

SLAVERY AND SERVITUDE

الرق والعبودية

Antonio Loprieno

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Antonio Loprieno

Sklaverei und Zwangsarbeit
Esclavage et asservissement

*While various forms of coercion to labor and restriction of individual freedom did exist throughout Egyptian history, slavery is rather defined by economic than by legal indicators. Some literary texts present figures of slaves, called *hm* ("laborer") or *b3k* ("servant"). The documentary evidence is multifaceted: during the Old Kingdom, very large segments of the population were drawn to corvée work, exemption for religious service and even upward mobility being possible, while foreign prisoners of war were clearly enslaved (*skr-nh*). With the emergence of new social elites, Egyptian texts from the early Middle Kingdom onward display a more distinct consciousness of the difference between "free" people, even if at the lower level of the social ladder (*nds*), and "servants" (*hm*, *b3k*), conscripts (*hsb*), and fugitives (*tšj*), true slavery being presumably confined to foreign prisoners. The New Kingdom, with its relentless military operations, is the epoch of large-scale foreign slavery, but also of local—owned or rented—servitude, both of which had become economically indispensable, adoption of a slave being a common practice leading to "free" status (*nmhj*). During the first millennium BCE, references to slavery become rare and are superseded by various forms of voluntary servitude caused by economic dearth or religious commitment. "Slavery" in the legal, inherited sense of the term unfolds in Egypt during the Hellenistic Period and is based on capture in war, on purchase in the slave market, and on the enslavement of debtors.*

وجد عبر التاريخ المصري أشكال عديدة من الإكبار على العمل وتقييد الحرية الفردية، ومع ذلك يتم تعريف العبودية استناداً إلى العوامل الاقتصادية وليست العوامل القانونية. قدمت بعض النصوص الأدبية أشكال للعبيد تحت مسمى *hm* (أي عامل) أو مسمى *b3k* (أي خادم). أما النصوص الوثائقية، فهي متعددة الأوجه، فخلال الدولة القديمة، تم تسخير شرائح كبيرة جداً من المجتمع لعمل السخرة، مما لا يعتبر هذا استعباد حيث تم إعفاء من قاموا بأعمال دينية وأيضاً بسبب وجود إمكانية للترقي في الطبقات الاجتماعية، وعلى جانب آخر، تم استعباد أسرى الحروب (*skr-nh*). ومع ظهور نخبة إجتماعية جديدة، بدأت النصوص من بداية عصر الدولة الوسطى فصاعداً بإظهار وعي أكثر وضوحاً في التفريق ما بين الأفراد «الأحرار»، حتى لو كانوا من الجزء الأدنى من السلم الاجتماعي (*nds*)، و«الخدم» (*hm*, *b3k*)، والمجندين (*hsb*)، والهاربين (*tšj*)، ومن المعتقد أن العبودية الحقيقية كانت مقتصرة على السجناء الأجانب فقط. أما بالنسبة إلى الدولة الحديثة التي اشتهرت بعملياتها العسكرية القاسية، فقد كانت فترة استعباد الأجانب على نطاق واسع، إلى جانب أيضاً العبودية المحلية سواء المملوكة أو المستأجرة وواللتان أصبحتان ضرورتان إقتصاديتان، في حين أدى تبني العبيد إلى تحريرهم في أغلب الأحيان، حيث يصبحوا من الأحرار (*nmhj*). وخلال الألفية الأولى قبل الميلاد، أصبحت الإشارات إلى العبودية نادرة، وتم استبدالها بأشكال مختلفة من الاسترقاق التطوعي الناتج عن النقص الإقتصادي أو الإلتزام الديني. أما مصطلح «العبودية» بالمعنى القانوني والذي

يتم من خلال توريث العبيد، فهو بدأ بالظهور في مصر خلال العصور اليونانية ويستند على القبض خلال الحرب، أو الشراء في سوق الرقيق وعلى استعباد المدنيين.

Egyptologists feel insecure when discussing slavery in Pharaonic Egypt (Helck 1984), since the very hypothesis of the existence of such an institution is a subject of debate among social and economic historians (cf. discussion by Menu 2004a: 337 - 359, 2004b; and Hofmann 2005). From biblical times, Western culture has maintained a view of Egypt as “house of slavery” (Ex 20,2), i.e., as a civilization whose wealth was founded on forced labor. On the other hand, the virtual absence of legally codified slavery in a society so keen on written documentation cannot be accidental. Evidence shows that the semantics of the Egyptian terms for slavery or servitude rather reflect socio-economic dependency than legal status (Eyre 2004: 176 - 177; Moreno García 2008), although a few documents (such as the so-called Adoption Papyrus, see below) do display legal concerns. Many social groups referred to in royal decrees and administrative texts were certainly subject to restrictions on individual freedom. In the Old Kingdom, “royal corvée workers” (*nswtjw, mrjt*), undertook coercive labor for a certain period of time, but not for life (Moreno García 1997), while from Dynasty 6 on, “dependents” (*mrjt*) represent the body of servants and laborers of a private or public domain (Allam 2004). From the First Intermediate Period on, “servants” (*b3kw*) appear employed in households, while “royal laborers” (*hmmw-nsw*) are state employees who can also be allocated to private individuals (Moreno García 2000). In addition, throughout Egyptian history, and increasingly during the New Kingdom, “war prisoners” (*skrw-nh*) and “conscripts” (*hsbw*) also appear employed in large-scale forced labor, so that the interpretative issues are in fact, at least in part, determined by terminology (Menu 2004b).

Anthropological analyses (Poole 1998: 893 - 895) point to the generally complex semantics of slavery: in some African rural cultures, for example, one's own children can be sold as property. The practice of selling children for work is also known, in different forms, in modern Europe. In this respect it is interesting to note that in an Egyptian

household of the Middle Kingdom, servants are considered part of the family structure (Stela MMA 12.184, l. 10-11, see Sethe 1959: 79, l. 12-14): “I was someone beloved by his community (*h3w=f*), forthcoming to his family (*sdmy n 'bt=f*), I did not neglect those who are in servitude (*n hbs=j hr r ntj m b3kw*).” Although historical, administrative, or legal texts are usually the most important source for our understanding of slavery, it should be kept in mind that Egyptian biographies and royal inscriptions are heavily influenced by the literary style, which limits their reliability as historical sources.

Literary Texts

It may be appropriate, therefore, to first take a closer look at the presentation of slaves or servants in literary texts. In Egypt, professional activities tended to overlap with social groups, since individuals were very often identified by the work they performed (Helck 1959). From the Middle Kingdom on, literature became the vehicle to codify the values of the elites, torn between fidelity to state institutions, represented by the king, and the affirmation of individualism, made possible by professional and economic success. In the eyes of a scribe, unconditional dependence on one's own labor appeared to be a feature of servitude. The human condition of the slave (whether called *hm*, “laborer,” or *b3k*, “servant”) is alluded to in the *Satire of Trades* (also known as the *Instruction of Khety*, after the name of the narrator), a classical literary text of the early New Kingdom composed in order to describe the advantages of the scribal profession over all others (Jäger 2004). Here, different forms of forced labor are thematized: peasants are “drawn to work” (*nhmw hr b3k=f*) or “obliged to work in the fields” (*mnjtj*), the carpenter's children do not benefit from their father's hard work (*nn pnk n hrdw=f*), a weaver is punished with fifty lashes for a day of absence from work (*hwjtw=f m šsm 50*), and a gardener is subject to a yoke (*k3ry hr jnt m3wd*). In spite of the lack of explicit references to slavery, the text provides evidence for large-scale coercive

work in Egyptian society, both in the public and in the private domain. In this sense, the hints in the *Satire of Trades* are corroborated by the separate address to “living ones” (*nhw*) and “servants” (*b3kw*) in the *Appeals to the Living* from the Old Kingdom (Sethe *Urk. I*: 112.5, 147.9; cf. Goedicke 1967: 218; Moreno García 2000: 131), by the references to the status of the “servant” (*b3k*) as opposed to the “city-dweller” (*nwtj*) in the biographical texts of the First Intermediate Period (Moreno García 2000), as well as to the “independent person of the land of Pharaoh, l.p.h.” in legal documents of the Ramesside Period (Adoption Papyrus rto. 22 - 24, vso. 2 - 7, Gardiner 1940), or by the accounts in the administrative Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446 from the late Middle Kingdom (Hayes 1955; Hofmann 2005: 141 - 156), which lists Egyptian and foreign servants, called “royal laborers” (*hmt*, *hm-nsw*, already documented in the Gebelein papyri, Posener-Kriéger 2004), in private households. The term *hm*, frequently translated as “slave,” also appears in the tales of Papyrus Westcar, dated to the late Second Intermediate Period or early New Kingdom, and refers to the private servants of one of the protagonists: “He found him lying down on a mat at the threshold of his house, a *hm* at his head massaging him and another wiping his feet” (Papyrus Westcar 7.14-16, Blackman 1988: 9).

Slaves are also part of the range of human types presented in the wisdom texts. Their condition is mentioned in the *Admonitions of Ipuwer*, a New Kingdom text in which the cultural decadence of society from a centralized state to political and social chaos is crystallized in a series of oppositions between golden past and tragic present: “Now even female laborers (*hmwt*) speak without restraint, and when their mistress gives an order, servants (*b3kw*) show impatience” (Admonitions of Ipuwer 4.13-14, Enmarch 2005: 31). This rhetoric chiasm speaks here for a semantic overlapping of the terms *hm* and *b3k*, which is typical from the New Kingdom on (Hofmann 2005: 243 - 246; Menu 2004a: 345, 2004b). Slavery in the broader sense appears to be an integral part of Egyptian ideology: the second section of the *Loyalist Instruction* (Posener 1976) displays a consciousness of the elite’s responsibility vis-à-vis the lower echelons of society, including

servants, which echoes a Middle Kingdom letter to the dead in which a deceased is asked to let a female servant (*b3kt*) recover from illness (Cairo Bowl, cf. Gardiner and Sethe 1928: 7 - 8, 22 and pl. VI/A; also Fischer-Elfert 1994: 41 - 44; Wentz 1990: 215 - 216, no. 350). Beginning with the First Intermediate Period, biographical texts focus on the patron’s care for his household and laborers: “I was the shepherd of my *mrjt*, (a man) of good reputation in his town” (relief block Cairo CGC 20503 l. 3, Lange and Schäfer 1908: 93 - 94; Moreno García 1998: 79, n. 30). A healthy workforce and good work were guaranteed only when servants and laborers were well kept, as mentioned in the *Instructions of Ani* of the late Dynasty 18: “Do not acquire another person’s laborer (*hm*) if he has a bad reputation” (Ani B 18,15; *pape* Quack 1994: 100 - 101).

Documentary Evidence

When turning to administrative records, three observations are in order. First, quantity and quality of the documentation vary considerably in space and time. There is a limited amount of material from the Old Kingdom: a few royal decrees and the archive of Abusir. The evidence from the Middle Kingdom is richer: the abundant correspondence of Hekanakht and the papyri of el-Lahun, as well as important administrative texts, such as the already mentioned P. Brooklyn. Even more material has survived from the New Kingdom, above all from Deir el-Medina, the village housing the workers of the Theban necropolis. A substantial number of texts, less relevant for a discussion of slavery, has come to us from the Late Period. Second, Egyptian documentation is distinctly empirical rather than conceptual: in administrative texts, attention is focused on single episodes rather than on general rules. Apart from some exemption decrees related to state temple property, attempts to reconstruct a legal code in the form these documents had in Mesopotamia (Westbrook 2003) or Classical Antiquity (Deißler 2003) are doomed to fail. Therefore, we mostly base our knowledge of ancient Egyptian social phenomena on punctual documentation. The picture however, fragmentary as it may be, turns out to be statistically fairly representative. Third, we should always keep in mind that Egyptian society was not a static entity,

but evolved considerably during the three thousand years of written documentation (Moreno García 2008). During the Old Kingdom, the entire population, except for the elite, was kept under tight administrative control and could be drawn to corvée work or expeditions, as shown by the evidence of royal decrees. From the First Intermediate Period on, society was also characterized by a variably thin layer of “free” people who viewed themselves in opposition to a lower class operating under various forms of institutional, economic, or professional coercion (Moreno García 2000). In fact, it makes sense to speak of institutional or economic “slavery” only against the background of a recognizable domain of “freedom” (*pace* Menu 2004a: 337 - 339), an ostensibly not relevant dichotomy in official Egyptian discourse (Eyre 2004: 176 - 177).

Old Kingdom

In the so-called Dahshur decree (Sethe *Urk. I*: 209 - 213; Strudwick 2005: 103 - 105) from Dynasty 6, king Pepi I specifies the number of people and the amount of inalienable property destined for the pyramid town of king Sneferu (Dynasty 4) and distinguishes those who are not subject to coercive labor, i.e., members of the ruling elite of the Old Kingdom composed of “queens,” “king’s sons and daughters,” and “nobles” (*smrw*) from those who are, i.e., the “dependents” (*mrjt*; Sethe *Urk. I*: 210.14-17). What is thematized here is the social opposition between the court and population at large, an opposition which corresponds to the ideological distinction between “nobility” (*pꜣt*) and “people” (*rhyt*) known in religious literature until the end of Egyptian history (Moreno García 1998: 71 - 73). When the solar cult based at Heliopolis triumphed during Dynasty 5, “solar priesthood” (*hnmmt*) was added to these two categories. This ideal distribution of Egyptian society into three groups continued unchanged until the second century CE, as shown by the late Egyptian Papyrus BM 10808 with its three terms *pé*, *lxé*, *hamen* (Osing 1976: 48 - 49; Sederholm 2006: 33).

These three groups, however, were not closed social groups, but rather ideal classes. Individuals could improve their original status, as can be

inferred from the autobiographical inscription of Henqu at Deir el-Gebrawi (Dynasty 6): “As for those who had been dependent (*mrjw*) in my service, their role became that of an official (*srj*)” (Sethe *Urk. I*: 78.6-7). Here, “dependents” refers to recruited field-workers (Moreno García 1998, 2000); these were sometimes also employed as laborers in state enterprises, as shown by the first dated graffito from Wadi Hammamat, or in military expeditions, as claimed by a nomarch:

“Mission carried out by the eldest son of the king, the treasurer of the god, the general of the expedition (*mšꜥ*, “army”), Djati known as Kanofer, who took care of his men on the day of battle, who knew how to foresee the coming of the day of corvée recruitment (*stp m ndwt-rꜥ*). I distinguished myself among the multitude and carried out this task for Imhotep, with 1,000 men of the royal palace, 100 men of the necropolis, 1,200 pioneers, and 50 engineers. His Majesty ordered all these people to come from the Residence, and I organized this task in exchange for provisions of barley of all kinds, since His Majesty placed at my disposal 50 oxen and 200 goats for daily victuals.” (Wadi Hammamat; Sethe *Urk. I*: 148.16 - 149.10)

“When His Majesty took action against the Asiatic Sand-dwellers, His Majesty made an army of many tens of thousands from all of Upper Egypt: from Yebu in the south to Medenyt in the north; from Lower Egypt; from all of the Two-Sides-of-the-House and from Sedjer and Khensedjru; and from Irtjet-Nubians, Medja-Nubians, Yam-Nubians, Wawat-Nubians, Kaau-Nubians; and from Tjemeh-land.” (Biography of Weni from Abydos; Sethe *Urk. I*: 101.9-16).

Exemption decrees such as the one from Dahshur mentioned above also show that a portion of the population was exempt from compulsory military service and corvée duty and employed either in a royal funerary complex (such as the pyramid town) or in religious foundations, as shown by the Abusir papyri. People involved in such activities—a class that also included priests and officials, who derived economic benefits from being exempt from corvée—bore the title of *hntj-š*, “those in front of the lake”:

“My Majesty has ordered the permanent exemption of these two pyramid towns from carrying out any forced labor (*k3t*) for the Royal Palace, from performing any forced labor for the Residence and from carrying out corvée duty (*h3w*) according to that which has been requested. My Majesty has ordered the exemption of all *hntj-š* of these two pyramid towns from the activity as messengers by river or by land, heading north or south. My Majesty has ordered that no field belonging to either of these two pyramid towns should be plowed by the dependents (*mrjt*) of any queen, of any king’s son or daughter or of any noble, except for the *hntj-š* of these two pyramid towns.” (Dahshur Decree of Pepy I; Sethe *Urk. I*: 210.2-17)

“I have ordered the exemption of this funerary chapel [...] in dependents (*mrjt*) and livestock, both [large and small]. [As regards] someone who is sent on any mission to the south, My Majesty will permit none of the costs of the voyage to be charged to this funerary chapel, nor those of someone traveling on a royal mission. My Majesty has ordered the exemption of this funerary chapel. My Majesty will not permit this funerary chapel to be taxed any amount for the Residence.” (Coptos Decree of Pepy I; Sethe *Urk. I*: 214.12-17)

In the Old Kingdom, Egypt’s population also included foreign prisoners of war, called *škrw-ḥh*, “bound for life” (Helck 1980). From the time of Sneferu, there is evidence of important expeditions to abduct Nubians or Libyans to work as laborers or to serve in specialized military units (Bietak 1985; Redford 2004; Zibelius-Chen 1988). The ideological aspect of this phenomenon is represented by the so-called “execration texts”—spells inscribed on terracotta figurines of the foreign princes to be suppressed—as well as by the ritual of “smiting the enemy” and the reliefs of prisoners of war with their arms tied behind their backs, documented throughout Egyptian history on the walls of temples. Prisoners captured during wartime and raids on occupied territories (initially in Nubia, then in Libya and Asia as well) formed a large segment of the population in a state of servitude.

Biographical texts from the end of the Old Kingdom document a meritocratic evolution

leading to the emergence of a new provincial upper class, who would eventually become the leading elite during the First Intermediate Period and the early Middle Kingdom. The new social fabric, however, also fostered new forms of servitude. Widespread impoverishment and subsequent slavery in the private sector were caused by an insecure economy and temporary food shortage (Moreno García 1998). The poorer would borrow grain from the richer and lend on security women or other members of the family for the period in which interests were due. During Dynasty 6, the architect Nekhebu says: “I also kept for him (i.e., the king) the accounts of his personal possessions for a period of twenty years. I never struck anyone to let him fall beneath my hand. I never forced anyone to servitude (*b3k*)” (Sethe *Urk. I*: 217.3-5).



b3k (after Davies 1902: pl. 24.9)

The term “servant” (*b3k*), therefore, denotes a wide range of conditions, from the rhetorical use by high officials to indicate their loyalty to the king (“more than any other among his servants”: Sethe *Urk. I*: 52.5, 81.6, 84.1, 99.4) to real servitude, as in the inscription of Henqu from Deir el-Gebrawi, in which the verb *b3k* appears accompanied by the determinative of a seated man with a yoke around his neck (Sethe *Urk. I*: 77.4; see also Davies 1902: table 24.9): “I have never forced one of your daughters to servitude.” That Henqu explicitly refers to daughters may point to the fact that women were the preferred form of deposit in the case of food lending, the ethical expectation being that interests should not be levied too heavily on the borrower. Also, officials who would abuse their power could be punished with enslavement (Moreno García 2000: 132, fn. 55).



hm (after Fischer 1958: fig. 1)

An even more decisive sign of social change is the contemporary emergence of the term that Egyptologists most frequently translate with “slave,” i.e., *hm*, “laborer.” In one of its first appearances, this word is accompanied by the determinative of a seated man or woman holding a club, which is nothing else than the phonogram of the word *hm* (Fischer 1958). This determinative is similar to the one sometimes used with the words “servant” (*bsk*) and “dependent” (*mrjt*) or with ethnonyms such as “Nubians” or “Asiatics,” who according to the royal decrees were granted a different status from Egyptians. A proof of the social evolution described here is given by the Pyramid Texts, the first corpus of Egyptian theology. In Spell 346, the late Dynasty 6 versions of Merenra and Pepy II replace the original “butchers” of the earlier text of Tety with the word “laborers” (*hmnw*): “To be recited: The souls are in Buto, yes, the souls are in Buto! The souls will be in Buto, the soul of the dead king is in Buto! How red is the flame, how alive is Khepri! Rejoice, rejoice! Butchers, give me a meal!” (PT 561).

Before occurring as a single word, the term *hm* was used in compound terms from the religious and funerary sphere: *hm-ntr*, “god’s servant,” *hm-k3*, “funerary priest.” Between Dynasty 5 and 6, *hm* appears in biographical texts (“I have never said anything bad about anyone, neither the king nor his laborers”: Sethe *Urk. I*: 233.13-14), and in the compound *hm-nsw*, “king’s laborer,” it is possible to recognize the semantics of slavery (Davies 1901: table 16): “Sifting grain by king’s laborers.”

First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom

In terms of social and intellectual history, the so-called First Intermediate Period displays a development of the individual initiative: after having served in corvée work as a lower priest (*w3b*), Merer becomes a free commoner (*nds*): “I did not let their water flood the fields of other people. I behaved like any efficient commoner, ensuring that my family had all the water they needed” (biography of Merer, Cracow MNK-XI-999, 10 - 11, cf. Černý 1961; other examples in Moreno García 2000). “Commoners” (*ndsw*) are a characteristic feature of Middle Kingdom society (Franke 1998). Regardless

of social differences, every Egyptian, even a servant, is now called a man (*rmt*), i.e., an individual with dignity, even when he serves another person as in the biography of Intef-iker:

“The men at my father Mentuhotep’s service were born at home, the property of my father and mother. My men also came from my father’s and my mother’s property, and apart from those who belong to me, there are others I bought with my own means.” (BM 1628, 13 - 15; Budge 1914: pl. 1)

Servants are defined as men, but treated like property. The radicalization of coerced labor at the end of the Old Kingdom now seems to have reached its apex: in changing patterns of economic redistribution, poorer families would borrow grains from richer field owners and, short of paying back the borrowed amount, increasingly commit family members—especially women—to forced service in the owner’s household (Moreno García 2000). This also explains why so many biographical texts of this period emphasize the amount of “dependents” (*mrjt*), “personnel” (*dt*), as in the el-Lahun papyri (Collier and Quirke 2004: 116 - 117, where the people representing a *dt* appear closely related to each other), or “workers” (*bskw*) accumulated during lifetime: one person added three male workers (*bskw*) and seven female workers (*bskwt*) to those inherited from his father (biography of Beb; Daressy 1915: 207 - 208), another individual even added up “heads” (*tpw*) to his inheritance (biography of Rehuy; Clère and Vandier 1948: n. 7).

In administrative texts from the Middle Kingdom, coerced work forces consisted of conscripts (*hsbw*), fugitives (*tšjw*), and royal laborers (*hmnw-nsw*; Gnirs 2001). The first two terms refer to soldiers and field-workers conscripted to serve in the army or to labor in state building projects or agriculture. The most abundant documentation is offered by the Reisner Papyrus (Berlev 1965; Simpson 1963) and by the el-Lahun papyri, which mention lists of prisoners (*hsbw*) being employed in state enterprises (Griffith 1898: pl. XIV, pl. XV, 31 - 35). The administrative text of Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1146 (Hayes 1955: 39 - 40, 76 - 77) displays them as subject to temporary coerced work on arable state land (Eyre 2004: 182 - 184; Menu 1998: 130 - 131). The punishment for flight

(*wʿr*) or absence (*tš*) was coerced labor for life: “Order issued by the Great Prison in year 31, third month of the summer season, day 5, that he be condemned with all his family to labor for life on state land, according to the decision of the court” (Hayes 1955: table VI, 57).

Interestingly enough, it is not laborers or slaves that are treated as offenders of the state service, but their “masters,” i.e., members of the middle class (Menu 1981; Quirke 1988, 1990: 127 - 154). The Brooklyn Papyrus also provides information about royal laborers (*hnmw-nsw*), whose feminine equivalent is *hnmwt*, without royal attribution. Unlike privately owned *bškw*, royal laborers were state-owned slaves who shared the status of Asiatics reduced to slavery as a result of military campaigns or trade. They could be entrusted to individuals as “property,” almost always after trying to escape. Although nominally belonging to the king (hence their attribute “royal”), recaptured fugitives, like Asiatic slaves, were assigned to the custody of a master, who could give them away or leave them to his children:

“Let my fifteen people (*tpw*, “heads”) and property of prisoners (*hnmw=j*, “associated to me”) be given to my wife Senebtisi, in addition to the sixty that I gave her the first time. Now, I make this gift to my wife, to be deposited in the Hall of the Speaker of the City of the South, as a contract that bears my seal and the seal of my wife Senebtisi.” (Hayes 1955: table XIV, 26 - 31)

“I am making this will for my wife, the woman of the eastern regions Sheftu-daughter-of-Sopdu called Teti, of everything given to me by my brother, the seal-bearer of the director of works, Ankhreni, with all the goods as they should be—all that he gave me. She herself shall give it to any of her children that she shall bear me. I am giving her the four Asiatics whom my brother, the seal-bearer of the director of works, Ankhreni, gave to me. She herself shall give them to any of her children that she wishes.” (Griffith 1898: pl. XII, 7 - 11, cf. pl. XIII)

“Servants” (*bškw*) guilty of disservice were sent away from home. Proof thereof can be found in the correspondence of Hekanakht, a landowner from the early Middle Kingdom who, while traveling for

work, continued to look after the management of his land by sending written instructions to his family:

“Now have the servant (*bškt*) Senen turned out of my house—pay attention!—on the very day when Sihathor reaches you. See, if she spends a single night more in my house, watch out! It is you who let her do evil to my concubine.” (Hekanakht I, 13v - 14; Allen 2002).

We do not really know what the ejection from a household would imply—at a minimum a loss of economic security.

The above mentioned letter to the dead, the so-called Cairo Bowl, witnesses how much a servant could become an indispensable part of family structure (Fischer-Elfert 1994: 41 - 44; Wente 1990: 215 - 216, no. 350). That servants were emotionally close to their household is also shown by a letter to the dead inscribed on a pottery stand from the First Intermediate Period, in which the sender asks his dead father and his grandmother on his father’s side to help his wife Seni bear him a son. Seni had been upset by two housemaids, whose malevolent influence is taken to be responsible for the couple’s problems:

“See, this vessel is brought to you in respect to which your mother is to make litigation. It is agreeable that you should support her. Cause now that a healthy male child be borne to me, for you are an excellent spirit. And behold, as for those two serving-maids who have caused Seni to be afflicted, namely Nefertjentet and Itjai, confound them and banish from me every affliction which is directed against my wife; for you know that I need her. Banish them utterly!” (Oriental Institute 13945, 3 - 7; cf. Gardiner 1930)

The ability to harm a child’s health by using magical power could be imputed on women of foreign origin, regardless of their social status, whether “servant” (*hmt*) or “noblewoman” (*špst*), as shown by Papyrus Berlin 3027 (Yamazaki 2003: spell D [II 6 - 10], 16 - 17, pl. 3). Although slavery was inherited, as we infer from the fact that Dedisobek, son of the slave woman Ided, was himself a laborer (*hm*; Gauthier-Laurent 1931), this did not prevent a slave from attaining a higher educational level: “This communication is to inform

my lord, who is occupying himself with your royal servant Uadjhau, teaching him to write without allowing him to flee” (Collier and Quirke 2002: 133; Griffith 1898: pl. 35, 10 - 13 = UC 32210).

We find royal laborers employed as field-workers, house servants, and cobblers; female laborers as hairdressers, gardeners, and weavers. This also applies to their Asiatic counterparts, who are distinguished by the fact that their names, even if Egyptian (which was regularly the case in the second generation), bore an ethnic qualification: “the Asiatic Aduna and her son Ankhu” (Hayes 1955: 87). Both their number and their hereditary status suggest that the position of royal laborers was comparable to that of Asiatic slaves. Of the 79 servants presented in the list on the verso of Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1146 as belonging to a single owner, at least 33 were Egyptians.

Second Intermediate Period and New Kingdom

A document dating to the Second Intermediate Period sheds some light on legal aspects of servitude and slavery. It examines the granting of citizenship to a slave who had previously been shared between public and private ownership:

“The Overseer of the City, Vizier, Overseer of the Six Great Courts, Amenemhat. An Order to the Reporter of Elephantine Heqaib to this effect: An order was issued for the Vizier’s Court in Year 1, first month of summer, day 27 of the time of Khubak—life, prosperity, health. The order concerns the appeal which the (administrator) Itefsonb son of Heqaib made, saying: ‘Senbet, Senmut’s daughter, is a slave-girl (*hmt*) of the tenants (*dt*) of Elephantine’s people, but she is also the slave-girl of Hebsy’s son Seankhu, my lord, and let her be given to me or to the city, according as her owners agree.’ So he said. So it shall be done as her owners agree. So run the orders [...] A reply to this leather roll of the Vizier’s Court has been brought, stating: ‘The attorneys of the people about whom you wrote have been questioned. They said: ‘We agree to the giving of the slave-girl Senbet to the city [as her owners] agree, in accordance with the appeal which our brother, the administrator Itefsonb, has made concerning her.’ Now they are to be made to take the oath upon it, and you shall

put the orders before the slave-girl Senbet.” (Papyrus Berlin 10470, 1.5 - 2.9; Hofmann 2005: 133 - 139; Smither 1948: 32)

This text demonstrates the gradual importance acquired by the community (*rmṯw n ʒbw*, “people of Elephantine”), whose role in the administration of public property replaces the nominal power of the king over the “royal laborers” in the Middle Kingdom. It also shows that a slave could eventually become a “citizen,” in some cases also by virtue of marriage (De Linage 1939: 217 - 234, tables 24 - 55).

Coerced foreign labor and the army were needed to deal with the growing expenses of an impressive military apparatus. The biographical text from the tomb of General Ahmose, son of Abana at Elkab (Lichtheim 1976: 12 - 15; Sethe *Urk. IV*: 1 - 11), provides a picture of the status of foreign slaves during the first part of the New Kingdom, boasting more than once that the king had allowed him to treat as slaves the Asiatics he had captured as spoils of war. In one of the few administrative archives of Dynasty 18, the correspondence of Ahmose of Peniati (Glanville 1928; Went 1990: 90 - 92), the mother of an Egyptian female servant (*bʒkt*) complains that the master to whom she had entrusted her daughter has now passed her on to someone else. This would suggest that Egyptian servants, unlike foreign slaves, were usually not treated as objects for trade, but rather as employees (Menu 2004a: 337 - 359). The issue then reaches the courtroom, where it becomes somewhat complex:

“What Ahmose of Peniati says to his lord, the treasurer, Ty: Why is it that the maidservant who was with me has been taken away to be given to someone else? Am I not your servant who obeys your orders night and day? Let payment for her be accepted for her to be with me, because she is only a child and unable to work. Or let my lord command that I be made to bear her work load just like any maidservant of my lord, because her mother writes me saying: ‘It was you who allowed my daughter to be taken away, although she was there in your charge. However, since she is a daughter to you I have not complained to my lord.’ So she says by way of complaint.” (Papyrus Louvre 3230b; Peet 1926; cf. Went 1990: 92, no. 117)

Another case of “ownership” of a maidservant is the concern of a letter sent to Ahmose:

“Ptahu greets the scribe Ahmose: In life and prosperity and in the favor of Amun-Ra! This is a missive to inform you about the case of the maidservant (*b3kt*) who is in the charge of the mayor Tetimose. The master of slaves (*hrj-mrw*) Abuy was sent to him to say, ‘Come, you shall litigate with him (Ptahu).’ But he refused to be legally answerable for Mini because of what the overseer of field-workers Ramose had said. Look, as for this maidservant, she is a maidservant belonging to the mayor Mini, the sailor, whereas he (Mini?) does not give heed to me so as to litigate with me in the court of magistrates.” (Papyrus BM 10107; cf. Wente 1990: 91, no. 115)

People given as reward are still referred to with Middle Kingdom terms such as “heads” or “people” (Habachi 1950). The Annals of Thutmose III define foreign prisoners of war as “men (*rmtw*) in captivity” (Sethe *Urk. IV*: 698.6) and employ the term *mrj*, “dependent,” to refer to people serving in temples or households, including foreign captives (Sethe *Urk. IV*: 172.5, 207.9, 742.14, 1102; cf. Allam 2004; Menu 2004b). The official Minmose received 150 dependents from the king as a reward for having contributed to the foundation of numerous temples:

“Now, as regards these [temples] that I have just mentioned, I laid their foundations, directing with absolute diligence the work on these great monuments with which my lord has satisfied the gods [...] My intelligence was constantly at his service. His Majesty praised me for my great ability and promised me a more rapid promotion than that of other officials: 150 dependents (*mrjw*), presents, and clothes were given to me.” (Sethe *Urk. IV*: 1444.1-8)

From the reign of Amenhotep III on, however, forced labor in temples seems to have been reserved for male and female slaves (*hmw*, *hmwt*), a term also applied to shabtis (Černý 1942; Poole 1998): “The lake (of the temple) was high because of the great inundation, filled with fish and birds, pure with flowers; his work house was full of male and female slaves, the children of princes in all foreign lands, His Majesty’s spoils” (Kitchen 1969: 2.15,

23.6; Papyrus Harris I, 8.9, 47.10, 58.3, 59.5, 60.3; Sethe *Urk. IV*: 1649.6-8; see also Erichsen 1933; Hofmann 2005: 225 - 226).

The shift in the status of local work force is an evident sign of an overall evolution of Egyptian social fabric as a result of foreign involvement during the late Dynasty 18. Military and commercial activity brought many Asiatics to Egypt, either as booty or as slaves bought in slave markets. This is also shown by the branding of war prisoners (an example is provided by the Sea People scenes in Medinet Habu, cf. Poole 1998: 897) and of soldiers in general (e.g., Papyrus Bologna 1094, 9.6, Gardiner 1937: 9.1; cf. also Papyrus Harris I, 77.4-6, Menu 2004b). During the Late Bronze Age, Egypt was the main purchaser of slaves in the Mediterranean market (Haider 1996) probably controlled by Asiatic Bedouins. We remember the biblical tale of Joseph being sold to Ishmaelite traders on their way to Egypt (Gen 37), which finds a documentary counterpart in a captain’s sale of foreign slaves (Hofmann 2005: 196 - 199).

Slaves could be rented for a certain period by people of relatively humble social condition, and the motive for hiring out a female slave could be as mundane as the need for new clothes, although the actual price appears high:

“Year 27, third month of the summer season, day 20, under the Majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Nebmaatira, son of Ra Amenhotep III, granted eternal life like his father Ra each day. The day in which Nebmehi, a shepherd in the temple of Amenhotep, presented himself to the shepherd Mesi saying: ‘I am without clothes: let me be given the value of two days’ work of my slave girl Harit.’ So the shepherd Mesi gave him a *d3jw*-garment worth 3 1/2 *shati* and a *sdw*-garment worth 1/2 *shati*. Then he came back to me once more and said: ‘Give me the value of four days’ work of the slave girl Henut.’ So the shepherd Mesi gave him grain [...] worth 4 *shati*, six goats worth 3 *shati*, and silver worth 1 *shati*, for a total value of 12 *shati*. But two of the working days of the slave girl Henut were particularly hot; for this reason he gave me two more days’ work of Meriremetjuef and two days’ work of the slave Nehsethi in the presence of several witnesses.” (Papyrus Berlin 9784, 1 - 10; Gardiner 1906; cf. also Navailles and Neveu 1989)

The same practice is documented in the community of Deir el-Medina, where each family could benefit from a servant's (*hm*, *hmt*) "days of service" (*hrww nj b3kj*). This service was granted by the administration of the Royal Tomb as a payment for goods or other services with other village inhabitants (Černý 2001: 175 - 182; Janssen 1997: 23 - 25). These servants appear on the same salary lists as workmen and others paid by the administration, but they range clearly at the bottom of the social spectrum at Deir el-Medina (Grandet 2000: 3 - 4, 14, fig. 707; Hofmann 2006). Some of the workmen possessed private servants, male, female, and children, or had a share in them. How they were compensated by their owners for their work is not documented (Janssen 1997: 23).

People in servitude also had the right to be treated equally when they broke the law. A female slave found guilty of theft was sentenced to give back twice the value of what she had stolen (Papyrus Leiden 352; Černý 1937). A number of administrative texts from the New Kingdom present different legal opportunities for slaves to be freed, often linked to a form of *quid pro quo* between slave and master, as in the case of a slave who agreed to marry an invalid niece:

"Year 27 under His Majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Menkheper, son of Ra Thutmose, given life eternity like Ra. The barber of the king Sabastet entered into the presence of the young princes of the royal palace, saying: My slave, one of my own people (*hsb*) named Ameniu, whom I had taken prisoner with my own arm when I accompanied the king [...] He has never been struck nor imprisoned behind a door of the royal palace. I gave him as wife Ta-Kemnet ("the blind one"), daughter of my sister Nebet-Ta, who had previously lived with my wife and my sister. He now leaves the house, being deprived of nothing [...] and if he decides to agree to a legal compromise with my sister, no one will ever do anything against him." (Sethe *Urk. IV*: 1369.4-16)

While in earlier periods a dependent humbly addressed a socially higher person referring to himself as *b3k*, "servant," during the New Kingdom the word *hm*, "laborer," came to be used in its place: "As a laborer serves his master, so I want to

serve my lord" (Papyrus Lansing 11.3; Gardiner 1937: 110:1). The same practice applies to administrative and legal documents, in which servants are identified by social status and by name. The term *b3k*, however, was still in use to describe a community of servants. Miscellanies (Caminos 1954; Gardiner 1937) as well as historical and biographical texts converge in presenting slaves either as a war booty or as chosen from the elite of the occupied territories. In the historical section of Papyrus Harris I, an important Ramesside administrative text that lists the property of the most important Egyptian temples, the king speaks of a manpower consisting of foreign warriors and prisoners of war captured during his military campaigns and how these were received in Egypt:

"I brought back in great numbers those that my sword has spared, with their hands tied behind their backs before my horses, and their wives and children in tens of thousands, and their livestock in hundreds of thousands. I imprisoned their leaders in fortresses bearing my name, and I added to them chief archers and tribal chiefs, branded and enslaved, tattooed with my name, their wives and children being treated in the same way." (P. Harris I, 77.4-6; Grandet 1994: 337; cf. Menu 2004b)

A slave could become free through adoption by his or her owner. A sterile woman adopts the children whom her husband fathered with a female slave, which implicitly shows that in the absence of such a procedure, the legal state of slavery must have been hereditary. This seems to have been a common practice in the ancient Near East. In Gen 30:1-13, Jacob's wives Rachel and Lea sent their husband to their maidservants to conceive the children they could not bear because of sterility or advanced age, and to take them as their own offspring.

In the so-called Adoption Papyrus, the term "free citizen in the land of the pharaoh" is used in opposition to "servant" or "slave" (cf. Gardiner 1933).

"We bought the slave girl Dienihatiri, and she gave birth to three children, a boy and two girls, three in all. And I adopted, fed, and raised them, and to this day they have never treated me badly. On the contrary, they have treated me well, and I

have no sons or daughters other than them. And the overseer of the stables, Pendiu, connected to me by family ties, since he is my younger brother, came into my house and took the elder sister, Taimennut, as his wife. And I accepted this on her behalf and he is now with her. Now, I have freed her, and if she gives birth to a son or daughter, they too will be free citizens (*rmṯ nmḥj*) in the land of the Pharaoh, since they will be with the overseer of the stables, Pendiu, my younger brother. And the other two children will live with their elder sister in the house of this overseer of the stables, Pendiu, my younger brother, whom I today adopt as my son, exactly as they are ... I (hereby) make the people whom I have put on record free citizens of the land of Pharaoh, and if any son, daughter, brother, or sister of their mother and their father should contest their rights, except Padiu this son of mine, for they are indeed no longer with him as servants (*bAk*), but are with him as brothers and children, being free citizens of the land <of Pharaoh>, may a donkey copulate with him and a donkey with his wife, whoever it be that shall call any of them a servant.” (Adoption Papyrus, 16r - 7v, after Gardiner 1940; Hofmann 2005: 226 - 234)

The use of the term “free citizen” (*rmṯ nmḥj*) in opposition to “servant” (*bAk*) requires a historical comment. The basic meaning of *nmḥj* refers to the condition of the orphan or of the poor. In Middle Kingdom texts, the expression “the poor woman of the city” (*nmḥt nt nwt*; Kóthay 2006) acquired the semantic connotation of “free woman” and became the feminine equivalent to “citizen” (*ḥnh nj nwt*; e.g., Cairo 20392, Lange and Schäfer 1902: 388 - 389; Ward 1986: 8 - 9). From the beginning of the New Kingdom, *nmḥj* could also be used to describe people who received from the administration an allotment of land, often as recompense for military service, which in practice became their property. These landholders formed a new social group: “May he (the king) prompt the officials (*srjw*) to remain in possession of (their) properties and the citizens (*nmḥjw*) to stay in their towns” (stela of Merenptah, l. 16; Kitchen 1982: 16.14 - 17.4). Their property, however, risked to be confiscated by state representatives; this kind of abuse is treated in the decree released by king Horemheb in the aftermath of the so-called Amarna Period (Kruchten 1981;

Sethe *Urk. IV*: 2140 - 2161; cf. Gnirs 1989: 104 - 110).

Another way in which a slave could become free was to be “purified” (*swḥ*), i.e., to enter temple service. The clearest formulation is found in the Restoration Stela of Tutankhamen:

“His Majesty built the barks (of the gods) on the Nile in cedar wood of the best in Lebanon, of the most prized along the Asiatic coast, inlaid with gold from the finest of foreign lands, so that the Nile was illuminated. His Majesty purified slaves, men and women, singers and dancing girls who previously had been slave girls assigned to the work of grinding in the royal palace. They were rewarded for the work done for the royal palace and for the treasure of the lord of the Two Lands. I declared them freed from slavery and reserved for the service of the fathers, all the gods, wishing to satisfy them by doing that which their Ka desires, because they protect Egypt.” (Sethe *Urk. IV*: 2030.1-11)

While the king maintained nominal property over slaves until Dynasty 18, Ramesside Egypt witnessed the development of private ownership of slaves, who could now be bought and sold. Papyrus Cairo 65739 (Gardiner 1935), for example, describes a long legal dispute between a soldier and a woman concerning the ownership of two Syrian slaves. Slaves were now provided some legal protection and owned property: Papyrus Wilbour, which dates to the time of Ramesses V, is the most important Pharaonic register of land assessment and refers more than once to slaves among the owners of the land being assessed (Gardiner 1941 - 1952).

To modern eyes, one of the most disconcerting aspects of the New Kingdom’s slavery is the presence of “houses of female slaves,” apparently devoted to the production of slave labor. In Papyrus Harris I, the prayer to Ptah at the beginning of the section devoted to the temple of Memphis contains a reference to a settlement, which seems to have been intended for the production of slave labor:

“I have issued for you great decrees with secret words, recorded in the archives of Egypt, built out of masses of scalpel-worked stone, and I have organized the service at your noble temple in eternity and the reorganization of your women’s

pure foundation (*grgt wbt nt hmwt*). I have gathered their children that had been scattered in the service of others, and I have destined them for You, in the service of the temple of Ptah, as an order established for them in eternity.” (P. Harris I, 47.8-9)

The biblical text of Gen 47:13 ff. tells us that Egyptians could opt to become slaves when forced to do so by famine, selling their possessions and also their own persons. In this vein, a priest of Medinet Habu named Amenkhau discusses in his second marriage contract the fate of 13 servants. Nine servants are passed on to the children of his first wife, and the other four are given to his second wife to become her property if her husband dies or in the event of divorce. This document is interesting because it presents, alongside the local servants, a foreign female slave (*hmt*) and, above all, because Amenkhau’s two wives are described as citizeness (*nh̄t nt nwt*): they enjoy the same status that we found in the document from Elephantine in which its citizens accept a request for emancipation of a female slave who was half owned by the city. The generic term appears in sources from the middle Dynasty 18 onward, when women took a more active part in private legal procedures (Menu 2004a: 366 - 367). In Amenkhau’s contract, the formula chosen by the vizier is revealing:

“Even if it had not been his wife but a Syrian or a Nubian whom he loved and to whom he gave a property of his, [who] should make void what he did? Let the four slaves which [fall to his lot] with the citizeness Anoksenedjem be given [to her?] together with [all that he may acquire] with her, which he has said he would give her: ‘my two thirds [in addition to] her one eighth, and no son or daughter of mine (i.e., Amenkhau) shall question this arrangement which [I] have made for her this day.’” (Papyrus Turin 2021, 3.11 - 4.1; Černý and Peet 1927: 32 - 33; Roccati 1985)

Egyptian laborers made up what would now be called a lower class whose status appears to oscillate between that of unpaid foreign slaves and that of paid local workers (Helck 1975).

Later Periods

During the first millennium BCE, Egyptian society became increasingly characterized by an ethnic blend (Vittmann 2003). While in the New Kingdom the relatively large numbers of servants and slaves had made them a basic, although textually underspecified, component of Egypt’s social texture, as the imperial power declined and Egypt lost its influence in Asia the number of slaves in the Nile Valley decreased considerably. Foreigners in Egypt were now mostly organized as autonomous communities, such as those of Greek (Pernigotti 1985), Semitic, or Carian mercenaries in places such as Elephantine or Naukratis (Bresciani 1985). References to slavery from the beginning of the first millennium are significantly less frequent than those of the Ramesside Period. In the inscription in which the Libyan potentate Shoshenq, “great chief of the Meshwesh” and future founder of Dynasty 22 (962 - 736 BCE), declares that he wishes to establish a religious foundation in Abydos to maintain the funerary cult of his father Nemlot (Cairo JE 66285, 13 - 14; Blackman 1941), there appears among the personnel of the foundation a field-worker responsible for four “laborers” (*hmw*). After this period, this term disappears from administrative documents. The status of slaves, if any, remains elusive (Cruz-Uribe 1982).

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that, in the fifth century BCE the Greek historian Herodotus does not mention the slave among the “seven classes of Egyptians” (*Aigyptiōn heptà gēneā*) that he considers representative of Egyptian society as a whole: “The Egyptians are divided into seven classes named after their occupations: priests, warriors, cowherds, swineherds, tradesmen, interpreters, and sailors” (*Histories* 2.164). Nor is it surprising that a few decades later, Plato’s analysis of Egyptian society very much resembles Herodotus’. In the dialogue *Timaēus*, an Egyptian priest talks to the Athenian lawmaker Solon about the laws in his own country:

“In the first place, there is the class (*gēnos*) of priests, which is separated from all the others; next, there are the artificers, who ply their several crafts by themselves and do not intermix; and then there is the class of shepherds and of hunters, and then that of husbandmen; and you will also observe that

the warriors in Egypt are distinct from all other classes, and are commanded by the law to devote themselves solely to military pursuits.” (*Timaens* 24a-b)

Also, during the Roman Period, Diodorus Siculus (1.73-74) divided Egyptian society, apart from the army, into three classes of free citizens: shepherds, field-workers, and craftsmen.

Priests, soldiers, and peasants were in fact the three social components emerging in the early first millennium BCE from the disintegration of imperial society. Priests occupied a privileged position administering the temple economy, which had become much greater than that of the palace. Most professional soldiers were mercenaries, employed from time to time by different dynasties. Field-workers and shepherds were “the working poor” (*nmlhw*). As mentioned above, the term *nmlh*, whose original meaning was orphan or poor, had been used in the Middle Kingdom to refer to free, but economically weak women. By the end of the New Kingdom, the term indicated untaxed landholders (“free people in the land of Pharaoh”) who had reached economic independence through an allotment of land. In Egyptian society of the first millennium BCE, whose political horizons had been reduced at the most to the Nile Valley, there was no longer room for large-scale slavery, so that semi-institutional servitude had been replaced by two forms of socioeconomic dependency: on the one hand by the corporative link between the individual and his professional group (so tight a link that the professional group appeared to Greek observers to be a closed social class); on the other hand by a more frequent recourse to commercial transactions of servants, who could eventually free themselves (*nmlh*) from this form of tight dependency; and finally by selling oneself as a servant in order to avoid economic hardship, as in the Cairo stela 27/6/24/3 (Bakir 1952: 85 - 86, pls. 3 - 4). In this respect, contracts from the Saite and Persian Periods provide no example of differentiation between indigenous and foreign people: slaves called “men of the north” appear in documents from the Kushite and Saite Periods such as Papyrus Louvre E 3228c (Malinine 1951) or Papyrus Vatican 10574 (Malinine 1946). Servitude was often the result of the search of economic protection and

could be encouraged by religious motivations, which clearly suggest that this form of tight dependency was closer to clientship than to slavery:

“You have acted so that I am in agreement with you about my price to become your servant. I am now your servant, and no one will henceforth be able to take me from you, nor shall I be able to assign myself (“become *nmlh*”) to another, but I shall remain in your service, along with my children, even in the case of cession of money, grain, or any other property of the country.” (Louvre E 706, 3r-7; Bakir 1952: table 17; Griffith 1909, Vol. 3: 52 ff.)

“The servant Tapnebtynis, daughter of Sebekmeni and of her mother, Esoeri, said before my lord Sobek, lord of Tebtynis, the great god: ‘I am your servant as are my children and my children’s children. I shall never be free (*nmlh*) in your temple, for eternity. You will look after me, keep me, safeguard me, keep me healthy, protect me from all male and female spirits, from every man in trance, from every epileptic, from every drowned man, from every drunkard, from every nightmare, from every dead man, from every man of the river, from every madman, from every foe, from every red thing, from every misadventure, from every plague.’” (Papyrus BM 10622, 7 - 14; Thompson 1940)

Greek papyri in Egypt reveal a rise in Hellenistic forms of slavery (Deißler 2003; Westermann 1929), based on capture in war, the purchase of slaves from Syria and Palestine, as described, for example, in Zeno’s papyri (Scholl 1983), the enslavement of debtors, and the inherited status of slaves’ children born in their master’s house. In the texts of the Ptolemaic Period, however, the most common form of servitude (including voluntary servitude) had turned to be that of temple service. The “freeborn” person was now in contrast with someone “born within the walls of the temple,” the last bastion of Egyptian high culture in an increasingly syncretistic society.

Final remarks

The study of servitude and slavery in ancient Egypt is instructive from a threefold perspective. From the historical standpoint, Pharaonic Egypt shows the adaption of different forms of servitude to varying

economic needs and political ideas, ranging from a widespread extent of coerced labor during the Old Kingdom, when the whole of Egyptian society was heavily dependent on state control, to politically motivated restrictions of freedom during the Middle Kingdom and to an abundance of foreign slaves in the New Kingdom, to end with different forms of voluntary servitude during the first millennium BCE. From a social point of view, the important changes that took place in the Pharaonic world during the three thousand years of its written history display an evolution from the pyramidal

model of the Memphite Period to the meritocracy of the Middle Kingdom, from Ramesside bureaucratic centralism to the emergence of closed social and religious groups during the Late Period. From the cultural point of view, the study of forms and patterns of Egyptian servitude allows us to outline a cultural history of Egypt, which reveals on the one hand the inner workings of an autocratic ancient Near Eastern society, on the other hand glimpses of extraordinary modernity such as the distrust in rigid legal codification of social status.

Bibliographic Notes

There are relatively few studies on Egyptian slavery, which encompass the entire history of this civilization. Bakir (1952) is outdated in terms of documentary evidence, whereas Helck (1984) presents an overview of the evidence and can still be read with benefit. Slavery and rural dependence are treated in depth in Moreno García (2008). Recent research privileges more detailed analyses of specific historical periods, cf. Moreno García (1997 and 2000) for the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period, Menu (1981) and Quirke (1988) for the Middle Kingdom, Navailles and Neveu (1989) and Menu (2004b) for the New Kingdom, Cruz-Urbe (1982) for the Late Period, and Scholl (1983) and Deißler (2003) for Hellenistic Egypt, or else punctual social contexts, such as Moreno García (1998) and Allam (2004) for the “dependents” in the earlier historical periods, Franke (1998) for the “working poor” in the Middle Kingdom, Haider (1996) for slave trade in the Late Bronze Age, or Hofmann (2005) for the cultural horizon of the most important terms connected with slavery and servitude. The core issue at stake remains the adequacy of a legal approach to describe social realities in Pharaonic Egypt. Menu (1998 and 2004a) is probably the most prominent representative of a positivistic answer and favors maintaining a legalistic view, whereas Eyre (2004) takes a more differentiated look at the issue and questions the validity of borrowing connoted terms used for different cultural settings when describing Egyptian social patterns.

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