

In the Middle Kingdom tomb of the prominent official **Djehutyhotep** at Deir el-Bersha, the concept of *sšt3* is used to describe the elaborate process of dragging his colossal stone statue of 13 cubits (about 22 feet) from the alabaster quarry at Hatnub (copied by John Gardner Wilkinson before 1856).

□ Expanding the Meaning of the Word



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Abstract : *The aim of this brief paper is to explore and expand the definition of the Ancient Egyptian term sšṯ3 to incorporate a new meaning of the term beyond the normative translation of "secret" and "mystery" to include the idea of "complexity." In order to this, it is important to look at some concrete contexts in which particular individuals experience sšṯ3. In pursuing this inquiry, it is necessary to trace the paths of sšṯ3 that have little to do with obscuring, concealing, and intentionally hiding restricted and/or protected knowledge from others. The author think that this brief investigation will help to shed light on a crucial meaning of the term sšṯ3 that encompasses intellectual notions of observing, planning, evaluation, and probing nature for the "secrets" to unlock the solutions to perplexing and intricate problems.*

Résumé : *L'extension du sens du mot sšṯ3 - Le but de ce court article est d'explorer et d'étendre la définition du terme égyptien ancien sšṯ3 pour y incorporer une signification nouvelle de ce terme au-delà de la traduction normative de "secret" et de "mystère", et qui se rapporte à l'idée de "complexité". Dans cette perspective, il est important d'examiner des contextes concrets dans lesquels sšṯ3 est impliqué. Dans la poursuite de ce questionnement, il est nécessaire d'examiner les sens de sšṯ3 qui évoquent ce qui est obscur, caché, intentionnellement dissimulé, à une connaissance limitée et/ou protégée vis-à-vis des autres. L'auteur pense que cette brève investigation aidera à jeter la lumière sur la signification profonde du terme sšṯ3 qui intègre les notions d'observation, d'organisation, d'évaluation, et révélant la nature des "secrets" propre à délivrer des solutions aux problèmes difficiles et compliqués.*

1. Introduction

The aim of this brief paper is to explore and expand the definition of the Ancient Egyptian term *sšt3* to incorporate a new meaning of the term beyond the normative translation of “secret” and “mystery” to include the idea of “complexity.” In order to this, it is important to look at some concrete contexts in which particular individuals experience *sšt3*. In pursuing this inquiry, it is necessary to trace the paths of *sšt3* that have little to do with obscuring, concealing, and intentionally hiding restricted and/or protected knowledge from others. I hope that this brief investigation will help to shed light on a crucial meaning of the term *sšt3* that encompasses intellectual notions of observing, planning, evaluation, and probing nature for the “secrets” to unlock the solutions to perplexing and intricate problems. I believe it is a mistake to define *sšt3* too narrowly without looking at the varied contexts in which it occurs.

2. Meaning of *sšt3* as “secrets”

The common notion of *sšt3* is seen as information or knowledge or things that are intentionally concealed. Thus, the common translation of the term as “secret.” This meaning intrinsically creates a barrier between those who know the “secrets” from those excluded from knowledge of them. Implicit in this common definition is the notion that there is certain knowledge and activities that require concealment. The tomb of **Hepdjefai**, an official during the *Middle Kingdom*, describes various activities in which he engaged in to know the “mysteries” or “secrets” of **Osiris**. One of these activities was following **Osiris** to his place in his tomb which is in Rokerret, the sacred land under **Anubis**. He goes on to provide the following epithet of *Rokerret* :



sšt3 imn n wsir int dsrt nt nb 'nh

hidden mystery of Osiris, sacred valley of the Lord of Life.¹

In this passage, the word *sšt3* “mystery” is modified by the adjective *imn* “hidden”. For *sšt3* to be qualified by *imn* implies that the notion of hiding or concealment is not an intrinsic part of the basic meaning of *sšt3* although it is predominantly read in this way. Another passage from the text of the *Middle Kingdom* official **Rudjahau** helps to further clarify the basic meaning of *sšt3*:



ink rh ht sšmw dhwt h3p-r sšt3 hwt-ntr

I am a knower of things, a follower of Thoth, and close-mouthed on the secrets of the temple.²

¹ Pierre Montet, “Les Tombeaux de Siout et de Deir Rifeh,” *Kemi*, Tome III (1930-1935), 50.

In this passage, **Rudjahau** stresses the fact that he is discreet or close-mouthed (*h3p-r*) regarding the “secrets” of the temple. Taken together, the above two passages indicate that there are “secrets” that can be hidden and “secrets” that require one to be discreet. This implies, in turn, that there are also “secrets” that are not hidden, i.e. secrets that are able to be revealed to the wise and studious person that explores and penetrates the mysteries of nature. This sense can be found in the text of **Amenhotep**, a royal scribe and chamberlain during the late 18th dynasty:



bs.kw.(i) grt md3t ntr m33.n.i sspd.i m-m

I was initiated into the divine book and I have seen the power of Thoth and I am supplied with



št3w.sn pg3.n.i itnw.sn nbw ndnd tw

their secrets. I have revealed all of their secrets so that one inquires



m-.i m sp.sn nb

*from me in all of their affairs.*³

Because **Thoth** is linked to science, medicine, cosmology, and writing among other areas, to have knowledge of the “secrets” of the power of **Thoth** is to be able to probe and unravel the “mysteries” of the intelligible and sensible world. Because of his knowledge, he takes pride in revealing (*pg3*) his reflections to others, not concealing or hiding them. Thus, this passage emphasizes the idea that *sst3* can be opened and revealed through learning, in this case being initiated into the knowledge of the divine book (*md3t ntr*). Because *sesheta* can be revealed or concealed, these are aspects that are associated with *sšt3*, but not intrinsically a part of the basic meaning of the word.

3. Meaning of *sšt3* as “complexity”

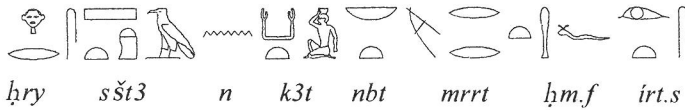
Although there are various shades of meaning that come together in the word *sšt3* and give it intellectual depth, I think the essential meaning of the word *sšt3*, as a noun, means complexity, i.e. knowledge, information, or things that are obscure, difficult, and inaccessible to those who are not initiated into them or trained to understand matters beyond general knowledge or understanding. When used as an adjective, *sšt3* modifies other nouns and stresses their complexity, not their intentional concealment from others as

² Hieroglyphic Texts from Egyptian Stelae in the British Museum, Part I, Plate 47.

³ Wolfgang Helck, *Urkunden Der 18. Dynastie*, Heft 21 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1958), 1820.

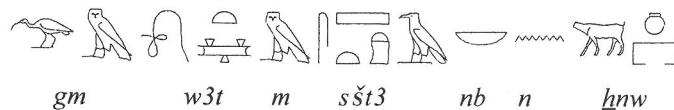
commonly assumed. As a causative verb, *sšt3* means to intentionally makes something complex or inaccessible.

With this framework, I will provide various examples to support the nuanced meaning of *sšt3* as complexity. In the *Old Kingdom*, the official **Sabu-Ibebi** describes himself as follows :



*Master of secrets of every work which his Majesty desired to be done.*⁴

The title *hry sšt3 n k3t nbt* is a prominent title of high administrative officials in the *Old Kingdom*.⁵ Translating *sšt3* as “secret” in this context obscures the essential meaning of the activity being described. “Work” denotes the creative mental and physical effort exerted to do or make things. In the context of making, doing, and acting upon things, it speaks to both the process and product of purposeful activity. The concept of “work” and “construction” in Ancient Egypt was a dynamic and intricate process that involved knowledge of mathematics and the various materials of nature used. It also involved complex planning and organization to mobilize the populace. “Work” was not a simple process in Ancient Egypt and the results of the projects and products of “construction” reflect a spirit of precision, of excellence, and a mastery of the complexities of knowing how to build and knowing how to mobilize the populace to undertake such magnificent works of craftsmanship. It is for this reason that I argue for the use of complexity as a translation to stress the concrete knowledge, planning, and understanding that is an integral part of any “work” or “construction.” The use of “secret” as a translation tends to obscure the logical sense inherent in these contexts that speak to a sophisticated attempt to unite and combine various related parts of “work” and “construction” into a functioning whole. Indeed, the text of **Sabu-Ibebi** provides further evidence for this translation when he describes himself as:



*one who finds the way in every complexity of the interior (i.e. Royal Residence).*⁶

“To find the way in every complexity” is to be engaged in a journey of reflection, pondering, inquiring, observing, and probing for solutions. Faulkner astutely translated the nuanced meaning of *sšt3* in this passage as “problem.”⁷ Again, the use of “secret” as a translation obscures the obvious description of himself in navigating the complex administrative domain of the *Royal Residence*.

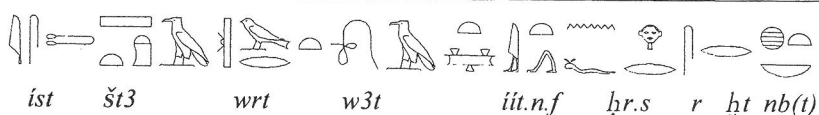
In the *Middle Kingdom* text of the prominent official **Djehutyhotep**, the concept of *sšt3* is used to describe the elaborate process of dragging his colossal stone statue of 13 cubits (about 22 feet) from the alabaster quarry at Hatnub (see Figure 1) :

⁴ Urk. I, 82.

⁵ See Nigel Strudwick, *The Administration of Egypt in the Old Kingdom* (London: Kegan Paul, Inc., 1985).

⁶ Urk. I, 84.

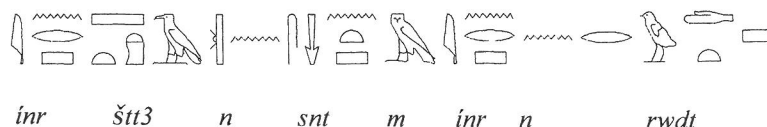
⁷ Raymond Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute Ashmolean Museum, 1991), 249.



and the road upon which it came was very difficult more than anything



and complex in the midst of men who dragged the great thing upon it from



the difficult stone of the base (of the statue) composed of hardstone.⁸

This passage is very important because we find three different grammatical uses of the word *sšt3*. The first use of *sšt3* is as an adjectival predicate in an adverb clause marked by the particle *ist*. The word *wrt* “very” is an adverb that is inserted between the adjectival predicate *sšt3* and its subject *w3t* “road.” In this use, *sšt3* is an adjective used to say something about the road upon which the statue was being dragged. The road was described as “very difficult more than anything.” Newberry suggests that this could indicate a part of the southern quarry where “the road is less well defined.”⁹ The important alabaster quarry at Hatnub is about 15 miles east of El Amarna.¹⁰ The transport of this colossal statue over land and down stream for several miles to El-Bersheh was a very complex process. In the second use, *sšt3* functions as a nominal predicate in an adverb clause also marked by the particle *ist*. In this use, *sšt3* communicates the mental idea of the complexity of the process for all the men involved in it (*hr-i n rmt*). Newberry asserts that “the whole task must have occupied a very large force of men for many weeks.”¹¹ In the third use, *sšt3* is an adjective modifying the noun *inr* “stone” and emphasizes the intrinsic complex nature of the stone used at the base of the statue. Newberry also states that “the difficulty of removing it was increased by the softness and delicacy of the material.”¹²

The use of *sšt3* in the context of the colossal statue **Djehutyhotep** commissioned for himself reveals different shades of meaning that would be obscured by the use of “secret” in translation. The first sense of *sšt3* in this passage is a physical sense whereby *sšt3* is applied as an adjective to describe the complexity of the natural terrain (*w3t*), in this case the road, and the complexity of material, in this case stone (*inr*). The second sense is a psychological sense that alludes to the intricate, involved, and perplexing process of the actual transportation of the statue for those who participated. The word *sšt3* is used to describe this process consisting of the various parts combined and united.

⁸ Percy E. Newberry, *El Bersheh. Part I, The Tomb of Tehuti-Hetep* (London: The Egypt Exploration Fund), 18, Plate XIV.

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ A. Lucas and J.R. Harris, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999), p.60.

¹¹ Newberry, *El-Bersheh*, 24.

¹² Ibid., 23.

The final example that I will give comes from the *Book of Coming Forth By Day* and describes the curious movement of the planet Venus. For the Ancient Egyptians, the divinity of the planet Venus was Osiris and a prominent epithet of the planet was the traveling star of **Benu Osiris** (*sb3 d3 bnw wsir*). The following passage describes the movement of the *bnw* “phoenix” or planet Venus:


ink mh^{cc} nwtj R^c ink bnw št3y ink ‘k ḥtp.f m

I am the son and heir of Ra, I am the phoenix, the mysterious. I am one who enters when he sets in the


dw3t pri ḥtp m nwt ink nb pḏtw ḥr

underworld and comes forth when (he) sets in Nut. I am lord of the celestial expanse and


š^{cc}s níwt m-ḥt R^c

(I) travel in the nether sky (i.e. the night sky) in the following of Ra.¹³

For the Ancient Egyptians, time was a moving image of eternity, and they closely observed and measured the celestial movements of the sun, moon, stars, and planets in the context of a universe that was eternally living and moving, an enduring cycle of life. In this passage, there is an accurate astronomical observation of the complex movement of the planet Venus. The description of Venus as *št3y*, or the “mysterious” tends to imply that Venus, was beyond human understanding and comprehension. The *bnw* “phoenix” is given this epithet of *št3y* because the planet Venus “mysteriously” passes the sun and rises and sets after the sun. In other words, it “overtakes” and is “overtaken” by the sun. Aveni tells us that if the planets Venus and Mercury are not “hidden below the earth, each is visible lying low in the west after sunset or hovering over the position of sunrise in the eastern predawn sky.”¹⁴ When the “mysterious” phoenix enters at the same time that the sun sets in the underworld, the movements of the planet Venus are hidden below the earth. And when the “mysterious” phoenix comes forth as the sun sets in Nut, the movements of the planet Venus are visible and lying low in the west after sunset. The movements of Venus are complex because after Venus as an evening star, goes from its first appearance to its last in approximately 263 days it “is out of sight for only several days before returning to the morning sky to repeat the whole process.”¹⁵ This explains why the Ancient Egyptians conceptualize Venus as traveling in the nether or night sky (*níwt*) in the following (*m-ḥt*) of

¹³ Ch.180 in E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead: The Chapters of Coming Forth By Day* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1898), 474.

¹⁴ Anthony Aveni, *Conversing with the Planets: How Science and Myth Invented the Cosmos* (New York: Times Books, 1992), 58.

¹⁵ Ibid., 28.

the sun-god Ra. The Ancient Egyptians not only distinguished the evening and morning appearances of Venus, but more importantly, they knew that the evening and morning appearances of the planet were not separate appearances; they were, more accurately, distinct movements from the same planet.

“Mysteries” commonly refer to happenings and phenomena that are never fully understood and can only be partially described, but not fully explained. The word *sšt3* possesses this sense in many contexts, but the problem arises when translations use “mystery” in an extreme esoteric sense and thereby imply that any logical meaning derived from the passage is inaccessible and unknowable. This is why I argue for the idea of “complexity” to be integrated into lexicons as part of the basic meaning of the word *sšt3* because although the deepest mysteries of human life and events can never be fully understood, there are many things that can be accurately described and explained through having the correct method (*tp-Hsb*) to probe and investigate nature in order to reveal some of its “mysteries” or master some of its complexities.¹⁶

4. Conclusion

The Ancient Egyptians did not have a pejorative aspect of *sšt3* linked to deception, lying, and denial. Thus, the intent of *sšt3* was not to intentionally deceive or conceal. The word *sšt3* refers to information, knowledge, phenomena or things that are complex, obscure, difficult, and not obvious. Future translators of Egyptian texts should be aware of the important basic meaning of *sšt3* as complexity. Regardless of the translation, *sšt3* refers to a dynamic that is not beyond the capacity of human beings to reason, know, and understand and sometimes master the complexities of their surrounding environment. It is difficult to encompass all of the nuanced shades of meaning of *sšt3* in a single definition because various aspects are related, but not always present together in any one instance. If we, as translators of this word, keep in mind the basic idea of “complexity” and not “concealment,” even as we continue to use translations such as “secret” or “mystery,” we will make a significant leap forward to understanding the basic essence and spirit of this important Egyptian word.

□ The author

Mario BEATTY received his B.A. from Miami University, his M.A. from The Ohio State University, and his Ph.D. from Temple University. His dissertation is entitled *The Image of Celestial Phenomena in The Book of Coming Forth By Day : An Astronomical and Philological Analysis*. He currently holds a joint appointment as an Assistant Professor in the Departments of Africana Studies and Social Science at Morris Brown College, Atlanta, Georgia.

Publications (<http://www.ankhonline.com>)

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M. BEATTY, *On the Source of the Moon's light in Ancient Egypt*, *ANKH* n°6/7, 1997-1998, pp. 163-177.

¹⁶ Theophile Obenga, *Ancient Egypt and Black Africa* (London: Karnak House, 1992), 46-47.