

## More on Decoding the Label of King Djer

David Cintron

In GM 221 (2009) Michinori Ohshiro gave a very insightful summary of the highlights of this label<sup>1</sup> of King Djer, third king of the first dynasty. However I feel many elements were left incomplete and I would like to give a full accounting of the features of the label and the explanation of this reasoning.

It is my belief that the corpus of 1<sup>st</sup> dynasty labels to which this belongs each denote a strong theme from which none of the vignettes on the label waver. This theme is the use of the power of symbolism as *hk3w* to assist the deceased king in succeeding to take his place in the abode of the gods, and that this success depends upon specific ceremony and the sanction of his divinity by the ancestors.



Figure 1 –Label of Djer

The label, seen in Figure 1, is constructed in three rows with a chip missing from the rightmost section of the lower two rows.

The first row illustrates a scene composed of two elements: a procession towards the serekh of Djer on the left and a ceremony to the right.

The second row illustrates a scene composed of three elements: a procession to the left followed by an activity and two mysterious seated figures.

The third row consists of seemingly random signs.

### Row 1

The first row begins with the serekh of Djer and continues, as noted by Ohshiro, with a procession that is possibly meant to show the delivery of the *ba* of Djer to the sky as defined by the sequential symbols overseen by the *ms* sign:

- A pelican denoting the *ba* of Djer,
- The Narmer catfish symbolizing the original *ba* of the kingship,
- A mummy symbolizing the newly dead Djer and
- A ladder on which the *ba* of Djer may ascend to the sky.

It is also possible that this procession may symbolize this sequence:

- The *psdt*-pelican representing the original gods of ancient Egypt, the Ennead <sup>2</sup>
- The Narmer catfish representing the first king of Egypt who followed the gods <sup>3</sup>
- The mummy of Narmer's successor, and Djer's predecessor, Aha and
- The ladder for the newly deceased Horus Djer, atop his serekh, to join his forebears.

The ladder itself seems to possess either two poles for leaning against its target, or two of the odd antennae-like fixtures seen on figures as part of predynastic rock art, denoting some kind of spiritual purpose.

The scene to the right may, as Ohshiro observes, denote an embalming ritual. The symbols above seem to denote an early form of the *nsw-bty* name with a clump of papyrus (M15) in place of the bee (L2) giving a name possibly denoted as *nsw-mhw* <sup>4</sup>. Below the name is either (a) what is more likely sign O43, *šsp*, meaning 'receive' or possibly 'commencement' as part of an expression <sup>5</sup> or (b) *šsp* for 'statue' <sup>6</sup> or less likely (c) simply the name of Djer repeated.

There is an interesting parallel in a label of Aha, shown in Figure 2, which also contains the *nsw-mhw* sign with what may also be the *šsp* sign written below.

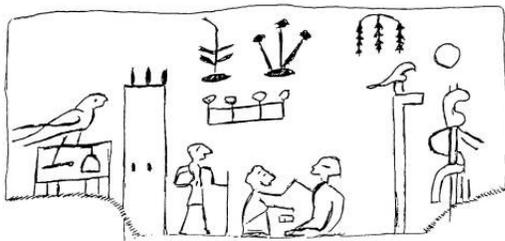


Figure 2 - Label of Aha

Combined with the symbol mounted on the pole, M44, *spd* for 'effective', this can be translated as 'Djer attaining effective' as his mummified *ka* becomes *akh*.

The Aha label shows what may even be sign A22 for *hnty* or *twt* <sup>7</sup> which, together with the *ms* sign, may instead indicate that this combination of signs means a statue is being carved in which case *spd* could be translated as 'sharp' or 'skilled' <sup>8</sup>.

## Row 2

The second row begins with a standard on which we find sign E2, *k3 nht*, 'victorious bull' <sup>9</sup>, preceded by the *ms* sign and followed by what is most likely the name of Djer. Following this is a mysterious combination of signs that show the *gb*-goose (G38) <sup>10</sup> handing down four objects to what looks like a baboon symbolizing Thoth or the *hd-wr*. The tail points straight at an ambiguous looking bird that could be either an ibis or a falcon. A likely candidate for these four objects is *nmst* jars as set of four *nmst* jars is mentioned in eight separate passages in the Pyramid Texts. <sup>11</sup>

E.g. PT 1293, “Raise yourself, loose your bonds, throw off your dust, sit on this your iron throne, be purified with your four *nmst* jars and your four ‘*3bt* jars which have come forth to you from the Castle of that God that you may be divine, they being filled to the brim from the Canal of the God, which Horus of Nekhen gave to you.”<sup>12</sup>

The baboon was connected in the Early Dynastic Period with the *hd-wr*, or ‘great white ones’ meaning ancestors, as represented in the underground panels of Djoser.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, this symbology ties in with the remainder of the line. Following this vignette are the two mysterious figures. Rather than write these off as two humans the symbols that appear above them may fit better with an interpretation of the baboon as *hd-wr* appearing earlier in the line.

Above the first is the *nbtj* sign and below what could be construed as sign Q3 or simply *p(y)* for Pe, for the souls of Pe<sup>14</sup>. Possibly a stretch but above the second is what appears to be a muted trio of *b3* abbreviations<sup>15</sup> or more likely sketchy hands (D46)<sup>16</sup> giving us two figures with titles of the Souls of Pe followed by the Souls of Dp, On or Nekhen.

### Row 3

The third row is quite enigmatic. It would seem at first glance to be a description of the goods attached and how they came to their destination. The set of signs to the right may spell *wts*<sup>17</sup> denoting a moving or weighing of goods. The wavelike symbols at the bottom may actually be sign V1<sup>18</sup> denoting six hundred *ht* things. Beyond that the signs become ambiguous.

The *sw* symbol with the fish and jar below appears on the other Djer label mentioned but in the same form as M24 with the plant growing out of the fish, and the little jar behind the fish instead of below.

The boatlike symbol at the end also appears on a wooden label of Aha from Abydos in the exact same form, but on two other Aha labels the object in the exact same position takes the form of a sealed jug with three strokes below.

Perhaps it is not so important as to the exact meaning of this last phrase save that it has something to do with the king or an administrator and jugs.

### Conclusion

This label is a typical post mortem religious *hk3w* that celebrates and reinforces the deceased king’s transformation from body to god and celebrates his victory in rebirth by positioning his place as rightfully beside the place of his ancestors. The translation is tentative and difficult but it is possible to piece together at least a set of alternative meanings that make logical sense and fit with known funerary practices and theology.

---

1. Noted as ivory in Egyptian Treasures from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, p. 30, but often called wooden.
2. Pyramid Text ¶278 associates the *psdt* pelican with the Ennead, of which both the greater and lesser are named both in the Turin Canon and by Manetho as part of a list of kings preceding the first dynasty. Faulkner, Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts and Redford, Pharaonic King-Lists, Annals and Day-Books, p.13
3. Ibid
4. Faulkner, A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian, p.114  
Gardiner, Egyptian Grammar, p.481
5. Faulkner, p.271
6. Faulkner, p.272
7. Gardiner, p.444
8. Faulkner, p.223
9. Gardiner, p.458
10. Gardiner, p.471
11. Faulkner, Pyramid Texts, ¶1140, 1164, 1180, 1293, 1365, 1733, 1917, 2012
12. Ibid
13. Boylan, Thoth, the Hermes of Egypt
14. Faulkner, Dictionary, p.86
15. Compare row 2 of Ivory label of Djer (Saqqara S2171 H) row 2 as described by Serrano in BAR 1076 Royal Festivals in the Late Predynastic Period and the First Dynasty, p. 64
16. Faulkner, p.77
17. Faulkner, p.72
18. Gardiner, p.521