

## Once again: The royal title *Nswt-Bjtj* (= *Swtj-Bjtj*)

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The Eastern Sahara and the Egyptian Nile Valley underwent dramatic climatic and environmental changes between 8500 and 3500 B.C. Between 8500 and 7000 B.C., heavy monsoon rains transformed the Sahara into a savannah, providing good living conditions for pastoralists. At the same time, the Nile Valley became an uninhabitable swamp. Over the next 3500 years, the monsoon rainfall zone slowly retreated southward, and the country gradually returned to its hyper-arid state, where only a narrow strip on either side of the Nile was irrigated by periodic floods, which still exists today.<sup>1</sup>

During the wet period, human settlement in the Nile Valley was possible only on elevated areas (geziras) and on the edges of the delta outside the floodplain. The early Neolithic cultures in Merimde-Benisalame, el-Omari and on the edge of the Fayum Basin developed around 5000 B.C. From the middle of the 5th millennium B.C., the beginning of the Egyptian Late Neolithic, permanent settlements of farmers appeared in the Nile Valley, who in certain regions cleared the thickets in the flood zone in order to make the alluvial soils usable for agriculture (e.g. el-Badari and Mahgar Dendera; from the 4th millennium B.C.: Hierakonpolis and Armant).<sup>2</sup> The subsistence of these people was based on agriculture, fishing, and sheep and goat herding.<sup>3</sup> As rainfall in the savannahs decreased, nomadic groups of hunters and herders lost their livelihoods. Many of them migrated in

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<sup>1</sup> Brooks N (2006), Cultural Responses to Aridity in the Middle Holocene and Increased Social Complexity, *Quat. Int.* 151, pp. 35–37; Kuper R, Croepelin S (2006), Climate-Controlled Holocene Occupation in the Sahara: Motor of Africa's Evolution, *Science* 313, pp. 805–807; Nicoll K (2004), Recent Environmental Change and Prehistoric Human Activity in Egypt and Northern Sudan, *Quat. Sci. Rev.* 23, pp. 565–575; Pennington BT, Sturt F, Wilson P et al. (2017), The fluvial evolution of the Holocene Nile Delta, *Quat. Sci. Rev.* 170, pp. 212–231.

<sup>2</sup> Köhler EC (2011), Neolithic in the Nile Valley (Fayum A, Merimde, el-Omari, Badarian), *Archéo-Nil* 21, pp. 17–20; Köhler EC (2020), Prehistoric Egypt, in: Radner K, Moeller N, Potts DT (eds), *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East*, Vol. 1, Oxford University Press, pp. 112–115.

<sup>3</sup> Köhler EC (2020), op. cit., p. 109; Abd El Karem (2013), Die Nutzung tierischer Ressourcen während des 5. und 4. Jahrtausends v. Chr. in Ägypten, Thesis, University of Vienna, pp. 32–44.

waves to the Nile Valley in search of new hunting grounds and water resources.<sup>4</sup> Some probably initially maintained their lifestyle as mobile herders or hunters,<sup>5</sup> while others established new settlements and added to the cultural and social complexity of Upper Egypt.<sup>6</sup> It can be assumed that the newcomers were initially viewed as invaders, because the habitable living space had been wrested from the Nile Valley with enormous labor efforts and was therefore scarce.

### Hypothesis:

In all cases of major migratory movements, there is some form of conflict between the migrants and the indigenous inhabitants of the destination country. Competition for living space and resources is deeply rooted in the collective memory of mankind.<sup>7</sup> This is related to the tendency to label the competing population group with generalizing terms that focus on "foreign" characteristics.<sup>8</sup> Such classifications could also have been used in the Egyptian Nile Valley. The indigenous farmers could have been called "*Bjtj(w)*". Possible interpretations for this term: a) "those who belong to the chieftain" (the subjects of a chieftain, from \**bj* or *bjt*, hypothetical root for "chieftain", "king"<sup>9</sup>); b) "the bee-like ones" (*bjtj* as nisba of *bjt*, "bee"<sup>10</sup>), because of their sedentary, hard-working way of life under the rule and for the benefit of a chieftain; or c) "those who belong to the papyrus" or "the

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<sup>4</sup> Brooks N (2006), op. cit., p. 37; Hartung U (2006), Some remarks on a rock drawing from Gebel Tjauti, in: Kroeper K, Chłodnicki M, Kobusiewicz M (eds), *Archeology of Early Northeastern Africa*, SAA 9, Poznań Archaeological Museum, Poznań, pp. 680–682; Hendrickx S (2013), Predynastic Period, Egypt, in: Bagnall RS et al. (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden MA, pp. 5514–5515; Kuper R, Kroeplin S (2006), op. cit., p. 806 (fig. 3); Nicoll K (2004), op. cit., pp. 572–575.

<sup>5</sup> Köhler EC (2020), op. cit., pp. 106–107;


<sup>6</sup> Cultural introductions that probably originated from immigrants: animal and hunting scenes on decorated pottery (Naqada I culture, white cross-lined ware, approx. 4500–3900 B.C.), cattle husbandry, and certain astronomical-religious ideas. Craig Patch D (2011), *Dawn of Egyptian Art*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, pp. 32–39; Kuper R, Kroeplin S (2006), op. cit., p. 806; McKim Malville J, Wendorf F, Mazar AA, Schild R (1998), Megaliths and Neolithic astronomy in southern Egypt, *Nature* 392, pp. 488–491.

<sup>7</sup> Padua Soto M (2022), *Xenophobia from an evolutionary biology perspective* (Thesis, Central European University Private University, Vienna), pp. 12–22.

<sup>8</sup> For example, in the history of the colonization of the North American continent, the indigenous population was referred to as "Indians", "redskins" or "savages", even though they had formed distinct nations with great cultural diversity. Conversely, the European invaders and settlers were called "white man", "white meat", "the hairy ones" regardless of their different countries of origin and motives. Mattioli A (2017), *Verlorene Welten. Eine Geschichte der Indianer Nordrhein-Westfalens*, Klett-Cotta (Stuttgart), pp. 15–61; <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldrush-white-mans-view> (last access on September 03, 2024).

<sup>9</sup> Takács G (2001), *Etymological Dictionary of Egyptian*, Vol. 2, Brill (Leiden, Boston, Cologne), pp. 111, no. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Takács G (2001), op. cit., pp. 107–108 (1–2); Wb I, p. 434 (1–5).

papyrus cutters" (from \**bt*, *bt*, "papyrus", "reed plant"?; *btj*, *btj*, "papyrus cutter"<sup>11</sup>). These realities of life were alien enough to the arriving nomads to derive their name for the autochthonous Nile Valley inhabitants. Conversely, the immigrants could have been called "*Swtj(w)*" across the board, even though they certainly belonged to different tribes. *Swtj(w)* means "those belonging to the grass", "grass people" (from *swt*, "grass", "sedge", "rush"<sup>12</sup> [probably all types of savannah grasses]; Coptic: *cw*; Kalenjin [East Africa]: *suuswoo*, "grass"). Traces of the two political powers in southern Upper Egypt can be found in the Pyramid Texts and inscriptions for King Adjib (1st dynasty) in the expression "the two lords" (*Nbwj*), which is wrongly regarded as the precursor of the *Nbtj* title.<sup>13</sup> The religious myth of the struggle for supremacy between Horus (a god originally worshipped in the region of Hierakonpolis) and Seth (*St*, *Stj*, *Stš*, *Stḥ*, *Swt* or *Swtj*,<sup>14</sup> a god probably worshipped by the former savannah dwellers<sup>15</sup>) is an echo of the prehistoric conflict in Upper Egypt.<sup>16</sup> It was not until the beginning of the protodynastic period in the second half of the 4th millennium B.C. (Chalcolithic) that a largely peaceful coexistence developed under a common chieftain or king, who for the first time bore the dual title *Swtj-Bjtj*. This title is probably a few centuries older than its spelling (, which is documented from the Thinite period onwards.<sup>17</sup> In the case of the grass plant hieroglyph as a spelling for the *Swtj* part of the population, the visual and phonetic meanings match. In contrast, the bee is a purely phonetic spelling for the *Bjtj* part of the population.<sup>18</sup> The grass plant

<sup>11</sup> Hannig R (2006), *Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch–Deutsch*, KAW 64, Zabern (Mainz), p. 283 (10244); Takács G (2001), op. cit., p. 355; Wb I, p. 485 (15). Papyrus was harvested on a large scale and used as building material for house walls and boats (the main means of transportation), as well as for making shoes, wickerwork and (later) writable sheets. Kamrin J (2015), *Papyrus in Ancient Egypt*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/papy/hd\\_papy.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/papy/hd_papy.htm) (last accessed on September 15, 2024).


<sup>12</sup> Wb IV, 58 (7–14).

<sup>13</sup> Müller H (1938), *Die formale Entwicklung der Titulatur der ägyptischen Könige*, Thesis, Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin, pp. 36–38; Petrie, WMF (1900–1901), op. cit., Part 1, plate 5 (12).

<sup>14</sup> Roeder G (1912), *Der Name und das Tier des Gottes Set*, ZAEs 50, pp. 84–85.




<sup>15</sup> Leonard B (2020), *Lord of the Oasis*, [https://www.monash.edu/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/2231077/Lord-of-the-Oasis.pdf](https://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/2231077/Lord-of-the-Oasis.pdf) (last access on September 03, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> The rivalry between Upper and Lower Egypt is mistakenly thought to be the basis of the Horus/Seth myth. Taylor IR [2016], *Deconstructing the Iconography of Seth*, Thesis, University of Birmingham, pp. 10–13; Emery WB (1961), *Archaic Egypt*, Penguin Books, London, p. 38–42, 119–120; Te Velde (1967), *Seth, god of confusion*, Brill, Leiden, pp. 32–46, 74–80. But the myth has its roots more than a millennium earlier, as this hypothesis suggests. Similarly in Taylor IR (2016), op. cit., pp. 34–37.

<sup>17</sup> Earliest known examples: Vessel fragments and seal impression from the tomb of King Den at Abydos (1st dynasty); The title is partly followed by  (dotted), which means the two (sandy) deserts ("*Swtj-Bjtj* of the two deserts"); Petrie, WMF (1900–1901), *Royal tombs of the 1st dynasty*, Egypt Exploration Fund, London, Part 1, plate 5 (12), plate 6 (5, 6, 8), Part 2, plate 19 (151).

<sup>18</sup> The bee hieroglyph was long thought to be related to a Lower Egyptian bee god. This is like assuming

hieroglyph always comes first. This may indicate that the *Swtj* dominated the *Bjtj* at certain times. The word for "king", *swtn*<sup>19</sup> or *nswt* (*nj Swtjw* "he of the *Swtj*"?) may also be due to this.

The resolution of the conflict may have been related to the rise of common competitors in the north. In the late fourth millennium B.C., the merging of chiefdoms in the Delta also led to the formation of a kingdom with larger cities at the beginning and along the trade routes (Memphis, Heliopolis, Tell el-Fara'in [Buto], Sais, Tell el-Farkha, Tell el-Iswid and others).<sup>20</sup> This made northern Egypt attractive to both internal Egyptian migrants and immigrants from the Levant.<sup>21</sup> A new rivalry now developed between the united Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt.<sup>22</sup> After these two territories had grown closer politically through supra-regional trade and cultural transfer, the entire country was united around 3100 B.C. under one king who held both the Upper Egyptian *Swtj-Bjtj* title and the new all-Egyptian *Nbtj* title ("the two ladies" = Nekhbet and Wadjet = Upper and Lower Egypt) as a double dual title. This is proven, for example, by finds from the tombs of Merneith, Semerkhet and Qaa (1st dynasty) and into the Old Kingdom.<sup>23</sup> In the long run, this formation of a unified Egyptian kingdom was accompanied by a blending of local religious ideas<sup>24</sup> and a redistribution of plant symbols: the grass plant became the symbol for Upper Egypt (predominantly flowering,  or , *šmꜥ.w*), and the papyrus plant became the symbol for Lower Egypt (, *ḥ mḥw* [northern land]).<sup>25</sup> In the Middle Kingdom, Horus and Seth even appeared iconographically in the *smꜥ-tꜣwj* motif as the unifiers of Upper and Lower Egypt.<sup>26</sup> The original assignments of these plants and gods had apparently been forgotten

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that the title "Son of Re"  is related to a duck god.

<sup>19</sup> Meyer E (1875), Seth – Typhon. Eine religionsgeschichtliche Studie, Engelmann (Leipzig), p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Köhler EC (2020), op. cit., pp. 98 (Fig. 2.IB), 115–119. This development most likely occurred under the influence of increasing aridity, which made the delta arable due to falling groundwater levels and attracted "climate refugees" from the savannah. Köhler EC (2020), op. cit., pp. 102–103; Rowland J, Bertini LC (2016), The Neolithic within the context of northern Egypt: New results and perspectives from fieldwork at Merimde Beni Salama, in: Quat. Int. 410, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ciałowicz KM (2016), Tell el-Farkha, in: Bagnall RS et al. (eds), The Encyclopedia of Ancient History, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden MA, p. 1; Ciałowicz KM (2017), New Discoveries at Tell el-Farkha and the Beginnings of the Egyptian State, Études et Travaux 30, pp. 233–235.

<sup>22</sup> Köhler EC (2020), op. cit., pp. 142–145.

<sup>23</sup> Petrie, WMF (1900–1901), op. cit., Part 1, plate 4 (9), plate 8 (1, 10, 13, 14), plate 9 (3, 8, 10), plate 12 (1), plate 17 (26); Müller H (1938), op. cit., p. 53. In the Old Kingdom, these two dual titles were assigned their own royal names (ibid., p. 52–53).

<sup>24</sup> For example, the integration of the Upper Egyptian gods Seth and Horus into the Heliopolitan family of gods and into the myth of Re. Taylor IR (2016), op. cit., pp. 35–40, 44; Te Velde H (1967), op. cit., pp. 27–31, 106–108.

<sup>25</sup> Wb IV, p. 472 (8-9), 473 (1-16); Wb II, 123 (12-14), 124 (1-9).

<sup>26</sup> Throne of Senwosret I (early 12th dynasty), Cairo Museum JE 31139 (CG 414), in Goebis K (2007), Chapter Twenty: Kingship, in: Wilkinson T (ed.), The Egyptian World, Routledge, London, New York, p. 278 (fig. 20.2). The *Sema-Tawy* motif may have originally been associated with the unification of the Upper

over the centuries.

Abbreviations:

B.C.: before Christian Era; ed./eds: editor(s); fig.: figure; JE: Journal d'Entrée du Musée du Caire; op. cit.: *opus citatum* (work already cited); p./pp.: page(s); Quat. Int.: Quaternary International; Quat. Sci. Rev.: Quaternary Science Reviews; Vol.: volume; Wb: Adolf Erman, Hermann Grapow, Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache, Vol. I–VII, Berlin 1897–1961; ZAeS: Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Schrift und Altertumskunde.

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Egyptian domains of the *Swtj* and the *Bjtj* and may have later been repurposed for Upper and Lower Egypt. The oldest known version of the motif from the time of King Adjib (late 1st dynasty) shows - as far as can be seen on the vessel shard - only the plants, no gods. Amélineau, E (1902), Les nouvelles fouilles d'Abydos, Seconde campagne, plate 21 (no. 4).