

Among other features, the **Stela of Ikhernofret** provides a narrative relative to the **Mysteries of Osiris**. In the stela, Ikhernofret describes his office (*i3t*) as *ḥry sšt3* “**Master of Secrets**”. This office gave him the power and authority to clothe and adorn the god in the context of the festival and ritual drama. XIIth dynasty under Senusret (1878-1841 B.C.). Berlin Museum (Germany), 1204.

□ The Title



ḥry sštꜣ

“Master of Secrets” : Functional or Honorific ?¹

Mario BEATTY

Abstract : *This paper is primarily concerned with discerning whether or not the title ḥry sštꜣ “Master of Secrets” was descriptive of an office (ỉt) with specific functions and duties. To date, most Egyptologists have concluded that the title was primarily honorific, an indication of ceremonial honor while not necessarily performing any specific functions. Because this issue is only peripherally important in the existing literature, key evidence in Ancient Egyptian texts is overlooked which helps to clarify this problematic. This paper seeks to isolate and highlight key textual references of specific holders of the title in the Old Kingdom (i.e., Uta, Nedjemib, and Sabni), the Middle Kingdom (i.e., Khentimsemt the Younger, Ikhernofret, Mentuhotep, and Hepdjefai), and the New Kingdom (i.e., Rekhmire). These textual references to the title ḥry sštꜣ emphasize the fact that the title is consistently seen as an office with specific functions and various duties in all periods of Ancient Egyptian history.*


Résumé : *Le titre ḥry sštꜣ “Maître des Secrets” : fonctionnel ou honorifique ? Cet article vise à déterminer si le titre ḥry sštꜣ “Maître des Secrets” renvoie à un office (ỉt) auquel sont attachés des fonctions et des services spécifiques. Jusqu'à ce jour, la plupart des égyptologues avaient conclu à son caractère primitivement honorifique, indice d'un honneur cérémoniel ne faisant pas nécessairement référence à l'exécution de charges particulières. Cette problématique, restée une préoccupation périphérique dans la littérature existante, est ici clarifiée en ayant recours aux textes de l'ancienne Égypte. Cet article identifie et met en lumière les références textuelles relatives aux porteurs de ce titre dans l'Ancien Empire (i.e., Uta, Nedjemib, et Sabni), dans le Moyen Empire (i.e., Khentimsemt le Jeune, Ikhernofret, Mentuhotep, et Hepdjefai), et dans le Nouvel Empire (i.e., Rekhmire). Ces références textuelles montrent que le titre ḥry sštꜣ est cohérent avec l'existence d'un office lié à des fonctions spécifiques et des services variés durant toutes les périodes de l'histoire de l'ancienne Égypte.*

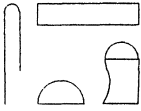
1. Introduction

This paper is primarily concerned with ferreting out and illuminating the semantic content which the Ancient Egyptians ascribed to the title ḥry sštꜣ. Grammatically, the title ḥry

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 50th Annual American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) Conference on April 25, 1999 in Chicago, Illinois.




sšꜣ is composed of the nisbe-adjective  *ḥry* which governs the noun

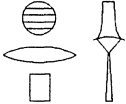



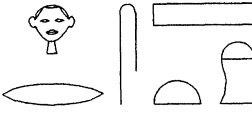
sšꜣ is and literally connotes the notion of ‘he who is upon the secrets’.² The sense of authority and power which seems to be inherently linked to this notion has led a number of scholars, namely Raymond Faulkner and William Ward, to translate the title as ‘Master of Secrets’.³


The essence of prominent titles like the title *ḥry sšꜣ* could be symbolically conveyed

through the use of signature ideographs. For example, the title  *imy-r*

“Overseer” could be symbolically conveyed by the ideograph of a tongue  . The

title  *ḥrp* “Director” can be shown with simply the *ḥrp* scepter of authority

 . Likewise, the title  *ḥry sšꜣ* “Master of Secrets” can be

ideographically conveyed by a recumbent dog  or a recumbent dog on a shrine



. These signature ideographs are not haphazard or even “sportive” as Gardiner suggests; they represent a reflective thought process by the Ancient Egyptians to capture the essence of the title with one glyph.⁴ Assumably, there would be no need for this type of process if the title were merely an honor; the process implies the Ancient Egyptians thought about the most appropriate way to depict the essence of an office fulfilling various functions.

Kjell T. Rydstrom, the author of the first descriptive chronological and textual overview of this title, cautions against reading the notion of ‘Master’ into the title and opts for the phrase ‘he who is in charge of secrets’ which, for him, conveys a modest sense of authority and distinction which is to be distinguished from the more inherently powerful notion of ‘Master’⁵. Since there are many facets of the *ḥry sšꜣ* that involve fulfilling various

² See par. 79 and 80 in Sir Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

³ Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1991), p. 249; William A. Ward, *Index of Egyptian Administrative and Religious Titles of the Middle Kingdom* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1982), p. 119.

⁴ See F20, S42, E15, and E16 respectively in Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*.

⁵ Kjell T. Rydstrom, “*ḥry sšꜣ* ‘In Charge of Secrets’ : The 3000-Year Evolution of a Title” *Discussions in Egyptology*, 28 (1994), p.55.

functions in the society with a discernable and significant measure of control and authority, not merely an honor, I maintain the reading of the title as “Master of Secrets” to convey this dynamic. In spite of these semantic nuances in translation, we still encounter yet a further difficulty in discerning whether the title *ḥry sšt3* was descriptive of an office



i3t with specific functions and duties or was it honorific, an indication of ceremonial honor while not necessarily performing any specific functions.

In researching this title in the Old Kingdom, Klaus Baer concluded that the title is to be ranked low in relationship to other titles and its importance is significantly elevated only when it is a part of titles such as *ḥry sšt3 n pr-dw3t* “Master of secrets of the house of the morning”⁶. Implicit herein is the notion that low rank will yield a title which is primarily honorific in stature. While Baines concurs with Baer’s low ranking of the title, he also points out that the title holds some significance in the respective areas of writing and “religious rituals, performed in principle by people of high status.”⁷ Helck maintains that the title is honorific performing only a ceremonial function. He says “sie bewahren das Geheimnis des Königs vor den Augen Unberufener.”⁸ For Helck, a title lacking a function such as *ḥry sšt3* does not necessarily mean it lacks authority over persons of subordinate status⁹. Strudwick asserts the need to comparatively distinguish between administrative holders of the title *ḥry sšt3* with explanatory additions (ex. *ḥry sšt3 n ḥwt wrt* “Master of Secrets of the Great Mansion”, *ḥry sšt3 n k3t nbt* “Master of Secrets of All Works”) and honorific titles in the context of the Old Kingdom, but no effort is made to define any particular function(s) for the *ḥry sšt3*.¹⁰ Rydstrom does not attempt to clarify this issue, but his commentary leans toward viewing the title as primarily honorific with some functions. In one place, he asserts that the title “does not necessarily mean a certain function, but could be a titular confirmation of competence”.¹¹ In another place, he states that “the title *ḥry sšt3* presumably did not express a certain function of the royal court, but may have been an official recognition of a man of integrity”.¹²

When we speak of the dichotomy between titles which are functional or honorific, I think that we are ultimately attempting to determine whether or not a title follows set procedures



and formal patterns of behavior which can be usefully defined as the “work”

⁶ Klaus Baer, *Rank and Title in the Old Kingdom: The Structure of the Egyptian Administration in the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), p.35. For a discussion on this title, see Aylward Blackman, “The House of the Morning,” *JEA*, 5 (1918), p.148-165.

⁷ John Baines, “Restricted Knowledge, Hierarchy, and Decorum: Modern Perceptions and Ancient Institutions,” *JARCE*, 27 (1990), p.9-10.

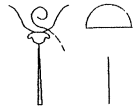
⁸ W. Helck, *Untersuchungen zu den Beamtentiteln des ägyptischen Alten Reiches* (Gluckstadt, 1954), p.43 as quoted in Rydstrom, “*ḥry sšt3*,” p.54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.111-119 as cited in Rydstrom, “*ḥry sšt3* ” p.77.

¹⁰ Nigel Strudwick, *The Administration of Egypt in the Old Kingdom* (London: Kegan Paul, Inc., 1985), p.197, 207, 248.

¹¹ Rydstrom, “*ḥry sšt3* ” p.72.

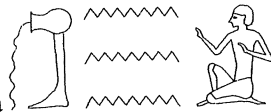
¹² *Ibid.*, p.82.



k3t of an “office” *i3t*, an occupation which implies doing things, making things, and/or managing things. If we theoretically suspend belief in what I sense is the overly rigid dichotomy between functional and honorific titles, perhaps we can entertain the notion that the *ḥry sšt3* manifests various aspects of behavior rather than a qualitatively distinct type of behavior which must be pigeonholed under the rubric of functional or honorific. Hence, the title *ḥry sšt3* may perform a role which is named, recognized, and defined as behavior which is both functional and honorific at the same time. In attempting to ferret out the meaning of the title *ḥry sšt3*, my central approach veers from the one taken by Rydstrom who attempted to discern the meaning and functions of the title largely within the context of examining the other titles held by the person.¹³ My approach herein is more limited, seeking to primarily isolate and highlight key textual references of specific holders of the title *ḥry sšt3* in the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms which are primarily autobiographical in nature. Commentary on explanatory additions to the base title of *ḥry sšt3* only occurs when the base title *ḥry sšt3* itself has been defined by the persons highlighted.

2. The Old Kingdom

In the Old Kingdom, there are numerous holders of the title *ḥry sšt3*, yet there are precious few autobiographical references which provide us with a direct rudimentary indication of the function(s) which the *ḥry sšt3* performed. One text is from the latter half of the Fourth Dynasty under the reign of Menkaure (2532 – 2504 B.C.) concerning



the official named Uta. Uta was a *wḥb* priest of the king, fulfilling all the requirements of basic purity in order to handle ritual instruments and objects and perform auxiliary tasks in the complex of the pyramid “Menkaure is divine.” In the text, he describes himself as:



imy-r gs ḥr-^c nswt ḥry sšta ir ḥt r st-ib nt nb.f m k3t gs

The Overseer of salve, Royal assistant, *ḥry sšt3*, one who does things to the satisfaction of his Lord in works of salve.¹⁴

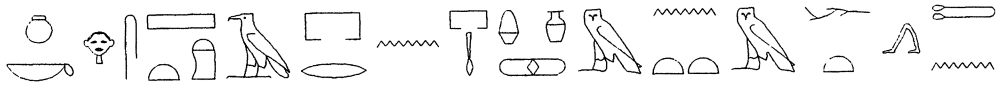
The salve would be used and applied by Uta in making a flexible material for sandals for the King and also making parchment roles (*mḏ3t*) of leather (*art*) for the Lector priest (*ḥry-ḥbt*). As *ḥry sšt3*, Uta is not only given the honor of being connected with the King’s person and intimate daily activities as the “favorite of his Lord,” but he is also given the

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.55.

¹⁴ *Urk.* I, 22, 7-8.

function of “doing things” specifically in works of *salve*. As the King is dressed each morning, anointed and equipped with the insignia of office, Uta must have played a significant role in this context as “Overseer of *salve*” who would organize and manage labor for the manufacturing of *salve* and perhaps the *hry sst3* points to intimate participation in the dressing of the King, whether it be in the human aspect of the daily morning ritual of anointing the King or the divine aspect in terms of the statues and royal corpses.¹⁵ Hence, we see the *hry sst3* combining honor and function harmoniously in the text of Uta.

Also in the Old Kingdom, the text of Nedjemib points to a significant role of the *ḥry sṣṣṣ* in the context of funerary offerings. He begins his message by saying “O you living ones who are on top of the earth, When you pass by this tomb pour water for me.”¹⁶ This is a straightforward “Appeal to the Living” which Lichtheim has described as “the briefest possible request” for an offering, composed of a simple address to the living and request for offering without motivating the visitors to do so by gaining favor with the god and King.¹⁷ The only information given by Nedjemib relative to his background is that he is a *ḥry sṣṣṣ*. Nedjemib says :



ink hry sšt3 pr.n.(i) prt-hrw m ntt m-h₃t tn

I am the *hry sŕt*, I have issued invocation-offerings of bread and bear in that accompanying you.¹⁸

Grammatically, the sentence is an example of what Gardiner refers to as “anticipatory emphasis in verbal sentences”. In this particular case, the use of the independent pronoun precedes the use of the *sdm.n.f* form.¹⁹ Thus, we encounter the *ḥry sṯṯ3*, by his own agency, issuing the call for invocation-offerings to come forth to the deceased in the context of funerary rituals. In this passage, the *ḥry sṯṯ3* asks for libations to be poured for him by the living and in return, because he is the *ḥry sṯṯ3*, he will reciprocally provide them with invocation offerings. Hence, we receive a glimpse of his role in sending forth the necessary funerary provisions for the deceased. With this text, in conjunction with the text of Uta, we can assume that the role and function of the *ḥry sṯṯ3* in the Old Kingdom is to be contextualized within both the spheres of the living and the deceased.

In the Sixth Dynasty under the reign of Pepi II (2278-2184 B.C.), Sabni, a Governor of the South, descends into Nubia to retrieve the corpse of his father Mekhu for embalmment. While in the process of returning to Egypt, Sabni meets the court official Iri who has procured all of the necessary products and people for embalmment. Among other things, Iri states that :

¹⁵ Rydstrom, “*hry sst3*,” p.62.

¹⁶ Urk. I, 75, 8-10.

¹⁷ Miriam Lichtheim, *Maat in Egyptian Autobiographies and Related Studies* (Universitätsverlag, Freiburg, Schweiz, 1992), p.158.

¹⁸ Urk. I, 75, 11-12.

¹⁹ See par. 148, 1 in Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*.



in.n.(i) n.f sty ḥb m pr-ḥdwy sšt3 m wḥbty

I have brought him festival perfume from the double treasury and secrets from the doubly pure place of embalmment.²⁰

The *wḥbty*, the doubly pure place of embalmment, is the workshop where requirements for the funerary cult were made. All ritual instruments and objects coming forth from the *wḥbty* are conceptualized here as *sšt3* and hence, the “secrets” were precious material products which were necessary for the spiritual preparation, preservation, and perpetuation of something precious - life itself. These *sšt3* endowed the deceased with the power and ability to transform into pure physical and spiritual beings which will enable them to not only travel effectively, but also have access to spiritual illumination. Without the *sšt3* from the *wḥbty* there obviously is no promise of an effective afterlife for the deceased which is why Sabni was, in part, motivated to retrieve the corpse of his father by the necessity to provide him with the essential funerary rituals and products which will perpetuate his spiritual life.

From a stela from the Ptolemaic period at Abydos, we can assume that the *wḥt* remained a sacred place of purity and embalming and the *ḥry sšt3* maintained an intimate connection to it. In the context of embalming a falcon mummy, the text states “the *ḥry sšt3* together with the lector-priests are going into the embalmment-house.”²¹ Another text from the Ptolemaic period states “Anubis, the *ḥry sšt3*, kneels under the head of this god, but no lector-priest may approach him (i.e. the god) in order to gain knowledge of the *ḥry sšt3* and any of his work there”.²² Herein, the *ḥry sšt3* kneels under the head of the god as a priest in the guise of Anubis wearing a jackal mask. The *ḥry sšt3* is conceptualized as a priest performing functions relative to the god inside the temple which are described appropriately as work (*k3t*) and his work is distinguishable from the work of the lector-priest which is why the lector-priest can not approach the god concurrently with the *ḥry sšt3*. The close connection and relationship evidenced here between the functions of the *ḥry sšt3* and the lector-priest in the Ptolemaic period recalls a long tradition in Ancient Egypt beginning in the Old Kingdom with their symbiotic pairing on the mastabas of many officials.


3. The Middle Kingdom

In the Middle Kingdom, the *ḥry sšt3* is not only seen in the context of performing rituals in the funerary cult; he is also an important figure and functionary in the context of festivals. One very important conceptual category that emerges in the Middle Kingdom as a

²⁰ *Urk.* I, 138, 4-5.

²¹ W. Spiegelberg, “Demotisches Miscellen,” *ZAS*, 53 (1917), p.119, n.2 as quoted in Rydstrom, “*ḥry sšt3*” p.80.

²² S. Sauneron, *Rituel de l'embaumement*. Papyrus Boulaq III. Papyrus Louvre 5.158 (Le Caire: Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte, 1952), par. VII, 4, 7-8 as cited in Rydstrom, “*ḥry sšt3*” p.80.

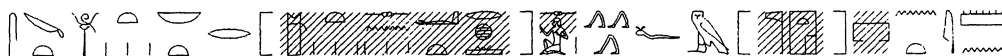
descriptor of the *hry sšt3* is  *i3t*, a term commonly translated as “office.” When the concept of *i3t* is applied and linked to a particular title it strongly and consistently implies that the title is functional, describing an official who actually does something.²³ The importance of *i3t* as a functionary is prominently illustrated in a number of cases. For example, on the statue of Minnakhte, an official from Koptos, he asserts that he is :



rdjt rh i3t nbt irt.sn m hwt-ntr

One who causes every office to know their duties in the temple.²⁴

In the Eighteenth Dynasty Menkhepersenebra, high priest of Amun, describes himself as :



sšmt i3t nbt r hnt.sn rdjt rh s nmtwt.f m hwt-ntr nt imn

Instructing all offices concerning their occupations. Causing a man to know his movements in the Temple of Amun.²⁵

In another text of the Eighteenth Dynasty in the tomb of the vizier Rekhmire, Rekhmire states that :



mk wnn s m i3t.f iri.f ht hft hr dd n.f

Behold, when a man is in his office, he does things in accordance with what is assigned to him.²⁶

Thus, we see officials holding an *i3t* are not only instructed (*sšmt*) on the essence of their office; they are also assigned (*dd*) specific duties (*irt*) to carry out as a functionary. The specific duties of their office can be performed as a priest inside the temple or outside the temple relative to other occupations (*hnt*).

In the Twelfth Dynasty under the reign of Amenemhat II (1929 – 1895 B.C.), Khentiemsemet recounts various honors and offices bestowed upon him from the King. Khentiemsemet received his offices in the presence of the King and the royal court of officials, a ceremonial and ritual precondition for taking office. He states that :

²³ For a narrative, succinct, yet insightful overview of the concept of *i3t*, see Ray Winfield Smith and Donald B. Redford, *The Akhenaten Temple Project, Vol. I: Initial Discoveries* (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, Ltd., 1976), p.111-112.

²⁴ Patricia Spencer, *The Egyptian Temple: A Lexicographical Study* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984), p.41.

²⁵ *Urk.* IV, 936, 12-13.

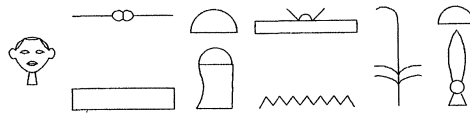
²⁶ *Urk.* IV, 1092, 9-10.



dī srw r ḥw.sn (s)w3d n.i i3t m-b3ḥ.sn m ḥnty m ḥr n št3

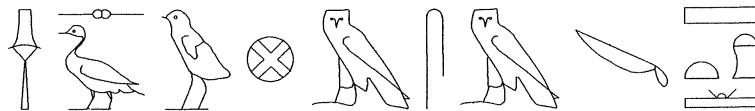
The officials being placed in their stations, office was bestowed on me in their presence, that of Chamberlain and *ḥry sšt3*.²⁷

Hence, the title *ḥry sšt3* was given to him as an office (*i3t*) with an implied function in the presence of other important officials (*srw*) and the King. Although no specific functions are given in connection with the title *ḥry sšt3*, it is important to note that Khentiemsetet also describes as :



ḥry sšt3 n ḥkrw nswt

Master of Secrets of the Royal Insignia



ḥrp s3w m sšm št3

Controller of Sais as leader of the mysteries.²⁸

Thus, these titles indicate that Khentiemsetet was intimately linked to the dressing of the King and equipping him with the insignia of his divine office. In addition, he led sacred ceremonies and rituals performed in honor of Osiris in the Lower Egyptian town of Sais which are collectively conceptualized here as *št3*, mysteries.²⁹

Another inscription of the Twelfth Dynasty, the noted stela of Ikhnofret, recounts events that occur under the reign of King Senwosret III (1878-1841 B.C.). Ikhnofret recounts the order from the King to use gold brought back from a victory over Nubia to adorn the image (*bsw*) or statue of Osiris which is conceptualized as being *št3*, “secret.” He was also given the task to prepare the festival for Osiris at Abydos, the sacred city of the god of the deceased. In order to do this, sacred time had to be closely demarcated which is why Ikhnofret urged the astronomers (*wnwt*) of the temple to diligently perform their duties (*irt.sn*) and he specifically caused them to know both daily rituals (*nt- nt hrw nb*) and festival rituals to mark the beginning of the seasons (*ḥbw tpy trw*). In the context of the

²⁷ HT, II, 8-9; Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Autobiographies Chiefly of the Middle Kingdom* (Freiburg-Göttingen: Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 84, 1988), 96-97.

²⁸ HT, II, 8-9.

²⁹ In regard to the word *št3*, Lichtheim says “To render *št3* here as ‘mysteries’ (as Gardiner did) appears suitable (though by and large the neutral term “secrets” is safer), since Senti’s phrases invoke the sacred and awesome nature of the ceremonies.” See Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Autobiographies*, p. 97.

festival of Osiris, Ikhnofret says that :



ḏb3.ni ntr m ḥ^cw.f m i3t.i nt ḥry sšt3 irt.i nt sm3

I clothed the god in his appearance in glory in my office of *ḥry sšt3* and my duty of stolist.³⁰

Here we have one ritual activity, clothing of the god in his appearance in glory, coming under the occupational purview of two titles, *ḥry sšt3* and *sm3*. The title *ḥry sšt3* is described as the office (*i3t*) of Ikhnofret and the title stolist (*sm3*) is labeled as his duty (*irt*). Conceptually, the sentence is very similar to the above mentioned text of Minnakhte who asserts the he is “one who causes every office (*i3t*) to know their duties (*irt.sn*) in the temple.” Thus, an office (*i3t*) has sundry duties (*irt*) and for Ikhnofret, clothing the god in his appearance in glory was a ritual performed as one specific duty (*irt*) in the context of his office (*i3t*) as *ḥry sšt3*. Implicit herein is the idea that the function of the office of the *ḥry sšt3* had sundry other duties (*irt*) to perform which were not limited to the clothing of the god.

Mentchuhotep and Sehetepibre were two additional officials in the Twelfth Dynasty who claimed to have clothed the god in his appearance in glory in the office of *ḥry sšt3*. Like Ikhnofret, both of these officials were Overseers of the Treasury (*imy-r sḏwt*) where precious material objects such as jewels and clothing were housed and were brought out an appropriate times in order to clothe and ornament divine statues. Sehetepibre provides exactly the same information as Ikhnofret relative to clothing the god in his office of *ḥry sšt3* and his duty of *sm3*.³¹ Mentchuhotep provides us with a more nuanced view of the office of *ḥry sšt3* in the sense that we are more able to accurately ascertain what clothing (*ḏb3*) the god actually entailed. Mentchuhotep says that he wants to provide:



stpw n ḥt nbt...rdit n ntr m ḥ^c.f m i3t.i nt (ḥry) sšt3w

the choicest of everything... which are given to a god at his appearance in glory in my office of *ḥry sšt3*.³²

From the perspective of Mentchuhotep, the “choicest of everything” which is given to a god in his appearance in glory includes offering tables with lapis lazuli, bronze, electrum and silver, plentiful bronze and copper, collars of real malachite, and ornaments of every kind of costly stone. Thus, clothing the god in his appearance in glory in the office of *ḥry*

³⁰ Heinrich Schäfer, *Die Mysterien des Osiris in Abydos* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964), p.18; Plate, Line 16. See Figure 1 for an epigraphic reproduction of the stela from this publication. For English translation, see Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Vol. I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 123-125.

³¹ CG 20538, 6, p.148; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Vol. I*, p.126.

³² CG 20539, 9-10, p. 155.

sšt3 involved procuring precious jewels, insignia of divinity, and other symbolic objects from the treasury and tending to the actual person of the god in terms of dressing and ornamenting it.

Access to the temple was reserved for restricted groups of priests and specialists. Inside the temple, the *ḥry sšt3* was a functionary who was allowed to enter the sanctuary where the image of the divine statue dwelt and to experience the body of the god by communing with the god ritually in terms of clothing it. The *ḥry sšt3* played an important role in the seeing (*m33*), appearing (*ḥw*), and coming forth (*prt*) of the god, especially during festival processions whereby the image of the principal god was carried out of the sanctuary and placed in a ceremonial barque borne by priests. The *ḥry sšt3* reaffirms and reinforces the relationship between the divine and human realm, especially within the context of ritually defined places and times which reflect perpetual continuity and order. The basic function, semantic content, and ritual activity of the *ḥry sšt3* was expanded with sundry explanatory additions in the titles of Ikhernofret, Mentchuhotep, and Sehetepibre. Additional titles describe Ikhernofret as Master of Secrets of the words of god (*ḥry sšt3 n mdw-ntr*), Master of Secrets of the two serpent goddesses (*ḥry sšt3 n w3ḏy*), and the Overseer of all secret commands (*imy-r wḏ-mdw nb št3*). Mentchuhotep describes himself as Master of Secrets of the House of Life (*ḥry sšt3 n pr-ḥ*), Master of Secrets of the words of god (*ḥry sšt3 n mdw-ntr*), and Master of Secrets of the King in all his places (*ḥry sšt3 n nswt m st.f nb(t)*). And Sehetepibre is entitled Master of Secrets in the temples (*ḥry sšt3 m r-prw*). Thus, we see the essential element of *ḥry sšt3* linked to speech, writing and scholarship, particular sacred spaces and areas and the King himself.

Other noticeable and important ritual functions performed by the *ḥry sšt3* in the Middle Kingdom occur in the context of funerary rituals. In the contracts of Hepdjefai made in the reign of Senwosret I (1971-1926 B.C.) in the Twelfth Dynasty, Hepdjefai makes ten contracts with the priesthood of Siut to perform the necessary funerary rituals, ceremonies, and offerings. In the third contract, Hepdjefai tells the funerary priest (*ḥm-k3*), who is responsible for perpetuating (*srwḏ*) his funerary rituals and maintaining his offerings, that he has contracted (*ḥtm m-ḥ*) the services of nine *wab* (*wḥ*) priests led by an Overseer of priests (*imy-r ḥm-ntr*) who are collectively referred to as the temple council (*knbt nt ḥwt-ntr*). Hepdjefai provides the temple council with rations of bread and beer on the day of the Wag festival in exchange for the things (*nn n ḥt*) that they will give to him in terms of caring for his statues and tomb. The *ḥry sšt3* was one of the nine temple officials who Hepdjefai made a contract with.³³ From the given context, we are able to gain some important insight and information relative to the title of *ḥry sšt3*. To begin, we can assume that the *ḥry sšt3* was at least a *wab* priest, fulfilling all the basic requirements of ritual purification enabling him to handle ritual instruments and objects and perform rituals and perfunctory and auxiliary tasks inside the temple. The *ḥry sšt3* was also a member of

³³ The other eight were the Herald priest (*wḥmm*), the Wearer of the kilt (*šndt*), the Overseer of the storehouse (*imy-r šn'w*), the Master of the broad hall (*ḥry wšḥt*), the Overseer of the Mansion of the ka (*imy-r ḥwt-k3*), the Scribe of the temple (*sš n ḥwt-ntr*), the Scribe of offerings (*sš ḥ3t*), and the Lector priest (*ḥry-ḥbt*). See Pierre Montet, “Les Tombeaux de Siout et de Deir Rifeh,” *Kemi*, Tome III (1930-1935), p.57-58.

the temple council which was the essential administrative and technical staff of the temple. The notion of a contract highlights the important responsibilities of the *ḥry sšꜥꜣ* in the context of ensuring that the deceased received the requisite offerings, rituals, festival ceremonies, and necessary tomb maintenance for optimal survival and existence in the afterlife. The binding contract concretely signals that the *ḥry sšꜥꜣ* rendered a functional service to the maintenance of the tomb that was worth not only being singled out, but was also worth being paid for.

Moreover, Hepdjefai contracts these priests particularly for the functions they will perform in the Wag festival which is closely connected to the divinity of Osiris. The importance of Osiris is highlighted in titles where Hepdjefai describes himself as Master of Secrets of Osiris in his place (*ḥry sšꜥꜣ n Wsir m st.f*), and Master of Secrets of Osiris in his place, the great tomb that encloses its lord Wenennefer, King of the Gods (*ḥry sšꜥꜣ n Wsir m st.f ḥꜥt wrt hnmt nb.s Wnnnfr nswt nṯrw*).³⁴ Hepdjefai also holds the titles Master of Secrets of the words of god (*ḥry sšꜥꜣ n mdw-nṯr*), and Master of Secrets of the temple (*ḥry sšꜥꜣ n ḥwt-nṯr*).³⁵ In the text, it is also noteworthy that Hepdjefai asserts that he is:



šms nṯr r st.f m ḥꜥt.f imt Rḳrrt tꜣ ḏr ḥr inpw

Following the god to his place in his tomb which is in Rokerret, the holy land under Anubis,




sšꜥꜣ imn n Wsir int ḏrt nt nb ḥn

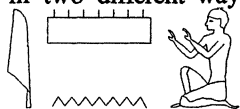
hidden mystery of Osiris, sacred valley of the Lord of life,



bs šꜥꜣ n nb 3bḏw

hidden secret of the Lord of Abydos.³⁶

It is notable in this passage that the word  *sšꜥꜣ* “secret” is grammatically used in two different ways. In one sense, it is used as a noun modified by the adjective

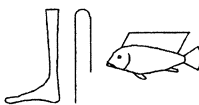


imn “hidden.” In another sense, it functions as an adjective

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.74.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.50, 76.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.50.

modifying the noun  *bs* “revelation.” This is an interesting philosophical juxtaposition of concepts given the fact that *sšt3*, *imn*, and *bs* can all be translated as “secret,” but the attempt to do so would not fully capture the semantic nuances of the passage.³⁷ The Ancient Egyptians want to stress that although the secrets of Osiris in Rokerret are hidden (*imn*), they are also able to be revealed (*bs*) to those who are introduced and/or initiated (*bs*) into the secrets. Thus, *bs* is a non-revealed secret that can be revealed and is distinguishable from, yet linked to the “hidden secrets” of Osiris.³⁸

Unlike the Old Kingdom, we encounter the new development of connecting particular divinities such as Osiris to the title *ḥry sšt3* in the Middle Kingdom. And as an adept at funerary and festival rituals, Hepdjefai has an intimate connection with and knowledge of important *sšt3*, “secrets” and “mysteries” linked to Osiris.

4. The New Kingdom

In the New Kingdom in the Eighteenth Dynasty, the famous text of the vizier Rekhmire reveals that the title *ḥry sšt3* continued to be labeled and conceptualized as an office (*i3t*) maintaining both important functions and honor following developments of the Middle Kingdom. The title *ḥry sšt3* occurs twice in the tomb of Rekhmire. The first occurrence is in the context of cataloging sundry products and treasure as tribute received in the temple of Amun. Rekhmire asserts that:



ḥtm špss nb m pr imn m i3t.f nt ḥry sšt3

Every precious thing was sealed in the temple of Amun in his office of Master of Secrets.³⁹

The second occurrence is inside the context of the temple whereby Rekhmire describes himself as:



The Master of Secrets who enters to the sanctuary and there is nothing which the god shuts away from him.⁴⁰

³⁷ See Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, p. 21, 84, 248-249.

³⁸ The translation of *bs* as “revelation” is, to my knowledge, a novel and nuanced semantic meaning for this concept. I thank Théophile Obenga for this suggestion in the process of critiquing this paper.

³⁹ *Urk.* IV, 1140, 16-17.

⁴⁰ Norman de Garis Davies, *The Tomb of Rekh-Mi-Re at Thebes, Vol. I* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1944), p. 79 and Vol. II, Plate XI.

Thus, the title *ḥry sšt3* embued Rekhmire, as vizier, with the functional power of an office (*i3t*), possessing both the authority over and the action of actually sealing the provisions and treasures brought into the temple. And the title also gave him the power and honor to enter any part of the temple, even the inner sanctuary of primary sacredness where only high priests were allowed entrée into. In this one text we view the *ḥry sšt3* both sealing precious things that are received in the temple and entering the inner sanctuary of the temple to behold the appearance of the divinity. The occurrence of theses nuances in the context of the same text is important to note because it shows and stresses the conceptual latitude of a title which is conceptualized as an office (*i3t*) which fulfills various duties.

5. Conclusion

If priests are identified by their duties within the temple and by service rendered to the god, the *ḥry sšt3* “Master of Secrets” can be clearly and definitively seen as an office (*i3t*) which performed an essential function in various aspects of daily life, ritual procedures, and festival ceremonies. Whether in the context of funerary offerings, embalmment, having access to the divine image in the inner sanctuary, dressing and anointing the King, clothing the god in his appearance in glory, or sealing precious material products entering the temple, the *ḥry sšt3* performed useful services for the god, the King, and people which are embued with both honor and function. By doing and performing *sšt3*, making *sšt3*, working with *sšt3*, sealing *sšt3*, and managing *sšt3*, it becomes clear that the Ancient Egyptians conceptualized “secrets” (*sšt3*) as much more than the common notion of the intentional concealment of information from someone else. *Sšt3* can allude to ideas, knowledge, the awesome presence and power of divinity, the process and procedure of ritual behavior, ritual instruments and cultic objects, and even the function of an office. The *ḥry sšt3* “Master of Secrets” was intimately linked with all of these various nuances and although we can not be certain of his ranking in the temple hierarchy, we can be certain that the holder of this title possessed both honor and specific functions in every period of Ancient Egyptian history.

□ 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.

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