"It Is Written"?: Making, remaking and unmaking early 'writing' in the lower Nile Valley

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Introduction

Analysis and interpretation of inscribed objects often focus on their written meanings and thus their status as products of completed action. Attention is less commonly directed to the ways in which past actors intermingled and transformed material substances via particular tools and embodied behaviours — the material practices which give rise to graphical expression and anchor subsequent acts of symbolic meaning (re-)construction. Building on research into the materiality of early writing and related image making (see Piquette 2007; 2008), this chapter focusses on one aspect of written object 'life histories' — the processes of remaking and unmaking. I explore below the dynamic unfolding and reformulation of 'writing' and related imagery as artefact within the context of a selection of early inscribed objects from the lower Nile Valley (**Figure 1**). The more portable writing surfaces include over 4000 objects, including small labels, ceramic and stone vessels, stelae, seals and seal impressions, implements, and personal items (Regulski 2010: 6, 242). The geographically- and temporally-related marks on fixed stone surfaces (variously referred to as 'petroglyphs', 'rock art', 'rock inscriptions' or 'graffiti', e.g. Redford and Redford 1989; Storemyr 2009) also constitute a crucial dataset for questions of early writing and image-making practices in north-east Africa, but fall outside the scope of this chapter. For its basis, this inquiry examines comparatively three inscribed find types: small perforated plaques or 'labels' of bone, ivory and wood; stone vessels; and stone stelae. Archaeologically, most are associated with large richly-equipped tomb complexes. I briefly touch on finds dating to the Late Predynastic (*c.*3300 / *c.*3200–3100 BCE),
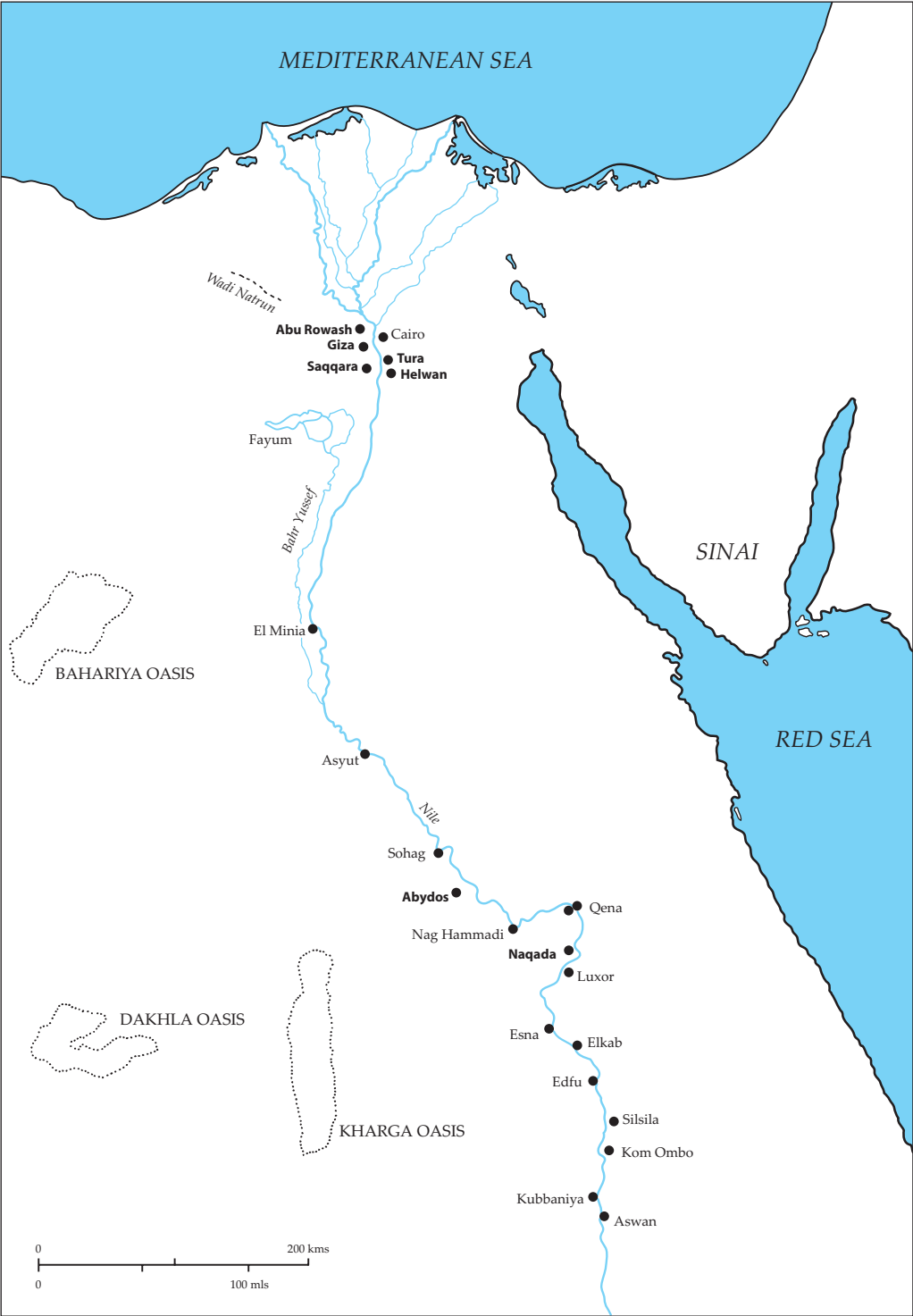
Figure 1: Map of Egypt with main find sites for inscribed labels, vessels and stelae in bold (after Spencer 1993: 19, fig. 6).

Cultural Phase	Calibrated Dates BCE	Dynasty	Period	Rulers
		2		Hetepsekhemwy
Naqada IIID	from c.2900 onwards			Qa'a Semerkhet
Naqada IIIC2	c.3000–2900			Adjib Den
Naqada IIIC1	c.3100–3000	1	Early Dynastic	Merneith Djet Djer Neithotep (?) Aha Narmer
Naqada IIIA1–IIIB	c.3300 / 3200–3100	'0'	Proto-Dynastic	Irj-Hor / Ka (?) Owner of Tomb U-j
Naqada IIC–IID2	c.3650–3300 / 3200			
Naqada IA–IIB	c.3900–3650		Predynastic	

Table 1: Chronological chart (after Hendrickx 1996: 64; Wilkinson 2001 [1999]: 27).

before turning to examples of written culture from the first half of the Early Dynastic Period (c.3100–2800 / 2770 BCE; **Table 1**).

Social Historical Context

The social history of this early period is reconstructed mainly on the basis of evidence found in funerary contexts. It is thought that members of a small number of polities rose to prominence in Upper Egypt, gradually accumulating political power at local, and eventually regional, levels. The main geographical areas of Upper and Lower Egypt, and outlying desert areas, were brought under the control of a single ruler who administered the so-called 'territorial state' through various political-religious institutions run by groups of officials (Baines 1995; Kohler 2010; Trigger et al. 2001 [1983]; Wengrow 2006; Wilkinson 2001 [1999]). Among the array of cultural developments associated with processes of Egyptian 'state' formation were marking systems including early hieroglyphic and hieratic scripts (Kahl 2001; Regulski 2009), which developed in conjunction with related marking practices (e.g. Baines 2004; Bard 1992; van den Brink 1992). The earliest widely-accepted evidence for 'writing' appears in Upper Egypt during the Late Predynastic period (c.3300 / 3200 BCE), although there is limited direct support for deciphering phonetic values and grammatical function (see Regulski 2008: 992). Much of the early scriptorial evidence is pictorial; given its depictive attempting to distinguish too strictly 'art' from 'writing' can be unhelpful. One wonders whether the term 'writing' is best avoided for this earliest evidence given the endless and often inconclusive debates and teleology that has characterised attempts at decipherment (e.g. cf. Baines 2004: 161–167 and Breyer 2002 with Dreyer 1998: 139-145). Palaeographic, art historical, and other approaches demonstrate that increasingly standardised sets of intermingled script – image motifs variously construct, communicate and display relationships of social and divine power, with particular emphasis on the ideology of rulership (Baines 2004). Numerical marks, names and titles or other 'personal identifiers' (hereafter 'PI', see Piquette 2010: 56), and indicators of social status and affiliation point to developing administrative structures and the importance of marking goods as well personal and collective identities (Piquette 2007; Wengrow 2006: 200–207).

Other archaeological evidence from cemetery, ceremonial and limited settlement sites provides parallel evidence for increasingly complex social stratification, and centralisation of bureaucratic, political and religious institutions. It is from this general social historical context that the case studies presented below derive, but with the recognition that for the theme of writing as a material practice, these objects were probably part of the activities and experiences of a very restricted segment of early Egyptian society.

About the Past, Constituting the Past

In contrast to notions of the inscribed object as something that 'is written' or constitutes a 'written source' which tell us *about* the past, early graphical expression is seen here as meaningfully constituted through the material actions of past individuals and as products of those actions. A mark or sign is thus seen as having efficacy in the past rather than just providing evidence about it (see Moreland 2006). For its theoretical and methodological bases, this study is informed by structuration, a practice theory which situates the agency of the knowledgeable individual in a mutually constituting relationship with social structures (e.g. Giddens 1984). According to this duality, the focus on choice requires consideration of the individual actor or technician, but always in terms of the ways in which individual choice was informed by, and re-informed, related social structures (cf. Meskell 2004: 53). Criticism has been levelled at what has been perceived, on the one hand, as structuration's over-individualising view on past actors, or on the other hand, as offering a grand unitary account where action overemphasises collectives and institutions, although these critiques have been challenged (Gardner 2007; 2008). Collective representations consist of the results of individual decisions to participate in the reproduction of certain past choices. Thus, the personal is necessarily social, the individual body forever part of the body politic, and the operational gestures of a single technician's hands, in making an inscribed label for example, are therefore tied to — though not totally determined by — collective representations (see Dobres 2000: 216). Whether episodes of action relate to a single and / or multiple individuals is not always archaeologically visible. Nevertheless, I hope the analysis of material patterning among the object types examined here gives some idea of the social structures reproduced or renegotiated across time-space through technological choice and related scribal and semantic intention, thus contributing to a more holistic and synchronically-derived understanding of written meanings (cf. Baines 2008: 842; see also Piquette 2013).

Signs of Production

As mentioned, it is difficult to locate many aspects of inscribed object production and use in time-space prior to deposition in the cemetery. However, some episodes of activity involved in the transformation of artefact materials and their inscription can be inferred from manufacture marks and other surface modifications. Through first-hand inspection or high resolution photographs or other documentation techniques of artefact surfaces (see Piquette forthcoming), it is possible to infer many behaviours involved in acts of marking. Moreover, when grounded in theories of social practice, the notion of *chaîne opératoire* research affords a great deal of empirical observation regarding the sequential activities of ancient materials processing. In conceptualising graphical practices it is also important to populate accounts with past people and embodied actions rather than focusing alone on tools and the results of their use (see Dobres 2000: 21–22, fig. 1.2, 166–169).

As I have discussed elsewhere, an artefactual emphasis in the study of early Egyptian graphical evidence reveals the impact of materiality on image expression and appearance, including the

restricted choice of certain material resources, methods for conversion and shaping, techniques for rendering imagery (e.g. the subtraction or addition of materials), and changes and continuities in conventions for image organisation (Piquette 2007; 2008). For example, the sequence in which inscription and the cutting and shaping of Late Predynastic bone labels occurred can be inferred from incised images which appear to have been cropped when the plaque was separated from its parent bone plate (Dreyer 1998: 137; Kahl 2001: 111; see also Wengrow 2008: 1027). Images cut through by the perforation, also indicate that incision took place prior to the drilling / carving of the perforation (e.g. Dreyer 1998: [T] 123, [D] 125, no. 90, [P] pl. 31, no. 90). Patterning among some inscribed labels dating to the reign of Qa'a, the last ruler of the 1st Dynasty (Piquette 2008: 103–104), exemplifies the theoretical point concerning the unfolding of inscribed meaning as both process and outcome of that process, and as manifold in its meaningful construction (roughly expressed: material + tool + embodied engagement + technique + compositional choice + time + social space = image) and consumption (image(s) + embodied engagement and perception by knowledgeable agent of constructive act and / or result + time + social space = meaning construction).

Inscribed Labels

More than 430 inscribed whole and fragmentary perforated plaques form one of the largest surviving corpora of script-bearing material from the Nile Valley from the period of *c.*3300 / 3200 BCE to *c.*2800 BCE (**Table 1**). These dockets or labels range in size from about 1.0–9.5 cm in height and width, with most tending towards the smaller dimensions (e.g. **Figures 2–3**). Largely on the basis of later written evidence the label inscriptions are understood as communicating the date, quantity and quality of funerary goods or other associated commodities, as well as place names, personal names, and titles. It is generally assumed that labels were affixed to items deposited in the tomb, such as containers of oil, clothing, jewellery, implements and other items the deceased required for a successful afterlife. Overall, labels and label fragments are encountered at seven cemetery sites in the lower Nile Valley (**Figure 1**), although the vast majority derive from the upper Egyptian cemetery site of Abydos. The labels can be divided chronologically into two main phases. Of some 370 published examples from Abydos, almost 200 come from a Predynastic / Later Predynastic cemetery (U) at this site, most being found in and around the large multi-chambered tomb U-j (Dreyer 1998). These have been dated to the Naqada IIIA1 cultural phase (*c.*3300 / 3100 BCE; Boehmer et al. 1993; Görsdorf et al. 1998). The remainder date from the Naqada IIIC–early D cultural phases (*c.*3100–2770 BCE), or the entire 1st Dynasty.

These plaques are marked using four main techniques involving incision and / or the application of pigment (Piquette 2008). At least five different kinds of graphical episode can be discerned:

1. inscription
2. inscription > further inscription
3. inscription > partial erasure
4. inscription > full erasure
5. inscription > erasure > possible re-inscription

A selection of these is detailed below.

Inscription > (Partial and Full) Erasure

At least 12 inscribed labels bear marks indicating that after initial inscription surface material was subsequently removed with the apparent intention of partially or fully eliminating the original
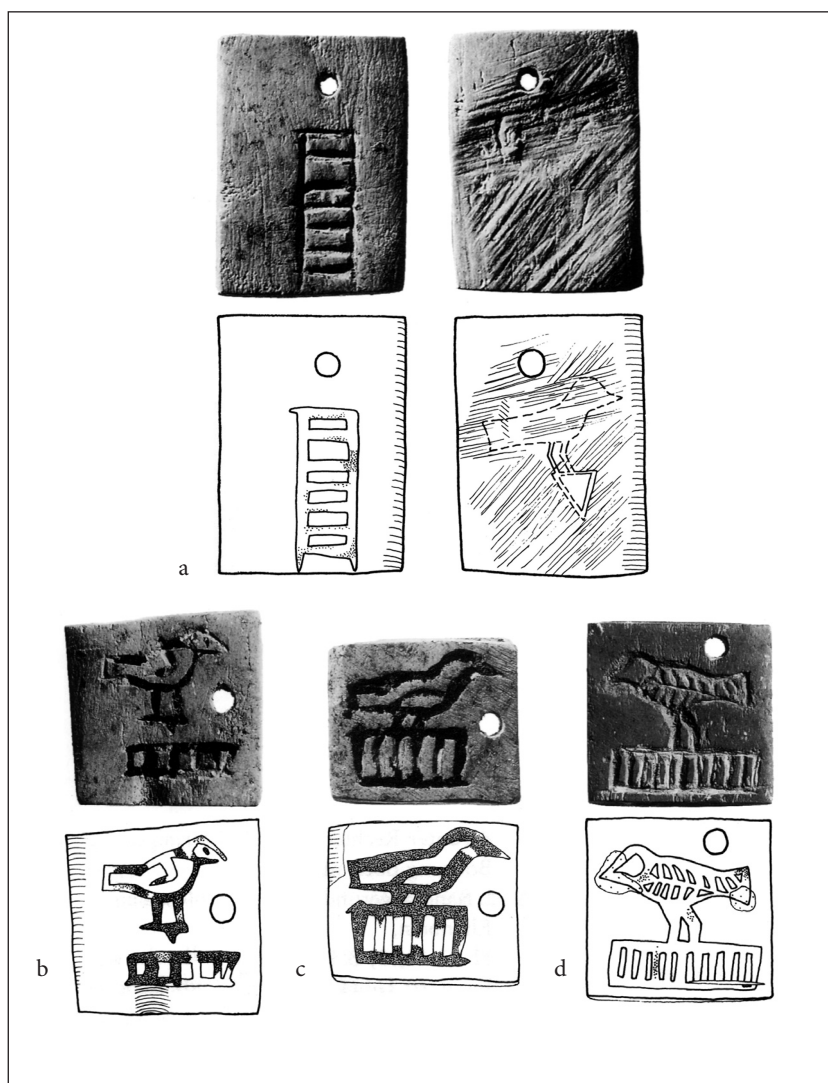
Figure 2: Inscribed bone labels from Cemetery U, Abydos dated to the Naqada IIIA1 phase. a) Label with 'rectangular shape' or possible 'N39' / 'pool' incised on one face and an erasure on the opposite face, the shape of 'G5-s33(?)' / 'bird perched on triangular support' still being discernible. ʜ 1.25 cm; ᴡ 1.7 cm; ᴛʜ 0.15–0.2 cm. Provenance: Tomb U-j S. Ab K 834. Source No. 4396; b) Label bearing an abutting combination of 'rectangular shape' and 'bird'. ʜ 1.3 / 1.35 cm; ᴡ 1.5 cm; ᴛʜ 0.25–0.3 cm. Provenance: U-j 11. Ab K 654. Source No. 4348; c) Label bearing the non-abutting combination of 'rectangular shape' and 'G5-s33(?)' / 'bird perched on triangular support'. ʜ 1.5 / 1.6 cm; ᴡ 1.7 / 1.5 cm; ᴛʜ 0.1–0.2 cm. Provenance: U-j 11. Ab K 655. Source No. 4364; d) Label bearing an abutting combination of 'rectangular shape' and 'bird'. ʜ 1.5 cm; ᴡ 1.5 cm; ᴛʜ 0.25–0.2 cm. Provenance: U-j 11. Ab K 658. Source No. 4349. All Dreyer 1998. 2a: [ᴛ] 131, no. 156, [ᴅ] 133, fig. 81, no. 156, [ᴘ] pl. 34. no. 156; 2b: [ᴛ] 126, no. 108, [ᴅ] 127, fig. 79, no. 108, [ᴘ] pl. 32, no. 108; 2c: [ᴛ] 128, no. 124, [ᴅ] 127, fig. 79, no. 124, [ᴘ] pl. 32, no. 124; 2d: [ᴛ] 126, no. 109, [ᴅ] 127, fig. 79, no. 109, [ᴘ] pl. 32, no. 109). Courtesy Günter Dreyer and the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Kairo.

Figure 3: Two ivory labels showing an erasure in the lower left of the bottom register. Warping and colour due in part to exposure to high heat, probably during the firing of the tomb. a) Photograph and drawing of recto. H 4.8 cm; W 5.6 cm; TH 0.2 cm. Provenance: Naqada, mastaba tomb attributed to Neith, chamber 'γ' (de Morgan 1897: [T] 161, 165, 167, 234, [D] 167, fig. 549). Source No. 0240. JE 31773. Author's photograph, courtesy the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, drawing from Spencer 1993: 63, with permission Richard Parkinson); b) Photograph of recto and verso. H 3.5+ cm; W 4.5 cm; TH 0.17–0.26 cm. Provenance: Naqada, near mastaba tomb attributed to Neith (Garstang 1905: 61, figs 2–3). Source No. 0241. E.5116. Author's photographs, courtesy the Garstang Museum of Archaeology, University of Liverpool.

inscription. In the following sub-sections I present those labels which evidence this sequence of graphical acts and consider the possible implications.

Begin Again?

A small Naqada IIIA1 bone label (Ab K 834) from Cemetery U, Abydos, is one of the earliest surviving labels showing evidence for graphical content adjustment and seems to be unique among this early group. It was incised on one face with 'G5-s33(?)' / 'bird perched on triangular support' which was then vigorously scraped away, although not completely (**Figure 2a**). The opposite face

bears an entirely different image, a 'rectangular shape' in a vertical orientation.[1] It is unclear whether the acts of incision + erasure occurred before or after the incision on the opposite face. A possible clue to the relationship between the two motifs is the co-occurrence on other contemporary labels of the 'bird perched on triangular support' motif with instances of a morphologically similar 'architectural element (?)' (**Figure 2b).** However, these are paired on the same face with the latter oriented horizontally with, and in at least two further instances, the 'bird' perches directly on this rectangular feature (**Figure 2c–d**). One might venture various explanations for the erasure, from error correction during the label production phase to re-purposing or re-cycling at a later stage of use, but if this was ever a common part of early labelling practices it seems to have been restricted to functions that preceded the funerary ritual or the activities that led to deposition in the tomb.

(Co)modification

I now turn to the early 1st Dynasty when more elaborate labels come into use. Two labels of elephant ivory, found in / around a tomb dated to the reign of Aha and located at the Upper Egyptian site of Naqada (de Morgan 1897; Garstang 1905: 61, fig. 1; **Figure 3a–b**), bear virtually-identical incised imagery organised in three horizontal registers. Each exhibits an area on the left in the lower-most register that has been scraped away. These are the only examples from the reign of Aha preserving the lower register on this label type, but comparison with similar examples dated to the preceding and following reign (Narmer and Djer, respectively), suggests that the erased area on these Naqada labels may have contained numerical or other information related to an offering or other commodity with which the label was associated (Newberry 1912: 288).

   Their parallel treatment suggests that both labels were subject to the same general set of original circumstances of creation, but also subsequent changes to those circumstances. If numerical or related item information had been present but was then erased, perhaps this was due to changes in quantities or other features of items involved in the equipping of the tomb or the funeral. The obliteration of product and / or numerical information raises a range of questions about the function of such labels and the intentions behind their use. Did original and subsequent circumstances arise prior to or after the arrival of the labels, and presumably associated goods, to the tomb? Why was this new information not updated on the label? The absence of quantitative or qualitative information would seem to contradict the function often posited for the labels, that of the administration of goods exchange (e.g. Ciałowicz 2001: 134, 138–139) — a function which also seems to have been secondary if the amount of compositional space dedicated to elaborate narrative imagery is any indication of priority. In contrast to the more comprehensive and vigorous removal of the entire, albeit less complex, composition of Ab K 834 discussed above, the act of 'erasure' here involves the relatively careful removal of marks from a larger composition. We might conjecture that the person who made these tidy erasures intended the space to be re-inscribed with new or updated information, or perhaps the labels had ceased to play a strictly administrative role by the time of deposition. Could this adjustment relate to label de-activation and / or re-deployment in the context of the deceased's transition from life to afterlife? While firm conclusions cannot be drawn at this juncture this example highlights the potential importance of, in addition to the creation of writing, studying its obliteration.

Renegotiating Events

A small fragment of an incised wooden label from Abydos (**Figure 4**), also dated to the reign of Aha, depicts what appears to be the preparation of oil or wine (see James 1995), or some other product involving crushing or pressing. A very similar scene appears in the middle register of each of the two ivory labels discussed above (**Figure 3a–b**); on each side of a large mortar and pestle

Figure 4: Fragment of an incised wooden label showing what appears to be an oil or wine pressing scene. The detail (right) shows that an image to the right of the 'mortar and pestle', possibly a 'human figure', has been erased (cf. **Figure 3**). ʜ 1.78+ cm; ᴡ 2.31+ cm; ᴛʜ 0.41 cm. Provenance: Abydos, tomb complex Z attributed to Djer, subsidiary grave Z3 (Petrie 1900: 21). Source No. 0943. E.0078. Photograph and detail with permission © Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels. Drawing from Petrie 1900: pl. 13, no. 5, courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.

stands a human figure, the left figure holding / manipulating the pestle. Another figure on the far right leans on a staff and appears to oversee the activity. On the wooden label fragment (**Figure 4**), however, we find that the space between the vessel and the figure on the right (who, rather than holding a staff, holds an arm up toward the body) is in fact empty. First-hand inspection reveals that the surface of this apparently empty area has been reworked. Rather than the type of scraping consistent with surface preparation, a slight concave depression attests to the removal of surface material. That something was there previously, perhaps a human figure, is also suggested by comparison with a similar scene in both labels in **Figure 3a–b**.

This erasure, previously unremarked to my knowledge, is particularly intriguing for several reasons. As noted, this scene is paralleled on the two ivory labels from Naqada, each of which also bears an erasure albeit in the lower-most register on the left. In contrast to the removal of what seems to be quantitative or qualitative product information, the erasure on the wooden fragment occurs in the context of narrative imagery in what appears to be a middle register and thus seems to relate to a different semantic category. Some scenes on labels have been interpreted as year names, understood to have been named according to festivals, cultic or other scheduled events, or perhaps assigned retrospectively after important campaigns or expeditions (Kahl 2006: 99–100). If we assume label production and pre-depositional use occurred in the context of centralised administrative activities, as suggested by the presence of similar iconography at the two different but contemporary cemetery sites (Naqada and Abydos), one would expect product dating

conventions to be fixed at the time of label creation. Even if this scene was not related to goods dating, but to commissioning, production, packaging, dispatch, or delivery — whether directly to the tomb complex or to officials, family or friends involved in tomb preparation who then brought the label and associated item(s) to the tomb as part of the funeral or subsequent mortuary activities — the presence of this erasure in one of three surviving examples suggests that despite any centralisation of labelling activities, label meaning and use was subject to re-negotiation at a more local level, in this case at Abydos.

Changing Identities

The practice of erasure persists at least into the mid-1st Dynasty as attested on several other label fragments from Abydos. Ab K 2602 and Ab K 2536 are two virtually-identical labels found in debris to the north of tomb complex T during re-excavation of this area (Dreyer et al. 1998: 162–163, pl. 12a; 2003: 93–94; **Figure 5a–b**). In the upper-most register each bears a 'niched frame' motif containing the PI of a ruler conventionally rendered 'Djet'. To the left of the 'niched frame', a vertical swath of the surface traversing Registers 1 and 2 has been vigorously scraped away.

From a compositional perspective the practioner's disregard for the register line is noteworthy. Surface removal episodes identified on other labels conform to compositional divisions of graphical space established at the time of initial drafting, units of semantic or narratival meaning being organised within a single register, column or other circumscribed space. It is unusual though not impossible that a semantic link was present between image clusters that traversed registers, or perhaps the individual undertaking the erasure took advantage of a coincidence whereby separate images requiring removal happened to be aligned one above the other.

Making sense of the erased area to the left of a 'niched frame' motif in Register 1 is aided by comparison with two surviving labels also bearing the 'niched frame' of Djet (Vikentiev 1959: 4, 6, fig. 1, pls 1, 3). As exemplified by **Figure 5c**, both show a PI incised to the left, perhaps the name of an official 'Sekhem-ka-sedj' (cf. Emery 1954: 102–103, fig. 105; Wilkinson 2001 [1999]: 124). Tantalising clues on the surface of the label detail in **Figure 5a** show the faint remains of what may be a 'D28' / 'pair of arms', as well as the remnants of an incised trough from another sign above and to the right.[2] If 'Sekhem-ka-sedj' or another PI was originally present on Ab K 2602 or Ab K 2536, these would provide precedents for the three later labels also bearing PI similarly located erasures (below).

While this erased area in Register 1 was not re-inscribed in either case, one wonders whether the 'architectural feature?' in the midst of the heavily-scratched area in Register 2 of Ab K 2536 (**Figure 5b**) was added after the erasure episode. First-hand study is necessary to confirm the sequence of surface transformations although slight stylistic differences may be discernible, including narrower and apparently shallower incisions.

Among the preserved / available labels datable to the subsequent reign of Den, three incised examples exhibit erasures with a key similarity to those just discussed. To the left of the 'niched frame' motif there is a blank area with abrasions also consistent with the removal of surface material (**Figures 6–8**). Above each is a cluster comprised of 'S20' / 'seal on lanyard' and 'L2' / 'bee', traditionally interpreted as 'seal bearer of the ruler of Upper Egypt'. Comparison with 4–5 similarly-composed, contemporary labels and fragments (all from Abydos: Source Nos 1253, 1254, 1390, 4087, and possibly 1312, see also 1252), shows a cluster or PI conventionally rendered as 'Hemaka'. No other PI is attested below the 'S20' / 'seal on lanyard' and 'L2' / 'bee' cluster on contemporary surviving labels, presenting the possibility that 'Hemaka' was originally inscribed in this location. But what was the reason for the obliteration of an aspect of the seal bearer's identity?

Despite the presence of 'S20' / 'seal on lanyard' and 'L2' / 'bee' cluster on these labels, the parallels they exhibit with Ab K 2536 and Ab K 2602 datable to the reign of Djet (above) are notable.

Figure 5: Incised labels bearing the PIs of Djet. a) Label (probably of elephant ivory, pers. comm. Günter Dreyer), showing erasure. ʜ 2.95–3.05 cm; ᴡ 3.1 cm; ᴛʜ 0.33-0.38 cm. Provenance: Abydos, near tomb complex T in area T-NOOO (Dreyer et al. 2003: [ᴛ] 94). Source No. 4807. Ab K 2602. Photograph courtesy Günter Dreyer and the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Kairo; b) Ivory label with an erasure in a location similar to 5a. Provenance: Abydos, fragments found during two seasons in areas T-NW + T-NOOO, northwest and northeast, respectively, of tomb complex T attributed to Den (Dreyer et al. 1998: [ᴛ] 162–163, [ᴘ] pl. 12a; 2003: [ᴛ] 93–94, [ᴘ] pl. 18f). ʜ 3.15 cm; ᴡ 3.9 cm; ᴛʜ 0.35 cm. Source No. 4084. Ab K 2536. Photograph courtesy Günter Dreyer and the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Kairo; c) Recto and verso of an incised and colour-infilled elephant ivory label. Provenance: Saqqara, tomb S3504, dated to the reign of Djet (Emery 1954: 3, 102–103, fig. 105). Source No. 986. JE 16830. Author's photograph, courtesy the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.
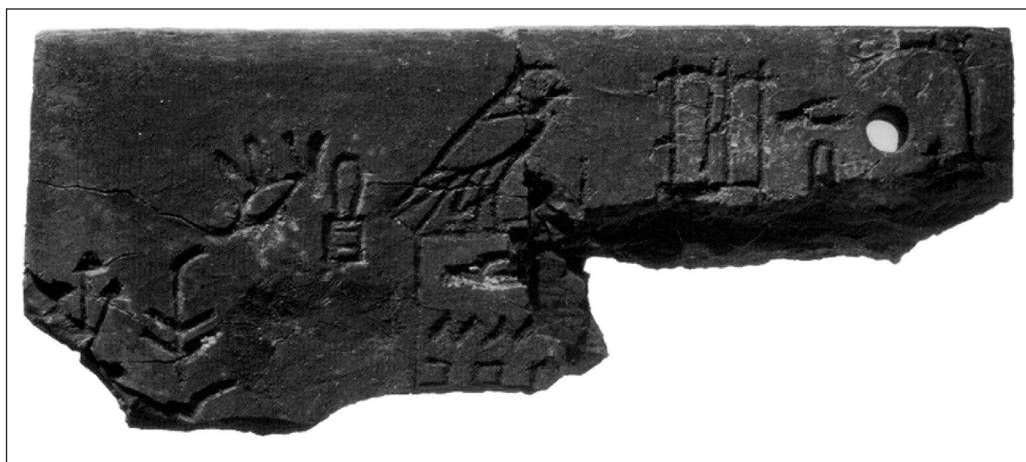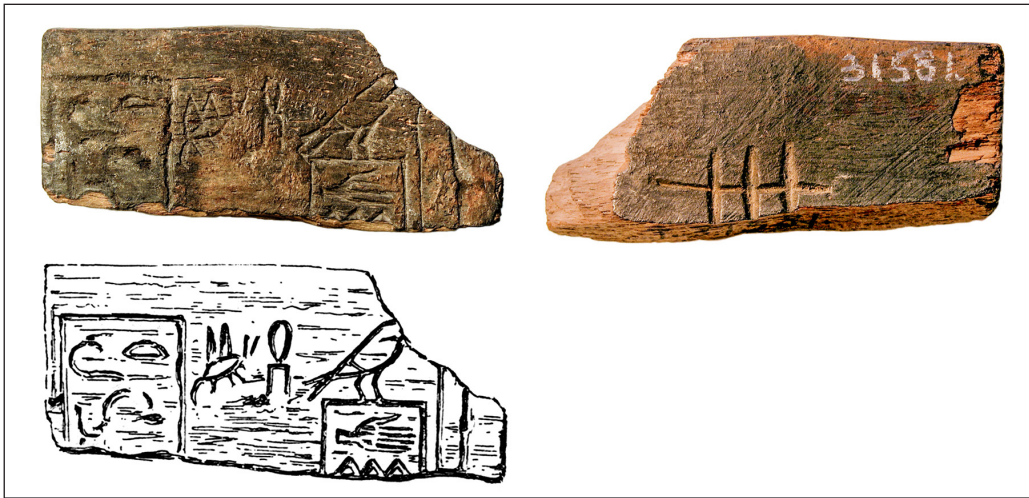
Figure 6: Incised label fragment (upper half) of wood bearing the PI of Den, a mid-1ˢᵗ Dynasty ruler. The imagery below the 'S20' / 'seal on lanyard' and 'L2' / 'bee' has been erased (cf. **Figure 7–8**). Provenance: Abydos, tomb complex T attributed to Den, Chamber S1 (Dreyer et al. 1990: [ᴛ] 80–81, [ᴘ] pl. 26a). н 2.7+ cm; w 6.9 cm; ᴛн 0.6 cm. Source No. 1372. Ab K 381. Photograph courtesy Günter Dreyer and the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Kairo.

Figure 7: Incised label fragment of elephant ivory bearing the PI of Den. Imagery below the 'S20' / 'seal on lanyard' and 'L2' / 'bee' has been erased (cf. **Figures 6** and **8**). Provenance: Abydos, tomb complex T attributed to Den (Petrie 1900: [ᴛ] 21, [ᴘ] pl. 11, no. 5). Source No. 1249a–b. E.1122. Author's photographs, courtesy the Ashmolean Museum. Drawings from Petrie 1900: [ᴅ] pl. 14, nos 12–12 A, courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.

If we assume that, based on complete examples, the space to the left of the niched frame was reserved for the PI of an official, seal bearer or otherwise, it is possible in each case of erasure that the individual retired, died or otherwise ceased to hold that post. It is tempting to conjecture a degree of continuity between reigns (see **Table 1**) whereby the same individual served Djet and Den rulers (and presumably the intervening ruler/regent Merneith), but who then fell out of favour or whose identity was otherwise deemed necessary to remove.

Figure 8: Incised label fragment of wood bearing the PI of Den. Imagery below the 'S20' / 'seal on lanyard' and 'L2' / 'bee' has been erased (cf. Figures 6–7). Provenance: Abydos, surface find. н 2.6+ cm; w 5.5 cm; тн 0.3–0.7 cm. Source No. 1366. JE 31581. Author's photograph, courtesy the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Drawing from de Morgan 1897: 234, fig. 782.

The presence of both erased and un-erased labels in the same cemetery at Abydos raises essential questions about processes of label creation and function(s). It is curious that the identity markers for one of the highest positions in the two lands at that time — seemingly key information for a label to carry, not least judging by its juxtaposition with the PI of the Egyptian ruler — could be omitted. That partially complete (or more accurately, 'partially unmade') labels were nevertheless 'valid' for use in the Egyptian ruler's burial or associated rituals or ceremonies questions the understanding of these objects as administrative documents. These omissions may also point to a role for (some) labels where function took on a more symbolic aspect, such as deposition in the tomb to ensure the continuing efficacy of events and goods depicted and described on their surfaces. A more mundane explanation is that erasures were part of preparation for re-use that ultimately never took place. An abundance of later evidence attests to the re-use of scribal / artistic materials and products (Caminos 1986), but evidence among the labels for re-use, such as palimpsest in areas related to quantitative and qualitative product details, or PI information seems to be unattested.

Postscript?

In addition to erasure episodes, the labels bear other evidence for scribal acts that possibly took place after their initial making. More than 60 are inscribed on both faces, raising the question of production sequence and the passage of time between them. In those cases where the same technique for both sides occurs in a similar style and sign density, and organisation is similar (e.g. de Morgan 1897: 167, fig. 550–551, 553–555 A–B), the relationship between faces and episodes can be understood to be temporally and semantically more immediate. For labels which lack symmetry across these variables, it seems reasonable to assume that the most densely inscribed face was intended to be the primary side. From this point of departure then, differences in image density, organisation, and style may indicate two phases of inscription, and where technique is different the relationship between graphic episodes is probably even less direct.

Figure 9: Wooden label inscribed using incision and red colour infill on the primary face, with applied red colour on the secondary face. Provenance: Abydos, tomb B 18 (Narmer) / B 19 (Aha) (Petrie 1901: [т] 21, 51, [р] pl. 3A, no. 5). н 6.79 cm; w 9.45 cm; тн 0.71 cm. Source No. 0284a–b. E 9396. Author's photographs, courtesy University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Drawings after Petrie 1901: pl. 10, nos 2–3, courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.

For example, stepping back in time to label evidence from the earlier reign of Aha, two double-sided wooden labels bear densely incised imagery on their primary sides (**Figures 9–10**). In contrast, the opposite faces are not only sparsely inscribed, but this has been accomplished using red and black colour, probably applied with a rush pen. The secondary side of **Figure 9** bears a 'U34ᵛ#' / 'mace / drill?' in red colour and other possible imagery too faded to identify. The similar but more fragmentary wooden label in **Figure 10** bears on its secondary face alternating images of a 'vessel' and 'semi-circular shape', also in red colour located 'on', or 'protruding from', a black 'rectangle', which may depict a 'Y5#' / 'gaming board' or container and its contents.

Both labels present an interesting parallel with the pair of elephant ivory labels from Naqada presented above, in that they also constitute a pair with material, technical, inscriptional, spatial, and temporal similarities. Both wooden labels appear to be made of the same type of wood (based on weight and visual inspection only), and were cut to the same general size, with similar narrative imagery and signs incised and formatted in four horizontal registers. Both were excavated from Cemetery B at Abydos (tombs B18 and B19; Petrie 1901: 21, 51), and date to around the time of Aha based on this find context and the presence of this ruler's PI on each label.
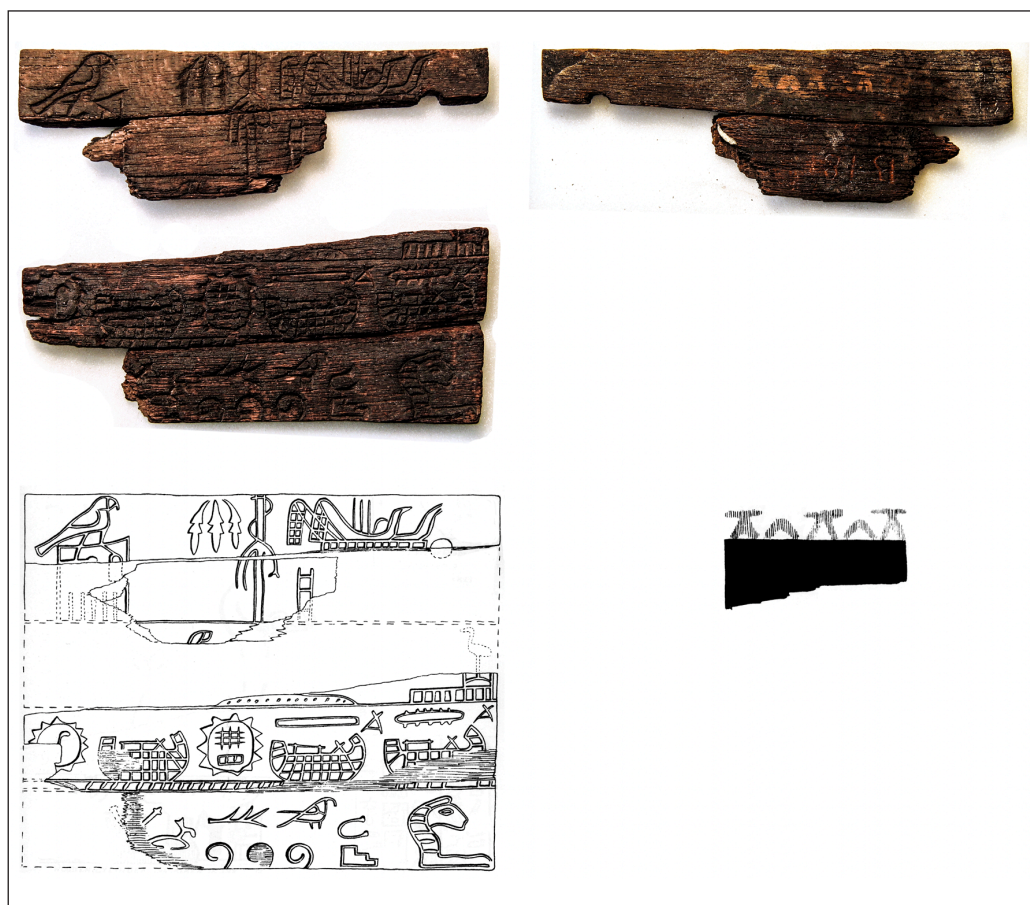
Figure 10: Fragmentary wooden label inscribed using incision on the primary face, with applied pigment on the secondary face (photography of full recto not permitted due to fragile condition). Provenance: Abydos, tomb B 18 (Narmer?) / B 19 (Aha?) (Petrie 1901: [T] 21, [P] pl. 3A, no. 6). H 5+ cm; W 9.6 cm; TH 0.23–0.4 cm. Source No. 0283a–b. EA 35518. Author's photograph, courtesy Trustees of the British Museum. Drawings from Petrie 1901: pl. 11, nos. 2–3, courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.

These and other examples of mixed image-making methods raise the possibility that the use of different techniques and styles for the two faces reflects greater temporal separation between production episodes. Perhaps incision of the primary side was the result of the immediate concerns of the (commissioner and) label-maker, while the addendum (?) was undertaken by a (different?) individual using different materials and writing implement, at a different time (and place?). Like the pairs of Naqada and Abydos labels, the life histories of these two examples, also from Abydos, seem to have been closely related, based on their temporal and spatial affiliations and the materiality of their inscriptions — an intersection of variables which can perhaps be understood as an indicator of the close proximity in which commissioners, label-makers and users sometimes operated.

To contextualise these graphical practices attested on label evidence, I would now like to turn briefly to contemporary examples of erasure, addendum and non-completion on Early Dynastic stone vessels and stelae.

Inscribed Stone Vessels and Stelae

Constructing, Deconstructing and Curating Personal Identity

Inscription on stone is sometimes characterised as intending permanency and immutability (e.g. Hiebert et al. 2000: 8; Kreamer et al. 2007: 110), yet many examples from ancient Egypt exhibit evidence for adjustment, addendum, palimpsest and erasure. Attested throughout the Pharaonic period (e.g. Der Manuelian 1999; Gozzoli 2000; Yoyotte 1951), erasure can be understood as an act of *damnatio memoriae* or the result of other changes in social status and relationships between individuals or between people and inscribed things, such as 'ownership'. Evidence of similar changing relationships is also evidenced on Early Dynastic stone objects including vessels.

Over half of all known early inscribed objects (more than 4500) are inscribed on vessels, the majority being made of hard stone, although most survive as fragments (Regulski 2010: 6, 26; see also El-Khouli 1978). Among these are a variety of rock and mineral types (e.g. basalt, diorite, granite, yellow limestone, quartz crystal, etc., see Aston 1994: 11–73), shaped into a range of forms (Aston 1994: 106–128). They are typically found in high status funerary contexts (e.g. Petrie 1901: pl. 46–53), and to a lesser extent ceremonial contexts (e.g. Quibell 1989 [1900]: pls 31 (2), 36). Vessel imagery contrasts somewhat with that of the labels. The former floats and clusters together with few narratival relationships between images in a compositional field with undefined boundaries beyond the surface area provided by the vessel. On the labels, narrative scenes are attested more often, particularly in the first-half of the 1st Dynasty, and compositional space is organised by register and column lines as well as the rectangular shape of the plaque itself (Piquette 2007). It therefore seems evident that images on the vessels, while depictive, are intended to serve a more scriptorial than pictorial function. The use of image categories such as 'sign', 'writing' or 'inscription' seems appropriate for the stone vessel imagery, but assumptions concerning a communicative function and a relationships to spoken language, such as the pronunciation of 'readings' from this early period, should be considered provisional (Trigger et al. 2001 [1983]: 56; see also Engel 1997: 434–435)

A survey of vessel inscriptions shows that they were made by removing surface material through incisions and less commonly, low relief carving. Many incisions are infilled with pigment / paste, as also attested on the inscribed labels (above). This would have aided visibility but colour also could also serve a symbolic purpose (Griffith in Petrie 1901: 51). Incised inscription usually occurs on the exterior of the vessel. Red or black colour applied directly to the vessel surface, attested more commonly during the 2nd Dynasty, was often located on the interior vessel surface (Regulski 2004: 955). Among the vessels and vessel fragments at least four types of scribal practice can be distinguished:

1. inscription
2. inscription > inscription
3. inscription > partial erasure / complete erasure
4. inscription > erasure > re-inscription

Subsequent to initial inscription (1), at least a dozen vessels bear inscriptions of type (2). These consist of a series of PIs laid out horizontally and understood as 'royal' titles (conventionally rendered *nsw.t-bi.t* and *nbty*) associated with Den, Adjib, Semerkhet and Qa'a (see Helck 1987: 101; see also Raffaele 2001 / 2002). It is suggested that after initial inscription, presumably commencing during the reign of the first ruler's PI in the list, the successor appropriated or otherwise acquired a vessel. The PI of the successor was then inscribed beside the predecessor's PI (see Kahl 2006: 96–99 for ideological influences on sequence for cylinder seals). Such examples highlight another way in which time is bound up in mark making. In comparison with the use of different
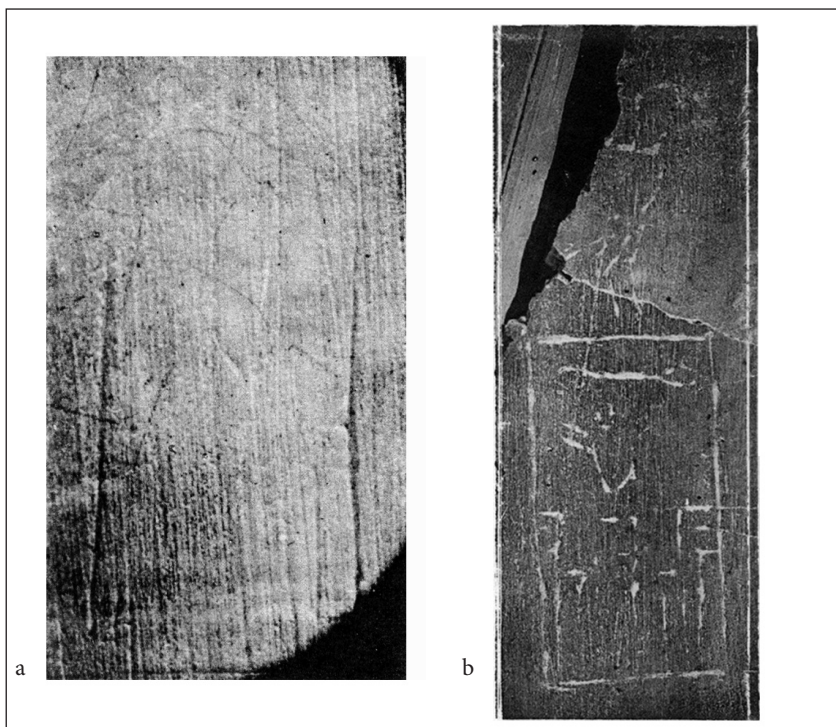
Figure 11: Details of stone vessels bearing erasures of the PI of Adjib. Provenance: Abydos, tomb complex U, attributed to Semerkhet, Adjib's successor (Petrie 1900: [T] 20). Not to scale. Photographs from Petrie 1900: [P] pl. 6, nos 9 and 11, courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.

techniques on different faces of a label and implications for the passage of time (above), here a temporal aspect that spans lifetimes is foregrounded in the sequence of graphical expressions of individual identity and social position.

One of the earliest occurrences of sign erasure (3) on stone vessels derives from Abydos tomb complex X attributed to Adjib. These had apparently been inscribed during the previous reigns of Merneith and Den based on traces of their PIs. Excavation of Abydos tomb complex U ascribed to Semerkhet also yielded a number of stone vessels bearing erasures (Petrie 1900: 19–20). Just visible beneath two examples are the faint remains of signs identified by Flinders Petrie as the name of Adjib, Semerkhet's predecessor (**Figure 11**), while others bore erasures of the PI of Merneith (Petrie 1900: 19, pl. 5, no. 5, see also 20, pl. 7, no. 6). This practice of erasing (though not completely enough to prevent the PI from being reconstructed) continued into the Old Kingdom. In the Valley Temple complex of Menkaure, a 4th Dynasty ruler, a cache of Early Dynastic vessels contained examples bearing both erasures and re-incision. These included an erased and re-inscribed vessel with the PI of Hetepsekhemwy and the erased PI of his successor, Nebra, on another (Reisner 1931).

These various episodes of scribal unmaking and remaking provide the modern investigator with valuable evidence for charting succession and lengths of reign (e.g. Kahl 2006). They also raise the question of whether these activities should be understood as *damnatio memoriae*, theft or usurpation, or seen as economically motivated. The notion of 'heirlooms' (see Jeffreys 2003) and seeing these activities as maintenance or curation may be more appropriate for some vessels, particularly those which bear accumulations of PI inscriptions rather than erasure. The proposal that an inscription was carved by an individual who was not fully literate and made an error

in the copying process thus leading to erasure (Dusinberre 2005: 52), is probably not relevant here. Unlike the majority of labels for which making, use and deposition appear to be relatively restricted in time-space (e.g. spanning one, two or three reigns at most), the inscribed stone vessels exhibit more diverse and extended life histories. This may have involved greater opportunities for changes in function and meaning over the generations, as the vessels took on different kinds of significance for those who engaged with and experienced them — presumably rulers, scribes / artisans and individuals working in the funerary domain, if not the great beyond.

A potentially important link might be observed in the relationship between inscribed vessels and changes in high status funerary practices. During the 1st Dynasty, inscribed stone vessels turned up in close association with the burial chamber and the ruler's body. By the mid-Old Kingdom, inscribed vessels were still deployed within the funerary domain, but deposited some distance from the pyramid (where the body was presumably entombed), within the Valley Temple where the cult of the ruler was perpetuated. Further study of burial chamber deposition versus placement elsewhere may elucidate the nature and significance of vessel curation where inscriptions undergo replacement versus accumulation.

Partially Incomplete, Partially Complete

The final inscribed find type briefly treated in this chapter is a funerary stele. The vast majority of early stelae derive from the large mudbrick tomb complexes built for many Early Dynastic rulers at Abydos. The entrance to the main structure, the burial chamber and series of side chambers (Reisner 1936), was probably flanked by two large 'royal' stone stelae each adorned with the ruler's PI (e.g. Amélineau 1899: pls 34–37; 1904: pl. 18; Petrie 1900: pl. 1). Surrounding the burial chamber and magazines were rows of male and female human (and some faunal) subsidiary graves. Based on general archaeological association it seems that more than 300 graves were marked with small 'private' limestone stelae (e.g. Martin 2011: 2–3; Petrie 1900: pl. 33; see also Martin 2003 on 'royal: private' distinction). Small numbers of signs and often a seated or standing human figure were painted, carved, hammered, pecked or scratched onto / into the upper part of often roughly shaped slabs.

A small number of stelae show evidence for multiple or incomplete graphical episodes (e.g. Martin 2011: Stelae 96, 122, 131, 132, 142, 193, 201). A relatively large and exceptionally elaborate example of the so-called private stelae (No. 48) was found in a small chamber (unlikely its original context) to the west of the burial chamber of Qa'a (**Figure 12**; Petrie 1900: 26–27, 44–45, pls 30–31, 36). Based on Petrie's (1900: 26–27) written description and Geoffrey Thorndike Martin's (2011: 44) more recent study, this medium-sized rectangular limestone slab is smoothly dressed on the front from the top to the bottom of the panel. Below this the surface is roughly dressed and the back carefully worked. The edges were rounded off rather than squared. The inscription was sketched onto the surface in a red-brown pigment and finalised in black. Work was then begun to roughly hammer the matrix from around the drafted images, but intriguingly, the task was never completed. This is particularly apparent on the right in the second row where the height of the surface around the sign has not been reduced completely. Consequently, some images are unclear save for traces in red and black colour.

If we assume a right to left 'reading' direction (into the faces of the images), it is interesting to note that the process of surface transformation appears to have been undertaken in a different sequence from reading, leaving the right-most images in the second and third rows incompletely defined, including the upright staff held by the stele-owner. From the perspective of the presumed right-left reading direction and importance of this object as a vehicle for expressing the owner's identity, it seems unusual that the image of the owner, and the beginning of the row just above, were not prioritised in the production process. Perhaps the act of inscription in certain media may

Figure 12: Limestone stele No. 48 with incomplete carving along the right side. Dated to the end of the 1st Dynasty. Provenance: Abydos, "[t]his lay in a chamber on the west of Qa'a" (Petrie 1900: [T] 26 and pl. 60, [P] pl. 36, no. 48, [D] pl. 30 [with red-brown drafting lines indicated] and pl. 31, no. 48; also Martin 2011: [T] 44, [D] 45, Stela 48, [P] pl. 14, Stela 48). H 84.2 cm; W 37.5 cm; D 8.5 cm. Source No. 1865. JE 34416. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Photograph and drawing courtesy Geoffrey Thorndike Martin and Harrassowitz.

have been undertaken according to the combined intentions and technological requirements of the scribe and / or other craftsperson(s) involved.

This evidence for the process of drafting, redrafting and partial carving, as well as erasure, raises a whole host of questions about why objects were not completed prior to being brought to the cemetery. It may be the case that in some circumstances aspects of production took place at or near the grave side (see also Martin 2011: 1). Alternatively, rather than seeing this stele as 'unfinished', perhaps its status within its past context of practice was constructed in a more contingent way. As long as a sufficient proportion of the imagery was present and / or discernible by the viewer (where intended), then perhaps the stele was considered to be sufficiently complete to serve its intended purpose. For this and the numerous other smaller stelae found in the same cemetery, the focus of material-graphical action appears to have been marking the personal identity

Figure 13: A wooden label showing what appears to be a roughly rendered inscription, subsequently scratched out (modern writing on the lower primary face in white ink reads, "Tomb of Zer, Abydos. 1901."). And on secondary face marked 'O' in pencil. Provenance: Abydos, tomb complex O, attributed to Djer (Petrie 1901: [T] 24, [P] pl. 6A, no. 5). H 3.6–3.8 cm; W 3.8–4.1 cm; TH 0.2–0.3 cm. Source No. 0643. E.1529. Author's photograph, courtesy Ashmolean Museum.

of the deceased. In addition to the inscription, this function may have also been accomplished via the spatial location of the stel(a)e adjacent to (or inside?) the tomb or grave of the individual concerned. If meaning was situated in and constructed through a network of spatial and material, as well as iconographic and semantic relationships, perhaps that an element was not 'fully' expressed would not have been perceived as problematic.

Discussion

In the preceding sections, I have examined three find types bearing graphical imagery, labels, stone vessels and stelae, with emphasis on their materiality in terms of surface transformation and evidence for practices of making, remaking, unmaking as well as partial making. If matter was removed from a surface rather than added to it, an image could not be easily changed or erased and work accumulated an internal 'stratigraphy' (Davis 1989: 184). At the same time, as part of different object types with different material properties, these surfaces were not simply passive foundations to support graphical imagery, but actively constituted and influenced expression and practice. By thinking through the *chaîne opératoire* of image-making we come to understand the ways in which imagery simultaneously embodied material processes and their outcomes.

Whether in making images fully or partially, or subsequently undertaking their adjustment, the particular contexts of those acts revealed different sets of choices and outcomes. For the wooden label in **Figure 13**, rather than a more comprehensive erasure, crossing out was used. This may have been a way of effectively decommissioning or cancelling potential use for ritual (?) or administrative (?) purposes. Perhaps the depositional context of the cemetery was nevertheless one of discard. The perforated bone plaque from the northern Egyptian cemetery site of Saqqara in **Figure 14** reveals a similar scribal act but on a smaller scale, indicative of intentions and choices bound up in a different set of circumstances. Here the marks of crossing out appear to be the correction of a perceived error, that the upper part of this large central sign or depiction was deemed to protrude too much. Such an adjustment seemingly resulted in the
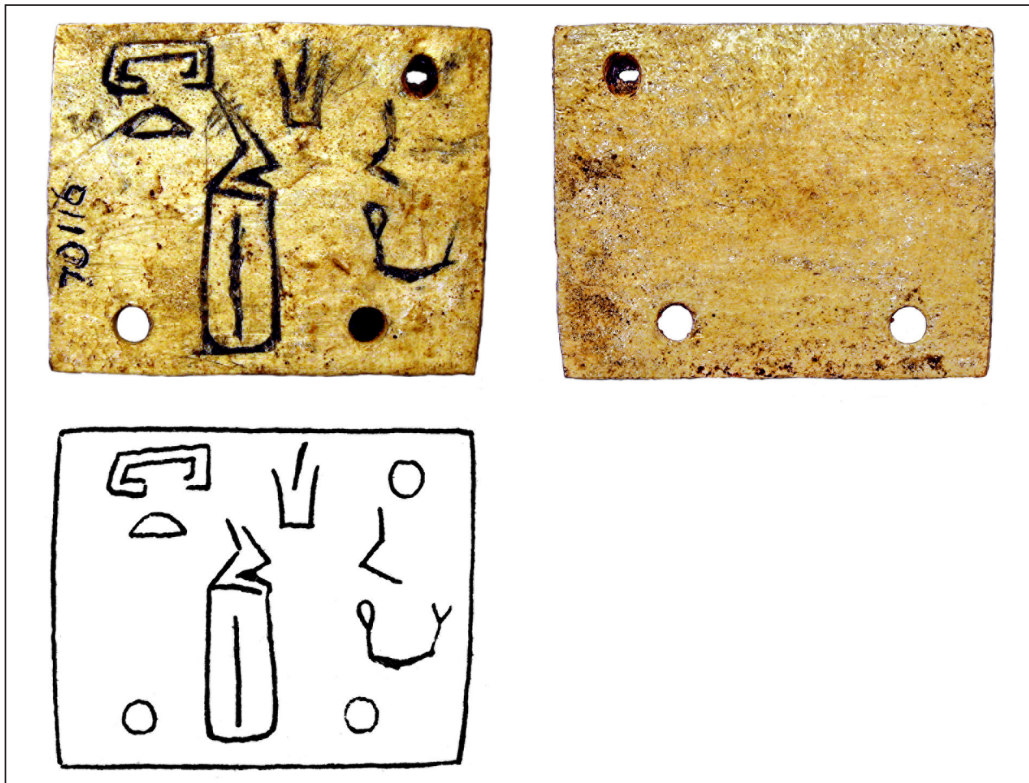
Figure 14: Incised ivory plaque showing the upper tip of the large central sign ('s25' / 'bag' [following Weill 1940: 222–223]) that has been scratched out. Provenance: North Saqqara, Tomb 3035. Dated to the 1st Dynasty reign of Djer? / Den (Emery and Sa'ad 1938: [т] 39, [р] pl. 17C (Cat. No. 413), [D] pl. 18C [Cat. No. 413]). н 2.6–2.61 cm; w 3.15–3.24 cm; тн 0.15–0.29 cm. Source No. 1422. JE 70116. Author's photograph, courtesy the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Drawing from Emery and Sa'ad 1938: pl. 18B.

continuation of the object's intended use based on its well-preserved find context in Tomb 3035 at North Saqqara, which included, in addition to the leather bag and other finds, another almost identically perforated and inscribed plaque bearing a similar 'container' with a more truncated top (see Emery and Sa'ad 1938: [т] 39, [р] pl. 17B, [D] pl. 18B (412); Source No. 1422; Egyptian Museum JE 70115).[3]

To sum up, overall the majority of evidence for graphical adjustment consists of surface removal following original incision. Addendum is more difficult to distinguish, apart from cases such as the wooden labels marked using different in techniques (**Figures 9–10**) or inscriptions including sequences of ruler PIs. The erasure of applied pigment through 'washing' or a similar removal method is likely, but microscopy and multi-spectral analysis are needed for detection.

Because the investigator encounters only the material outcomes of action, it is easy to be seduced by the apparent fixity of the material evidence. Similarities in general archaeological context, repertoire and style, both palaeographic and compositional, point toward much of this graphical evidence being a realisation of the same emerging system (although this must remain an open question for the NIIIA1 survivals). On the basis of the high status find contexts, perceived values of materials (particularly ivory and stone), the elaborate nature of much initial inscription, this early written evidence is often infused with an air of regal or courtly precision,

formality, monumentality, and fixity if not permanence. Scribal and iconographic practice is often seen as on a par with the might and power of early rulers, the administration of the early Egyptian 'state', recording and commemorating activities undertaken during their reigns, and conveying some definitive message about royal prerogative and control over people and goods in life and the afterlife.

Detailed consideration of the relationship between the material substances and surfaces, technological action, and the temporal and spatial conditions of making, use and reception shows that the ways in which that 'system' was practised was nevertheless variable and contingent. Indeed, 'writing' may be conceptualised as a relatively discrete category and concept in many cultural contexts. When examined in detail through the lens of practice theories (e.g. Dobres 2000), we find that individuals reproduced / renegotiated developing conventions and social structures in particularistic and complex ways. The majority of the evidence supports a firm social relationship between graphical / scribal activities and 'royal' and elite power and the maintenance of political authority, but these small details provide important insight into the nuance of individual and local experience. The multi-layered processes for image making, unmaking and re-making, the interactions between scribes / artisan, materials, tools, images and meaning, lends weight to Dobres' (2000: 130–132) notion of the 'becoming' of material culture — a concept which I argue must also form a cornerstone of research on written evidence.

Inasmuch as writing is understood to have been developed by elite members of early Egyptian society in order to consolidate and maintain authority, to formulate ideologies of rulership and cosmic stability, and otherwise 'fix' symbolic meaning, perhaps the devil is in the detail when we consider that writing simultaneously embeds material messages of mutability and transformation.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] Here the artefact assumes the same orientation as when the erased 'bird' motif is viewed in an upright position. The conventional publication for NIIA1 labels prioritises the upright position of clearly identifiable figural images with the effect that perforations are rarely located on the side (cf. Piquette 2010: 59). However, the intended orientation of the preserved image on the label in **Figure 2a** may be questioned when we consider that the other instances of this rectangular shape co-occur as part of a 'bird' / 'bird on perch' combination. Based on morphological similarities with later examples, this rectangular shape may be classed as 'N39' / 'pool' (Regulski 2010: 532) — a designation that inherently requires horizontal orientation and also complements the upright orientation of the accompanying 'bird'. Thus, together with the schematic nature of the preserved image on **Figure 2a**, which makes its iconic significance difficult to discern, and the precedent for the variable location of the perforation, intended orientation must remain an open question, whether in the past context of production or use (e.g. label attachment, grasping, viewing, turning).

² Faint depressions in the shape of 'D28' / 'pair of arms' suggest the same sign, if not cluster, was also originally inscribed in the label in **Figure 5b**. In both cases, the sequence of surface transformations and the underlying marks could be clarified with the application of a computational photographic technique, such as Reflectance Transformation Imaging (e.g. Piquette 2011; see also Earl et al. 2011).

³ Compared with other NIIIA1 or NIIIC–early D 'labels', the number of perforations (3) and graphical content of this pair are unique, raising the question of whether either should be considered a 'label' in the same sense as single-perforated examples.

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