The Queens Ahhotep I & II
and Egypt’s Foreign Relations

A riddle from the end of 17th Dynasty (c. 1630-1540 BC) concerns the identity of the two queens named Ahhotep. The confusion about these women has been deepened because surviving records pertaining to them are scarce and insufficiently documented,¹ their burials having been discovered at a time when archaeology was more treasure-hunting than scientific research. Nevertheless, the surviving records show that both of these women played an important role in Egyptian history at the very beginning of the New Kingdom (c. 1540-1070 BC).

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Queen Ahhotep II

In 1900, George Legrain discovered a stela in front of the eighth pylon in the temple of Karnak.² The piece is now kept in the Cairo Museum.³ This stela contains a long inscription of King Ahmose, the first ruler of the 18th Dynasty, recording his virtues and the numerous deeds and benefactions he performed for Egypt and for Amun. A remarkable section of this text deals with Queen Ahhotep, the mother of Ahmose. In this passage the lady is addressed by various unusual titles and epithets. Furthermore, the text contains a striking description of the achievements which the queen accomplished for Egypt.

The translation of the passage is as follows:⁴

Give praise to the Lady of the Land, the Mistress of the shores of Haunebu, (her) name is raised over every foreign country, (and) who governs the people. The wife of the king, the sister of the lord (= king) - life, prosperity, health! The princess, the king’s mother, the noblewoman, who knows things and takes care of Egypt. She looked after its (= Egypt’s) soldiers and protected them. She brought back its (= Egypt’s) fugitives and gathered its dissidents together. She pacified Upper Egypt and expelled its rebels. The king’s wife Ahhotep, may she live.

Besides being addressed by the usual titles for a queen of that period (‘princess’, ‘king’s sister’, ‘king’s wife’, ‘king’s mother’), Ahhotep is also given the titles ‘Lady of the Land’ (nbt t3) and ‘Mistress of the shores of Haunebu’ (hnwt idbw H3w-nbwt). The two references to locations are supplemented by a third: ‘over every foreign country’ (hr h3swt nbwt).

Thus, three geographical terms are used, each obviously designating a different location. It is clear that these terms are used in a broad sense and do not necessarily signify a particular region. On the other hand, it can be shown that they are meant to be ambiguous and probably connoted specific geographical regions and countries. This is clearly observable in the first expression. The title nbt t3 is a shortened form of nbt t3wy, designating the ‘two lands’, i.e. Egypt. Ahhotep is the ‘Lady of the Land’, which is a general statement for the queen, but evidently one that stresses her position as queen of Egypt.

In contrast to the first designation, the second

Section of Stela CG 34001 in hieroglyphs dealing with the eulogy to Queen Ahhotep, the mother of Ahmose I (white text on black). [After P. Lacau: Stèles du nouvel empire Vol. 1 (1909), pp. 3 & 4]
and third indicate foreign countries surrounding Egypt. Although the term h3swt nbwt means ‘foreign lands’ in a general sense, thus contrasting with h3 (‘land’ = Egypt), it also has to contrast with the expression idbw H3w-nbwt. Closer examination of the word h3swt shows that the term should be understood as hill country, mountainous country or simply the desert. It would be futile to search for a specific region around Egypt that could be linked to this expression. Hswt, in contrast to h3, which refers to the flat and fertile land of Egypt, simply denotes the arid hill countries that adjoin Egypt to the east and west.

The third term, idbw H3w-nbwt, is more difficult to explain, and numerous suggestions and interpretations have already been proposed. In general, it denotes a region north of Egypt, but two more specific locations are suggested. One of these is the Aegean, the isles of the Aegean, or more specifically Crete. According to the other interpretation, it is an Asiatic region, specifically Phoenicia.

Taking into account the fact that the term should stand in contrast to the other two terms, a region or land in close proximity by water is the most logical conclusion. This is emphasised by the word idbw, which is translated as ‘river-banks’, ‘shores’, or ‘riparian land’. Thus, the idbw H3w-nbwt is a coastal area in Asia or, more generally, a part of the eastern Mediterranean. Thus, the expression denotes a region north of Egypt, in contrast to the mountainous countries to the east and west of Egypt. The logic behind these three expressions is that Ahhotep was not only the Lady of the Land, i.e. the queen of Egypt, but also held a special position in respect of the foreign countries surrounding Egypt.

The epithets given to Ahhotep are indeed remarkable, and it would be a mistake to treat them only as a venerated status for the queen honoured by her son, Ahmose. The epithets used for Ahhotep can be compared with similar titles and epithets that were normally given to the pharaoh. The king was the ruler of Egypt and all foreign lands. Besides this similarity to the titles of Pharaoh, another important fact has to be stressed: to our knowledge, no other queen or royal lady throughout Egyptian history ever possessed the title h3w idbw H3w-nbwt. Such a title would not have been bestowed without good reason. One is inclined, therefore, to believe that it relates to genuine historical events.

The second part of the queen’s text also suggests that there must have been a special reason for Ahmose to record the deeds and achievements of his mother. It can be supposed that the queen was in some way the instigator of important events (military actions?) which took

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place at the end of the 17th Dynasty. It seems logical also to connect these events with the expulsion of the Hyksos and the re-establishment of Egypt’s unity and power.

On the other hand, the text should not be overestimated. As interesting and unique as the passage might seem, it is presently not possible to link it with any other historical facts or archaeological evidence. It is difficult to say, therefore, how far the queen was personally involved in decisions and actions independent of the king and his advisors. It would certainly be premature to assume that Ahhotep had pharaonic status and exercised some kind of royal power over Egypt and the regions mentioned in the text. Her power was limited. As the wife of the king (hm.t nysw), she was only a part of the overall concept of Egyptian kingship and not in the position to act as a king in her own right.

Basing his ideas on the text of the Ahmose stela, the historian Eduard Meyer reconstructed an intriguing, though unsubstantiated and romantic, story concerning this Ahhotep. According to him, she played an active role in the establishment of Egypt as an imperial power at the beginning of the New Kingdom. After the death of her husband, Sehkenenre Tau II, she acted as regent for her sons, Kings Kamose and Ahmose. Meyer translated the expression tdbw H3w-nbwt as ‘Cretans’, claiming that the queen had some contact with them and that she even married the Minoan ruler! He was of the opinion that the Hyksos were driven out of Egypt by a co-ordinated attack from the north by Cretans and from the south by Thebans. He tried to strengthen his theory by pointing to the Minoan influences which were apparent in some of the items found with the coffin of Ahhotep discovered at Dra Abu el-Naga.

Meyer’s unrealistic ‘story’ was soon refuted by various scholars. As with many other Egyptologists, both before and after him, Meyer had confused the material pertaining to the two queens named Ahhotep. Those artefacts bearing the Minoan-influenced decoration did not belong to the queen who is mentioned in the Ahmose stela but to an earlier Ahhotep.

Who then was this queen, who received such praise from her son? Is there further contemporary evidence that could shed light on this period and this particular individual. Unfortunately, facts and finds are few and far between and inconclusive. The only other object known to us is her coffin, which was found in the famous Royal Cache of Deir el-Bahri (TT 320), but no mummy or other funerary equipment of this queen has been found. In her coffin lay the mummy of king Pinudjem I of the 21st Dynasty. Ahhotep’s original tomb has not yet been positively identified.

Queen Ahhotep I

The coffin of the other queen, Ahhotep I, was discovered by Auguste Mariette’s workmen in 1859. The inscription on this coffin lacks the title ‘mother of a king’, whereas this title is present on the coffin of Ahhotep II from the Deir el-Bahri Royal Cache. Numerous objects were found with the coffin and in the wrappings of the royal mummy, which was unfortunately destroyed during the excavation. Surprisingly, most of these objects bear the name of King Ahmose, and some the name of King Kamose. It was originally believed, therefore, that this woman was the mother of Ahmose - an opinion which was later rightly rejected because the queen did not bear the title ‘King’s Mother’. It is indeed remarkable that this queen, whose burial equipment is associated so closely with the names of Kamose and Ahmose, should not have been directly related to these two kings.

An epigraphic detail in the lady’s name indicates that her coffin was decorated at the latest during the time of Ahmose. Ahhotep I could therefore have died during this king’s reign. Unfortunately, no other records of this Ahhotep are known. According to her titles, she was the

The gilded coffin of Queen Ahhotep II found at Dra Abu el-Naga in 1859. [Photo: D. Rohl]
The village of Dra Abu el-Naga, on the West Bank at Luxor, believed to be located over the 17th Dynasty royal cemetery in Western Thebes. [Photo: D. Rohl]

chief wife of a king, but because of the paucity of documents, it is not possible to ascertain which pharaoh of the late 17th Dynasty was her husband and who were her offspring. 21

A word has to be said about the place where the queen’s coffin was unearthed. As already mentioned, no accurate records exist about the location of the find. According to Mariette’s own observation, the queen was discovered near to where the coffin of Kamose had been excavated just two years earlier. 22

It is probable that neither Kamose nor Queen Ahhotep were originally buried in the place where they were found by Mariette. The discovery locations might have been secret caches dating from the period at the end of the 21st Dynasty, when the other royal burials were hidden in the Royal Cache of Deir el-Bahri. It is rightly assumed that the search for tombs of the kings and queens of the late 17th Dynasty must be focussed further to the west, up in the rocky hills of Dra Abu el-Naga. It is clear, therefore, that the objects found with Queen Ahhotep’s mummy, bearing the names of Kamose and Ahmose, need not necessarily have belonged to the original burial equipment of the queen. It is generally believed, however, that they could have been gifts from Ahmose.

Nevertheless, a closer look at some of these objects reveals some interesting details. Surprisingly, none of them bear the name of the queen, thus strengthening the assumption that the queen’s burial-place was only a hiding place from a later period. Among the many artefacts, the large quantity of weapons of different kinds, both ceremonial and functional, is striking. Two ceremonial axes and two real axes of bronze belonging to Kamose, a javelin head bearing Kamose’s cartouche, plus a dagger and a ceremonial axe of Ahmose were found. 23 The discovery of such a quantity of weapons in a royal burial is usually thought to be understandable given the unstable and militant circumstances of that time. 24

One piece in particular, the ceremonial axe of Ahmose, shows in its decoration some unusual features that have to be mentioned in detail. The

![Figure 1 (left) & Figure 2 (above)]

[Illust: P. Jánosi, after (1) von Bissing, op. cit. [30], pl.1; and (2) Evans, op. cit. [27], fig. 884]
inscriptions and depictions clearly express one thing: the king is represented as the victorious ruler over the Hyksos. On one side of the axe-blade a griffin is depicted (Fig. 1). Griffins are known in Egyptian art from prehistory onwards, but this type shows interesting features that are found only in depictions of griffins from the Aegean. The outstanding characteristics are the beak of a vulture; the crested head; the upraised wing; and the spirals on the neck, shoulder, and wing. A similar creature is depicted in the throne room of the palace of Knossos (Fig. 2). Although their postures are different, the shape of the heads and the decoration on the shoulders are similar.

According to the hieroglyphic inscription, the king, in the form of the recumbent griffin, ‘is beloved of Montu’. Above the griffin, the king is shown in an attitude that is also well attested in royal representations throughout Egyptian history. With one hand he holds the hair of a subdued enemy, who he is about to kill (Fig. 1). However, this particular representation of a king is unusual. Normally the king holds a mace in his right hand, which is raised and ready to smite the enemy. On this piece, the object which the king has in his right hand is not clearly discernible. It may well be a dagger with which he is stabbing the Asiatic. Furthermore, the king’s left hand is not actually holding his enemy’s hair since the hair is too short (or just a cap?) but he rather has his fist upon the captive’s head.

On the other side of the blade, the king is represented as an (Egyptian) sphinx, with the body of a lion and a human head (Fig. 3). It differs from similar depictions in that, in this case, the forearms are human and in his right hand the king is holding the decapitated head of an enemy. In similar representations, the sphinxes usually hold vessels or the cartouche of the king, objects which are being offered to the gods.

Figure 3. [Illust: P. Jánosi, after von Bissing, op. cit. [30], pl. 1]

Axe-head of Ahmose found with the grave goods of Queen Ahhotep I at Dra Abu el-Naga. Cairo Museum. [Photo: D. Rohl]
The second important item from the Ahhotep treasure, which exhibits Aegean elements, is the so-called ‘Queen Ahhotep dagger’. The outstanding feature on the dagger blade is the scene of a lion hunting a calf in the pose known as the ‘flying gallop’. It is one of the earliest attested examples of this style. Above the animals, the landscape is indicated in the typical Aegean form of a very simplified design to denote space. On the same side of the blade, four grasshoppers are facing the hunt. Their appearance on this weapon is quite remarkable and still not completely understood (Fig. 4).

There are two more exceptional features on this ceremonial dagger: the joint between the blade and the handle, which is formed by a bull’s head in gold facing towards the handle, and the handle itself, which terminates in a pommel showing one female head on each of its four sides.

Besides the open question as to how these objects were brought together with Ahhotep’s coffin and the issue of whether they really reflect some kind of active (military?) involvement by the queen in Egypt’s politics, other important questions have to be raised. Where were these objects, which show clear Aegean decoration, produced, and who were the artists? Are they gifts from an Aegean ruler to Pharaoh imitating Egyptian motifs? Were Aegean artists employed by Pharaoh in Egypt, or did Egyptian artists simply try to imitate some motifs from the Aegean?

Fritz Schachermeyr thinks that an Egyptian artist was responsible for these artefacts, whereas Wolfgang Helck rightly points out that the hieroglyphs on the dagger are written in a way that precludes their production by an Egyptian. The representation of the Egyptian sphinx with the decapitated head on the axe-blade is also a ‘misinterpretation’ of an Egyptian motif. According to Helck, the dagger and the axe could have been manufactured in the Aegean.

Regardless of the correct interpretation, the interest in, and the influence of, Aegean art on Egypt at this time is clearly visible. It is also interesting to note that Aegean motifs occur mainly on weapons, which leads to the tentative conclusion that Aegean weapons may have been considered important status symbols or perhaps they were admired for their quality.

The epigraphical and archaeological facts thus indicate that there were two queens at the end of the 17th Dynasty who can be associated with the Eastern Mediterranean: one through the motifs depicted on objects found with her coffin, the other through an inscription that enumerates unusual epithets and titles which probably have their roots in historical events. However, it would certainly be rash to reconstruct an historical scenario for the beginning of the 18th Dynasty, as Meyer did, based on such limited evidence. There are currently unfortunately no other material facts to link these two queens more closely with either the Aegean or Crete.

On the other hand, the few and scattered clues show that some kind of relationship or connection must have existed with the regions north of Egypt. These facts, insubstantial as they might be, should not be overlooked or regarded as insignificant. This is especially the case in view of new archaeological findings which are dramatically increasing our knowledge of this period. The discovery in recent years of a large number of Minoan frescoes at Tell ed-Daba, ancient Avaris (see the report in JACF 4, (1991), pp. 86-88), was surprising. The archaeological results and the stratigraphy of the site show that these frescoes date from the Second Intermediate Period or, more precisely, from the Hyksos period. Although their purpose and exact original location within Avaris has not yet been determined, these frescoes add a new dimension to the history of the Hyksos period and to our...
knowledge of the events surrounding the beginnings of the New Kingdom. It is to be hoped that the Minoan paintings at Avaris will also provide answers to the riddles of the idbw IIIw-nbwt of Ahhotep II, the mother of King Ahmose, and to the appearance of the Aegan/Cretan motifs on the funerary equipment of Ahhotep I.

One is inclined to conclude that these women were somehow involved in events that concerned the Hyksos and the Eastern Mediterranean, specifically the Aegan and/or Crete. A critical but open mind is certainly required when approaching these intriguing issues. With the right approach and armed with the anticipated increase in our knowledge brought about by the ongoing excavations at Tell ed-Daba, we may soon be able to provide a clearer picture of this important epoch in Egypt’s long history.

Notes and References


11. A. Gardiner: Egypt of the Pharaohs (1980), p. 173, suggests that her titles reflect a regency for her son Ahmose after the (unexpectedly) short reign of King Kamosse.


13. A similar view was expressed by W. Wolf: Funde in Ægypten. Geschichte ihrer Entdeckung (1966), p. 157ff. and Das alte Ägypten (1978), p. 97. He thought that the queen was responsible for gathering Egyptian refugees together in Crete and, with the help of the Cretan fleet, bringing them into the Delta, where they took part in the war against the Hyksos. F. Stubbing: CAH II/pt. I, p. 634.


17. PM I, pt. 2, p. 600.