

## **Music Bands in the Old Kingdom**

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### **Abstract**

The Egyptians loved music and it apparently played an important part in their lives, this is demonstrated on the walls of tombs and temples as early as the Old Kingdom whether in private banquets, or in religious contexts, under the offering table of the deceased. Egyptian- musical instruments were well developed and varied. The music scenes of the Old Kingdom included string instruments like different types of harps, percussion instruments like clappers and rattles, wind instruments like flutes, clarinets, double pipes. Music-bands appear on walls as early as the 5th dynasty, some of which were male or female bands or even mixed bands, the number of musicians differed as well. This paper is concerned with the formation of music bands in the Old Kingdom in relation to participants gender and number, also musical instruments used, their designation in the ancient Egyptian language. The study ends with a main conclusion.

### **Introduction**

Tomb carvings of Egyptian banquets show musical ensembles performing for elegantly dressed men and women as they dined, while such a carving conveys a wish for food and entertainment in the next world, also it is reasonable to assume that the general structure of a banquet with music reflects the banquets Egyptians knew on earth. A close examination of the musicians themselves in tomb and temple scenes can illuminate gender and class issues. The association of women and men with particular instruments in ensembles hints at Egyptian gender relations. Considering the large number of representation of musicians, very few can be identified. Some ensembles are shown with the players' names written next to them, and in these cases, it must be assumed that they represent groups which actually existed and where the participants remain anonymous, it is much more likely to be a conventional 'ideal scene (Manniche, 1991, p. 120). Among the names of musicians known are Hekenu the harpist, Khufu-ankh overseer of the flautists, Sneferu-nefer I and II who were overseers of the palace cantors, Nefer and Kahay who were directors of cantors, Ipi the palace flautist, Merneret Nesut the female harpist and palace cantor, Neferesris who was overseer of the palace musical ensemble and Senankhwer who was flautist of the royal retinue and others (Arroyo, 2003, pp. 397-398).

#### **This paper aims at:**

- Investigating music- bands in scenes of the Old Kingdom
- Analyzing music-bands formation in the Old Kingdom in regards to number and gender of musicians and how musicians are organized in scenes
- Identifying the music instruments used by musicians and their designation in the ancient Egyptian language.

Researcher gathered around 50 music- scenes from the Old Kingdom but chose 16 of the most distinguished ones to display in the following part. The scenes were chosen based on number of musicians (2 or more) to be categorized as a music-band. The term “chironomist” used in the below scenes represents the singer or the person who uses his hand to guide the musician. His hand sign demonstrates a variety of playing unison, chord and polyphony (Gadalla, 2016, p.6).

**Examples of Music Bands in the Old Kingdom: (Kinney, 2008)**

**Scene 1 (fig.1):**



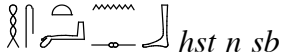

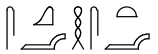

In the Outer hall of the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnum hotep at Saqqara, Dynasty V , is a scene( see below fig.1, PM III 2 , p.643), From the left, is a group of three male- musicians: (a double flute) player, a chironomist and a male flautist, above the left flautist reads:  *sb(3) mmt* ( WB II , 59) “to play the double flute”, and above the second flautist  *sb3 m3t* ( WB II , 6)” to play the flute”. The second group consists also of three, a male flautist and two chironomists above the two chironomists reads:  *hst n sb* (WB III, 165): “to sing with wind-instrument”. The third group consists of two male harpists, seated one after the other facing the same direction. They are both playing arched-harps probably of nine or ten strings, between them reads  *skr bnt*, “striking the harp” ( Faulkner,1970, p.177), seated in front of the two male harpists are three chironomists with three different positions of the hands, between the first from the left and the harpist reads  *hst (n) skr* “singing the harp”. The last figure is the music master, behind him reads  *sb3* (WB IV, 82-83) which means master. (Manniche, 1991, pp. 25-30).



Fig.1: A banquet scene from the Mastaba of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep at Saqqara (Manniche, 1991, p. 27).

**Scene 2 (fig.2):**




A music scene from the tomb of Nenkehtikai at Saqqara, Dynasty V (PM, III<sup>2</sup>, p. 580; Sourouzian, & Saleh, 1987. n. 61). The scene is part of a banquet, in the upper part, are three male musician groups, a harpist, a flautist, and a musician with double clarinet and four chironomists. (two in front of the harpist, one in front of the flautist, one in front of the musician with double clarinet), behind the harpist the caption reads  *skr n bnt*: playing the harp. Above the two chironomists and the harpist the text reads  *hst n bnt*: singing to the harp. Above the double flute player, the text reads  *mnt*. Above the chironomist and flautist *hs sb* singing to the flute (Faulkner,1970., p. 219 *sb3* = surveying instrument).



fig.2: A music scene from the tomb of Nenkheftikai at Saqqara  
(Maspero, 1907, fig. 131).

**Scene 3 (fig.3):**

On the west-wall of the chapel of the mastaba of Neferirtenef at Saqqara dating from Dynasty V (PM. III<sup>2</sup>, p. 584, Now in Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire, Brussels E. 2465; Arroyo, 2003, p. 299), is a group of male musicians, starting from left to right is a chironomist, above him is the word "hst" for singer, sitting facing him is a male flautist playing a long flute, behind him is seated a male-harpist playing a seven-string harp which is drawn in profile but the sound box is shown from the front, above the harpist is the word "bnt" for harp.

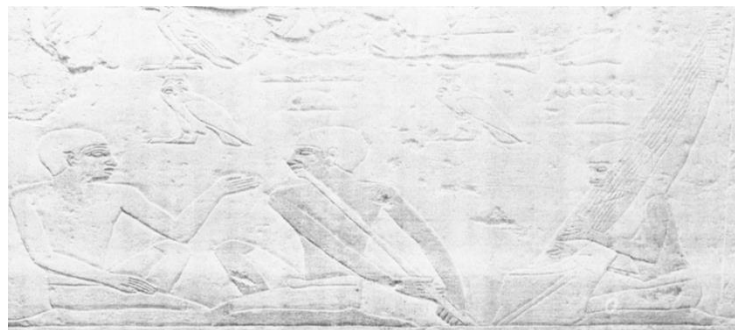

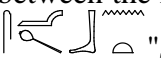


Fig.3: Music scene from the mastaba of Neferirtenef at Saqqara.  
(Arroyo, 2003, photo. 28).

**Scene 4 (fig.4):**

A relief from the mastaba of Kaemrehy n.79 at Saqqara dating from Dynasty V ( PM III<sup>2</sup>, p. 486; Now in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek in Copenhagen). The scene is immediately below the deceased, who is sitting at an offering table, it shows three groups of male musicians, the first group from the left is a male flautist, above him is  sb3 for flute, seated next to him in the same direction is a chironomist whose right elbow rests on his left knee while his left arm is down touching the ground. Above him is Hst, seated in front of him is a male harpist holding his instrument against his left shoulder and his head appears between the neck of the harp and the string plane. The harp has six strings above him reads  "skr bnt" striking the







harp. The second group from the left consists of a male flautist, above him is   "sb3" for flute, seated facing him is a chironomist   "hst". The third group is a male harpist playing a similar harp in shape and size to that of the first group, above him is   "skr bnt" and seated in front of him is a chironomist (Arroyo, 2003, pp. 290-291).



Fig. 4: Music scene from the mastaba of Kaemrehy at Saqqara

(Arroyo,2003., p. 290, photo. 20).

**Scene 5 (fig.5):**

On the chapel of the mastaba of Akhouhotep at Saqqara, Dynasty V (PM, III<sup>2</sup>, p. 636). In the upper register we can see two groups of male musicians, from the left a male-harpist, playing an arched-shovel sharp harp seated in front of him is a chironomist, a male flautist and another chironomist we can recognize the word Hst for singer- "bnt" for harp



Fig.5: Music scene from the mastaba of Akhout-hotep

(Wreszinski, 1936. 5 A)

**Scene 6 (fig.6):**

On the west wall of the funeral chapel of the mastaba of Nikauhor at Saqqara dating from Dynasty V (Now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (PM, III<sup>2</sup>, p. 498; Arroyo, 2003, p. 307, Gadalla, 2017, p.21). In the upper register are three male musician groups, from the left the first group consists of a chironomist seated in front of him is a male harpist, his




instrument resting against his left shoulder, the neck is unusually decorated with three dark vertical lines, representing the four stems which form a bundle of papyrus, above the chironomist and the harpist the text reads  "hst bnt skr mt" singing and playing with the harp. The second group from the left is a chironomist sketching a circle with his right hand, seated in front of him is a flautist, above them reads  "hst sb3 m3t" singing (to) the flute player. The third group consists of a chironomist, seated in front of him is a clarinetist (it is not possible to distinguish the two tubes), above them reads  hst sb3 m mmt singer, playing with the clarinet or double flute player (Arroyo, 2003, p. 307).



fig.6: Music scene from the mastaba of Nikauhor

(Arroyo,2003, p. 307, illust. 15).

**Scene 7 (fig.7):**



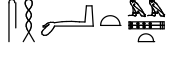
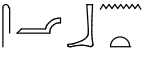


From the mastaba of Iymery at Giza, Dynasty V (PM III<sup>1</sup>, p. 172). The deceased is seated behind an offering table, underneath him in the lower register are male musicians. Two harpists, two flutists and four chironomists. The text above the harpists reads  skr m bnt: Playing with the harp, and in front of the flautist reads  hst sb3 singing (to) wind instrument,  hst mmt: singing (to) the double clarinet. Notice that the two chironomists in front of the harpists are almost having the same position, and the two others in front of the flutists are having a different position.



Fig.7: Music scene from the mastaba of Iymery

(Wilknison, 1878, p. 233).

**Scene 8 (fig.8):**

In the second corridor above the door way of the tomb of Ty at Saqqara Dynasty V (PM, III<sup>2</sup>, p. 468).The musicians are divided into two groups, two male harpists facing one another and a chironomist, between them  *skr bnt* : striking the harp and a male flautist and two male chironomists. The one in front of the male flautist, snaps his fingers as if to keep a rhythm (Maspero, 1895. p. 279), above the chironomists the word  *hst* used for singer and above the flutist is the word  (*s*)*b* for wind instrument.

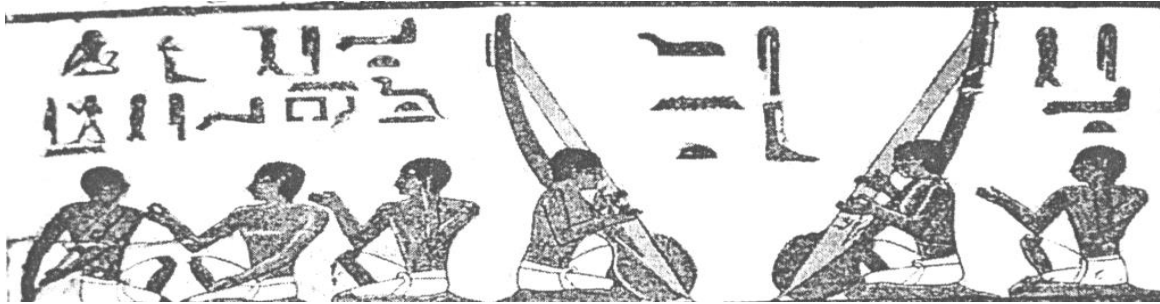


Fig.8: Music scene from the mastaba of Ty

(Hickmann, 1951 fig. 10. p. 243).

**Scene 9 (fig.9) :**

Serdab wall of the tomb of Nefer and Ka-Hay at Saqqara, dating from the Middle to late Dynasty V (PM III<sup>2</sup>, p. 640). The lowest register is divided into two levels, presenting on the upper line two singers and two flautists seated in pairs. The two singers, both looking to the right, show almost the same pose: their left arm bent and extended in front of them and their right hand raised to the ear as if to gauge the sound. The flautists seated opposite the first singer plays a long flute (*m3 t*), pointing it downwards to the left, touching the upper end with his mouth. The flautist facing the second singer plays the so-called *mmt*, a double flute. He holds the instrument in a horizontal position playing both pipes. The lowest register, shows two harpists squatting on the ground with their instruments, both instruments are arched shovel shape (*bnt*). Both have the same attitudes but strike different chords (Moussa, &Altenmüller,1971, p. 32).

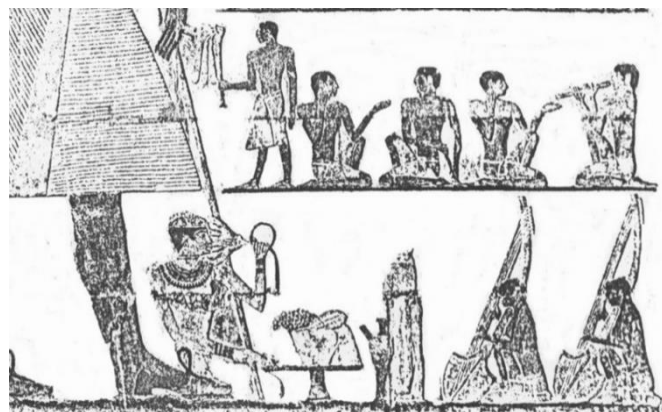


Fig.9: Musicians from the tomb of Nefer and Kahay

(Moussa &Altenmuller, 1971, pl.26)

**Scene 10 (fig.10) :**

South-wall of the tomb of Nekhtka (PM, III<sup>1</sup>, p. 240) at Giza, middle of Dynasty V or later. The scene shows the deceased and his wife seated before offerings and offering bringers, in the lower register, two groups of musicians: two harpists facing each other and a singer facing west, in between them behind this scene is a flute player and another member of the chorus face each other (Hassan, 1933, p. 30). The two arched harps are quite big in size which is characteristic of the Dynasty V.



Fig.10: Musicians from the tomb of Nekhtka

(Hassan, 1933. p. 29).

**Scene 11 (fig.11):**

South wall of the chapel of the mastaba of Sekhemka at Giza end of Dynasty V (Arroyo, 2003, p. 282). In register VI, below the deceased, it is divided into two sub-registers, in the upper one to the left is a male musician playing a clarinet held parallel to the ground, seated in front of him is a chironomist with the traditional one hand covering the ear and the other arm bent in front of him, seated behind him in the opposite direction is a male flautist. In the register below are two groups of male musicians, to the left a flautist facing a chironomist, to the right a harpist playing on a large arched-harp (probably with seven strings) facing a chironomist (Arroyo,2003,, pp. 282-283).The harpist is smaller in size than the other-musicians but not his instrument which is shown with the resonator in profile and with a large curved neck.



Fig.11: Musicians from the mastaba of Sekhemka.

(Arroyo, 2003, p. 283, illust 11).

**Scene 12(fig.12):**

From the mastaba of In-snefru-Ishtef at Dahchour dating from Dynasty V or VI (PM, III<sup>2</sup>, p. 891. Now in the Egyptian Museum CG 1778). The scene is a part of a banquet, in the lower register, there are two female harpists, seated in the same direction a singer and a male flutist.


Playing a long flute ahead of him is  sb m(3)t flute player. The hair (or wig) of the two harpists pulled back in one lock at the back is not common in this period and is shown in later period (Middle-Kingdom)



Fig. 12: Musicians from the mastaba of snefru in Ishtef

(Wreszinski, Atlas I. pl 414).

**Scene 13 ( fig.13):**

On the west wall to the south of the false-door of the mastaba of Nuneter at Giza, Dynasty VI (PM, III<sup>1</sup>, p. 217; Arroyo, 2003, p. 361). In the middle of the scene are four female musicians, each putting her weight on the left leg and holding a fork shaped sistra in her right hand, three of them are also holding what appear to be a serpent form clappers, or a pair of normal clappers in their left hands, the four musicians have the same costume and hairstyle, the last figure in this group is a female dwarf, her hair decorated with a garland of lotus flowers and holding a small sistrum in her right hand as she dance (Arroyo, 2003,p. 361). The type of forked sistrum is rarely represented unlike the arched sistrum, Male musicians are represented here and not female as usual (sistrum was usually held by women)



Fig 13 :Musicians from the mastaba of Nuneter.

(Arroyo, 2003,p. 361 illust. 12).





**Scene 16 (fig.16):**

Left of the inner wall of the tomb of Ihy (PM. III<sup>1</sup>; p. 291) n. 186 Khokha, **Dynasty VI or first intermediate period**. Ihy is seated on a chair before a table piled with offerings, accompanied by his dog and three of his attendants and in front of him are female musicians squatting while playing their navi-form harps (New berry, pp. 97-98). The scene is important because of number of players of harp which is usually not exceeding two.



Fig.16: Female harpists from the tomb of Ihy at Khokha

(Vandier, 1964. p. 418).

**Analysis:**

In the majority of the music-bands in the Old Kingdom, the most frequent musical instruments are the harps and the flutes where both instruments are more related to male musicians.

**Examples of Music band of two male musicians:**

(Arrangement from left to right)

1. a harpist – singer
2. Flautist – a singer
3. a double clarinet- player a singer
4. two harpists.

1-2 as in the mastaba of Nikauhor (fig.6), at Saqqara, Mastaba of Iymery at Giza (fig.7).

Example of 4 in the tomb of Nefer and Kahay at Saqqara (fig.9)

**Examples of Music bands of three male musicians:**

(arrangement from left to right)

1. Two harpists, a singer as in the mastaba of Ty at Saqqara (fig.8), and the mastaba of Nekhtka at Giza (fig.10).
2. A Flautist, two singers as in mastaba of Ty at Saqqara, in the mastaba of Niankh-khnum and khnumhotep at Saqqara. (fig.1)

**Examples of music bands of three musicians or more:**

1. Three female harpists as in the tomb of Ihy no 186 at khokha (fig.16).
2. Two-male harpists and three singers as in the mastaba of Niankhnum and khnumhotep at Saqqara (fig.1).

3. A female harpist, a male singer, a female harpist and a male flautist as in the mastaba of In-Snefru-Ishtef at Dahshur (**fig.12**).
4. Five male musicians (the fifth is a dwarf) with forked sistrum in the tomb of Nuneter at Giza (**fig.13**).
5. Seven-male harpists in the tomb of Ibi in Deir el Gebrawi from Dynasty VI (**fig.14**)

The common harps in the Old Kingdom were the arched naviform and the shovel types (**Hickman, 1953**).

***The player of the harp in the Old Kingdom is shown:***

1- In pairs either:







- a) seated directly one after the other as in the tomb of Niankh-Khnum and Khnumhotep at Saqqara Dynasty V (**fig.1**), the tomb of Nefer and Ka-Hay at Saqqara (**fig.9**).
- b) seated in the same direction with a singer between them as in the tomb of Nekhtka at Giza Dynasty V (**fig.10**).
- c) facing one another directly as in the tomb of Ty at Saqqara Dynasty V(**fig.8**).
- d) Facing one another, a singer between them as in the mastaba of Snofru jen ashtef at Dahshour Dynasty IV (**fig.12**), and the tomb of Nekhtka at Giza, Dynasty V (**fig.10**).

2- shown alone as in tomb of Akhouthotep (**fig.5**).


















3- More than two harpists as in:

- a) The tomb of Ahy at Thebes which has three female harpists seated one after the other Dynasty VI (**fig.16**).
- b) The seven harps in the tomb of Iby in Deir el-Gebrawi from Dynasty VI (**fig.13**).

***Designation of the harp in the ancient Egyptian language (Hickman, 1955)***

1. The harp was called: *bnt* , , *b(n)t* , (*b*) *nt* , *bint* , *bnwt* 

2. playing of the harp or striking the harp "*sqr bnt*" either:

 ,  ,  , *sqr* (*b*)*nt* , *skr bint* , or playing with the harp *skr m bnt*   ,   , *skr m b(n)t*   



3. singer accompanying the harp or making chironomic signs to a melody signification for the harp   *hst n bnt* meaning singing to the harp.





Fig.17, Music master from tomb of Niankhkhnum & Khnumhotep (from fig.1)

### *The Forked sistrum*

This type is rarely represented as in the mastaba of Nuneter at Giza dating from Dynasty VI (**fig.13**), representing a group of musicians holding forked sistrum and the interesting thing is that they are male and not female musicians as usual with the sistrum.

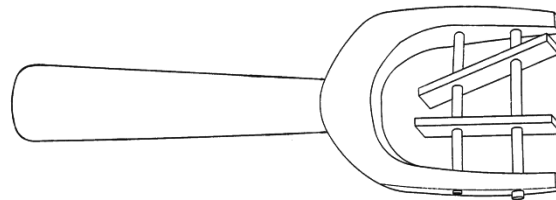


Fig.18: Example of forked sistrum

(Arroyo, 2003, illust.18)

### **Conclusion:**

- Male music-bands were more common than female bands in the Old Kingdom.
- The biggest number of musicians in one register is in the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep at Saqqara which contains a total of twelve musicians (including the standing figure of the music-master) since it is not sure they are playing together it is considered several bands, otherwise it would be the biggest band in the old kingdom.
- The scene of the tomb of Ibi in Deir el Gebrawi is considered the biggest single group of musicians in the Old Kingdom.
- The most common musical instruments in the Old Kingdom scenes are the harp and the flute.
- The “chironomist” or singer is an important member in music scenes of the Old Kingdom.
- There were different types of harps and flutes in Ancient Egypt, but in the Old Kingdom what was common was the flute (short / long) and Parallel double pipes. (or clarinet) (short / long argahul). The common harps in the Old Kingdom were the arched naviform and the shovel types.
- There were different terms used in the ancient Egyptian language designating the flute, the harp and terms related: *mwh*, *m3t*, *mmt* for the flute, and *bnt*, *bint*, and *bnwt* for the harp, also, *sb3* for the playing of the flute and *skr* for the harp.

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