha, who is considered either the first or second king of the First Dynasty.²²



Product label from the reign of King Aha, front, Dyn. 1, 3000–2800 BCE, ebony, length 9.5 cm, width 7.0 cm, from Abydos, Penn Museum E9396.

3.2.1 Scenes

The front of this label is divided into four registers. Essentially, the damaged top register shows the *serekh* of King Aha and a cult complex of the goddess Neith.²³

In the third register from the bottom, a man is running toward a charging wild bull, his cloak billowing. He has just thrown a net at the bull. On the right edge is a Lower Egyptian sanctuary (*pr-nw*) with a heron standing on top.

²¹ W. Fritschy (2021) argued that the events depicted should not be specified to a particular regnal year, but rather to the entire reign of the respective king (Ref 13). She coined the term "regnal labels" (Ref 13, p 213).

²² This depends on whether his predecessor, King Narmer, is counted as belonging to the Predynastic Period or the First Dynasty.

²³ Ref 4, p 660.

The second register from the bottom features three boats and four city symbols. The lowest register is occupied by a hieroglyphic inscription.

The manufacturer of the label has used hatching or crosshatching to depicted various regular patterns: the mud brick floors of the sanctuaries, the buildings (post-and-wattle or mud brick walls), the slightly bumpy running surface of the bull (sand?), the king's robe and cloak (fur or fabric), the fishing net, the water surface, the boats made of reeds or papyrus, and the lion's fur in the hieroglyph  [F4]. Traces of color pigments were found in the incised lines.²⁴ Fragments of a second label with virtually identical scenes were found.²⁵

3.2.2 Details und hieroglyphic inscriptions

3.2.2.1



Early *serekhs* had a concave upper border, which only became straight under King Djet. During King Aha's reign, the Horus falcon was playfully incorporated into the spelling of the royal Horus name. The falcon's legs extend into the writing space, forming the arms of the sign  (arms holding a mace and shield [D34A], phonetic value *ḥ*). This sign was used to write the king's name "Aha". For clarity, see the pottery fragment in the photo on the right.²⁶

3.2.2.2



Despite the top part being broken off, the symbol next to the *serekh* is recognizable as

²⁴ Ref 14.

²⁵ British Museum EA35518 (Ref 15, p 11, fig 6; Ref 16, Aha 4).

²⁶ British Museum EA38010.

hieroglyph  (three fox skins? [F31], phonetic value *ms*). The hieroglyph appears on several labels from the Thinite period. Schott (1951) read it as *ms(j).t*, the infinitive of the verb *msj*. He translated this verb as “to construct.”²⁷ According to this interpretation, Aha had the Neith shrine built. However, the verb *msj* almost exclusively occurs in connection with giving birth, rebirth, procreation, and creation through divine action. Other scholars assumed that the sign  referred to the festive founding of a city or cult complex (   *msy.t* “festival”).²⁸

3.2.2.3



The sign  is followed by a pole on which a large bird with a long neck and legs is impaled. Its head hangs limply down. Compare this to the hieroglyph  [G84]. To the right of the pole is an object shaped like a ladder.

3.2.2.4



The cult complex dedicated to the goddess *Nt* (Neith) consists of a paved area with two flagpoles (poles wrapped in strips of cloth²⁹), another pole bearing the emblem  of the

²⁷ S. Schott justified his translation as “to construct” with inscriptions related to the mouth-opening ritual on statues (Ref 2, p 1734). However, in the context of this ritual, the sign's intended meaning was “to bring to life”.

²⁸ Cf. Ref 13, p 217; Ref 15, p 27.

²⁹ Ref 6, p 442. They are the model for the ideogram [R8] for *ntr* “god.”

goddess,³⁰ and a so-called *pr-wr* sanctuary. Neith was one of the oldest mother goddesses in Egypt and was associated with hunting or war.³¹ The *pr-wr* sanctuary ("house of the Great") was a sacred structure with a vaulted roof that was likely modeled after an elephant's back.³² Its hieroglyph,  [O326], appears already on Predynastic labels.³³ As mentioned above, S. Schott (1951) interpreted this scene as depicting King Aha founding the cult complex.³⁴

Hypotheses regarding the top register:

Top reg.-a: The impaled bird is probably a heron. A heron-shaped deity named *db^cw.tj* (Djebawti) was the patron god of the city of Buto in the Delta, modern Tell el-Fara'in, whose temple district was called *db^cw.t* ("The Sealed").³⁵ Prior to the unification of Egypt, Buto was a chiefdom or small kingdom and a rival of the Upper Egyptian kingdom, although Upper Egyptian cultural influences have been documented there since Naqada IIC/D.³⁶ The impaled heron may symbolize the defeated city of Buto.

Top reg.-b: The cult complex for the goddess Neith refers to the city of Memphis, where this goddess had a shrine and was worshiped for her protective power.³⁷ I disagree with the common view that the cult complex refers to the Lower Egyptian city of Sais (modern Sa al-Hagar).³⁸ Neith was an Upper Egyptian goddess. The oldest evidence of her symbols, as well as the Red Crown, which she often wears in her representations, originates from the Upper Egyptian Naqada I/II culture.³⁹ R. Schlichting (1982)

³⁰ The emblem of the goddess Neith shows a sausage-shaped object with two crossed arrows tied to it with a ribbon. Neith herself was depicted with the hieroglyph  [R24] on her head. It probably represents two hunting bows tied together (Ref 4, pp 684, 686-687; Ref 6, p 442).

³¹ Ref 17.

³² The protrusions sticking out from the front are tusks. Some researchers argue that it is more likely a male hippopotamus.

³³ The variant  [O19] is also found (Ref 1, pp 122 [nos. 61-69], 633; Ref 4, p 3). The younger forms of the hieroglyph,  [O18] or  [O18A]) served as general ideograms for an Upper Egyptian shrine (Ref 18, pp 934-935).

³⁴ Ref 2, p 1735.

³⁵ Ref 2, p 21; Ref 5, p 1209 (43008); Ref 19, pp 110-112; Ref 20, pp 138-139.

³⁶ Ref 2, pp 1727-1728; Ref 21, pp 102-104. It was assumed that the district of Buto was temporarily ruled by a Libyan chieftain.

³⁷ The cult complex of Neith in Memphis may have existed as early as the Predynastic Period. Two vessels from Helwan, the necropolis on the east bank of the Nile near Memphis, bear the name of a predynastic king named "Ni-Neith," meaning "He, who belongs to Neith" (Ref 22, p 57, fig 2).

³⁸ E.g., Ref 23, p 291; Ref 24, p 47; Ref 25, p 20.

³⁹ Ref 4, p 151; Ref 22, p 57; Ref 26; Ref 27, p 47, fig 8.

identified Neith (*Nt*) with Naunet, the female counterpart of the primordial god Nu(n) in the Ogdoad of Hermopolis.⁴⁰ In my opinion, the earliest that a cult site for the goddess Neith could have arisen in Sais was in the middle First Dynasty.⁴¹

According to the ancient Egyptians' understanding of perspective, the structure above the cult complex is behind it. Its base resembles the surface of the water in the second register from the bottom. The curved, pointed objects on it resemble two boats sailing side by side with fishing nets thrown out in front of their prows. This may be an allusion to one of Neith's epithets: "Daughter of the Nile."⁴²

Top reg.-c: Apparently, the sign  [F31] did not have a uniform meaning on Early Dynastic labels. In a few cases, it seems to abbreviate the verb  ( ) *mz* "to bring," as seen on a label belonging to King Djer.⁴³ Applied to the label discussed here, this would mean that King Aha is presenting the deceased heron, the symbol of victory over the city of Buto, to the goddess Neith. While this interpretation cannot be completely ruled out, I argue that the sign  here stands for the participle of the verb   *msj*, "born," which can also be nominalized as *ms.w*, "the born" or "son."⁴⁴ The entire top register can therefore be understood as a heading:

Hr.w ^c*h* *ms(.w)* *Nt*

„Horus Aha, born of Neith“ (or: „Son of Neith“)

Neith was an ancient Upper Egyptian goddess of creation and motherhood, as well as the patron goddess of the king. Therefore, the king's epithet as "Son of Neith" could be considered an early version of the royal title "Son of Re," introduced in the Fourth Dynasty.⁴⁵ On another label of King Aha, the sign  appears alongside a standard of the god Horus pointing away from the king.⁴⁶ There, Aha is "Son of Horus" or "begotten

⁴⁰ Ref 28, p 393. Inscriptions in the Temple of Esna support the view that Neith was originally a primordial goddess because they state that she was the first to bring land out of the Nun.

⁴¹ Cf. Ref 24, p 61.

⁴² Ref 29; Ref 30, p 33.

⁴³ Cairo JE 70114 (cf. Ref 15, p 12, fig 7; Ref 16, Djer 2); *ms (mz)* „to bring forth, to present“ (Ref 5, p 381 [13754, 13755, 13767]).

⁴⁴ The abbreviation  is well established for the verb *msj* (Ref 5, pp 381–382).

⁴⁵ Neith was incorporated into the theology of Re as "She, who gave birth to Re" or the "Divine Mother of Re" (Ref 24, pp 60–63).

⁴⁶ Cairo JE 34907-8 (Ref 15, p 7, fig 2; Ref 16, Aha 2). Also compare the label Cairo JE 34907, where the sign  appears before a city symbol containing the standard of Horus (Ref 15, p 28, fig. 22; Ref 16,

by Horus," not someone who brings a Horus standard nor someone who makes a Horus standard (as Schott's translation of the sign  would suggest⁴⁷). Aha's tomb or cenotaph in the north of Saqqara, the royal necropolis of Memphis, suggests a close connection between him and Memphis.⁴⁸ If King Narmer, Aha's presumed predecessor, was responsible for moving the royal residence from Thinis to Memphis,⁴⁹ Aha may have been born there. In that case, he would also be a "Son of Memphis."

3.2.2.5



The bullfighter in the third register from the bottom is depicted as a stick figure without hands or feet. He wears an elongated headdress that may be a headscarf or a war crown,⁵⁰ as well as a short kilt and a cloak. There is a hieroglyphic inscription behind him.

This figure has been interpreted as a magician or Sem priest who captures a bull-shaped Lower Egyptian god.⁵¹ The lettering behind the figure has been read as *sm zp 4* meaning "Sem priest, four times."⁵²

Hypothesis:

The figure is King Aha. The two signs behind the king's head are the   *njsw.t-bj.t* title.⁵³ More specifically, it is the title, but lacks the  hieroglyphs beneath the two elements. The forms  or  have been observed several times during the Thinite period.⁵⁴ The bee

Aha 5).

⁴⁷ See note 27; Ref 2, pp 1734–1735.

⁴⁸ The royal necropolis of the First and Second Dynasties was located in Abydos (Umm el-Qaab). In the north of Saqqara, there are additional royal mastabas attributed to kings of the First Dynasty based on inscribed artifacts, including the mastaba No. 3357 of King Aha. However, some scholars theorize that these tombs belonged to officials, who were buried near the administrative center of Memphis (Ref 31, pp 72-73).

⁴⁹ Ref 32, p 75.

⁵⁰ It lacks the typical form of the White Crown of Upper Egypt.

⁵¹ Ref 67, pp 95, 96.

⁵² Ref 67, p 96, fig 19.

⁵³ I stick with *njsw.t-bj.t*, although recently the transcriptions *nzw-bj.t*, *nzw-bjt.j*, or *swt.j-bjt.j* have been given preference.

⁵⁴ Ref 4, p 57.

(𓀀 [L2], phonetic value *bjt*) facing left is clearly recognizable by its wings, long antennae, and legs. However, the sign beneath it bears little resemblance to the sedge hieroglyph, 𓀁 ([M23], phonetic value *sw*) or 𓀂 (*sw.t*), which is expected there.⁵⁵ Another plant sign, such as 𓀃 (M3 in a vertical position) or 𓀄 (M3C), might have been used instead during the early First Dynasty.

Behind the back of the king, the billowing cloak overlaps with the sign 𓀅 (basket [V30], phonetic value *nb*), which always has a wickerwork pattern in detailed elaboration.⁵⁶ Below that is the sign 𓀆 (piece of jasper [O48]), an ideogram for the city of *Nekhen* (Hierakonpolis).⁵⁷ Next to it are four short strokes representing the number four.

Therefore, the caption behind the king reads:

𓀁𓀀𓀅𓀆𓀇𓀇𓀇𓀇 *njsw.t-bj.t nb nhn 4* „The King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of *Nekhen*, [regnal year] 4.“

Until now, King Den was considered the earliest bearer of the *njsw.t-bj.t* title.⁵⁸

3.2.2.6



The bull approaches from the direction of a so-called *pr-nw* sanctuary. It is a Lower Egyptian shrine and the model for the hieroglyph 𓀈 [O20]. Similar to the Upper Egyptian *pr-wr* sanctuary, it was a post-and-wattle structure with a vaulted roof, but it had distinctive corner posts that protruded above the roof. A *pr-nw* sanctuary with a heron standing on the roof represents the temple district of the Lower Egyptian city of Buto, called *db^cw.t*.⁵⁹ The sign in front of it is probably 𓀉 (loaf of bread [X1]) for the

⁵⁵ The top curve to the left is very short and barely visible. The typical double leaf arrangement is also not recognizable.

⁵⁶ Ref 39, sign V30.

⁵⁷ Ref 6, p 441.

⁵⁸ Ref 33, p 283.

⁵⁹ Ref 34, pp 266–267. Until the Late Period, the divine heron on a fan remained the classifier of the temple district of Buto, 𓀈𓀉𓀈 *db^c(w).t* (Ref 5, p 1209 [43008]).

consonant *t*.

Hypothesis:

Capturing a wild bull was a dare that kings recounted proudly.⁶⁰ However, the bullfighting scene on this label is probably allegorical. In ancient Egypt, the bull always embodied strength, whether divine, worldly, or natural.⁶¹ Here, the bull may represent the military strength of an attacking force from the chieftom of Buto. The image of King Aha with the throwing net symbolizes his role as a military leader who bravely confronts and captures enemy warriors. I believe the sign \ominus (*t*) in front of the *pr-nw* sanctuary means *t*³ "land." Together, they can be read as *t*³ *db^cwt.j* "land of Djebawti" (land of the heron god of Buto).

3.2.2.7



The boats in the second register from the bottom are Egyptian riverboats, identifiable by their stern ends that rise higher than their prows.⁶² The city symbol on the left depicts a long-legged bird. A similar bird with short crest feathers appears on the so-called "City Palette", a ceremonial cosmetic palette from around 3000 BCE.⁶³ G. Dreyer (1998) interpreted it as a heron.⁶⁴ The middle city symbol encloses two hieroglyphs: \square (stool or mat [Q3], phonetic value *p*), which has a woven pattern in detailed elaboration,⁶⁵ plus a long, rectangular sign. The two oval city symbols⁶⁶ on the right are empty, but each is accompanied by the sign \searrow (hoe [U6], phonetic value *mr*). This may indicate that the Upper Egyptians had founded their own settlements or subjugated existing ones during their Buto campaign in the Delta. The hoe is supposed to serve as an ideogram for the

⁶⁰ E.g., Stela of Thutmose III, Temple of Montu at Armant (Ref 35, p 13).

⁶¹ Ref 36, PT 260 §316a; PT 273 §397a; PT 306 §481a-c; PT 320 §516c; PT 365 §625b; PT 480 §998b; PT 480 §998b; PT 572 §1477c; Ref 37, pp 751-753; Ref 38, pp 23-34, 38-40, 49-57.

⁶² Ref 21, pp 82-83.

⁶³ Egyptian Museum Cairo JE 27434 (CG 14238), Ref 1, plt 43a. The palette is also called the "Libyan Tribute Palette" because it depicts rows of cattle, donkeys, sheep, and olive trees, as well as the hieroglyphic spelling \searrow for Tjehenu (Libya). The cities on the other side are likely cities or fortresses in the Delta.

⁶⁴ Ref 1, p 173.

⁶⁵ Ref 39, sign Q3.

⁶⁶ The oval fortified wall was also used to symbolize a fortress or economic entity (Ref 4, p 109).

founding of settlements, which begins with the ceremonial hoeing of the ground,⁶⁷ or for the construction of a fortress to secure the conquered territory⁶⁸.

Hypotheses:

At the end of the fourth millennium BCE, the city of Buto was formed from the settlements of *Dep* and *Pe*, which were separated by a branch of the Nile. Together, *Dep* and *Pe* were the political counterpart to the twin cities of *Nekhen* and *Nekheb* (Hierakonpolis and Elkab) in southern Upper Egypt.⁶⁹ The bird in the city symbol on the left could represent the heron god Djebawti, the predynastic patron deity of Buto.⁷⁰ The temple district was located on the *Dep* side of the Nile arm.⁷¹ *Pe* is represented in the middle city symbol, which contains its hieroglyphic spelling, $\overline{\square}$ (the sign $\overline{\square}$, canal section [N36],⁷² serves as a classifier). The two empty oval city symbols accompanied by hoes might represent the cities of *Nekhen* and *Nekheb*, where the ship caravan departed (the stern ends of the boats are on the right).

3.2.2.8



The hieroglyphic inscription in the lowest register consists of the following signs (read from right to left):

$\overline{\square}$ (forepart of a lion [F4]): ideogram for *h³.t* “front;”

\square (ritual vessel [W10]): phonogram for *ḥb* and *hn*, and classifier for a ritual vessel;

⁶⁷ Ref 4, p 147; Ref 21, p 19; Ref 40; Ref 41, p 841; Ref 42, p 40; Ref 43, pp 61–63. Compare the sign $\overline{\square}$ in the verb *grg* “to found” or “to rebuild” (Ref 5, p 974 [35969, 35970]). Other scholars have suggested that the hoe symbolizes the destruction of a city (Ref 2, pp 1725–1726; Ref 44, pp 258–260; Ref 45, pp 14–16). However, I agree with D. Wildung’s point that this hoe was a wooden agricultural tool incapable of demolishing solid buildings (cf. Ref 42, p 40).

⁶⁸ Assumption of G. Dreyer (Ref 1, p 174).

⁶⁹ Ref 46.

⁷⁰ In the mature hieroglyphs $\overline{\square}$ [G31], $\overline{\square}$ [G32], and $\overline{\square}$ [H2], the heron has long decorative feathers on its head, which are characteristic of species of herons, such as the Grey Heron and Little Egret. This detail is usually absent from pre- and early dynastic labels.

⁷¹ Ref 47, pp 208–210, fig 19. I believe that, in later texts, when the city of Buto is referred to as “*Djebawt-Pe*” or “*Pe-Djebawt*” (Ref 20, p 139), “*Djebawt*” signifies the *Dep* part of the city.

⁷² Ref 4, p 612.

- ⊗ (area with crossroads? [O49]): ideogram for *njw.t* “city” and classifier in toponyms;
 ≡ (hobble [V13]): phonogram for the consonants *t* or *tj*;
 🪜 (stairs [O40]): ideogram and classifier for *rwd* “stairs” and *htjw* “podium with steps” or “upland plateau” (the sign on the label is a prototype with only three steps);
 🦅 (buzzard [G4]):⁷³ phonogram with the phonetic values *tw*, *tjw*, or *tjw*;
 🌿 (tree branch [M3]): phonogram for *ht* and ideogram and classifier for wood;
 ⊖ (unclear object [Aa1]): phonogram for the consonant *h*, which also occurs as **O**;
 🪶 (clump of papyrus [M16]): ideogram for *mh.w* (“Lower Egypt”);
 🐃 (newborn water buffalo [E9]): phonogram for *jw*;
 🍞 (loaf of bread [X1]): phonogram for the consonant *t*;
 🪴 : a stylized pot;⁷⁴
 11 [Z4A]: numeral for the number 2.

🪴 *h3.t* or *h3.t.t* means “the best [of something]” (literally “the foremost” in terms of quality or harvest time). Without further specification of the product, it typically refers to oil, incense, or other aromatic plant material used in rituals and mummification.⁷⁵ However, vessel 🪴 also appears as a classifier in connection with fruits and grains.⁷⁶

Hypothesis regarding the inscription:

The commodity to which the label was attached came from a city (⊗) on or at the foot of an upland plateau (*htjw* or *htjw*).⁷⁷ It could refer to Al Jabal al Akhdar (Green Mountain), a relatively rainy, forested plateau on the northeastern coast of Libya, which was called the land of “Cyrenaica” in antiquity. This upland resembles a podium with steps because its southern side slopes down in terraces to the Libyan Desert.⁷⁸ This identification is supported by the fact that the phrase *htjw thn.w* “Libyan plateau” appears on a label from the time of King Den.⁷⁹ Al Jabal al Akhdar is home to plants, which provide essential oils and terpenoid resins, such as Phoenician juniper, Mediterranean mastic tree, and

⁷³ J. Vandier (1952) failed to identify the sign as a bird. See the drawing on page 5 (Ref 48, p 837, fig 560).

⁷⁴ Ref 4, p 821. On other First Dynasty labels, the sign more clearly resembles a pot, such as 🪴. Examples include Cairo CG 14142 and Berlin 18026 (Ref 49, pp. 105 [cat. 3.2.11], 107 [cat. 3.2.13]). See a photo of the vessel type in Ref 50, p 96, fig 10.5.

⁷⁵ Ref 4, pp 491–492; Ref 5, pp 537 [19429], 541 [19579]; Ref 10, vol 1, pp 301–303; Ref 13, pp 215–216.

⁷⁶ Ref 4, pp 110, 794–795.

⁷⁷ Ref 5, p 674 [24569, 24571]). The arrangement on the label of the hieroglyphs for the word *htjw* is notable because it must be read from bottom to top. This strange arrangement is consistent on all labels from the First Dynasty. The correct sequence of hieroglyphs would be 🪜🌿⊖🦅 *htjw-ht-h-t-tjw* or 🌿⊖🦅🪜 *ht-h-t-tjw*, depending on whether the sign 🪜 is used as a phonogram or a classifier.

⁷⁸ Ref 51. The Al Jabal al Akhdar in northeastern Libya should not be confused with the upland of the same name in Oman.

⁷⁹ Ref 4, p 149; Ref 13, p 209 (fig 1, Den 1); Ref 16, Den 1.

umbrella pine.⁸⁰ Pine oil from there was used for mummification in Egypt.⁸¹

Scholars interpret the group  *jw.t* as the nominalized past participle of the verb *jwj*, "to come," and translate it as "delivery." Therefore, the phrase  *mḥ.w jw.t* means "delivery from Lower Egypt."⁸² The reason for the transposition of the nouns of this phrase is unknown. Alternatively, the sign  could be an abbreviated adjective to the upland (*mḥw.j* "northern" or "Lower Egyptian"⁸³).

The vessel at the end is likely a logogram representing a volume measure, such as the *hnw* (hin) measure, which was used to quantify oils, ointments, dried fruits, and incense.⁸⁴

Based on these assumptions, my two translation suggestions are:

ḥ3.t njw.t ḥtjw mḥw jw.t hnw 2

- a) „Best [oil/incense] of the city of the upland, delivery from Lower Egypt, 2 hin.“
- b) „Best [oil/incense] of the city of the northern upland, delivery: 2 hin.

In summary, the label from the time of King Aha features an inscription about the commodity and its origin. Above this inscription are scenes from an eponymous event. They should be viewed from bottom to top in order. First, a ship caravan is shown en route to Buto. Next, the campaign against Buto is depicted in allegorical images. Finally, the result of the campaign is shown: the *serekh* of the victorious king alongside the cult complex of Neith in the capital city, Memphis. At the gates of Memphis, a heron – the symbolic animal of Buto – is impaled on a stake.

Afterthought:

Assuming that the events depicted on the Early Dynastic labels are historical, and that King Aha was the immediate successor to King Narmer,⁸⁵ the following hypothetical sequence of events emerges: Narmer, the king of Upper Egypt up to and including Memphis,⁸⁶ began the conquest of the Nile Delta. He kept the Libyans in the west at bay,⁸⁷

⁸⁰ Ref 13, pp 216–218; Ref 51.

⁸¹ Ref 13, pp 215–216; Ref 52, pp 132, 190, 331.

⁸² Ref 4, pp 97, 100. At the time of Aha, the phrase was also spelled  (Ref 4, p 894).

⁸³ Ref 5, p 375 (13598–13600).

⁸⁴ 1 *hnw* pot (approximately 0.48 liters), in full spelling  (Ref 5, pp 526 [19020], 1320; Ref 53, pp 16, 17). Both the biconical vessel type with an everted rim and the volume measure "hin" also existed in Syria-Palestine (Ref 21, pp 27–30; Ref 54).

⁸⁵ Ref 32, p 80.

⁸⁶ Ref 55, pp 29–30.

⁸⁷ There is an ivory cylinder seal, which depicts King Narmer "smiting the enemy." The enemy is a pointed-bearded captive described as *ḥnw* "Libyan" (Ashmolean Mus. E3915, Ref 16, Narmer; Ref 56,

expelled the Shasu bedouins from the eastern Delta,⁸⁸ and made the southern Palestinian peoples his vassals⁸⁹. Aha completed his predecessor's work by subjugating the last stronghold, the chiefdom of Buto. Subsequently, Upper Egyptian deities were established in the most important cities of the Delta. These included Neith in Sais; a cobra goddess in *Dep*, who was called "Wadjet" there (*w3d.t* "the Green One"); and Horus in *Pe*, whereby gradually the distinction between *Dep* and *Pe* became blurred.⁹⁰ To avoid dividing the glory of conquering Lower Egypt between two successive kings, a founding myth was created with a unifier of the kingdom named Men or Meni (Greek Menes).⁹¹

Support for King Aha's role in this hypothetical scenario is found in the fact that he was the first to hold the two royal titles of the united Egyptian kingdom: the *nb.tj* title  "[King of the realms of] the Two Ladies"⁹² (Elkab and Buto – the cobra goddess Wadjet had meanwhile replaced the heron god Djebawti as the patron deity of Buto), and the *njsw.t-bj.t* title, "King of Upper and Lower Egypt."⁹³

History repeated itself at the end of the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1550 BCE): King Kamose of the Theban 17th Dynasty invaded the Delta from northern Sinai and began a war of reconquest against the Hyksos kings.⁹⁴ His successor, King Ahmose, finally achieved the war's objective: the expulsion of the Hyksos and the reunification of Egypt.

Abbreviations

ADAIK: Abhandlungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Kairo; Archéo-Nil: Revue de la société pour l'étude des cultures prépharaoniques de la vallée du Nil; ASAE: Annales du service des antiquités de l'Égypte; BCE: Before Christian era; BMSAES: British Museum Studies in Ancient Egypt and Sudan; cat.: catalog; cf.: compare; CG: Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire; CT: Coffin texts; ed/eds: editor(s); EME: Etudes et mémoires d'égyptologie; fig: figure; GM: Göttinger Miscellen: Beiträge zur ägyptologischen Diskussion; JE: Journal d'Entrée (du Musée du Caire); JEA: The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology; KAW: Kulturgeschichte der Antiken Welt; MDAIK: Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo; Memnonia: Memnonia, Bulletin édité par l'Association pour la sauvegarde de Ramesseum (Cairo/Paris); no./nos.: number(s); OIMP: Oriental Institute Museum

p 5, after Baines 1989). It is possible that Libyans attempted to invade the Fayum or Memphis.

⁸⁸ See part 1 of this work, section 2.2.2.3.

⁸⁹ Numerous Egyptian artifacts and *serekhs* of King Narmer in rock inscriptions and on pottery fragments were found at southern Palestinian sites (Ref 55, p 31; Ref 57; Ref 58, pp 114–118, 119; Ref 59, p 104).

⁹⁰ Ref 4, p 550; Ref 20, pp 138–146; Ref 47, p 210; Ref 60, p 161; Ref 61, p 16; Ref 62, p 3; Ref 63, p 243. Still under King Ptolemy I Soter, the goddess Wadjet was referred to as "Lady of *Pe* and *Dep*," and Horus as "Lord of *Pe*" (Great Satrap Stela of Ptolemy I Soter, 311 BCE, Cairo JE 22182; Ref 64).

⁹¹ Many Egyptologists question the historicity of King Menes (literature review in Ref 65, pp 79–90).

⁹² Cairo JE 31773; Ref 32, pp 64 (note 11) 76 (fig 15).

⁹³ See the hypothesis on image 3.2.2.5.

⁹⁴ The reconquest of Lower Egypt from the Hyksos is attested to on the second stele of Kamose (Ref 66).

Publications; OIP: Oriental Institute Publications; p/pp: page(s); plt: plate; REdeH: Revue Égyptienne des Études Historiques; Ref/Refs: Reference(s); SAGA: Studien zur Archäologie und Geschichte Altägyptens; SAK: Studien zur altägyptischen Kultur; Stud. Naut. Arch.: Studies in Nautical Archeology; Vol./Vols: Volume(s).

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Photo credits

Images in Chapter 3.1: Labels from tomb U-j at Abydos:

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Jar fragment with the *serekh* of King Aha, from Abydos, BM EA38010. Photo: British Museum,
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