Musical Performers of an Ancient Egyptian Harem?  
Aspects of Continuity, Discontinuity, and Change  
in Relation to the Wordḥnr

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Abstract
The institution pr-ḥnr was interpreted as a harem in traditional Egyptological literature. From the 1980s, it began to be viewed as a group of performers, especially for the period of the Old and Middle Kingdoms. The objective of this paper is to show continuity in the function of the studied institution and to demonstrate how the original translation was incorporated into Egyptological studies.

Keywords
harem | performers | New Kingdom | Judicial papyrus | Orientalism

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The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.¹

Every human being looks at the world around them through the lens of their experiences, ideas, and culture. We tend to project our ideas onto our work. Egyptology is no exception. Some concepts are more characteristic of their time of origin than the studied subject matter. An interesting example is the institution of *pr-hnr* and the dynamics surrounding its interpretation.²

The term *hnr* is already well attested from the late Old Kingdom and throughout the Middle Kingdom and is understood as referring to a group or institution of (musical) performers. In the Egyptological narrative, the institution shows clear continuity from the Old Kingdom into the New Kingdom, but also aspects of discontinuity and complete change. The latter is, however, not intrinsic to the term and office itself, but rather to a change in its interpretation in modern times—from the harem to musical performers. The term’s translation as *harem* is loaded with exotic ideas and this interpretation has continued to appear in the literature, both scholarly and for the general public, even thirty years after having been proven incorrect, or at least highly doubtful. The persistence of this translation demonstrates that more focus on the primary sources is needed.³

**THE INSTITUTION *pr-hnr***

The institution *pr-hnr* is a challenge to Egyptologists. The word was first translated as “harem” by Théodule Devéria and interpreted according to ideas which were associated with this institution in the mid-19th century. This translation and concept of the *pr-hnr* were adopted by other Egyptologists, as is discussed extensively below.⁴ A new interpretation emerged when more female Egyptolo-

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² This article is based on part of my forthcoming dissertation. It is one of the partial results, which may change in the course of preparation. I am aware that other aspects of this topic need to be addressed, such as the relationship between written sources and archaeological finds, i.e., palaces. These will be addressed in future studies.
³ This article is based on the present author’s dissertation work, dealing with the institutions of *pr-hnr* and *jp.t nsw* in the 18th and 19th Dynasties. This dissertation is still a work in progress.
⁴ Harem as a topic is currently studied by several Egyptologists; for more literature see, for example, Silke Roth “Harem,” in *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, ed. Elisabeth Frood and Willeke Wendrich, accessed May 2020, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1k3663r3; Marine Yoyotte, “Le ‘harem’ royal (*jp.t nsw*) et son personnel aux époques tardives: observations préliminaires,” in “Parcourir l’éternité”: hommages à Jean Yoyotte 2, ed. Christiane Zivie-Coche and Ivan Guermeur (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 1109–22.
gists were involved in the field. A significant departure from the translation of the word *hnr* as *harem* was introduced by D. Nord. She, among others, reviewed the doctoral thesis dealing with ancient Egyptian harems, as will be discussed below, of E. Reiser and offered an alternative translation: “musical performers.” This was accepted by other scholars (see Tab. I).

| **xnr.wt** | **Musical performers** | **Nord 1981** |
| **Harem (NK)** | **Harem (since OK)** | **Wb III 297.7** |
| **Harem** | **Wb III 297.2** |
| **Harem** | **TLA, lemma-no. 60790** |
| **Musical performers** | **Nord 1981** |
| **Group of musical performers** | **Bryan 1982** |
| **Troupe of Singers and Dancers** | **Ward 1986, 69** |
| **Member of a troupe of musicians** | **Jones 2000, 689** |
| **Harem** | **Lesko 2002, 150** |

Tab. I Different forms and translations of the word *hnr*, as could be found in dictionaries and handbooks.


Based on the study of visual culture, D. Nord defined the *hnrt* as a group of performers consisting of dancers, singers, and clappers of both genders—existing from the 6th Dynasty at least. In the chapels of the Old Kingdom tombs, they are usually accompanied by captions for singing (e.g., *hs.t*) and lamentation (e.g., *h3t*)

The iconography can help to clarify the participation of the performers on different occasions. In the Old Kingdom, they are depicted as part of the funerary procession. The institution of *hnrt* was connected with a *pr D.t* funerary estate—for example, in Abusir—and from the 6th Dynasty it was also associated with the cult of the goddess Hathor. This can be observed in scenes from private tombs dealing with the topic of invoking Hathor, “The Golden One.”

The cult of Hathor was also linked with the idea of the divine king. Also, the title *jmy-rA xnr n nsw* proves a connection with the king, presumably involving performances of the *hnrt* at some royal ceremonies, religious or otherwise. The participation of the *hnrt* in the Hathoric rituals is also documented for the Middle Kingdom, alongside its presence at funerary rituals related to funerary estates (e.g., *pr D.t*). The performers’ contributions to the rituals are wider, although we also have more data on this period; the cult of Hathor is not the only one which had *hnrt*. The same institution was also involved in the cults of deities such as Sakhmet, Bat, Wepwawet, Horus, Min, and Onuris. The association of the *hnrt* with royal ceremonies continues as well. Therefore, it can be stated that from the Old Kingdom, the *hnrt* (probably as performers) were responsible for participating in three types of rituals:

a) those of the cult of the goddesses and gods;

b) funerary rituals, where they were part of the funerary estates;

c) royal ceremonies.


10 Morris, “Paddle Dolls,” 79.


12 Morris “Paddle Dolls,” 75.


14 For more information about the involvement of the xnrt in Hathoric rituals, see Morris, “Paddle Dolls.”


16 Morris, “Paddle Dolls,” 79.

The unresolved question is whether three different types of *hnr* existed or the same group of people was involved on different occasions.

The next challenge of the *hnr* is its interpretation throughout Egyptian history. A still prevalent interpretive strategy is to divide the institution of *pr-hnr* into before and during the New Kingdom, stating that before the New Kingdom, this institution fulfilled different purposes, including those proposed above, but in the New Kingdom it was more similar to a *harem*.\(^\text{18}\)

This idea is connected with a change in the international situation when Egypt was the *Imperium*. New Kingdom rulers had several wives, including women from foreign countries. With a gap in our knowledge of what happened to these females after marriage and the character of marriage in general, there is a tendency to reconstruct the institution into something which reminds one of the *Ottoman harem*. Additionally, since the *hnr* was primarily interpreted as a harem, this translation survived at least partly for New Kingdom Egypt. This attitude, although logically evolved from the changing international situation, is questionable. Is it possible that the studied institution changed from a group of performers into a *harem*? The New Kingdom has not been studied as closely as previous periods, which could be, as S. Onstine\(^\text{19}\) states, due to this period being perceived as complicated, especially with the phenomenon of the foreign wives of the king. The lack of data on the organization of the royal court and the presence of foreign women could have led to a simplified theory that placed these women into a “*harem*.” This paper intends further to present a New Kingdom emic continuity of the institution as well as to analyze the issue of a persevering, but inaccurate, etic terminology.

**NEW KINGDOM CONTINUITY**

By studying this institution in the New Kingdom, one can observe its continuity of function. Although the spelling *pr-hnr* instead of *hnr* appears in the New Kingdom, we may assume that it is the same institution.

a) Cult of the gods and goddesses—the depiction of the *hnr* from the Karnak temple

The continuation of the participation of the *hnr* in temple rituals is documented not only by the title of the *wr.t hnr n* (NAME OF THE GOD or GODDESS; 


\(^{19}\) Onstine, *The Role of Chantress*, 7.
see Tab. II) but also by iconography in a royal as well as a non-royal context (see further). In the case of the iconographic documents of *hnr*, specific women are not displayed. Titles lower than *wr.t hnr* cannot be attested by their female owners and are therefore not included in Tab. II. From the titles of the holders of this office it is apparent that even local temples had the *hnr*; therefore, it can be assumed that every local temple maintained this institution.

Concerning the iconographic sources, there is an *hnr* depicted in tomb TT 930 of Kenamon, the chief steward (*jmy-r3 pr-wr nsw*) and overseer of the cattle of Amun (*jmy-r3 jH.w n jmn*), in procession to Karnak on the east wall of the transverse hall. The scene displays the bringing of the statues of Kenamon to the Karnak temple.

The third register shows the dragging of the statue followed by a man marked as a companion (*smr*) and a group of men running with branches in their hands accompanied with the inscription: “Our master comes. He received favor, and I rejoice as one in happy mood seeing that he is provided for daily to the end of eternity.” A female group succeeds them. The first four are depicted in elaborately decorated long skirts with only sashes tethered across their chests (so-called Libyan bands). They are marked as *hnr n hw.t-hr* and followed by a group of women in long dresses with broad collars, holding menits in their left hands and sistroms in their right. They are also labelled *hnr n hw.t-hr*. Presumed that these women belonged to a different temple; therefore, their costumes are different. He also denoted them as “dancing priestesses.”

From this image it is clear that the women marked as *hnr* were present as temple personnel and participated in the procession that followed the offering officials’ statues to the Karnak temple. None of these women are marked as *wr.t hnr*; therefore, though it seems that they were executing common service in the temple, the character of this service cannot be read from this depiction.

The *hnr* is also shown on one block (block 66) from The Red Chapel of Hatshepsut. The block comes from the south wall and is part of the scene where the bark of Amun is coming back from Luxor temple. The scene of the block can be divided into four parts: the first is located on the left side of the upper register and shows the harpist. Next to him there is a group of three women

20 See PM I.1 190–94.
21 Norman de Garis Davies, *The Tomb of Ken-Amûn at Thebes* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1930), Pl. XXXIX.
23 Ibid., 40.
24 Ibid., Pl. XXXIX.
25 Ibid., 41.
marked as ħntr.w ladies27 of the temple (ḥntr.w n hw.t-āntr). They wear long dresses and hold sistrums in their right hands. In the lower register, four female acrobats are shown, dressed only in small strips of linen deployed in two sub-registers on the left. On the right there is a male choir (ṣsp.t dhm) consisting of three men wearing kilts.

As in the previous example, this image from Karnak shows that the group of women with the title ħntr were part of a religious procession.

b) Funerary rituals

The presence of the ħntr as part of a group of mourners in the burial procession is a common theme of New Kingdom tomb decoration.28 Even though the participants rarely had a caption designating them as an ħntr, they most probably belonged to one29 with the title ṣmwy.t, ḥsy.t, and ṣḥd.30 A direct caption of a female with the title ħntr is very rare, but there are a few examples of it, as in the case of Amenemhet (TT 82),31 where a group of women belonging to the cult of Hathor are standing with the menits, sistrums, and fly-whisks in front of the offering table.32 These women are part of the Hathoric feast. Hathor is closely associated with the funeral cult. Hence the scene depicted in the tomb that is described in this section of the article.

c) Royal ceremonies

The participation of the ħntr in royal ceremonies is again documented indirectly because of the lack of captions that would have explicitly designated a group of female performers as an ħntr. However, there are some examples of performers which could be linked to this institution—for example, a depiction from the tomb of Kheruef (TT 192).33 The west portico of the south wing is reserved for scenes of the first jubilee festival of Amenhotep III.34 Two registers show

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27 According to the classifier, the ħntr.w is here meant to mark the group of females.
31 See PM I.1 163–67.
32 Nina Davies and Alain Gardiner, The Tomb of Amenemhet (No. 82) (London: EES, 1915), Pl. XIX.
33 See PM I.1 298–300.
a group of performers in front of the king. The depicted female participants are
dressed in the usual manner for an *hnr*—namely, with bare chests, Libyan bands,
and skirts. They are shown in different dance positions. There is also a group of
musicians and singers in the second register. Even though these women were not
marked as an *hnr*, it is highly probable that they belonged to one.

The continuity of this office from the Old Kingdom into the New Kingdom
is mostly visible in examples of the *hnr* connected with the cult. Although the
participation of the *hnr* in royal ceremonies and funerals is not documented di-
rectly, it is still possible that the singers, musicians, and dancers depicted at such
ceremonies belonged to an *hnr*. The question still remains: were there specialized
*hnr* for different occasions or was the same group of performers involved in dif-
ferent ceremonies? From the sources which the present author has investigated,
there is no need to believe that this institution assumed different characteristics
in the New Kingdom from those it possessed in previous periods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Husband</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Reign of the king</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meryt</td>
<td><em>wr.t hnr n sbk sd.ty</em></td>
<td>TT 63</td>
<td>Sobekhotep</td>
<td><em>jmy-rî htm.w-ntr n sbk sd.ty</em></td>
<td>Thutmose IV / Amenhotep II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuya</td>
<td><em>wr.t hnr n jmn/ wr.t hnr n mn</em></td>
<td>KV 46</td>
<td>Yuya</td>
<td><em>hm ntr n mn</em></td>
<td>Amenhotep III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takhat</td>
<td><em>wr.t hnr n jmn</em></td>
<td>TT 50</td>
<td>Ameneinet</td>
<td><em>jt ntr n jmn</em></td>
<td>Amenhotep III / Akhnaton?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taemwadjisy</td>
<td><em>wr.t hnr n nb-npr.w-r</em></td>
<td>temple Faras</td>
<td>or brother Huy</td>
<td><em>z3 nsw n Kš</em></td>
<td>Tutankhamun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iuy</td>
<td><em>wr.t hnr n jmn-htp</em></td>
<td>TT 19</td>
<td>Amenmosi</td>
<td><em>hm-ntr tp.j n jmn-htp (n p3 wbš)</em></td>
<td>Ramesse I / Sethi I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merytre</td>
<td><em>wr.t hnr n jmn(r</em>)</td>
<td>TT 106</td>
<td>Nebnetjeru called Turi</td>
<td><em>hm-ntr tpj n jmn</em></td>
<td>Sethi I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebettawy</td>
<td><em>wr.t hnr n mw.t</em></td>
<td>TT 255</td>
<td>Roy</td>
<td><em>jmy-rî pr hr-m-hb</em></td>
<td>Sethi I?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bwy</td>
<td><em>wr.t hnr n mw.t</em></td>
<td>TT 255</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiy</td>
<td><em>wr.t hnr n jmn</em></td>
<td>TT 106</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sethi I / Ramesse II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maiay</td>
<td><em>wr.t hnr n mn tw nb lw</em></td>
<td>TT 331</td>
<td>Paenniut</td>
<td><em>hm-ntr tpj n mn tw</em></td>
<td>Ramesse II (first half of his reign)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiy</td>
<td><em>wr.t hnr n mn tw</em></td>
<td>TT 382</td>
<td>Usermontu</td>
<td><em>hm-ntr tpj n mn tw nb ws.t</em></td>
<td>Ramesse II</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Aspects of Continuity, Discontinuity, and Change in Relation to the Word *hnr*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Takhat</th>
<th>wr.t hnr n jmn/ wr.t hnr n lw.t-hr</th>
<th>TT 157</th>
<th>Nebwenenef</th>
<th>hmn-nt r tp.j n jmn/hm.ntr tp.j n lw.t-hr</th>
<th>Ramesse II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neferetmut</td>
<td>wr.t hnr n jmn</td>
<td>TT 194</td>
<td>Djehutiemhab?</td>
<td>jmy-r3 shtj.w n pr jmn</td>
<td>Ramesse II</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tab. II** Examples of holders of the title wr.t hnr from the Theban area.

To sum up, although our understanding of the *hnr* may be full of gaps, it does not appear likely that the institution fundamentally changed its character in the New Kingdom. However, this is not the only difficulty. There is still the issue of persistent but inaccurate terminology. To address this, it is necessary to analyze the origin of the translation.

**THE ORIGIN OF THE TRANSLATION OF ** *pr-hnr* **AS HAREM**

As was demonstrated, there is no need to accept the translation of the word *hnr* as “harem” without further discussion. An interesting topic, which shows how science can be influenced by popular culture, is how this translation was established in Egyptology. The term *harem* was first used in Egyptology by an inventive scholar, Théodule Charles Devérie (1831–1871). The French Egyptologist 35 included the Turin Judicial Papyrus,36 Cat. 1875, 37 in his studies and published its

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The papyrus belongs to a set of papyri dealing with malevolent acts, not specified in the text itself, which were aimed at King Ramesses III. The supposed protocol about a lawsuit was written in hieratic, and from the neat handwriting, Devéria identified it as an official document. The term “Judicial” papyrus was established.

Within the papyrus text, Théodule Devéria came across words of unknown meaning. An understanding of Egyptian lexis and grammar was still developing. Devéria worked with this text only a few decades after the hieroglyphs had been deciphered. Today’s standard publications, used for work with the texts, had not been written at that time.

The first problematic word Devéria discussed was the word harem, and he translated it as harem. In his publication he argued for his interpretation at length, dedicating an entire chapter to the issue of an Egyptian harem. Moreover, he was concerned not only with the translation but also with the character of the institution. In the following lines, I will recapitulate and challenge Devéria’s thoughts as well as suggest what influenced him in promoting the discourse of a harem in ancient Egypt.

Devéria began by analyzing pr-hnr on the basis of individual signs. He proposed that the word was not difficult to transcribe into hieroglyphs and wrote it as: . The present author’s challenge starts with the classifiers. Pr-hnr is determined first with the classifier of a building; the second set of classifiers of this word is more problematic. Devéria sorted its attestations into three

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38 Together with Papyrus Lee and Papyrus Rollin—see, for example, Théodule Devéria, Le papyrus judiciaire de Turin et les papyrus Lee et Rollin: étude égyptologique (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1856), 56; Goedicke, “Was Magic Used”; Lexa, Staroegyptské čarodějnickví, 231–33.
39 The purpose of the document was probably to intimidate anybody contemplating doing any evil to the reigning king by displaying the punishments of the conspirators. Thus, the designation as a judicial papyrus is potentially not correct (Grandet, Ramsès III, 341).
40 Devéria, Le papyrus judiciaire, 2.
41 Ibid., 37.
43 Devéria, Le papyrus judiciaire, 37.
44 In hieratic, the hieroglyphical sign  has the same appearance as the sign  , cf. Georg Möller, Hieratische Paläographie (Leipzig: Hinrichs Buchhandlung, 1965), 8, no. 90 and 44 no. 491. In this case, the reading of both signs is the same. Devéria, Le papyrus judiciaire used the transcription with the nose; however, the present author would prefer the second one because it is the sign which is more often used for the pr-hnr on Egyptian monuments.
groups. The first (Fig. 1) has, according to him, the classifiers Ⲳ ⲱ ⲱ, so the whole word is written as ⲡ ⲥ ⲯ ⲱ ⲱ. This interpretation agrees with the later standard interpretation of the hieratic signs in the papyrus as shown below. 45

![Fig. 1 First group of hnr attestations: Devéria’s drawings (left) and a photo of the papyrus itself (right). (Col. IV, 2; Devéria 1865, 37; Foto Cat. 1875; Nicola Dell Aquilla e Federico Taverni/Museo Egizio ©.)](image1)

The second group is more questionable. Devéria 46 transcribed it in hieratic with different classifiers compared to the previous group (Fig. 2). 47 He connected the last two signs using a different ligature, which he interpreted as ⲡ ⲱ. 48 In connection with this interpretation, he argued that there is no difference between the depiction of a seated man and woman in the hieratic script. Therefore, his interpretation of the second group looks, in hieroglyphs, like this:

![Fig. 2 Second group of hnr attestations: Devéria’s drawing (left), followed by photos of the papyrus itself (center and right). (Col. IV, 5–6; Devéria 1865, 37; Foto Cat. 1875; Nicola Dell Aquilla e Federico Taverni/Museo Egizio ©.)](image2)

Nowadays, better technology allows us to see parts of the papyrus in detail (Fig. 2). It is evident that the signs are the same as those in the first group. There is no ligature as Déveria presumed; therefore, there is no reason to transcribe them differently, and the form stays the same: ⲡ ⲥ ⲯ ⲱ ⲱ. 49 This hieroglyphic

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45 Cf. Möller, Hieratische Paläographie, 69, no. LVIII.
46 Devéria, Le papyrus judiciaire, 37.
47 Ibid., 37, listed in the second group attestations: col. IV, 3; col. IV, 5; col. IV, 6; nevertheless, col. IV, 3 does not have any mention of hnr.
48 Devéria, Le papyrus judiciaire, 38.
49 In the case of the first photo there is a preposition n before pr-hnr.
transcription was already preferred in the Turin museum (Museo Egizio) database of the papyrus collection,\textsuperscript{50} as well as in the standard edition of the New Kingdom texts KRI V (353.6; 353.13),\textsuperscript{51} demonstrating that the option of using the ligature was not universally accepted among scholars.

The third group (Fig. 3) is the most problematic. Devéria\textsuperscript{52} interpreted the upper sign as the consonant “t” and the two strokes as a sign of a sitting female.\textsuperscript{53}

Fig. 3 Third group of hnr attestations: Devéria’s drawing (left) and a detailed photo of the papyrus itself (right). (Col. V, 3; Devéria 1865, 37; Foto Cat. 1875; Nicola Dell Aquilla e Federico Taverni/Museo Egizio ©.)

His main argument for this transcription is based on the ligature in the word sister (e.g., sn.t) from the same line (col. V, 3), which should have a determinative of a seated female. However, the sign is not the same at all (Fig. 4). The sign for t and two vertical strokes are used as determinatives in the case of the word xnr, whereas the word sn.t has a clear sign for a seated female.\textsuperscript{53}

Fig. 4 The word sn.t from the Turin Judicial papyrus, col. V, 3 (Nicola Dell Aquilla e Federico Taverni/Museo Egizio ©).

\textsuperscript{50} https://collezionepapiri.museoegizio.it/public/afc11e45b1304cd7a6eeb24990db266d/;jsessionid/77bfac41759e480a83375c9c77d69f48.2C620D0FF5B22C6175362FBACBD68A77RTL_H.png (Accessed April 7, 2020).

\textsuperscript{51} The author of the edition used Devéria’s work for transcription into hieroglyphs, which was checked by A. M. Blackman and J. Černý, KRI V, 350.

\textsuperscript{52} Devéria, \textit{Le papyrus judiciaire}, 39.

\textsuperscript{53} Cf. Möller, \textit{Hieratische Paläographie}, 5, no. 61.
Even though the transcription of the Judicial papyrus detail can be debated, the signs in Fig. 3 cannot be transcribed as $\overline{\overline{\text{'}h}}$$. The upper sign could be the consonant “$\text{t}$.”$^{54}$ The lower one is not clear. It could simply represent two strokes;$^{55}$ therefore, the whole word, in hieroglyphic transcription, could look like this: $\overline{\overline{\overline{\text{'}h}}}$$. An interesting approach was taken by Kitchen (KRI V, 357. 6): the word is transcribed as Devéria proposed, but the sign of a seated female is hatched as if to indicate that the papyrus was damaged, and the signs were not readable. However, this is not the case with this word because the relevant part of the papyrus is not damaged (see Fig. 3). It is assumed that Kitchen intended to point out a problematic reading but did not want to challenge it directly.

The classifiers are crucial because Devéria used them to build an entire theory regarding the meaning of this word. He started with the first one—namely, the sign $\overline{\overline{\text{'}h}}$ that indicates a *locus*—which refers to a place or a building. Then he moved to the reconstructed sign of the sitting female $\overline{\overline{\overline{\text{'}h}}}$$. Together he read the word as a place where the women lived—the *gynaeceum* or, as he says more often, the *harem*.$^{56}$ Hence, several classifiers with a problematic reading became his major argument for introducing the concept of the *harem* into ancient Egyptian historiography.

Since he understood this word as *harem*, he went on to define what this institution looked like and how it supposedly operated. He defined the royal *harem* as a place where women were detained and separated from the outside world. They could not leave this institution, but their female relatives could visit them.$^{57}$ The status of these women was not clear, he admitted, but he stated that they were probably slaves or even “normal” persons. Devéria$^{58}$ built his interpretation mostly on general information on the supposed functioning of a Muslim *harem*, assuming that the equivalent ancient Egyptian institution must have been very similar.

There are several problems with Devéria’s view of *pr-ḥnrt*. Devéria himself pointed them out but did not resolve them. The first issue is the question of the legality of polygamy$^{59}$ in Ancient Egypt. Devéria$^{60}$ admitted that polygamy

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$^{54}$ Cf. ibid., 52, no. 575.
$^{55}$ Cf. ibid., 66, no. XXXVI.
$^{57}$ Ibid., 46.
$^{58}$ Ibid., 44.
$^{60}$ Devéria, *Le papyrus judiciaire*, 45.
was not a regular type of marriage in Ancient Egypt. Interestingly, according to him, it may even have been illegal.

Another problem is related to the holders of the title wr.t hnr n jmn. Devéria\(^6\) admitted that it was a sacerdotal title, but he did not define what this title meant and how it is connected with the hnr when this word is understood as referring to a harem. His view was that wr.t hnr n jmn represents a different group of females from the harem attendants of the king, despite the same word and writings being used. These other women could have been, according to him, part of the temple’s retinue of prostitutes. Devéria did not discuss the topic of wr.t hnr n jmn and other gods any further. Nevertheless, this title is significant and has the potential to change his argument. It is difficult to determine if he was aware of it and, therefore, perhaps he simply omitted it from further argumentation.

Along with people connected with hnr, the papyrus also mentions officials connected with a jp.t-nsw, the second word Devéria related to a harem. Devéria\(^6\) reconstructed the title jmy-rĀ jp.t-nsw with the classifier of the sitting female. He proposed that this title was held by the royal officials who were employed in the harem. He further proposed that it could also be held by a female; and did not specify further what the exact job description or position of these officials was. Nevertheless, the term jp.t-nsw then began to be translated as a royal harem, without any deeper analysis of the title.

The last argument for Devéria’s theory about the hnr is even more problematic. He interprets the plot of the papyrus as a murder of the king by his harem because this is what usually happens in the harem. Moreover, the identification of the harem is later explained by the plot because the murder of the king usually happens in the royal harem.\(^6\) The fascination with the concept of a harem is rather evident and apparently led Devéria to propose this circular argument.

To evaluate Devéria’s ideas the date of his study should be taken into consideration. The second half of the 19th century was a period of intense intercultural contact but also of imperial domination and an asymmetric power relationship between European and non-European powers. These asymmetric political relationships were reflected in intellectual discourse as well as popular culture. The so-called Orient was often perceived as the opposite of Europe.\(^6\)

This was, in fact, nothing new in the perception of exotic countries, as can be demonstrated by an extract from the Historiae written by Herodotus:

\(^6\) Ibid., 44.
\(^6\) Ibid., 47–50.
\(^6\) Ibid., 59.
\(^6\) Said, Orientalism, 5; Thomas Gertzen, Einführung in die Wissenschaftsgeschichte der Ägyptologie (Berlin: Lit-Verlag, 2017), 161.
Just as the Egyptians have a climate peculiar to themselves, and their river is different in its nature from all other rivers, so, too, have they instituted customs and laws contrary for the most part to those of the rest of mankind. Among them, the women buy and sell, the men stay at home and weave; and whereas in weaving all others push the woof upwards, the Egyptians push it downwards. Men carry burdens on their heads, women on their shoulders. Women pass water standing, men sitting. They ease their bowels indoors, and eat out of doors in the streets, explaining that things unseemly but necessary should be done alone in private, things not unseemly should be done openly. No woman is dedicated to the service of any god or goddess; men are dedicated to all deities male or female. Sons are not compelled against their will to support their parents, but daughters must do so though they be unwilling.

(Herodotus, Histor. II. 35)

The same logic is present in the work of the orientalists of the 19th century, especially when dealing with sexuality. The Orient was described as being much more liberal with courtesans, slaves, and harems, where every sexual dream was possible. This generalization appeared even in the work of E. W. Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, published in 1836. This book was very influential among researchers, as well as authors of popular literature. The best example of this phenomenon is in the work of Gustave Flaubert, who defined the image of the “ideal” Oriental woman, reifying her for popular consumption and imagination.

Another problem with Orientalism is that ancient cultures were often “modernized” and interpreted through the lens of the perception of the modern Orient; thus, the image of Ancient Egypt was based on a not entirely accurate view of 19th-century Egypt. This tendency in Egyptology is recognized by Nord in the case of the harem. Nord argues that using the problematic word harem in ancient Egyptian historiography is a result of the tendency to connect Ancient Egypt with the status of Arab women in the 19th century. As such, it is part of a larger element of “Orientalizing” Ancient Egypt by drawing problematic parallels with later periods of Egyptian history.

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66 For a biography of this pioneering orientalist, see Jason Thompson, *Edward William Lane. 1801–1876. The Life of the Pioneering Egyptologist and Orientalist* (Cairo – New York: AUC Press, 2010).
68 Ibid., 22–23.
69 Ibid., 6.
70 Ibid., 121.
In this context, the reason why T. Devéria found his conclusion that pr-ḥnrt should be translated as a harem so appealing is clearer. Not only was the image of a harem embedded in the Western imagination, but there were still harems in existence, which could be studied not only in Egypt but also in Europe, namely within the Ottoman Empire. Although Devéria was careful not to equate an ancient Egyptian harem with the Ottoman harem explicitly, he did so implicitly throughout his study.

Moreover, the problem with polygamy and the harem was complicated by Déveria’s own inaccurate image of the contemporary harem. This institution was not necessarily connected with polygamy. Even in Ottoman Istanbul, only 2.29 percent of harems consisted of more than one wife, indicating that on average polygamous marriages involved two wives.72

In addition, the word ḥnrt was written with various spellings (see Tab III); therefore, the methodology of Devéria, which was fully based on classifiers, was not accurate. The classifiers, as well as the orthography of the whole word, were not uniform.73 In the earlier Old Kingdom, the word was mostly written without human classifiers.74 At the end of the Old Kingdom, greater orthographic variability appeared, along with classifiers for the collective showing both genders.75

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Image</th>
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<th>Old Kingdom</th>
<th>Bryan 1982, 36; Wb III 297.7</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>ḥnrt</td>
<td>the late Old Kingdom</td>
<td>Nord 1981, 140; Bryan 1982, 37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>ḥnrt</td>
<td>First Intermediate Period</td>
<td>Nord 1981, 143; Bryan 1982, 37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>ḥn/jr</td>
<td>Middle Kingdom</td>
<td>Nord 1981, 144–145; Bryan 1982, 37; Wb III 297.8</td>
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</table>

Tab. III Variant spellings of the word ḥnrt.

Tracking how this translation came into general use is a challenge. It was used, for example, by H. Brugsch in his Egypt under the Pharaohs—History derived entirely from the monuments, published in 1891. H. Brugsch was a close friend of A. Mariette, who supported Devéria as a talented scholar.76 Therefore, there

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73 Nord, “The Term,” 137.
76 Thompson, Wonderful Things 2, 229–30.
is a high probability that Brugsch not only knew Devéria’s work but was also inspired by Devéria’s translation in the book featuring the chapter about the *harem* conspiracy.\(^7^7\)

The main impact of Devéria’s translation stems, of course, from its inclusion in dictionaries. This happened to the term *harem* when Erman\(^7^8\) and Grapow used this translation in their *Wörtebuch*.\(^7^9\) The dictionary lists different forms of this word (see Tab. IV). Its use in titles is also included in, for example, *jμy.t-r3 hnr*\(^8^0\) and *wr.t hnr*.\(^8^1\) In all the above titles the dictionary uses the translation of *hnr* as *harem*.

<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Tab. IV</strong> Different forms and translations of the word <em>hnr</em>.</th>
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The translation *harem* appeared in another influential work—namely, the main handbook for the administration of the Middle and New Kingdoms, written by W. Helck.\(^8^2\) He did not discuss *pr-hnr* as an institution; nevertheless, he translated the titles with this element, e.g., *rätzlich n hnr.w* as “Inspektoren des Harims.” Helck also lists different *harems*, which are supposed to be known from literary sources, i.e., *Grg-W3s.t, Mr-wr*, and directly refers to the Turin

\(^7^7\) Heinrich Brugsch, *Egypt under the Pharaohs—History derived entirely from the monuments* (London: John Murray, 1902), 335–36; the present author is using a later edition of this book because the original is not available.

\(^7^8\) A. Erman is perceived as the man who defined, shaped, and labelled the Egyptian past; Thompson, *Wonderful Things 2*, 156.

\(^7^9\) Wb III 297.

\(^8^0\) Wb III 297.4.

\(^8^1\) Wb III 298.1.

Judicial papyrus. Although he does not discuss this topic in depth, his translation is a witness to his perception of the institution.

The *harem* was chosen by E. Reiser as the topic for her doctoral thesis in 1972. Reiser did not perceive *pr-hnr* and *jp.t-nsw* as two separate institutions and she translates both words as *harem*. Her thesis is, so far, the most complete study on these two institutions; nevertheless, she adopts Devéria’s concept of what the institutions were.

Interestingly, when material was being collected for the *Wörterbuch*, there was another approach toward the translation of the word *hnrt*. A. M. Blackman oscillated between referring to the holders of *hnrt*-related titles as musician-priestesses and concubines. He noticed that the holders of these titles were connected with the cults of different gods, which led him to the idea that they might be human concubines of the given god; on the other hand, for the Middle Kingdom, he translated the word *hnyw.t* as musician-priestesses. Also, concerning Amun’s “concubines” in the New Kingdom, he stated that even as concubines these women were nothing more than musician-priestesses.

The case of Blackman’s interpretation illustrates that the conception of this institution as a *harem* and holders of this title as *members of the harem* was questioned even before the publication of the *Wörterbuch*. The question is: why was Blackman’s interpretation not included in it? It could be assumed that the inclusion of only one possible meaning of the word influenced a whole generation of Egyptologists, who did not question this interpretation. Moreover, it possibly prevented any further scholarly discussion of this topic until the 1980s.

Although the translation of *hnrt* as *harem* was, therefore, shown as at least disputable, this interpretation has very deep roots and has proven to be wonderfully resilient, persisting even after thirty years of revision. This leads to the rather paradoxical situation shown in *A Dictionary of the Late Egyptian Language*, by Leonard H. Lesko. The first edition was published in 1982, the second in the year 2002. The word *pr-hnr* is translated as *harem* in both editions. In both versions the hieroglyphs are shown as . The first example came from the Papyrus Wilbour (Wil 101R19); however, Lesko did not follow the orthography of the word in this papyrus. Gardiner, who published this edition, transcribed the studied part as , with a note that the part is mean-

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84 Reiser, *Der königliche*, 77.
87 Ibid., 9.
88 Ibid., 15.
ingless (Will Pl. 49A). Besides this, the hieratic original (Fig. 5), though unclear, does not allow for Lesko’s transcription and Gardiner’s interpretation seems more accurate.

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 5** Part of the inscription which was used in Lesko’s dictionary (Will, 101, 19).

The situation gets more interesting when searching for other words connected with *hnr*. 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CONCLUSION

The current article highlights several tendencies regarding the use, meaning, and (modern) interpretation of the term *hn₂r*. Firstly, it clearly indicates that the term *hn₂r* likely referred to a group of performers who were involved in the same general types of ceremonies throughout the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom: funerary rituals, as well as royal and temple ceremonies.

Secondly, the author wishes to draw attention to a general tendency in the scholarly literature to perceive the same office differently during the Old Kingdom and the New Kingdom because of the disputable translation of the term *hn₂r* in the middle of the 19th century. This apparent “development” in the meaning of the term is, however, not due to factual changes in ancient Egyptian society and the ancient Egyptian court, but rather to the limited number of sources available that touch upon the organization of the royal family in the New Kingdom. Nevertheless, the spelling did change—from *hn₂r* to *pr-hn₂r*. Since both variants appear in titles, this does not seem to reflect a fundamental change in the institution.92 This also holds true in relation to various questions and issues concerning the state and position of the foreign wives of the king, where the absence of data regarding their lives has often resulted in the emergence of orientalist interpretations of the institution of *hn₂r*, such as the notion that it was a harem.

Finally, the author wishes to point out that this concept does not have enough support in the available sources and was created based on a misconceived view of the Orient. The Orient was often perceived in a very sexualized way during the 19th century, and the harem especially was one of the main topics often discussed—first and foremost by western male authors who did not have access to this institution. Their view of the harem was incorrect and misleading, and when it was taken over as a translation for the word *hn₂r* it was loaded with these biases. The ongoing use of this translation in Egyptology is extremely problematic and other translations (such as “musical performers”) should be widely accepted given that a clear continuation of the role and function of the *hn₂r* institution can be observed from the late Old Kingdom into the New Kingdom and beyond.

92 The change from *hn₂r* to *pr-hn₂r* is a topic that will be addressed in the future.
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