

# Slavery, Pharaonic Egypt

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Discussions of slavery in Pharaonic Egypt are hindered by the complicated terminology used by the Egyptians to refer to different classes of people with limited freedom; these terms also changed in meaning over the course of dynastic history (Loprieno 1997: 185). Consequently, slavery will here be defined as something imposed upon a person that makes him or her the property of a master so that they can be bought, sold, and inherited.

The word *hm* (pl. *hmw*) is commonly translated as “slave”; it is known from the Old Kingdom onwards, and is an element in the word for “priests” (*hmw-ntr*) and “agricultural workers” (*hmw-nsw*). However, the translation “servant” could equally be suitable, as the level of freedom enjoyed by such people is not clear (Bakir 1952: 29–30). Similarly, a group of people called *b3kw* are sometimes classed as slaves, although again, in the Old Kingdom, “workers” or “servants” might be a more accurate translation. Another group occasionally categorized as slaves are the *meret*; in the Old Kingdom these were “dependent workers,” people tied to agricultural land for the state, but who could also be assigned to perform non-agricultural work as *corvée* labor for state building projects, or even as soldiers (Loprieno 1997: 191–2). All of these people had limited freedom, but there is no specific evidence to classify them as slaves for this period.

In the Middle Kingdom, *hm-nsw* refers to people who belonged to the state in perpetuity – normally as punishment for having fled imprisonment. Once assigned this status, they could be given to individuals as property; they could be sold or passed down a family line. Consequently, they can be classed as slaves. Also at this time, *meret* could be passed from one person to another and work in the service of the king, the elite, or temple estates. Prisoners of war were used as slave

labor, and had the same rights as *hm-nsw*. Middle Kingdom references to *b3kw* having been bought are also found (Loprieno 1997: 196–200). The Middle Kingdom Bologna Papyrus records that a ship carrying Near Eastern captives came to Egypt; here these people are classed as *hmw*, which could indicate that they were to be used as slaves (Allam 2001: 294).

By the New Kingdom, *meret* had much the same meaning as *hm-nsw*. Such people could be given away by the king to members of the elite as reward for service. Prisoners of war, who were brought into Egypt in large numbers during the New Kingdom, were classed as *meret* and awarded to soldiers by the king. The majority, however, would be sent to work in temple workshops. Asiatics could also be bought from slave dealers at this time; these were classed as *hmw* – a word that often, although not exclusively, referred to foreign slaves (Bakir 1952: 31). These were often bought and sold on to others, and could perform a variety of functions during their lives. Egyptians who had sold themselves into slavery in order to pay off debts or were made slaves as a form of punishment, are referred to in this period as *b3kw*, but their relative freedoms were much the same as those of the *hmw* (Bakir 1952: 22, 74–6); typically, however, *b3kw* performed one particular function throughout their lives, rather than a variety of tasks. Both groups could own property, and male slaves could marry free women, while masters could grant their slaves freedom. Also from the New Kingdom there is evidence for slaves being rented out; this was known as *hrw n b3k* (“day of service”) and is evidenced at the workmen’s community at DEIR EL-MEDINA in Thebes. These privately owned slaves were additional to slaves provided by the state, who were shared by the workmen (Loprieno 1997: 202–12; Allam 2001: 295).

Writing in Egypt’s Late Period, HERODOTUS makes no reference to slaves in his seven classes of Egyptian society, although slavery is known to have continued and is referenced in much of

the contemporary textual evidence. Papyrus Rylands III–VII refer to Egyptians selling themselves into slavery in order to pay off debts – their children and all of their property would also go to their new master (Bakir 1952: 74–6). A papyrus in Leiden records the value of certain slaves, which can be compared to similar evidence from the Ramesside and Third Intermediate periods (Allam 2001: 294–5).

SEE ALSO: Late Period, Egypt; Middle Kingdom, Egypt; New Kingdom, Egypt; Old Kingdom, Egypt; Third Intermediate Period, Egypt; Warfare, Pharaonic Egypt.

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