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ARTICLE

Some New Remarks on the Egyptian Word “ššt” in Urk IV, 1938, 4

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Abstract

This essay makes a renewed attempt to explain the Egyptian word “ššt” from Urk IV, 1938, 4. The word appears there next to the “ḏcm”-gold. The investigation thus has a philological focus. The study of philological questions traditionally promises the most benefits in Egyptology. The topic has been rarely addressed in previous research. The expected result therefore has a certain novelty value. The interpretation given here provides for a connection with the root “šht” “to weave”. The “weaving” of gold can be understood as either “twisting” jewelry, winding wreaths, or twisting ropes. The use of “ḏcm”-Gold in wreaths can also be proven in other contexts, which also applies to ropes as well. The entire expression “šht ḏcm” “to weave gold”, can be explained as a technical term from the terminology of metal craftsmen. The phenomenon as such can be considered relatively well known. The list of Egyptian examples of metalcraft language is thus further expanded. In this case, one might think of jewelers or toreuters. The two possibilities may be equally valid, but the limited information available does not allow for more detailed statements. The study of socio- or idiodialects is also high on the agenda in neighboring disciplines.

Keywords: Egyptian Philology; Egyptian Literature; Explanation of “ššt”

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1. Introduction

This article focuses on the word “ššt” from the tomb inscriptions of Imn-Htp in Theben-West. The complex is part of a local civil servant’s necropolis. The age of the underlying text can be dated to the New Kingdom. Egyptian culture experienced one of its heydays during this period, as the pharaonic state developed into a significant power in the ancient Middle East. In addition to the Assyrian, Babylonian, Hurrian, and Hittite empires, it belonged to the global players of the Bronze Age. The historical epoch can roughly be equated with the 2nd millennium BC.

2. Materials and Methods

The burial site in Thebes, Upper Egypt, is situated in the west cliffs of one of the main cemeteries of the New Kingdom. The tomb itself could no longer be located during the time of Kurt Sethe. The word is mentioned in the passage “ḥti nbw ššt ḏcm, šspc3(.w)t nb(.wt) ḥ.t nb.t šb3k(.t) (sic ?) in NN”^[1], which can be translated as “engraving gold, making ḏcm-gold ššt, obtaining from all kinds of precious stones and all kinds of light wood by NN”. The accompanying scene shows a figure with a green and yellow band around his head. The collocation of the previously only transliterated word “ššt” with the “ḏcm-gold” is significant to stress. The connection does not appear to be available anywhere else. The “ḏcm-gold” was of varying quality and came from various sources. It was generally naturally occurring. During the New Kingdom, however, it was also alloyed with other metals^[2]. The word “ššt” received the fire determinative, the function of which we will try to understand at the end. The word seems to be a hapax, which makes it somewhat suspicious. The development of the word through Egyptian language history cannot, therefore, be further reconstructed. If the creation of a new lexeme, which is never entirely unproblematic, is to be avoided, the solution must be sought elsewhere. The next lines will suggest for this. The color “gold” had a solar hue for the Egyptians, which need not detain us here. Compared to other ancient cultures, Egypt was considered particularly rich in gold. Modern research has not dealt with this word very often. The following two points of view deserve to be mentioned the most.

The first philological discussion of the crucial pas-

sage was carried out by Helck^[3], who decided to render it “weaving ḏcm-gold (?)”. However, the background for this choice remained open with him. The suspicion arises that he was pondering a connection with the root “šḥt” when he thought of the meaning “to weave”. The meaning “to weave” is firmly established for that root, as a look in every dictionary shows. However, the question mark allows Helck’s uncertainty on this point to shine through. The following remarks show that Helck was basically on the right track. Special attention will be paid to phonetic proofing. Helck also leaves unanswered the question of what he understands by weaving gold. This aspect will be discussed in more detail below. For now, the overview of previous opinions will be continued.

The author of these lines then went public with his approach^[4], whereby the explanation of “ššt” as spelling for „šḥt“ was retained. In terms of content, two scenarios were outlined. In the first case, a connection to the expression “šḥt ḏb.t” “shaping bricks” was constructed. The transfer to the “ḏcm-gold” would result in the meaning “casting metal ingots”. In the second case, a possible connection to the root “šḥt” “to retreat”, was considered. The adaptation to the “ḏcm-gold” would lead to the meaning “driving metal”. The process was related to the production of valuable metal vessels.

The scientific interest in this linguistic detail noticeably diminished afterwards. To the best of my knowledge, no further treatment appears in the secondary literature. However, the word has not yet revealed all of its secrets. The question is therefore now being taken up again with new arguments. The meaning of the word is thus penetrated more and more deeply. The own opinions will not be withdrawn entirely, but they will be supplemented with a perhaps even better suggestion.

The old view of “ššt” in Urk IV, 1938, 4 as a spelling for “šḥt” “to weave” can easily be defended. In retrospect, Helck is confirmed. However, the form “ššt” has undergone a significant transformation process, which is worth briefly recapitulating. The spelling “ššt” for “šḥt” may owe its origin to the well-known sound change between “ḥ” and “š”. The underlying phenomenon has already been dealt with several times^[5,6]. The intermediate stage exists, so to speak, in the late spelling “ššt”^[7] for the homonymous root “šḥt” “to catch birds”, which at least shows the conversion

of “ḥ” in “š”. The second reason for the spelling “ššt” for “šḥt” can be seen in the assimilation of “š” to “š”, which is also one of the well-known phenomena. The aspect was treated by Sethe^[5], for example. The base, therefore, has the necessary stability to secure the writing phonetically. The phonetic laws that apply to the spelling “ššt” for “šḥt” “to catch birds” therefore already occur with a root of the same type that is over a thousand years older. The writing “ššt” for “šḥt” is thus characterized by an astonishing modernity, such that it deserves interest for that reason alone. The number of examples of that phenomenon increases to one and a half times as many. The significant time gap need not be irritating, as in such cases there are always gaps in the tradition. Schenkel’s^[8] well-known saying that one reliable document is worth more than a thousand unsafe documents also applies to the current situation.

The spelling “ššt” for “šḥt” is therefore fixed linguistically. In terms of content, perhaps a small step forward can also be made. The technical term “šḥt ḏm” “to weave gold”, may have belonged to the professional idiom of the metal craftsmen. The principle has already been observed several times in this professional group^[9-11]. The age goes back to the Old Kingdom. The example above continues this tradition. The development can thus be traced seamlessly all the way up to the New Kingdom. The assumption is also justified that “weaving” means twisting the gold. In other words, the “ḏm”-gold is twisted into a delicate wire. The “fire determinative” of “ššt”, which was already mentioned above, then points to the high temperatures that are necessary for this process. This way, the metal remains supple. The interpretation seems to make perfect sense. The idea aligns well with the text that precedes it, which discusses engraving gold. It is probably justified to assume that the preparatory work was carried out for the production of jewelry. The goldsmith’s craft had already reached perfection in the Middle Kingdom^[12]. The finds from the princess graves of Daschur provide impressive evidence of this. In this regard, there could, of course, be two other possible explanations. In the interests of completeness, they should not be concealed here. The “ḏm”-gold was explicitly used as a material for wreaths^[13,14]. The twisting of a wreath can be associated with the idea of weaving. The interpretation is supported by the Coptic, where the weaving of crowns occurs in the Manichaean

Psalter^[15]. The question of the original language of the Coptic-Manichaean Psalter can be set aside for the time being. In short, Syrian has the best prospects according to the current opinion communis. The fire determinative of “ššt” could here also be an indication of the heat supply to promote the elasticity of the metal. The following observation is just as important. The “ḏm”-gold was also used as a material for ropes^[16]. Twisting ropes can also be reconciled with the idea of weaving. The goal can therefore be achieved from several directions. The explanations do not have to be mutually exclusive; rather, they can complement each other. In such cases, the spectrum can never be broad enough. Other valuable materials, such as silver and precious stones, were also used in Egyptian craftsmanship. Egyptian goldsmiths also used other techniques, including gilding and enameling.

The following argument should also be noted: The connection between “šḥt” and “gold” also emerges from the passage “nn šḥt ḏr.t=f n nbw”^[17,18], for which the translation “There is no one whose hand weaves with gold” is recommended. The evidence can be found in the Great Nile Hymn, which is traditionally dated to the Middle Kingdom. For sure, the content there can not be directly compared, since the passage deals with the contrast between the significant gifts of the Nile on the one hand and valuable but not essential things on the other. The passage alludes specifically to textile production, in which gold proves to be unsuitable compared to flax. However, the example shows very clearly that the combination of “šḥt” “to weave” and gold is perfectly permissible in the Egyptian language. The different gold designation hardly has any hindrance, as they only emphasize the flexibility of the Egyptian language. An literary text source thus secures the explanation suggested here. The possibility cannot be ruled out that the passage in the Nile Hymn indirectly refers to the transferred meaning. Given this fact, nothing should stand in the way of adding the root “šḥt” in the example above. The interpretation has the additional advantage that it avoids the detour through the metaphorical meaning of “šḥt” “to braid”, as is present in “šḥt” “to braid light”^[19,20].

3. Results and Discussion

The above explanation fulfills both the content and phonetic requirements. The word is found in a caption to a

scene that deals with the processing of precious materials. The special way in which gold objects are made fits well into this scheme. The phonetic laws are strictly observed.

4. Conclusions

To sum up: The door is opened to a new interpretation of the word. The analysis of “ššt” as writing for “šht” makes most sense. Helck’s explanation is thus philologically confirmed. The understanding of the passage can be further improved in this way. The suggestion can at least be proposed as a working hypothesis. The expression “šht dcm” “to weave gold” comes from the language of metal craftsmen. The existence of job-specific technical languages is also documented in other areas. The soldier’s language is critical to mention^[21-23]. The reference to the language of butchers might be most worthwhile also in this context^[24].

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The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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