BEN-OIL IN ANCIENT EGYPT

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Introduction

There were many kinds of oil in ancient Egypt, for example, *nhh*, *mr-ht*, *sgnn*, *sft* and so on.⁽¹⁾ The oil called *b3k* was one of the most important oil among them. *B3k* was thought to be olive oil for a long time by Egyptologists.⁽²⁾ However, the Egyptian word for olive was *dt*.⁽³⁾ *Dt* from ancient Egyptian records was very rare. It first appeared in Egypt at the time of the Eighteenth Dynasty, and was probably imported from Syria.⁽⁴⁾

Ben-oil is produced from the seeds of *Moringa peregrina* Fiori (*Moringa aptera* Gaertn., *Moringa arabica* Pers.) and a very similar oil is obtained from the seeds of *Moringa oleifera* Lam. (*Moringa pterygosperma* Goertn.).⁽⁵⁾

The refined oil is yellowish in colour and tastes sweet. As it is odourless, it has been used as cosmetics. It was also used for cooking. In ancient Egypt, it was also used as ingredient for medicine. The Ebers papyrus shows the recipe for the remedy for stomach trouble. A mixture of honey, *Moringa* oil, frankincense, wine was boiled and eaten. It was also used as enema and refreshing ointment. *Moringa* oil was also considered to be insect repellent.⁽⁶⁾

Moringa tree is very tall, about 10~15 metres high, and has long pods with seeds.⁽⁷⁾ Each pod is 20 cm long and consists of several seeds in it. A seed is 15 mm. long and 12 mm. broad on the average.⁽⁸⁾ Today, *Moringa peregrina* Fiori occurs wild in the rocky region of the Upper Egypt, but very rare. It also grows naturally in Syria, South Arabia, Eritrea, Abyssinia, and Sudan.⁽⁹⁾ Lucas identified Pliny's myrobalanum as *Moringa* 'ree'.⁽¹⁰⁾

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I. B3k as Person's Names

The words of *b3k* appeared first on the wall paintings of the tomb-chapel of Pepiankh (*ppy-nh*) in Meir. This tomb is dated as belonging to the end of the Old Kingdom, the Sixth Dynasty.⁽¹¹⁾ We can find the following names as the names of people, *b3k*,⁽¹²⁾ *b3kk*,⁽¹³⁾ and *nfr-b3kt*⁽¹⁴⁾ inside the tomb-chapel.

In the Eleventh Dynasty, *b3kt*⁽¹⁵⁾ and *b3kty*⁽¹⁶⁾ were also used for person's names in the tombs of Beni Hasan.⁽¹⁷⁾

From the end of the Old Kingdom to the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, the usage of the word *b3k* was limited only to person's name. We have not any records of *b3k* as referring to *ben-oil* until the Twelfth Dynasty in Egypt.

II. Inscribed Records of *Ben-Oil*

1. The Story of Sinuhe⁽¹⁸⁾

The story of Sinuhe is one of the most popular ancient Egyptian stories. This story has taken place in the Twelfth Dynasty. The following passage from this story is one of the earliest records referring to *ben-oil* in Syria. Syria seems to have been the main producing country of *ben-oil* in the ancient time.

*rdi-n-f wi m-h3t hr dw-f mn-n-f wi m s3t-f wrt rdin-f stp-i n-i m h3st-f
m stpw n wnt hn'-f hr t3š-f n kt h3st t3 pw nfr 'I33 rn-f iw d3bw im-f
hn' i3rrt wr n-f irp r mw '3 bit-f š3 b3k-f dkrrw nb hr ht w-f iw it im
hn' bty nn drw mnmnt nbt '3 grt dmit r-i m ii n mrt-i rdit-f wi m hk3
whyt m stp n h3st-f ir n-i 'kw m mint irp m hrt hrw iw f ps 3pd m š3r
hrw-r 'wt h3st iw grg-tw n-i iw w3h-tw n-i hrw-r inw n tsmw-i iw irt
n-i ht š3wt m pst nbt ir-n-i rnpwt š3wt hr dw-i hpr m nhtw s nb m d3r
whyt-f*

"He placed me in front of his children and married me to his eldest daughter. He made me take from his country the best of what he owned at the border of his land with another country. It was a good land, Yaa was its name. Figs were there as well as grapes, and wine was more plentiful than

water. The land abounded with honey and *ben*-oil. All kinds of fruit were on its trees. Barley was there and also emmer, as well as a large number of cattle of different kinds. Furthermore, what I was offered by reason of his love for me was great. I was made a ruler of the best tribe in his land. Loaves were provided for me daily, and so was wine and cooked meat and roast duck as well as desert game. Men hunted for me and laid food before me in addition to the quarry of my hunting-dogs. Many good things were made for me, and boiled in every way. I spent many years while my children became fine men, each one as the head of his tribe."

2. The Biography of Ineni

Ineni lived through the reigns of Amenophis I, Tuthmosis I, Tuthmosis II, and Tuthmosis III at the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty in the New Kingdom. He served the above four kings and had the title of the "overseer of the granary of Amen". His autobiography in his tomb, the tomb No. 81 at Sheikh 'Abd al-Qurna in the Theban West,⁽¹⁹⁾ is an important record of the early period of the Eighteenth dynasty. In his autobiography referring to the reign of Tuthmosis II, a record of *ben*-oil is seen.⁽²⁰⁾ Judging from this passage *ben*-oil was a luxury and as it is listed with food and drinks, it seems to have been served as some sort of provision at the meal time.

*iw·i m ḥswt ḥm·f m ḥrt-hrw snm·tw·i ḥr tt nt nsu m t n' bw-r nsu ḥnkt
mitt iwf dd3 rnpwt dkrw šbnw bit š'yt irp b3k iw nd·tw ḥrt·i m snb 'nh m
dd ḥm·f ds·f n mrt·i*

"I received his majesty's favour every day. I was supplied from the table of the king with bread for his breakfast, beer likewise, meat, fat, vegetables, different kinds of fruits, honey, biscuit, wine, and *ben*-oil. I am enquired after my health and life, as his majesty himself said for my love."

3. The Fifth Campaign of Tuthmosis III

Tuthmosis III made 17 military expeditions to Asia. At his 5th expedition in the 29th year of his reign, he went as far as the town of *Tunip* in the Northern Syria.⁽²¹⁾ *Ben*-oil appears in the record of this expedition.⁽²²⁾

From this record, the relationship of *ben-oil* and the northern Syria is suggested. It also shows that *ben-oil* was used at special occasions such as during festivals in Egypt at that time.

rḥt inw iny n ḥm·f m wdyt tn ḥmw ḥmw 51 ssmwt 32 ḥd ddt 10 sntr b3k bti mni 470 irp mni 6428 ḥmt dhṯy ḥsbḏ w3d mnmnt 618 'wt 3636 t nfr t šbnw 'š3 twr ššrw stw nd.... dkṛw nb nfr n ḥ3st tn ist wnn mš' n ḥm·f gsw m b3k r' nb mi nty ḥbw m T3-mri

"The list of the gifts brought for his majesty on this campaign. 51 slaves, male female, 32 horses, 10 silver dishes, incense, *ben-oil*, 470 jars of honey, 6428 jars of wine, copper, lead, lapis lazuli, green stone, 618 cattle, 3636 small cattle, good loaves, many different kinds of loaves, clean grain and flour.... all good fruit of this country. Lo, the army of his majesty was drunk and anointed with *ben-oil* every day, as at festivals in Egypt."

4. The Private Poetical Stela (JdE. No. 28569, the Egyptian Museum, Cairo)⁽²³⁾

This stela is a private poetical stela written according to a certain style and it does not seem to indicate a historical fact. *Ben-oil* is listed among other things brought from Asia. This stela is written after the style of other records of expeditions or tributes from Asia such as the record of the expeditions of Tuthmosis III as referred above.

iw·n·f Stt m ḥntyt inw·sn mh·n·f t3 pn ḥd ḥr smywt·f ḥsbḏ m3' mfk3t '3wt nbt špsy ḥmt dhṯy 'š3·sn ssmwt·sn wrt·sn ḥmw ḥmw m msw wrw irpw sntr b3k w3d 'š mrḥiw tpw n ḥtyw ssndm(?)

"There come to him the Asiatics, travelling to the south, their gifts, it filled this land, silver from its deserts, real lapis lazuli, turquoise, every kind of noble precious stone, copper and lead according to their abundance, their horses, their chariots, slaves, male and female together with the children of the chiefs, wine, incense, fresh *ben-oil*, cedar and resin of the best of the hillsides..... sesnedjem-wood(?)"

5. The Tomb of Rekhmira (TT. 100)

Rekhmira was the vizier and the governor of the town under the kings Tuthmosis III and Amenophis II (c. 1450 BC). His tomb, Theban private No. 100, is located at Sheikh 'Abd al-Qurna.⁽²⁴⁾ This tomb has very famous wall paintings of foreign tributes from Syria and Nubia on the south side of the west wall of its hall. On the second register from the bottom, there is a tribute scene from Syria, the land of *Rṯnw*. An Egyptian scribe is recording their tribute. In front of him, there are four smaller registers showing the gifts brought from Syria. These gifts consist of various products such as silver, gold, lead, copper, cedar, lapis lazuli, etc. And in the bottom register, there are a number of jars with inscriptions on them. The inscriptions are no longer clear but according to the record made by P. Newberry, there are three jars with the name of *b3k* on them together with other jars of incense and *sft* oil. Today only the determinative of tree can be identified for the inscription of *b3k*.⁽²⁵⁾ (Fig. 1-1).

On the south wall of the inner chamber of the same tomb, the name of *b3k* is seen as a product of the Lower Egypt with incense and wine. This is an important evidence to indicate that *ben*-oil was produced in the Lower Egypt.⁽²⁶⁾

On the north wall of the inner chamber is a scene where Rekhmira and his wife Meryt are seated to receive sistrums and menits from their daughters. There is an inscription above them. The inscription indicates that anointment with *ben*-oil was a pleasure. Probably, it had an effect of relaxing or soothing. The text says as follows.⁽²⁷⁾

*šmḥ-ib m33 bw nfr ḥsi ḥbt šm' wrḥ 'ntyw gs m b3k sšn r šrt t irp bniwt
ḥt nbt ms n k3 n r-p't ḥ3ty- imy-r niwt t3ty rḥ-mi-r' m3'-ḥrw*

"The enjoyment of the sight of good things; music, dancing, and making music, anointment with *myrrh* and smearing with *ben*-oil, lotus to the nostril, bread, wine, date-wine, and all things, presented to the *ka* of the hereditary noble, the governor of the town, the vizier, Rekhmire, justified." (Fig. 1-2)

6. The Palace of Malkata

Out of 1400 jar labels from the Palace of Malkata, excavated by the Metropolitan Museum and reported by Hayes, 22 (about 1.6%) are reported to have the name of *ben*-oil on them.⁽²⁸⁾ Other contents of the jars are wine (285), beer (298), meat (375), fat (91), fowl (18), honey (7) and beans (2). The jar labels Nos.183-196 refer to *ben*-oil according to Hayes. Also two jar labels of seeds of Moringa tree have been reported by Hayes (Nos. H. 215-6). Further, 177 labels have been found by the excavation of the Palace of Malkata by the University Museum of Pennsylvania during the years between 1971 and 1974. Among them 5 (2.8%) (Nos. L. 86-90) had the name of *ben*-oil. Others had the names of wine (20), beer (56), meat (3), fat (2), fowl (5) and grain (3). Leahy reports the jar labels excavated by the University Museum of Pennsylvania.⁽²⁹⁾

- H. 183 30 *b3k w3d*: (Year) 30, fresh *ben*-oil
- H. 184 *b3k ndm n nsu Hwi n p3 hb-sd tp n hm-f 'nh wd3 snb*: sweet *ben*-oil of the Royal Scribe Huy for the first jubilee of his Majesty l. s. h.
- H. 185 *b3k n t3ty Hwi n p3 hb-sd*: *ben*-oil of the vizier Huy for the jubilee
- H. 186 [*b3*]*k w3d n p3 hb-sd* *p3-sr n š 3pd* (?): fresh *ben*-oil for the jubilee of) Paser of the Lake of the Bird.
- H. 187 [*H3t-sp* 36] *b3k ndm*: (Year 36) sweet *ben*-oil
- H. 183 *H3t-sp 37 b3k ndm n hm-ntr imy-r pr Mryw-Pth*: Year 37, sweet *ben*-oil of the prophet, the overseer of the house, Meryw-Ptah
- H. 189 *b3k* *n p3 k3mw*: *ben*-oil of the orchard
- H. 190 *b3k n hm-ntr*: *ben*-oil of prophet
- H. 191 *b3k w3d n whmw-nsu 'Imn-m-int*; fresh *ben*-oil of the royal herald, Amenemonet
- H. 192 [*b3k*] *w3d n sš-nsu Hwi*: fresh [*ben*]-oil of the royal scribe, Huy
- H. 193 *b3k w3d*: fresh *ben*-oil
- H. 194 *b3k tpy*: *ben*-oil, the best
- H. 195 *b3k ndm*: sweet *ben*-oil
- H. 196 *b3k*: *ben*-oil

H. 215 *H3t-sp 32 prt b3k n p3 k3mw m Mn-nfr m drt imy-r 'hnty T3y*: Year 32, seeds of Moringa tree of the orchard of Memphis in charge of the chamberlain, Tjay

H. 216 *prt b3[k]*: seeds of Moringa tree

L. 86 *b3k ir n: ben-oil* donated by

L. 87 *b3k*: *ben-oil*

L. 88 *b3k ir·n·f n: ben-oil* he donated for

L. 89 *b3k nfr n t3 w'bt*: good *ben-oil* from the refectory

L. 90 *[b3]k w3d*: fresh *ben-oil*

As shown above, only short inscriptions can be found. *Ben-oil* is characterized as “fresh” (*w3d*), “sweet” (*ndm*), “good” (*nfr*), “very good” (*nfr nfr*) and “best” (*tpy*).

As the land that produced *ben-oil*, š *3pd* (?) “the Lake of the Bird” on the label No. 186 is the only recorded name. The problem remains of identifying “the Lake of the Bird”. Hayes, though not abandoning the possibility of š *3pd* as a variant of š *kbb* “the Lake of Waterfowl” near Heliopolis, mentions that *kbb* “waterfowl” has so far not been known to have been written with the sign of the bird alone.⁽³⁰⁾ Yet it is highly likely that *ben-oil* was produced in the Lower Egypt. Hayes states that the official names inscribed on the labels are related to Memphis, Athribis and other regions of the Lower Egypt. Further, two jar labels (Hayes Nos.H.215-216) inscribed to have contained *prt b3kt* (the seeds or pods of the Moringa tree) have been excavated from the Palace of Malkata, and one of them mentions that these seeds had come from the orchard of Memphis as shown above (No. 215),⁽³¹⁾ thus indicating the close relationship between the Moringa trees and Memphis, that is, probably Moringa trees were grown in the Lower Egypt.

Besides jar labels, *ben-oil* is also inscribed on the clay used as jar sealings. Hayes reports one and Leahy reports three examples of the jar sealings with the name of *ben-oil*. (Fig. 2-1, 2, 3).

H, EE. *b3k w3d n p3 htm*: fresh *ben-oil* of the Fortress⁽³²⁾

L. LIV *b3k ndm n pr hmt nsu*: sweet *ben-oil* of the estate of the Royal Wife⁽³³⁾

L. LV. *b3k ndm n st in(w)*: sweet *ben*-oil of the place of revenues

Hayes identifies the "Fortress" on H. EE as Tjel in the northeast Delta.⁽³⁴⁾ The problem then remains of identifying the location of the "estate of the Royal Wife" in L. LIV. Considering from the available data, it is highly probable that the estate was located near Memphis or in the Lower Egypt.

A. Leahy also reports two wooden labels with the name of *ben*-oil (L. 178, L. 179).⁽³⁵⁾

L. 178 *b3[k] w3d*: fresh *ben*-oil (Fig. 2-6)

L. 179 *b3k w3d*: fresh *ben*-oil (Fig. 2-7)

No wooden labels have been excavated by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

7. The Royal Tomb of Amenophis III

The Archaeological Mission of Waseda University did the re-clearance of the royal tomb of Amenophis III (WV-22) in March, 1990.⁽³⁶⁾ During that time, two wooden labels were found near the entrance outside the tomb. This tomb was studied by Howard Carter in 1915.⁽³⁷⁾ Carter found nine wooden labels in the room beneath the shaft (the room Ea). According to the notes of Carter, these nine labels and the ones we have found seem to be of similar type.⁽³⁸⁾ The two wooden labels found by the Waseda University must have been originally excavated by Carter from the same spot in the room Ea and dumped outside unnoticed. On the surface of these labels, inscriptions were written in hieratic about *ben*-oil.

W. WL-1 *b3k tpy n hm·f 'nh w3 snb*: *ben*-oil, the best of His Majesty, 1. p. h. (Fig. 2-4)

W. WL-2 [*b3*]*k tpy n -r-h3*: *ben*-oil, the best of (*T3*)-*r-h3*⁽³⁹⁾ (Fig. 2-5)

The source of *ben*-oil inscribed on WL-2 as -*r-h3* can be identified as *T-r-h3* (*Salhi*) of the northern Syria considering the list of place names of

ancient Egypt. The inscription on this label is the only example where *ben-oil* is directly related to the actual place name in Syria as the land that produced it.⁽⁴⁰⁾

I have studied the *ben-oil* in the ancient Egypt concentrating mainly on the problem of its producing land. From the end of the Old Kingdom to the First Intermediate Period, *ben-oil* must have been brought to Egypt through the contact with Asia, especially with Syrian district. During the Middle Kingdom, *ben-oil* was a special product of *Rṯnw* (Syria) as shown in the story of *Sinuhe*. In the New Kingdom, as a result of the expeditions to Asia by Tuthmosis III, a great amount of *ben-oil* were brought to Egypt. *Ben-oil* seems to have been produced in the Lower Egypt and at the royal orchard in Memphis as well.

In the royal tomb of Amenophis III, a great number of high quality goods offered at his third *sed*-festival were placed as funerary goods. Among them was some *ben-oil*. From the wooden label excavated from the royal tomb, it has become clear that *ben-oil* from *Salḥi* in the northern Syria was of the best quality. Among the jar labels excavated at the Palace of Malkata, inscriptions indicating that the seeds of moringa tree were brought to Thebes were found. It suggests that probably *ben-oil* was produced in Thebes after the raw material, that is, Moringa seeds, was transported there. The above fact raises a question regarding the transport and production of *ben-oil*. After the reign of Amenophis III, a number of jar labels have been discovered at the Palace of Tell al-Amarna though I have not been able to study them in this paper. The exact use of *ben-oil* as food and medicine is another problem to be studied in the future.

Notes

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Fig. 1. Wall scenes from the tomb of Rekhmira (T.T. 100)

(1. Gifts from Syria. 2. Rekhmira and his wife Meryt sat to receive sistrums and menits from their daughters. : after N. de G. Davies, 1944)

Fig. 2. Jar sealins and wooden labels

(1. H.EE 2. L.LIV 3. LV 4. W.WL-1 5. W.WL-2 6. L. 178 7. L.179)

After W.C. Hayes(1), M. A. Leahy (2,3,6,7), J. Kondo (4,5)