

Two lexicological notes related to the concept of music in Ancient Egypt


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Through an analysis of two of the main verbal roots expressing the musical fact in the Egyptian mind, the author revises the concept of music among the people of the Nile valley. He distinguishes between melodic and organizative aspects, expressed by means of specified taxograms and associated words.

Mediante un análisis del significado de dos de las principales raíces verbales que expresan el Hecho Musical para la mentalidad egipcia, el autor revisa el concepto de música que poseían los habitantes del Valle del Nilo. Distingue entre los aspectos organizativos y melódicos que ellos expresaban con taxogramas específicos y palabras asociadas.

THROUGH this work the author will try to present an approach to concept of music by means of two of the principal lexical roots used by Egyptians in order to refer it and the musical facts¹ considering the contexts in which those lexical components appeared. It is about verbal roots *hn* and *hs*, both related for the Egyptians with prototypical acts of the musical fact and habitually translated in dictionaries as “play music” and “praise” or “sing praises”, respectively. One of the most direct ways to understand the idea of music is by means of its setting in motion, i. e., the musical fact, represented by verbal roots. In this article we have selected only these ones for two reasons: they do not show an arm hieroglyph as phonogram (which could lead to confusion, as we will see below) and they are more directly linked in Egyptian texts with what Egyptian considered to be the genuine

musical act from which all the other musical elements were derived. In this paper this is considered crucial in order to understand the cultural significance which music had for ancient Egyptian people, since the concept of music is not universal, contrary to what is generally thought.² Ancient cultures apparently lose part of their wealth before our eyes in this field, since we are used to assimilate it to our idea of music and related concepts. This unadequate approach very often produces our missing of whatever hides the subtlety of the language—specially in the case of the Egyptian script, a language of its own—and finally misleading our understanding of the true meaning of the music within the framework we study.

German musicologist Hans Hickmann³ postulated that the sign for the arm,  D41, was a reminiscence of cheironomic melodic

* Acknowledgements: I am especially thankful to Francesca Jourdan for having much patience in helping me to translate this article from the original Spanish. I am also very grateful to Dr. M. A. Molinero Polo, who kindly suggested to me its publication.

1. In respect to “musical fact”, Nattiez, J.J., *Music and Discourse: toward a Semiology of Music*, Princeton,

New Jersey, 1990, where chapter one is devoted to this subject.

2. Barahona, A., “Aproximación al concepto de música del Egipto antiguo”, in *Arte y sociedad del Egipto antiguo*, M. A. Molinero Polo y D. Sola Antequera (coordinators), Encuentro, Madrid 2000, 37-65.


3. Hickmann, H., “Le problème de la notation musicale dans l’Égypte ancienne”, *BIE* 36, 1955, 489-531.




and rhythmic signs. For the melodic ones, he made a distinction between the palm of the hand facing down or making certain signs and the diverse inclinations of the forearm in relation to the arm. He associated this D41 sign with the demarcation of passages pointing out that, since the New Kingdom, the scribes marked the verses⁴ of poems –written in hieratic– by means of red dots which ended with D41, at the end of either the stanzas or the poem itself.⁵ The author believes that the presumed indication of the melodic elements has yet to be proven. However, there are rational elements which lead us to think that, at first, the signs of the hand and forearm were used to represent distinct musical functions whose meaning eventually weakened as they were accompanied by other signs, indicating several other aspects of the concept of music.



THE ROOT *hn*





Among the general hieroglyphic signs which represented the musical prototypes, without doubt the most characteristic might have been




the arm; particularly since it directly suggested certain movements of the musical fact. Let's see how it show up in the root *hn*:





 *dhn*; to beat time (together with music)⁶, one who beats the *tempo*.⁷

 *hn*; (hand)clap, in the expression ⁸
 *dit hn* “to clap” = to beat time.⁸

 *hn*; speech, declaration, subject, issue, part of a song⁹ (the reply to a responsorial chant?) in *hn n wšb*,¹⁰ a ragged chorus (of shouts) in *hn n itt int*,¹¹ song of joy in *hn (n) nhm*,¹² lullaby in *hn n hnhn*.¹³ [Determinative: ].

 *hni*; make music [Var.  , ],¹⁴
 ¹⁵].

 *hni*; to land after a flight,¹⁶ alight from flight, to stop, to pause, to relax or to rest (on something) [Determinatives  ¹⁷,
 ¹⁸].

 *hni*; play music with a sistrum, to clap marking the rhythm, to mark the tempo (in *di-hn* [*dhn*]), choral song¹⁹ [Determinatives  ,  or ].

4. Actually the lines were marked regardless of their content.

5. Lefebvre, G., *Grammaire de l'égyptien classique*, I.F.A.O. 2ème ed. 1955, 46. §68.

6. Hannig, R. y Vomberg, P., *Wortschatz der Pharaonen in Sachgruppen, Hannig Lexica-2*, Philip von Zabern, Mainz. In section 159 (Tätigkeiten) it is indicated that this term is more likely to be *wdi hn*. We believe that the word may have undergone transformation from the lexicalization from an original *d(w)-hn*, “the act of giving a beat” or “to make clap”.

7. Hannig, *op. cit.*, 160 (Personen). A person who makes a beat on the leg.

8. Newberry, P.E., *El Bersheh*, Egypt Exploration Fund, London [1894-1895], I, 12, top.

9. Helck, W., *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie. Heft 19 bearbeitet von Wolfgang Helck. Historische Inschriften Thutmosis' IV. und biographische Inschriften seiner Zeitgenossen*, Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1957, 710, 12..

10. Hannig, *op. cit.*, 162 (Gesang, Lied) the expression is translated as “responsorial singing” (for workers).

11. Hannig, *op. cit.*, the expression is translated as “discretionary song”.

12. Hannig, *op. cit.*, the expression is translated as “responsorial chant”.

13. Hannig, *op. cit.*, 162 (Gesang, Lied).

14. Buck, A. de, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts*, ed. by A. de Buck and A. H. Gardiner, Univ. of Chicago Pr., Chicago 1935-1938, Vol. 1, 23.

15. Davies, W.V. *The Story of King Kheops and the Magicians, Transcribed from Papyrus Westcar (Berlin Papyrus 3033) by A. M. Blackman*, J.V. Books 1988, 11, 17.

16. Sethe, K., *Die altägyptischen Pyramidentexte, nach den Papierabdrücken und Photographien des Berliner Museums, neu herausgegeben und erläutert*, Hildesheim, Georg Olms, 1960, Vol. II, §1971.

17. Budge, E. A. W., *The Book of the Dead: the chapters of coming forth by day; the Egyptian text according to the Theban recension in hieroglyphic, edited from numerous papyri, with a translation, vocabulary, etc.*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, London 1898, Vol. 1.

18. Helck, W., *Urkunden IV: Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*, 152b, 11.

19. Hannig, *op. cit.*, 159 (Musik).

𓇧𓇰 *hnt*; beat of sistrum.²⁰

𓇧𓇰𓇱 *hnw*; musician, (*dancer), minstrel.²¹

𓇧𓇰𓇱𓇲 *hnw(t)*; musicians²² (along the music of the sistrum).²³

𓇧𓇰𓇱𓇳 *hnw*, *hnw-n-ꜥ*; *castanets.²⁴

𓇧𓇰𓇱𓇴 *hnwt*; woman musician,²⁵ (*female dancer of the temple), Hathor's female musician, *female minstrel [Var. 𓇧𓇰𓇱𓇴, ²⁶ 𓇧𓇰𓇱𓇴𓇲, plural: 𓇧𓇰𓇱𓇴𓇲, ²⁷ 𓇧𓇰𓇱𓇴𓇲𓇳, ²⁸ 𓇧𓇰𓇱𓇴𓇲𓇳𓇴, ²⁹ or 𓇧𓇰𓇱𓇴𓇲𓇳𓇴]

The root of this group of words, *hn*, appears to mean in this verbal conjugation form 𓇧𓇰𓇱 *hni* “to rest or alight on something”, as in fact represented by the determinative of the landing duck; its meaning could also be extended to what this movement would signify in a certain cultural context. Usually 𓇧𓇰𓇱 *hn* is translated as “(hand)clap”. Nevertheless the author believes that, although its meaning seems similar, this may not be exactly so.

To our modern western eyes, it is curious that the determinative used by the Egyptians to classify this word is the sign 𓇱 D41 in Gardiner's list³⁰ and not any other representation of the hand or arms, perhaps *𓇱𓇲 or *𓇱𓇳, which in today's society might be used if we have to draw our idea of “make a handclap”. However, the fact that Egyptians used this sign has an explanation which the author will try to expound below. D41, representing a forearm

with the palm of the hand face down, is easily recognized by the arm and forearm bent in an acute angle at the elbow, thus implying a certain position for the person making this forearm gesture. It is the position of a person's forearm and arm when knocking on something relatively close to the body with the palm of the hand, for example the leg. It is also the most natural means of holding the arm when sitting in a neutral attitude and perhaps for this reason it is the determinative used to write the original word for “arm” 𓇱𓇲𓇳 *gb3* and to indicate the bend or inclination of the limbs, subsequently becoming an abstraction of this idea.³¹ However, contrary to the term for the words “left” and “facing or on the left-hand side” which uses the D41 determinative sign as a characteristic element, it is rare to find this determinative in the composition of the words “right” and “facing or on the right-hand side”. Evidently, this could be indicative of something characterizing the left arm as producing something in particular, to the point of being able to represent with D41 an activity requiring the exclusive use of the left arm. Nowadays, in the liturgy of the Coptic Church of Egypt, the singers who psalmody the sacred texts still make it in a peculiar way. While they make gestures of diverse nature with the right hand, they invariably mark rhythmic elements with the left one on the left leg; the duration of the sounds is thus organized and keep the inner organizative elements of the music itself into account as they are performed. The hand

20. Hannig, *op. cit.*, 162 (Allgemeines).

21. Hannig, *op. cit.*, 160 (Personen).

22. Sethe, K., *Ägyptische Lesestücke zum Gebrauch im Akademischen Unterricht zusammengestellt von Kurt Sethe. Texte des Mittleren Reiches. Dritte unveränderte Auflage*, Hildesheim, Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1959, 87, 21.

23. Wb. II, 286.

24. Hannig, *op. cit.*, 163 (Instrumente). According to the determinative used in the word, we believe that these are more likely to be crotals, since a handle is present. The first of the terms, *hnw*, would mean something similar to “beater” and the second, *hnw-n-ꜥ*, “hand beater.”

25. Blackman, A. M., *The rock tombs of Meir*, Egypt Exploration Fund, London 1914-1924, IV, 7.

26. *Ibidem*, IV, 4.



27. Sethe, *op. cit.*, 87, 21-2.





28. Davies, *op. cit.*, 11, 24.

29. Helck, *op. cit.*, 1059, 12ss.

30. Gardiner, A., *Egyptian Grammar*, Griffith Institute, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford 1927.


31. The case of the word *rmn* (“arm”, “shoulder”) is different since, here, the determinative is imposed on the word to indicate the same sense in which we say “on the right” or “on the left” to distinguish sides or directions; hence it can also mean “half”. Other languages of the world proceed in a similar manner.

always remains on the leg until it is time to produce a new beat. The actual term  *grh* means “to cease movement”, “to stop”. For this reason *hn* may be accompanied in some words by the determinative  D54 which represents the taxonomic feature of “presence or absence of movement”.

Continuing along these lines, it seems improbable that the term  *hn* originally meant “(hand)clap” but rather “measurement”, “movement”, since the Egyptian word does not directly seem to refer to the clap produced when placing the hand on the leg. It would be more accurate to translate the term here with “beat” or “marking”, not necessarily implying the presence of noise. Moreover, other Egyptian terms are given the meanings of “(hand)clap” or “to clap” since they seem to directly refer to the element of sound. This is the case with  *m3ht*, meaning “clapper” and also “clap on the leg”, or  or  *m3h*, both also translated as “clapper”, “play the palms of the hands” or “mark the rhythm”. It is possible that a general sense of “handclap” evolved from these original meanings. In the mastaba of Mereru-ka, each clapping girl is referred to as *r-m3ht*, that is, “the ones (fem.) who have relation to *handclapping* or to *marking the rhythm*”. In Spain they would be called *palmeras* o *tocadoras de palmas*.

THE ROOT *hs*

However, there is another sign which represents the forearm in a different position, yet usually kept for other meanings. This is the case of D207 sign from Buurman's *Manuel de Codage*³², which shows a forearm forming a

straight angle with the arm and with the hand seen from the side, showing the palm slightly inclined downward, like this: . This position implies that the arm is raised and lightly bent forward with the hand moving, as the singers are shown on tomb paintings. Somewhere else³³ the author mentioned that the Egyptian singers who are sitting on the ground with the hand (usually the right one) in this position –considered as cheironomists throughout all the work of musicologists Kurt Sachs and Hans Hickmann– do not necessarily use this or other movements to indicate the sound which the instrumentalists before them must play, but rather such positions seem to obey to compulsive movements of the singers. Such movements and poses might be sufficiently characteristic to finally represent a symbol of the afore mentioned activity. Nowadays this type of compulsive movements –which never reach the status of cheironomy– can still be seen in many oriental singers and specially in the Spanish *cantaoras* of flamenco. Eventually, the Egyptians have associated this type of musical activity with these movements; through a metonymic process, the right arm represented this aspect of their music. In a way it is obvious that the arm was chosen as the hieroglyphic representation: according to pictorial Egyptian conventions, the most characteristic, relevant and distinct sign was always the best choice. In modern dictionaries D207 usually appears as interchangeable with D41 and in the term *hzi*, one can see either sign without making a distinction in their meanings. The author believes that the sign with the left hand and the palm facing down can be involved in the organizer action of the musical material, while the other sign with the hand

32. Buurman, J. *et al.*, *Inventaire des signes hiéroglyphiques en vue de leur saisie informatique*, Institut de France, Mémoires de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Nouvelle Série, Tome VIII, Imprimerie Lienhart, Paris 1988.

33. Barahona, A., “Reflexiones sobre la posibilidad de una notación musical en el Egipto antiguo”, in *Boletín de la Asociación Española de Egiptología* 7, 1997, 229-248. Available in <http://www.egiptologia.net/is-misc.html>

slightly downwards as well as sideways symbolized the emotional elements probably related to melody and ornamentation. This brings us to the second most important lexical roots in sustaining musical concepts in Ancient Egypt, *hs*:

𐎗𐎗𐎛 *hsi*; to sing, to make music.³⁴ [Var. 𐎗𐎗𐎛 or 𐎗𐎗𐎛].

𐎗𐎗𐎛 *hsi (hzi)*; to favour someone, praise.³⁵

𐎗𐎗𐎛𐎗𐎗 *hsw*; minstrel, street musician, popular singer.³⁶ [Var. 𐎗𐎗 or 𐎗𐎗; feminine 𐎗𐎗𐎛, 𐎗𐎗𐎛 or 𐎗𐎗𐎛].

𐎗𐎗𐎛𐎗 *hst*; favour, praise, reward.³⁷

𐎗𐎗𐎛𐎗𐎗 *hsw*; spell (to protect oneself from the waters).³⁸

𐎗𐎗𐎛𐎗𐎗𐎗 *hsy*; favoured, praised.³⁹

𐎗𐎗𐎛𐎗 *hst*; entonation, tune, (love, religious, drinking,...) song.⁴⁰

𐎗𐎗𐎛𐎗𐎗 *hsty*; praise.⁴¹

𐎗𐎗𐎛𐎗 *hsy*; song.⁴²

𐎗𐎗𐎛𐎗𐎗𐎗 *hsyt*; concubines.⁴³

𐎗𐎗𐎛𐎗 *hst (hzt)*; jar of water for libations⁴⁴ [Var. 𐎗𐎗𐎛].

𐎗𐎗𐎛𐎗𐎗 *hswty*; favourite.⁴⁵

As early as the Old Kingdom, the Egyptians selected the phonogram *hst* “water-pot”, in order to represent the root of a group of words whose semantic field concerns to our study. We believe that, in the case of the use of this root to represent certain concepts of the

musical facts, the selection made by the old Egyptian goes beyond the purely sound aspect.

Water has always been a symbol of *dissolutio* and *purificatio*. Moreover, in a country that practically depends on the Nile, water is much more than this: it is the element of life. To pour water in libations in honor of the gods, to satisfy them, to please them and to gain their favour, is a very ancient ceremonial act in Egypt. This is not to mention that in a country with high temperatures, always near to the desert, fresh water is a symbol of enjoyment, rest and pleasure. On one hand, the root of this word seems to be linked to the idea of religious pleasure, and on the other hand, because of a subsequent extension, to the idea of recreation and physical pleasure. According to this, a “spell” like 𐎗𐎗𐎛𐎗 *hsw* is, simply put, a propitious entonation aiming to please a deity, so that it may protect or execute the desires of the petitioner. Thus music, indicated by the root *hs* is pleasing and propitious, through several processes represented in some cases by the determinatives of the word, as is the case for 𐎗𐎗𐎛 *hst* “entonation” (from 𐎗𐎗𐎛 *hsi*) and 𐎗𐎗𐎛𐎗 *hsw* “street musician”. Actually, in the second word the D41 sign appears, while D207 is used in the first, hence indicating that, in the Egyptian language, the concept of street singer involved the organized movement of the left hand, while the idea of entonation used the image of the arm compulsively moving with melody, ornaments and intensity.

Madrid, March 1999

34. Sethe, K., *Urkunden des alten Reichs*: I, 45, 14; Hannig 159 (Tätigkeit).
 35. Helck, W., *Urkunden der 18 Dynastie*: IV, 134, 13.; 58, 2.
 36. Davies, N. y Gardiner, A., *Theban Tombs Series I: The Tomb of Amenemhet, 15 and 27*; Hannig 160 (Personen)
 37. Helck, *op. cit.*, IV, 31, 5; 203; VII 30, 11.
 38. Faulkner, R.O., *A Concise Dictionary of Middle*

Egyptian, Griffith Institute, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford 1962, 177.
 39. Helck, *op. cit.*, IV, 913, 5.
 40. Hannig, *op. cit.*, 162 (Gesang, Lied).
 41. Sethe, K., *Urkunden des mittleren Reiches*: VII, 30, 9.
 42. Hannig, *op. cit.*, 162 (Gesang, Lied).
 43. Sethe, *op. cit.*, VII, 1305, 8.
 44. Gardiner, A., *Egyptian Grammar*, 529, W14.
 45. Sethe, *op. cit.*, VII, 37, 16.

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