

Rwty “Drummer”
Henry George Fischer

Dilwyn Jones, in his *Index of Ancient Egyptian Titles*, no. 2640, usefully assembles all the many divergent views concerning the meaning of $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$, a title that appears in the offering niche of Kha-bau-Sokar, dating to the Third Dynasty.¹ There is an archaizing recurrence of it, some seven centuries later, in the titulary of a Memphite high priest of the Twelfth Dynasty, where it is simplified as $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$.² Something very like it is also known, however, from a single occurrence of the title $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ (Jones, *Index*, no. 613),³ and yet another title refers to the “house of the *rwtj(w)*,” over which the goddess Seshat presides (*ibid.*, no. 2128). As may be seen from a drawing made by Margaret Murray (Fig. 1),⁴ the most detailed example of the determinative clearly represents a man, and not a woman, as some have said, and he holds a pair of knobbed batons. Among the various interpretations, I think that of Junker comes closest to the mark.⁵ He translates the title as “Leiter der Tänzer von Ober- und Unterägypten,” and in support of this he cites the $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ of Pyr. 884, and compares the title *hrp mrt Šmꜥ Mḥw* “director of the *mrt*-singers of Upper and Lower Egypt” (Jones’ no. 2619). Rather similarly an official who is concerned with the finery of dancers is $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ “one who looked after the singers of Lower and Upper Egypt.”⁶ At any rate an association with music-making seems justified.



Fig. 1

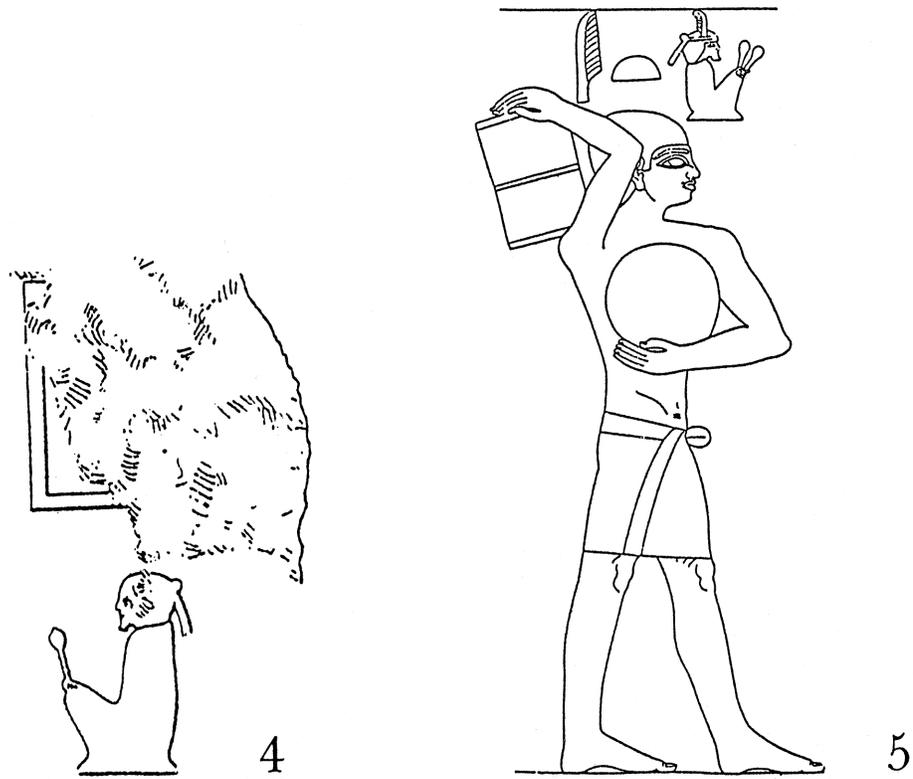
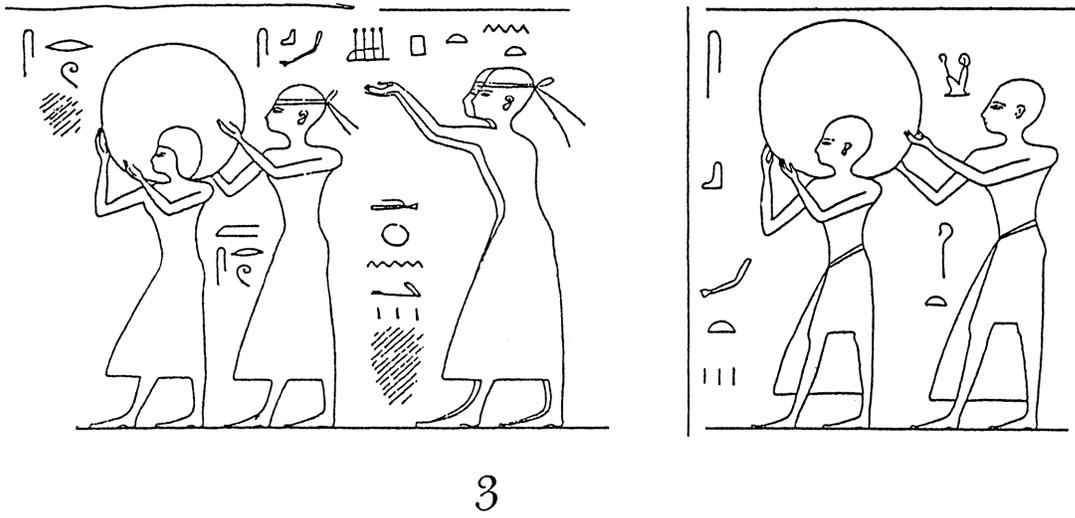
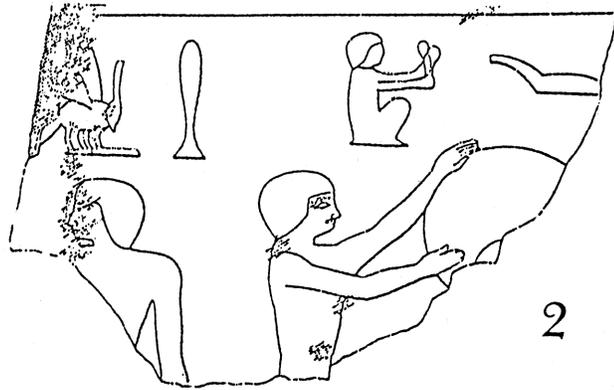
1. Nadine Cherpion, (*LP* 11 [1980], 79–86); a further confirmation of the date is the stylistic resemblance to another Third Dynasty relief: *Etudes... dédiées à Jean-Phillippe Lauer*, pp. 177, 185.

2. *BMA* 28 (Nov. 1933, Pt. 2), 15. He has other archaic titles as well: notably $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ (no. 2904) and $\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏}$ (no. 1302).

3. From my own copy of the inscription shown by Kaplony, *Inschriften der Äg. Frühzeit* II, p. 945, which confirms the absence of a feather.

4. *Saqqara Mastabas* I, pl. 37 (3).

5. Junker, *Gîza* I, p. 150.



Figs. 2-5

I believe a much more precise indication of the meaning may be provided by a fragment from the sun-temple of Neuserre (Fig. 2),⁷ showing a man who holds a tambourine with one hand while striking it with the other.⁸ In view of its size, the tambourine may also be supported by a figure that is lost. The caption above this describes his activity as *sqr (in) rwtj* “beating (by) the *rwtj*.”⁹ The feather is lacking in this case, as it is in the case of the aforementioned overseer of *rwtjw*, but the knobbed batons leave little doubt about the reading, for they are otherwise unknown. Although they are wielded vigorously in both hands, instead of being held together and at rest, their deployment corresponds to the drummer’s activity in a very general sense.

The same activity is twice represented on fragments from the Twenty-second Dynasty temple at Bubastis (Fig. 3).¹⁰ In both cases a very large tambourine is carried by one man, while another steadies it with one hand and beats it with the other. In the first case the caption is *sqr m srw* “beating on the tambourine;”¹¹ in the second it is simply “beatings.” Another caption, *šzpt nt dh̄n* is attached to a group of men with arms extended in the gesture of clappers who are “giving the rhythm;”¹² in the second scene they appear in a register below this one. The second scene also gives a more puzzling caption to the man who does the drumming: *hq̄ h̄q̄st* “chief of chieftaincy.” I wonder if the sign  derives from a misunderstood variant of the sign for *rwtj*. This occurs in an early Fifth

6. Hassan, *Gîza VI/3*, fig. 190, as emended in my *Eg. Studies III*, p. 21. There  is interpreted as *rwj* “production,” which is possible, but I have finally decided that *hs(w)* is the likelier alternative.

7. Von Bissing, *Re-Heiligtum des Kgs. Ne-woser-re III*, Pl. 3 (118).

8. In PM III,² p. 317, this is described as “man beating gong,” which is hardly possible, for he is slapping the instrument with his hand. Nor is there any evidence for gongs in ancient Egypt; cymbals are known, but not before the New Kingdom: Hickmann, *ASAE* 49 (1949), 472.

9. For the omission of *in* see Edel, *Altäg. Gramm.*, § 696; also Junker, *Gîza VI*, p. 144 and fig. 45; Fischer, *Eg. Studies II*, p. 82 and n. 211.

10. Naville, *Festival Hall of Osorkon II*, pls. 11, 16.

11. For *sqr m* see *Wb.* IV, 306 (15), and for *sr/srw* see *ibid.*, 181 (6).

12. *Wb.* IV, 537 (12); V, 484 (16).

Dynasty reference to the aforementioned “house of the *rwtyw*” (Fig. 4),¹³ where the feather may again be lacking, and where the two batons are replaced by a single piriform mace. It is, in fact, possible that the batons always represent a pair of maces, but in the absence of sufficient detail, this point remains uncertain.

The original ideograph reappears in the later Fifth Dynasty mastaba of *Ty* (Fig. 5),¹⁴ in the context of a market scene, where a man labelled *rwty* holds two objects, one of which may well be a tambourine, and thus offers some support for the reading of the designation attached to the tambourist in fig. 2. The other object he carries may equally well be a cylindrical drum.¹⁵ The only other Old Kingdom evidence for the tambourine is a scene in one of the rock-cut tombs at Hemamiya, where it is played by a woman who is evidently singing to her mistress as she beats the rhythm.¹⁶

None of this evidence entirely explains the pair of knobbed staves that appear in the determinative of *rwty*. Although the modern eye may see them as drumsticks, there is no indication that the Egyptians ever applied sticks to drums or tambourines, nor do they have much use in the native music of Egyptians today. Sticks and clappers were frequently used as percussion instruments, however, and especially, along with hand-clapping, to mark and to emphasize the rhythm of singing and dancing.¹⁷ The label of the tambourine player in fig. 2 certainly suggests that the knobbed batons also refer to this activity. If so, they would simply classify the tambourine-player as a percussionist, along with the more usual *hnrw/hnrwt*. William Ward maintains that *hnrw* is sometimes

13. Borchardt, *Grabdenkmal des Kgs. Sazhu-re*, pl. 1.

14. Henri Wild, *Tombeau de Ti III*, pl. 174.

15. First attested by an actual specimen from the Middle Kingdom: Manniche, *Ancient Egyptian Musical Instruments*, p. 8.

16. Mackay et al., *Bahrein and Hemamieh*, pl. 1; Fischer, *Egyptian Women*, fig. 13 and n. 92. Manniche, *op. cit.*, p. 10, describes the player as a man, and so too El Khouli and Kanawati, *El-Hammamiya*, p. 42, though their pl. 44 makes the gender even more apparent. This conforms to the very many cases where women are in the service of women.

17. Discussed in *JARCE* 38 (2001), 3–5.

written with an ideograph that represents a tambourine player; the evidence, dating to the late Middle Kingdom, suggests that the tambourist is to be read differently, but in any case not as *rwty*,¹⁸ which probably did not survive the Old Kingdom except as an isolated archaism.

As Junker conjectured, the word *rwty* must indeed be related to *rw*. But although *rw* is thought to refer to dancing in Pyr. 884, the determinative  displays the clappers that dancers wielded, and it is virtually identical to some of the Old Kingdom determinatives of *hnwt* “percussionist.”¹⁹ It is true that the same determinative is also used for *ib*; “dancer” (Pyr. 1947), but a parallel to the passage in question (Pyr. 863) gives the determinative as , which represents a pair of hands clapping.²⁰ And in other passages, notably Pyr. 2014, the verb *rw* clearly has precisely that meaning  “hands are clapped for thee, feet are stamped for thee.”²¹ Were it not for the fact that Pyr. 884 shows a masculine determinative in one case (P), a female in the other (M), *rw* might be interpreted as a feminine “percussionist” rather than a term for “dance” that is not otherwise attested. It may, however, mean “beating,” in which case,  would best be translated: “a pair of hands is presented to thee; the clapping nears thee.” Thus the evidence from the Pyramid Texts seems to confirm that *rwty* means “one who is concerned with (rhythmic) beating.”

18. Ward, *Index of Egyptian Religious and Administrative Titles*, p. 132 (1127). Leiden 13 and 15 show the title as , var.  (probably the same *Ppi*), while 13 also has  (*Qqi*). Although the tambourine is often misshapen, some of the examples in Leiden 13 show it very clearly. The reading is complicated further by the example of  that is cited in my *Egyptian Titles of the Middle Kingdom*,² p. 47 (296), but this may possibly be *imy-r mnizww* (Jones’ no. 535), since the form of  assumed some strange variations in the Middle Kingdom (*MMJ* 12 [1977], 12, figs. 12–13).

19. *JARCE* 38 (2001), p. 4, fig. 8b; a similar determinative occurs in the masculine counterpart: Reisner’s G 5233 (*Tn*).

20. Fischer, *Eg. Studies* III, p. 183.

21. Following Faulkner, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, p. 290; one might also translate “hands clap,” etc.; cf. his note 2 on p. 170.

Another clue to the meaning is to be seen in the feather, which may seem to lend the ideograph a foreign note, since it also appears in the determinative of peoples beyond the borders of Egypt. But the foreigners hold the feather on their knees, not on the head, and have a quite different style of hair.²² A closer comparison is to be found in the feather and fillet that appear on the head of the bowman in , the determinative of *mšꜥ*.²³ A military association is also indicated by later representations, dating to the New Kingdom, where a drum is often seen in the hands of soldiers.²⁴ And this association is likewise attested by the slightly earlier stela of Embab.²⁵

The association of the *rwtyw* with Seshat remains to be explained. In one case the epithet referring to them accompanies other epithets relating to writing; in another (Jones no. 2128) it appears among the titles of an official who is concerned with building, and in Pyr. 616b she is in fact “mistress of builders.” The same official is also a priest of Seshat, as are both the director and overseer of *rwtyw*. In this connection the drummers may have accompanied the corps of workers required for major works of construction, for such activities certainly called for chanting and singing, as they do in Egypt today. The same service would also have been required for troops of soldiers on the march. But although this would doubtless have been the principal activity of the *rwtyw*, they also, as tambourists, supplied the rhythm for singing in religious ceremonies. Their nearly complete absence in the reliefs of tomb chapels is understandable since drums and tambourines do not seem to have been played with other instruments, and the scenes of daily life in the Old Kingdom tomb chapels do not show building projects involving large corps of workers or soldiers.²⁶ A vast project such as this is known, however, from the Middle Kingdom at Bersha, in the well-known scene

22. Cf. Clère, *MDAIK* 16 (1958), 40–41. In any case the interpretation of *rwty* as a foreigner hardly suits the reference to Upper and Lower Egypt in the titles of the director and overseer, nor does it suit the presence of the *rwty* in the market place.

23. The earliest examples, and most detailed, are to be seen in Petrie, *Medum*, pl. 9.

24. Manniche, *op. cit.*, pp. 7–8.

25. Černý, *MDAIK* 24 (1969), 87–92; Baines, *JEA* 72 (1986), 41–53.

26. My copy of the inscription (n. 3 above) clearly shows the name of the goddess.

depicting the hauling of a colossus. Here a man “gives the rhythm to the army” by clapping, and in doing so he effectively commands the combined efforts of the several teams of chanting workers.²⁷

27. Newberry, *El Bersheh I*, pl. 12, Here the man who sets the tempo of the work is called *mdww*, a term which seems to occur in the Sixth Dynasty: Blackman and Apted, *Meir V*, pl. 30; on p. 38 Blackman translates  as “the lads,” but this hardly suits the determinative, and no such meaning is known for *mdw* or *mdww*.