

Choosing to hear? The concept of *sdm* as a tool for constructing identity among officials in Pharaonic Egypt

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This paper offers a case study in Ancient Egyptian identity building based on association with a single word: *sdm*, a verb ostensibly meaning “hear”, but possessing a wide range of lexical meanings including “obey”, “understand”, “satisfy”, and “judge”.¹ Ancient Egyptian officials from as early as the Old Kingdom and through to the New Kingdom (i.e. 2700–1100BCE) regularly made use of the participial form of this verb, *sdm.w* (“one who hears”) to describe themselves, and this paper seeks to shed further light on what exactly this might say about them. What was this exclusive group of people, marked out by a common connection with this concept, actually supposed to be hearing? And what might this tell us about power dynamics between those doing the hearing and those being heard?

As its core dataset, this paper uses the existing prosopographic corpora of Old, Middle and New Kingdom titles, which allow for analysis of every published attestation of official titles related to *sdm* over the 1600-year chronological span of the study.² The paper will explore correlations between officials holding *sdm*-containing titles and other indicators of social status, such as ranking titles indicating proximity to the royal administration or sources of authority in the Egyptian provinces, as well as autobiographical inscriptions describing activities in which holders of *sdm*-containing titles participated during their careers. Such autobiographical inscriptions are relatively rare, but where available they can provide a much deeper insight into the lifeways and sense of professional identity of a given official.

Alongside these primary aims, the paper will also offer thoughts on the long-standing methodological dilemma of identifying cause as opposed to consequence in studies of the interplay of language and its users. Thus, did holders of *sdm*-containing titles construct their careers, social status, and material monuments in the way that they did precisely because they were associated with *sdm* and felt a need to conform to specific modes of practice inherent in the concept, or conversely were they labelled (by themselves or others) as members of the *sdm* group because they were already fitting the criteria? And, if the latter was true, to what extent might the aspiration to join or stay in the *sdm* class influence the choices made by the officials in question? Of course, it should be stressed that not all of these questions might be answerable given that datasets are inevitably fragmentary, but from a perspective of methodological enquiry they are nonetheless worth interrogating to whatever extent may prove possible. In so doing, the paper hopes to renew debates around the usefulness of titles as markers of identity and as influencers of decisions made by the individuals holding them, both in Ancient Egypt and other societies more broadly.

¹ For this basic range of translations, see R. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1962): 259. For a fuller range, see A. Erman & H. Grapow, *Wörterbuch der Ägyptischen Sprache* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1971): 384–389.

² For the Old Kingdom corpus, see D. Jones, *An Index of Ancient Egyptian Titles, Epithets, and Phrases of the Old Kingdom* (Oxford: Archaeopress/BAR, 2000). For the Middle Kingdom corpus, see W. A. Ward, *Index of Egyptian Administrative and Religious Titles of the Middle Kingdom: with a Glossary of Words and Phrases Used* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1982), with addenda in H. G. Fischer, *Egyptian Titles of the Middle Kingdom: A Supplement to Wm. Ward's Index* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985) and S. Quirke, “The Regular Titles of the Late Middle Kingdom”, *Revue d'Égyptologie* 37 (1986): 107–133. For the New Kingdom corpus, see A. R. Al-Ayedi, *Index of Egyptian Administrative, Religious, and Military Titles of the New Kingdom* (Ismailia: Obelisk Publications, 2006).