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# Workers in Perpetuity? Notes about the *mrt* Workers of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom Based on the Stela CG 20516

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This paper aims to study a social group of Egyptian people called *mrt* workers, based on their representation in epigraphic, funerary and literary sources dating to the Middle Kingdom.

The stela CG 20516 is especially important for our research since it shows one of the few iconographic representations of these *mrt* workers. This stela is essential since it shows the *mrt* workers performing their tasks and serving their deceased owner in an exceptional way. Such representation suggests a personal link in perpetuity between these workers and their masters.

Therefore, the *mrt* workers' social and legal status is reconsidered by studying whether they were forced to work periodically or were dependent workers in perpetuity.

*¿Trabajadores a perpetuidad? Algunas consideraciones sobre los trabajadores mrt del Reino Medio egipcio a partir de la estela CG 20516*

Este trabajo se propone ahondar en el estudio de un grupo social, los trabajadores *mrt*, durante el Reino Medio egipcio a partir de su representación y mención en fuentes epigráficas, funerarias y literarias.

Específicamente se analiza la estela CG 20516, en la cual se observa la que se considera hasta el momento la única representación iconográfica de estos trabajadores *mrt*. A juicio del autor, la importancia de dicha estela radica no sólo en esta imagen sino también en el hecho de que los presenta prestando servicios y tareas para el difunto propietario de la estela, lo cual induce a pensar en una ligazón personal a perpetuidad por parte de estos trabajadores.

Así, en este trabajo el autor se pregunta sobre la condición social y jurídica de estos sujetos, indagando acerca de si eran trabajadores periódicos obligados a cumplir con ciertas tareas, o bien si se trataba de trabajadores dependientes a perpetuidad.

**Keywords:** Ancient Egypt, Ancient Egyptian society, dependent workers, social status.

**Palabras clave:** Antiguo Egipto, sociedad egipcia, trabajadores dependientes, estatus social.

**This** article is part of a long discussion about the status and the role of the *mrt* people.<sup>1</sup> Based on epigraphic, funerary and literary sources dating to the Middle Kingdom (2055-1650 BC), this paper aims to study a social group of Egyptian people called *mrt* workers.

The term *mrt* appeared in several royal decrees by the end of the Old Kingdom (2686-2181 BC). It defines a group of dependent workers who used to be assigned to certain areas or tasks by the state. However, this term can be clearly found in literary sources, epigraphic records in tombs and private funer-

<sup>1</sup> For the different studies on the *mrt* people, see Goedicke 1967: 212; Helck 1975: 102; Eyre 1987: 35 and 1994: 112; Perepelkin 1986: 164 and 1988: 287; Moreno García 1998: 71-83 and 2008: 116-120; 128-129; 137 and 142-146; Allam 2004: 123-155 and 2010: 41-64; Andrassy 2005: 27-68; Hafemann 1985: 7 and 2009: 157-159 and 177-183; Papazian 2012: 84-100; Römer 2017: 79-93; Di Teodoro 2018: 39-40; 45-46 and 84.

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ary stelae of Egyptian nobles during the Middle Kingdom.

In this article we are particularly interested in the stela CG 20516,<sup>2</sup> which dates to the beginning of the Middle Kingdom.<sup>3</sup> This stela is essential since it represents one of the few iconographic representations of these *mrt* workers that has so far been found in an Egyptian source.

Therefore, these sources will be used to explore the representations of this social group of workers. In addition, the *mrt* workers' social and legal status will be reconsidered by studying whether they were periodical workers forced to accomplish certain tasks or dependent workers in perpetuity during the Middle Kingdom.

### 1 | Defining the *mrt* workers

The Egyptian term  $\overline{\text{m}}\overline{\text{r}}\overline{\text{t}}$  *mrt* is commonly translated as “servants” or “dependent workers” subordinated to certain people or institutions with the aim of performing certain tasks or jobs.<sup>4</sup>

According to Berlev, the origin of this term derives from the verb  $\overline{\text{m}}\overline{\text{r}}$  *mr*, “to love”. As a result, this population group could be considered as the well-beloved. Additionally, this

term could be used to refer not only to a free population, but also to a dependent one, or just to those dependent of a domain.<sup>5</sup>

Taking into account the *mrt* population's identity, Helck supported the idea that the origin of this term derived from the verb  $\overline{\text{m}}\overline{\text{r}}$  *mr*, which means to “tie” or “intertwine”. Accordingly, the *mrt* workers would be agricultural servants bounded to the land.<sup>6</sup>

According to Goedicke, the *mrt* people could be considered tenants, since they were in a dependency relationship to land ownership or to the institutions for which they used to work.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Eyre argues that it is difficult to determine these people's freedom, although he agrees that they could have been tenants since he defines this group of *mrt* people as common peasants forced to work in the lands that used to be donated to officials or institutions.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, Hafemann claims that the term *mrt* could be related to the dependency relation between the Egyptian people and the king and the different social strata according to the hierarchy.<sup>9</sup>

The discussion concerning the meaning of the term *mrt* was summarized in an article by Moreno García. He rejects the translation of *mrt* as servants and prefers the use of the neutral term *mrt* people. Additionally, this author

<sup>2</sup> The stela CG 20516 was discovered by Auguste Mariette in 1872 at the site of Kom es-Sultan, near the city of Abydos. It is a semicircular limestone stela measuring 0.86 m high, 0.55 m wide, which is written and carved in low relief and preserved at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. For hieroglyphic text, see Mariette 1880: 104–105; Lange and Schäfer 1902b: pl. XXXV and 1908: 108–111. A plaster cast of this stela can be found at the Museum of La Plata in Argentina.

<sup>3</sup> Freed 1996: 310–311 includes this stela within the group of stelae with flower motifs and whorls. She designates it under the category of workshop number 4 in her study of stelae workshops of the early Twelfth Dynasty.

<sup>4</sup> *Wb.* II: 106; Faulkner 2009 [1962]: 111; Hannig 2006: 1085.

<sup>5</sup> Berlev 1972: 128.

<sup>6</sup> Helck 1975: 102; *Wb.* II: 105.

<sup>7</sup> Goedicke 1967: 212. He also rejects the slave status of *mrt* people.

<sup>8</sup> Eyre 1994: 112.

<sup>9</sup> Hafemann 1985: 7.



Figure 1. The stela CG 20516. ©Cairo, Egyptian Museum. Photo: Courtesy of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Reproduced by permission of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

argues that the *mrt* people were not subject to permanent slavery. They were simple and free Egyptians who used to be periodically recruited by the state to carry out agricultural tasks.<sup>10</sup>

Andrássy considers that the criteria used to distinguish peasants, tenants and agricultural workers in ancient Egypt did not apply for the Egyptians in relation to the term *mrt*. Thus, people that generally depended on land-owning institutions used to exist under the term *mrt*, and based on the analysis of sources from the Old Kingdom, most of the Egyptian people should have had the social status of *mrt* in the sense of ordinary people.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Papazian claims that the noun *mrt* represented a jurisdictional term applied to a category of Egyptians who were part of the temple, the *pr-šn* or some private estates, and could also refer to a designation for a distinct category of laborers.<sup>12</sup>

All in all, we must not forget the complexity and the different nuances that the study of social dependence implies and the terms that the Egyptians themselves had for it. In fact, the ancient Egyptians used to occupy different positions simultaneously, which makes them stand at the crossroads of various socio-economic situations that remain invisible when too restrictive terms are used as free, serfs or slaves.<sup>13</sup> Since the term *mrt* is a polysemic word, we cannot expect to find a precise connection be-

tween this Egyptian term and other terms such as slave, serf or client, used in different historical contexts and under different socio-economic circumstances.<sup>14</sup> According to Andrássy, the term *mrt* should be defined as a neutral term without any modern category and should thus be translated as *mrt* people.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, it is certain that these *mrt* people were defined as a group of dependent workers, generally associated with agricultural and plowing tasks, and assigned to certain plots of land or tasks by the state. They were recruited from peasant communities or from the lowest social classes of the Egyptian society<sup>16</sup> and assigned to private individuals or state areas such as state territories, storehouses and temple lands. However, they could also be recruited from captives during the New Kingdom (1550-1069 B.C.).<sup>17</sup>

The first references to the *mrt* as a population group can be found in the titles of officials in charge of supervising, controlling or census taking, in several royal decrees and in some autobiographies from the end of the Old Kingdom.

Regarding the use of the word *mrt* in the titles of the Egyptian officials of the Old Kingdom, Bakir has claimed that it can be associated with titles such as *sš mr(y)t*,<sup>18</sup> “scribe of the *mrt*”, or *imy-r iswy mr(y)t*,<sup>19</sup> “overseer of the two departments of the *mrt*”.<sup>20</sup> Moreno García argues that there are also other titles related to



Figure 2. *mrt* workers' representation. Lower register of stela CG 20516. See credits in figure 1.

the supervision and control of the agricultural tasks performed by these people, such as *sš 3ht mrt*,<sup>21</sup> “scribe of the *mrt*'s fields” or *imy-r wpt mrt*,<sup>22</sup> “supervisor of the *mrt*'s missions or tasks”.<sup>23</sup> Although these titles would confirm the existence of a bureaucratic control over them, this fact does not clarify much the social status of these people and their tasks.

On the contrary, the royal decrees from the end of the Old Kingdom do mention their social status and their tasks more clearly. The *Dahshur Decree* describes not only the agricultural work these people had to do in the pyramids cities, but also how certain private individuals—such as royal wives, the king's sons and some followers and high officials of the king's court—could possess them.<sup>24</sup> *Coptos De-*

*cree G* of Pepi II mentions how the *mrt* workers were recruited to perform agricultural tasks for the *pr-šn*, a royal storehouse.<sup>25</sup> *Coptos Decree D* of Pepi II is even more revealing. Here, those *mrt* workers who belonged to a specific royal domain were protected by his Majesty and exempted from doing other tasks or performing statute labour in other places.<sup>26</sup>

Lastly, the *Coptos Decree I* mentions how the king Neferkawhor from the Eighth Dynasty ordered that the *mrt* workers be put under the authority of a vizier called Shemay.<sup>27</sup> This shows how these workers could be assigned to private subjects as if they were servants linked to a place or domain. The *Biographical Inscription of Ibi*<sup>28</sup> and the *Inscription of the nomarch Tefibi*<sup>29</sup> also show the dependent status of the

<sup>10</sup> Moreno García 1998: 81–83 and 2008: 143.

<sup>11</sup> Andrássy 2005: 64.

<sup>12</sup> Papazian 2012: 84 and 92.

<sup>13</sup> Moreno García 2008: 104.

<sup>14</sup> Andrássy 2005: 27 and Moreno García 2008: 142–143.

<sup>15</sup> Andrássy 2005: 28.

<sup>16</sup> Moreno García 1998: 71.

<sup>17</sup> Bakir 1952: 23.

<sup>18</sup> Jones 2000: 853.

<sup>19</sup> Mariette 1889: 125; Jones 2000: 65.

<sup>20</sup> Bakir 1952: 23.

<sup>21</sup> Jones 2000: 835.

<sup>22</sup> Jones 2000: 95.

<sup>23</sup> Moreno García 1998: 73.

<sup>24</sup> Berlin 17500. For the text, see *Urk.* I, 210, 14–16; Strudwick 2005: 103–105.

<sup>25</sup> Cairo JE 41892. For the text, see Goedicke 1967: 128–136; Strudwick 2005: 114–115.

<sup>26</sup> Cairo JE 43052 and New York MMA 14.7.10. For the text, see *Urk.* I, 289–292; Hayes 1946: 7–11; Goedicke 1967: 137–147; Strudwick 2005: 112–113.

<sup>27</sup> Cairo JE 43053. *Urk.* I, 303, 7; Goedicke 1967: 176. For the text, see Goedicke 1967: 172–177; Strudwick 2005: 117–118.

<sup>28</sup> Ibi was an Egyptian servant during the reign of Pepi I. The inscription is written on the eastern wall of tomb n° 8 of Ibi at Deir el Gebrawi. For the text, see *Urk.* I: 142–145; Davies 1902: pl. 23.

<sup>29</sup> Nomarch of the XII Nome during the First Intermediate Period. The main source about his life comes from his biography, inscribed within tomb III at Asyut. For the text, see Brunner 1937: 17–26, and 46–61.

*mrt* workers and their link to private subjects since both inscriptions describe how these workers were under their command in their own territories.

During the Middle Kingdom, most of the records of such workers appear in some tomb inscriptions, funerary stelae of private royal officials and elite members, and funerary and literary texts. This paper is mostly focused on the stela CG 20516 since it shows one of the few iconographic representations of the *mrt* workers.

## 2 | The stela CG 20516 and the representation of the *mrt* workers

There are two important matters regarding the stela CG 20516. Firstly, since it has a double royal dating,<sup>30</sup> this stela is one of the essential documents to support the existence of a royal coregency between the king Amenemhat I and his son Senusret I at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, we can see one of the few representations of a group of *mrt* workers performing their tasks. Therefore, this stela becomes a vital document for the study of the representations and perceptions of the *mrt* workers.

This stela is part of those referred to as votive stelae, which the elite members of the

Middle Kingdom set up at Abydos as part of the feasts of the Osiris Mysteries.<sup>32</sup> The stela CG 20516 belongs to a man without titles or rank called Intef who claims to have worked for the kings Amenemhat I and Senusret I (figure 1).

Here, Intef appears in one of the registers sat next to his wife in front of an offering table full of offerings that are brought by his son, the lector priest Hetep. Underneath, we can observe Intef's sons and daughters. In the last register of the stela, Hetep appears again sat in front of a table full of offerings brought by eleven subjects. Among them, we can distinguish six women and five men who bring offerings such as furniture, vessels, animals and goods. Each of these subjects is identified by a hieroglyphic text. According to the text, among these subjects we can find men and women who were servants such as butlers (*wb3*), maidservants (*wb3t*), servants (*kyt*) and nursemaids (*mn't*). There is also a hieroglyphic text with the legend: "His son, his beloved Hetep. He sees the goods<sup>33</sup> brought to his father by his *mrt*"<sup>34</sup> above the offering table where Hetep is sitting (figure 2).

Regarding this scene, Allam<sup>35</sup> and Moreno García<sup>36</sup> remark that the subjects represented in the lower record of this stela are *mrt* workers. Therefore, this seems to be one of the few

representations of the *mrt* workers in an ancient Egyptian source.

Despite this, there are some issues surrounding this scene that are worth mentioning. Firstly, the combination of an image and text with the names and the tasks performed by the *mrt* workers linked to Intef. In this sense, it is not only surprising their iconographic representation on a stela, but it is also interesting how these workers gained self-identity by being associated with their own names. On one hand, this stela gives these anonymous people, classified only as *mrt* workers, their own self and personal identity since they appear identify which their own names.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, it shows how these workers performed their domestic tasks, such as helping their masters, being butlers, servants and nursemaids as well. Regarding these occupations, the Egyptian term *wb3* is related to servants<sup>38</sup> and domestic servants of the private houses. According to Helck, they must have been part of the royal assistants or the chiefs of the butlers during the Middle Kingdom.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the *kyt* or female servants<sup>40</sup> and the *mn't* or nursemaid<sup>41</sup> were related to the private rooms of the house since they were trustworthy people that used to take care of the owners and their children.

Thus, we can observe that these *mrt* people could be part of the household of certain subjects and have a close relationship with the members of the house because of their roles and occupations as butlers, servants and nursemaids.


A similar scene can be found in the tomb of the Sixth Dynasty nomarch Pepiankh the Middle at Meir.<sup>42</sup> In the third register of its north chamber, there is a scene showing some people bringing food offerings for Pepiankh the Middle, with the following text: "The *mrt* of the estate come with every type of fresh plants and all good things".<sup>43</sup> These participants in the procession, identified collectively as the *mrt* of the estate, were also depicted individually with names and titles related to the court, including "noble of the king" (*sps nswt*), "chamberlain of the king" (*hry-tp nswt*), and "steward" (*imy-r pr*).<sup>44</sup>

Taking into account the representations and the inscriptions on the stela CG 20516 and the tomb of Pepiankh the Middle, it is clear that the *mrt* people did not only perform agricultural tasks as is usually observed in most of the sources dating to the Old and Middle Kingdom. Moreover, these sources also confirm the proposal by Andrassy that *mrt* would have been a collective

<sup>30</sup> The stela has a double dating: the year 30 of Amenemhat I and the year 10 of Senusret I.

<sup>31</sup> Murnane 1977: 242–246; Arnold 1991: 14; 18; 42–42; González Mancebo 2002: 45; Jánosi 2017: 1–7. We can find a different opinion in Delia 1979: 15–28; Obsomer 1995: 45–112, who are against the idea of a coregency.

<sup>32</sup> Due to this popular celebration during the Middle Kingdom, Abydos became a ceremonial funerary center where the Egyptians used to go to dedicate and set up offering chapels, cenotaphs and stelae. The primary aim was to ensure their eternal participation in the annual rites in honor of Osiris. See Schäfer 1904; Chassinat 1966–1968; Bleeker 1967: 69–90; Lavier 1989: 289–295 and 1998: 27–33; Eaton 2006: 75–101; Collier and Manley 2007: 84; 126; Smith 2017: 226–234.

<sup>33</sup> The word  *inw* also means tribute or gift. Faulkner 2009 [1962].

<sup>34</sup>  *s3, f mry, f htp m33, f inw in n it, f n mrt, f*.

<sup>35</sup> Allam 2004: 137.

<sup>36</sup> Moreno García 2008: 137.

<sup>37</sup> Moreno García 2008: 145 claims that there is nothing strange in the fact that the *mrt* people could be individually appointed to positions, professions or activities since they could perform different duties during their service for an institution or a local potentate.



<sup>38</sup> Faulkner 2009 [1962]: 58; *Wb*. I: 292; AEO I: 43\*.

<sup>39</sup> Helck 1975: 187.

<sup>40</sup> Faulkner 2009 [1962]: 50.

<sup>41</sup> Faulkner 2009 [1962]: 108.

<sup>42</sup> Tomb D2 at Meir. He was associated with different titles, such as a Nomarch, Vizier, Superintendent of the Two granaries, Overseer of prophets of Hathor Mistress of Cusae, Overseer of Upper Egypt in the central nomes. See Blackman 1924; Kanawati and Evans 2012.

<sup>43</sup>  *iw(t) mr(w)t nt pr n dt hn' rnpwt nb(t) ht nb(t) nfr(t)*. Blackman 1924: plate IX. As Papazian 2012: 92 observes, the word *hn'* was originated carved  by mistake.

<sup>44</sup> Blackman 1924: plate IX, Andrassy 2005: 56; Papazian 2012: 92.

term used to refer to the female or male staff that served both in an institution or in the household or domain of a high dignitary or official.<sup>45</sup>

Lastly, the representation of the *mrt* people in the lower register of the stela CG 20516 may show their possible link in perpetuity with their owner. As these subjects were represented in a funerary stela bringing offerings for the deceased, we may infer that Intef decided to include them on his stela to keep them working for him in the afterlife. Alternatively, it may also be possible that these people could have played the role of priests who brought offerings for the deceased.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, since the funerary scenes from tombs and stelae tried to represent and perpetuate an ideal image of the deceased's life, the representation of the *mrt* workers would have a double intention. On the one hand, by representing Intef as a person who included servants, it tried to raise hierarchically Intef and his family's social status hierarchically. On the other hand, the stela tried to perpetuate his relationships with his dependent workers in the afterlife.

Taking everything into account, the stela CG 20516 is an essential and revealing source to address the issue of the *mrt* workers in the Middle Kingdom since it is one of the few sources that represents them and their tasks and grants them self-identity by using their proper names. Furthermore, it introduces the matter of the *mrt* workers' perpetuity.

### 3 | *mrt* workers in perpetuity?

In order to address the issue of the possible perpetuity between the tasks of the *mrt* workers and their masters, it is necessary to compare the evidence concerning the existence of this group in other sources of this period and observe their social relationships. Apart from the stela CG 20516, there are other sources such as private stelae and literary and funerary sources that reveal the existence of a permanent dependency between these workers and their masters. Such permanence can be observed when these workers were bequeathed as if they were goods, or when their dependent bonds with their masters were perpetuated in the afterlife.

Many sources dating to the end of the Old Kingdom mention the state assignment of *mrt* workers to private and public domains to perform agricultural tasks. However, there is no mention of their independence. Such state assignments of these workers do not seem to be recorded in the sources of the Middle Kingdom. Here, these workers seem to have been acquired only by inheritance.

In this respect, the stela of Samentuser,<sup>47</sup> which dates to the Eleventh Dynasty,<sup>48</sup> makes reference to different wills that describe the acquisition of the *mrt* workers by inheritance. Samentuser, who was the mayor of a land belonging to the god Montu, claims to have controlled his *mrt* workers when he was alive and shows how he bequeathed them to his son in his will.<sup>49</sup> The text in the stela says: "I was a wise man in rul-

ing my *mrt* until the day will come when I shall be blessed. I handed this on to my son in my will".<sup>50</sup>

Although this text is somewhat ambiguous, since Samentuser claims that he left this to his son as inheritance (*rdi n.i st n s3. i m imyt-pr*), and the pronoun (*st*) could refer to both the *mrt* people and the goods that he previously mentioned in a generic way, it seems clear that we have a source in which the *mrt* people were bequeathed in a will along with other goods. This is a revealing source, which would confirm that some *mrt* workers could also be bequeathed or gained through inheritance. It may also imply that their social status was quite close to slavery<sup>51</sup> and that they would serve their masters in perpetuity. Moreover, another stela dating to the Eleventh Dynasty also confirms the bequest of dependents in legacy.<sup>52</sup> The text says: "There were people of (my) father Montuhotep as descendants of the house(hold), from his father's possession and from his mother's possession; (and) there were likewise my people from my father's possession, from my mother's possession; (and) as my own possessions, which I had acquired by my (own) arm."<sup>53</sup> According to Franke, Montuhotep gave all his possessions and his dependent<sup>54</sup> people to his son

Intef through an inventory transfer document. Additionally, these dependents were inherited from Intef's parents since the servants or dependent people were once part of the household over the course of several generations.<sup>55</sup>

After comparing the representation found in the stela CG 20516, in which the *mrt* people of Intef seem to be working for his son Hetep, with the information of the stelae of Samentuser and Intef, we could also suggest that these workers seem to have been transferred by inheritance. This being the case, there would be a clear dependency relationship between these workers and their masters that transcends their deaths.

Although other stelae from the Middle Kingdom mention the existence of *mrt* workers' personal dependency relationships, they are not clear about their final destination. This is the case of the stela CG 20499<sup>56</sup> in which a *w<sup>c</sup>b* priest called Ak-Hor is referred as the master of the *mrt* workers.<sup>57</sup> In a fragmented inscription of the stela CG 20503,<sup>58</sup> there appears a man who claims to be the shepherd of his *mrt* workers. That is to say, a good patron and protector of his dependent workers.<sup>59</sup> Finally, the stela CG 20541,<sup>60</sup> which belongs to


45 Andrassy 2005: 62.

46 Andrassy 2005: 53.

47 Florence Stela 6365. Varille 1934: 554-555; Bosticco 1959: 24-25.


48 A different date for the stela is proposed by Fischer 1972: 69-70 who dates it to the beginning of the Twelfth Dynasty.

49 Varille 1934: 554-555; Bakir 1952: 22; Allam 2004: 130-131.

50  *ink spd hr hrp mrt.fr iw hrw nfr n.i im. frdi n.i st n s3. i m imyt-pr*. Varille 1934: 554-555.

51 Bakir 1952: 22-23.

52 Stela BM EA 1628. See Franke 2007: 149-174.

53  *iw wn rmt nt.it i mntw-htp m msw n pr m ht it.f m ht mwt.f iw wn rmt. i m mitt m ht it.i m ht mwt.i m ht ds.i irt n (.i) m gb3.i*. Franke 2007: 150-152.

54 The term that appears on the stela to refer to those dependents is *rmt*, but Franke 2007: 160, note 29 claims that those people could be *mrt* workers.

55 Franke 2007: 160.

56 For the text, see Lange and Schäfer 1908: 90-91.

57 Lange and Schäfer 1908: 90.

58 For the text, see Lange and Schäfer 1908: 93-94.

59 Loprieno 2012: 3.

60 For the text, see Lange and Schäfer 1902b: pl. XXXIX, and 1908: 161-162.

an official called Amenemhat, establishes the *mrt* workers' existence in the lands of the temple of Osiris at Abydos.<sup>61</sup> Thus, all these stela show the existence of personal dependency relationships, although they are not precise regarding the perpetuity of such social bond.

The sources from the religious and funerary literature that arise during the Middle Kingdom, known as the *Coffin Texts*, are even more revealing. Here, the *mrt* workers have a personal dependency relationship that seems to transcend and be perpetuated in the afterlife. For instance, in the Spell 131,<sup>62</sup> there is a decree where the god Geb gives the deceased his protection and the salvation of his family, his children, his brethren, his father, his mother and all his *mrt* workers, servants and dependents. Consequently, according to this spell, the *mrt* workers' final destination was linked to the deceased and his family. There are two issues to consider regarding the fact that the *mrt* workers' final destination was apparently the same as the one of the deceased and his family. Firstly, the *mrt* workers, together with the servants, were considered as part of the household. Secondly, those *mrt* workers following the final destination of the deceased and his family would work in perpetuity for them in a dependency relationship that would transcend earthly life and be perpetuated in the afterlife. Besides, Spell 146<sup>63</sup> reveals how the deceased goes down into the sky and goes down into the earth looking for his family, his par-

ents, his friends, his servants and *mrt* workers, who worked for him on earth. The same idea of a dependency link in perpetuity that would last even in the afterlife also seems to appear here. Lastly, Spell 214<sup>64</sup> shows how the deceased's *mrt* workers are brought for him and his family.

According to Allam, in these funerary texts the *mrt* workers appear as being dependent to the deceased and his fate in the afterlife.<sup>65</sup> Even though it is true that these sources belong to funerary literature, where instead of expressing reality they tried to express an intention or a religious desire, it is the case that such texts would only illustrate the masters' vision of their *mrt* workers. Moreover, there seems to be a correlation between such funerary texts and the stela CG 20516 since the first describes the *mrt* workers following the deceased's fate and the second represents them graphically to perpetuate their link with the deceased and his family for all eternity.

The *mrt* workers' immutable social status is also mentioned in literary texts. *The Admonitions of Ipuwer*,<sup>66</sup> for instance, describe a social revolution where the social status of most people is disrupted. There are many representations considered chaotic for an ideal and organizes society. For instance, the release of the dependent subjects and their consequent transformation into their own masters.<sup>67</sup> According to this literary text, the *mrt* workers are the only subjects that keep their depen-

61 Franke 1998: 35.

62 CT II, 151d–152b. de Buck 1938; Faulkner 1973: 113–114; Carrier 2004: 308–309.

63 CT II, 181c–184b. de Buck 1938; Faulkner 1973: 125; Carrier 2004: 342–342.

64 CT III, 174e. de Buck 1947; Faulkner 1973: 171; Carrier 2004: 516–517.

65 Allam 2004: 125.

66 The text is preserved on the recto of the Papyrus Leiden I 344. For further reference about the literary text, see Gardiner 1909, Enmarch 2008; Rosell 2015.

67 Rosell 2015: 107.

dent status<sup>68</sup> and they are never released from their tasks. *The Admonitions of Ipuwer* describe a social revolution in a chaotic world. However, even here it is impossible to imagine the release of the *mrt* workers from their dependency and state obligation.<sup>69</sup> Such descriptions reinforce the idea of the *mrt* workers' dependency in perpetuity.

While the sources analyzed so far may confirm the possible perpetuity between the *mrt* workers and their masters, there appears to be some reference to their possible release as well. This reference can be found in the tomb of the nomarch Khnumhotep II.<sup>70</sup> In the main inscription in his tomb, Khnumhotep II describes how he promoted his officers from his *mrt* workers.<sup>71</sup> This inscription shows how these subjects could be socially promoted and released from their tasks after being granted the favor of their masters.

All in all, although there is clear evidence that these *mrt* workers were dependent on private subjects and state institutions, the details concerning their social status is even more complex.

Taking into consideration the ways these subjects were acquired by inheritance, the compulsory nature of their work and their apparently permanent relationship with land of their owners, Bakir stated that it would have

been more appropriate to classify this population as slaves assigned to agricultural tasks.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, Allam claims that the servile status of these subjects would be rather permanent than temporal since there is no clear evidence that shows or decrees their freedom.<sup>73</sup> However, he did not consider the *mrt* workers to be slaves but rather dependent workers or servants in perpetuity.

On the other hand, Moreno García claims that although the term *mrt* refers to those Egyptian workers forced by the state to perform certain agricultural tasks periodically and compulsively, they should not be considered as true servants or slaves since they did not perform such tasks permanently.<sup>74</sup> However, the evidence found here suggests that the status of this population would be rather permanent than temporal. Thus, as Papazian claims, once endowed, these *mrt* people remained attached to their holding<sup>75</sup> and, in some cases, the permanence of the affiliation of these people with an estate could result into the development of bonds of familiarity between them and their masters that could persist even in the afterlife.<sup>76</sup>

In conclusion, in our view, these *mrt* people were legally free servants or dependent workers designated by the king to private individuals or to some state areas to perform tasks in

68 *Adm.* 9,5. Rosell 2015: 26 and 107.

69 Rosell 2015: 107.

70 Khnumhotep II was a nomarch of Oryx during the reign of Senusret II. His tomb (number 3) is at Beni Hasan. See Kanawati and Mourad 2014: 31–36, plates 7–13 and 110–114.

71 Newberry 1893: 57; pl. XXV.

72 Bakir 1952: 23.

73 Allam 2004: 124.

74 Moreno García 1998: 71; 81–82.

75 Papazian 2012: 94 affirms that in some circumstances they could be transferred to an alternative jurisdiction while maintaining their relationship with the original estate.

76 Papazian 2012: 94.

order to comply with the state requirements. Additionally, as has been previously analyzed in the aforementioned sources, when these workers worked for private individuals, they were usually part of the household and apparently linked to their owners in perpetuity.

Thus, the representations of the *mrt* workers found in the stela CG 20516, as well as in the passages of the *Coffin Texts*, would confirm the perpetuity of these workers' dependency relationship. Although there are sources that show that they could be passed on through inheritance, this perpetuity would not necessarily transform them into slaves.

Even though the inscription of Khnumhotep II shows how the nomarch had promoted his officials from his *mrt* workers, there is no clear evidence which supports that they were released from their tasks or whether the nomarch had changed such tasks. Taking the contrasted evidence into account, we support the idea of the *mrt* workers' dependency in perpetuity.

### Final considerations

In this paper we have tried to reconsider the roles of the *mrt* people during the Egyptian Middle Kingdom. The term *mrt* is regarded as a generic term which is usually used to refer to a group of working people without any details of their social and legal status. In order to understand and conceptualize this group of workers, specifically their social status, we have analyzed and compared different sources from this period: tombs, stelae, literary and funerary texts. In this sense, the stela CG20516 plays an essential role since it offers one of the few iconographic representations of the *mrt* workers. Here, they are identified by their names, performing their tasks and bringing offerings to the deceased owner of the stela. In addition, in such stela the *mrt* workers

seem to be linked to the deceased Intef, which may show a dependency bond in perpetuity.

Taking this stela and other sources of the period into account, we have discussed the social and legal status of the *mrt* population and studied whether they fulfilled periodic working obligations or if they were dependent workers in perpetuity. Although they had to comply with the state requirements, the relationship between the *mrt* workers and their obligations with some household became perpetual and it could last for all eternity, even in the afterlife. All in all, in those cases, these individuals would become servants in a perpetual dependency working relation under the state or the Egyptian elite command.

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