

Beyond the interpreter hypothesis

Multifunctional frontier agents in Ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom

Christian Olalla-Soler

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

This article revisits the commonly held assumption in the historiography of interpreting that interpreters existed as a professional category in Ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom. Focusing on individuals designated by titles compounded with $\overline{\text{A}}\text{I}^{\text{C}}(w)$, this article reassesses the fragmentary textual and iconographic evidence often cited in support of this claim. The author argues that these individuals should not be understood as having been interpreters in the modern professional sense, but rather as multifunctional agents of frontier mediation. Their roles — which ranged from linguistic and cross-cultural negotiation to administrative coordination, military supervision and the management of mobility and resources in liminal zones — reflect flexible strategies of border management shaped by circumstance rather than a stable occupational profile. By re-examining the available sources through the lens of function rather than profession and highlighting the anachronistic projections, the tendency to retroactively professionalize the past is challenged. The author proposes instead that the $\overline{\text{A}}\text{I}^{\text{C}}(w)$ titles designate the adaptable mediators embedded in Ancient Egypt's intercultural peripheries and offers a historically grounded model of premodern mediation that invites further dialogue between Egyptology and Translation and Interpreting Studies.

Keywords: history of interpreting, Ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom, $\overline{\text{A}}\text{I}^{\text{C}}(w)$, interlinguistic mediation, frontier governance

1. Introduction

Translation and Interpreting Studies, as an applied discipline, responds to a core societal need: communication across languages and cultures. Its legitimacy is tied to its capacity to solve real-world challenges (Muñoz & Olalla-Soler 2021:195). Given its close links to the translation and interpreting professions, establishing

scholarly status often involves foregrounding the historical continuity and social relevance of translators and interpreters.

One influential line of argument stresses the antiquity of interpreting. Some scholars have, regrettably, referred to it as the “second oldest profession” (Stähle 2009). A key moment was the mid-20th-century rediscovery, by Hermann (1956) and later by Kurz (1985), of Gardiner’s (1915) claim that interpreters or dragomans existed in Egypt’s Old Kingdom (Fourth–Eighth Dynasties; ca. 2543–2118).¹ Gardiner argued that the title $\overline{\text{𓂏}}$ $i^3(w)$,² attested to since Sahure (Fifth Dynasty; ca. 2428–2416), designated such individuals, providing a potential *terminus ante quem*³ for the profession.

By the time Kurz published her paper, Gardiner’s hypothesis had already been challenged by Egyptologists, most notably by Goedicke (1960, 1966); but these criticisms were largely absent from Interpreting Studies accounts. Even though neither Hermann nor Kurz was an Egyptologist, their endorsement of Gardiner’s hypothesis anchored the profession’s origins in the Old Kingdom (Delisle & Woodsworth 2012; Guo 2020; Lung 2009; Pym 1998; Ruiz Rosendo & Persaud 2016). Much later, Falbo (2016) brought Goedicke’s objections into the Interpreting Studies debate, to the best of our knowledge for the first time explicitly foregrounding an Egyptological hypothesis that challenged Gardiner’s understanding of $i^3(w)$ as ‘interpreter’ and instead linked the title to foreigners who spoke another language. However, like Kurz, she did not engage with the wider Egyptological literature that had refined or contested Goedicke’s proposal. This disciplinary disconnection motivated the present article: to bridge Interpreting Studies and Egyptology by reassessing whether a professional class of interpreters indeed existed in the Old Kingdom.

A second motivation arose in Egyptology itself: there is no consensus on the nature or functions of holders of titles compounded with $i^3(w)$. Unlike clear base titles such as $\overline{\text{𓂏}}$ $sh3$ (‘scribe’) or $\overline{\text{𓂏}}$ $hmwty$ (‘craftsman’), $i^3(w)$ seldom appears autonomously (mostly in peripheral contexts such as the Egyptian Eastern Desert) and occurs instead chiefly in genitival composites with hierarchical determiners such as $\overline{\text{𓂏}}$ hrp $i^3(w)w$ (‘director of the $i^3(w)w$ ’), $\overline{\text{𓂏}}$ $imy-r3$ $i^3(w)w$ (‘overseer’), $\overline{\text{𓂏}}$ shd $i^3(w)w$ (‘inspector’), $\overline{\text{𓂏}}$ $imy-ht$ $i^3(w)w$

1. The dates (all of them BCE) cited in this article follow Hornung, Krauss and Warburton (2006). See Appendix 1 for a complete chronology of Ancient Egypt’s Old Kingdom.

2. This study adopted the transliteration used by Bell (1976) because it is based on the most comprehensive linguistic analysis to date. However, the plural form is rendered here as $i^3(w)w$, rather than Bell’s $i^3(ww)$.

3. Literally, this is Latin for the “time before which”. This refers to a datable layer or structure in an archaeological sequence that provides a *terminus ante quem* dating endpoint.

(‘deputy’) and  *hry-ʿ iʿ3(w)w* (‘assistant’). This pattern parallels other titular practices: the collective  *mšʿ* (‘expedition’) is common, whereas individual expeditioners (*mšʿyw*) are rarely attested to as title-holders, yet their overseers ( *imy-r3 mšʿ*) are. The near-absence of *iʿ3(w)* as a base title therefore points not to a profession in the strict sense but to a functional category or collective that was incorporated into different hierarchies.

Accordingly, this article focuses on titles compounded with *iʿ3(w)*, which constitute most of the evidence and provide the most reliable basis for reconstructing their holders’ roles. It responds to four research questions:

1. What evidence does the Egyptological literature provide for such titles in the Old Kingdom?
2. What functions are attributed to their holders, and on what evidentiary grounds?
3. What documentary gaps, contradictions and methodological challenges persist?
4. To what extent does the evidence support the common claim in the historiography of interpreting that a professional class of interpreters existed in the Old Kingdom?

This study offers a state-of-the-art review of the functions associated with titles compounded with *iʿ3(w)* in Egypt’s Old Kingdom. Methodologically, relevant publications were identified in Egyptology-specific resources (Online Egyptological Bibliography) and general databases (Google Scholar, Scopus, OpenAlex) and then they were analyzed with attention to: (1) the functions attributed to holders of *iʿ3(w)* titles and (2) the evidentiary bases used to justify those interpretations.

For analytical purposes, the functions identified in the literature were grouped into three domains: (a) interlinguistic mediation,⁴ (b) military roles and (c) administrative tasks. This tripartition is purely heuristic: in practice, these categories overlap and often co-occur in the same individuals or contexts. Moreover, individual inscriptions admit of divergent readings and the same evidence is sometimes cited for contrasting functional interpretations.

4. In Interpreting Studies, mediation is used in more than one sense. Following Pöchhacker’s (2008) typology, the term may refer to (1) linguistic or cultural mediation (largely coextensive with interpreting), (2) cognitive mediation or (3) contractual or conflict mediation — the last of which is often associated with ‘intercultural/cultural mediators’ rather than interpreters and is the main source of terminological controversy (see also Arumí Ribas 2017; Taibi 2022). In this article, interlinguistic mediation is used in the linguistic or cultural sense, i.e., as a synonym for interpreting.

This article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews interpretations of titles compounded with $i^3(w)$; Section 3 elaborates on these findings in relation to the research questions and their implications; Section 4 concludes the article by situating the $i^3(w)$ -compounded titles within broader historiographical debates and outlining avenues for future research relevant to Egyptology and the historiography of interpreting.

2. Historiographical review of the functions attributed to titles compounded with $i^3(w)$

This section reviews the main functions that Egyptological scholarship has attributed to holders of titles compounded with $i^3(w)$ in the Old Kingdom.

2.1 Interlinguistic mediation

2.1.1 *Early approaches: $i^3(w)w$ as interpreters*

The first analysis of the term $i^3(w)$ in the Old Kingdom was published by Gardiner (1915). He argued that the Late Egyptian root  ($i^3(w)$) meant “to speak a foreign language” and that the Old Kingdom forms  and  ($i^3(w)$) designated “foreign-language speakers,” who may therefore have served as interpreters or dragomans (Gardiner 1915: 120).⁵

Gardiner grounded his proposal in a philological analysis of New Kingdom texts in which  ($i^3(w)$) appears in contexts of incomprehensibility, dialectal variation or the need for translation. Therefore, in Papyrus Anastasi I (BM EA 10247), a speaker sarcastically criticizes his interlocutor’s manner of speaking, remarking that not even a foreign-language speaker could act as his interpreter. In Papyrus Sallier I (BM EA 10185), a teacher compares his pupil to a “deaf ass”⁶ and to a Nubian who understands nothing. In contrast, the Israel Stela (JE 31408) alludes to the pleasure of hearing foreign languages. In the Middle Kingdom *Story of Sinuhe* (pRamesseum A [pBerlin 10499], verso), the spouses of the Asiatics speak foreign languages when Sinuhe faces the strongman of Retenu (a Syrian region).⁷ In this vein, Gardiner followed Spiegelberg (1893), who equated $i^3(w)$ to the Greek βαρβαρίζειν (‘to speak like a barbarian,’ i.e., to speak in a foreign language).

5. A dragoman was chiefly an interpreter of Arabic, Turkish or Persian who was employed specifically in the Near East.

6. Gardiner’s (1915: 121) translation. See Bell (1976) for a study on the connection between the lexical roots i^3 (‘donkey’) and $i^3(w)$ (‘speak a foreign language’; ‘interpreter’) and the deep root i^3 .

7. See Appendix 2 for a map of the Egyptian and Nubian toponyms mentioned in this article.

According to Gardiner, the link between the Late Egyptian form  and the Old and Middle Kingdom form  is evidenced by the stela of Iueferseneb (CG 20035, Middle Kingdom): his office  bears the classifier ⁸ which is parallel to the New Kingdom variants,  and . Having established this bridge, Gardiner examined occurrences of *iʕ(w)* in the Old and Middle Kingdom texts. Given its context of appearances in expeditions to Nubia and Syria, Gardiner considered that, in the Old Kingdom, *iʕ(w)* functioned as a title meaning ‘interpreter’ (or, more literally, ‘foreign-language speaker’), whereas in the New Kingdom, the same form denoted simply a ‘foreigner’ and was therefore no longer a formal title (Gardiner 1915: 125).

2.1.2 *Semantic tensions: Interpreters, scholars or scholar-interpreters?*

Following Gardiner, several authors questioned the translation of  as ‘interpreter’ and proposed a broader semantic field linked to knowledge, erudition and specialized expertise. An early example is Peet (1915), who examined a fragment from Khuy’s tomb (Tenth Dynasty, ca. 2118–1980) at Saqqara:       (swnw pr-ʕ iʕ[w] hmt wt šbt). While accepting ‘interpreter’ for , Peet read the whole as “royal physician, interpreter of a difficult science”, using ‘interpreter’ quasi-metaphorically for someone who elucidates specialized knowledge (Peet 1915: 224).

The proposed semantic expansion of  met resistance, though, because scholars questioned whether it reflected ancient usage or projected a modern English sense. Read (1917) argued that Peet’s reading over-extended the term. Re-examining the passage in pAnastasi I cited by Gardiner, he suggested the word  referred not to a ‘foreigner’ but to a ‘scholar’ capable of grasping complex discourse — the jibe mocking speech so convoluted that even a learned person would struggle to follow it. While accepting Peet’s grammar for Khuy’s titular, Read rejected ‘interpreter’ and instead proposed “royal physician, scholar (or skilled practitioner) in a difficult science” (Read 1917: 142). His criticism highlights the functional inappropriateness of rendering  as ‘interpreter’ in medical or technical contexts, where the task is the mastery of a discipline rather than translating others’ speech.

Read also examined chapter 125 of the *Book of going forth by day*. There, a figure is called “Scholar of the World”, later identified with the god Thoth

8. Classifiers (also known as determinatives) are unpronounced signs placed at the end of words. Although they carry no phonetic value, they indicate the general semantic category of the word (e.g., person, place, action, material) through the meaning of the image depicted. Their function is disambiguating and classificatory.

(                                

This semantic broadening remained contentious: Goedicke (1966:172), criticizing Fischer's (1964) support for 'interpreter' in Khuy's inscription, warned that understanding 'interpreter' in the English sense of 'explainer' imports anachronistic connotations. Even so, Bell (1976:66) allowed that 𐎧𐎠𐎫𐎡𐎹 may have a range as broad as the English 'interpreter,' connoting the ability to grasp what is unknown, secret or obscure.

2.1.3 Complex proposals: Egyptian interpreters vs Egyptianized Nubians

Bell (1976) proposed an agent-conditioned reading: when applied to Egyptians, $i3(w)$ should be rendered as ‘interpreter’; but when applied to foreigners (especially Nubians), it should be rendered as ‘foreigner’ or ‘Egyptianized Nubian’.

Bell (1976: lxxxv) grounded this in etymology: *iʕ* meant ‘babblers’ (when applied to human beings) and ‘brayer’ (when applied to donkeys); therefore, applied to Egyptians, *iʕ(w)* meant ‘interpreter,’ and to foreigners, ‘Egyptianized Nubian.’ Language therefore marks otherness, allowing the term to cover both outsiders and Egyptians with foreign-language competence. Bell also noted the scarcity of *iʕ(w)* as a standalone title versus the abundance of supervisors of the *iʕ(w)w* (*imyw-rʕ iʕ[w]w*) in the Old Kingdom, suggesting that interpreting was not an institutionalized profession but an occasional competence assigned to particular individuals (Bell 1976: 61).

Bell examined several cases to support this reading. In Sahure's mortuary temple reliefs, for instance, figures labeled  are shown on ships whose expedition party is explicitly rendered as Levantine. Contrary to Goedicke (1960: 64), who read them as being foreigners, based on a gesture (one hand raised, the other on an Asiatic's head), Bell (1976: 58–60) argued that there is no strict label–gesture correlation: many who make the gesture lack the label , and vice versa. Their appearance is indistinguishable from that of Egyptians and their number is small (one or two per boat; see Figure 1), leading Bell to infer that they were Egyptians acting as interpreters.

The hybrid character of *iʕ(w)* becomes clearer when set alongside Nubian groups, especially *nḥsyw* (Nubians) and the ‘pacified’ (i.e., ‘Egyptianized’) Nubians ( *nḥsy ḥtp*). Bell (1976: 69–70) proposed that the *nḥsyw ḥtpw* mentioned in the Dahshur Decree of Pepy I (Sixth Dynasty; ca. 2276–2228) may have constituted an administrative or legal subgroup of the *iʕ(w)w* in state ser-

Several authors challenged Bell's hypothesis. Uchida (1983:3) agrees that, in Sabni's inscription, $i^3(w)w$ appear alongside Egyptians and Nubians, all marked with the same collective classifier (𓂏). For Uchida, the text names three distinct collectives, not one group plus a functional subset; therefore, here, $i^3(w)w$ cannot be read as Egyptian interpreters. Since $rm\bar{t}$ already denotes Egyptians, assigning $i^3(w)w$ to Egyptian interpreters collapses two coordinated labels and disrupts the tripartite structure. His criticism targets translating $i^3(w)$ as 'interpreter' (when referents are Egyptian), not a confirmation of Bell's ethnic reading.

Diego Espinel (2006:122) likewise challenges Bell. In Sahure's temple reliefs, the eight documented instances of the label 𓂏 apply to figures of Egyptian appearance, but he reads this not as an ethnic marker: for him, $i^3(w)$ designates any foreign-language speaker, Egyptian or foreign, since the root i^3 means 'foreign-language speaker'. The defining feature is therefore linguistic competence, not the bearer's identity.

Another relevant inscription on the pacification of Wawat is found in Sabni II's tomb (high official under Pepy II; 2216–2153; Excerpt (2)).

Excerpt (2) Fragment of Sabni II's inscription. Hieroglyphic text after Edel, Seyfried and Vieler (2008: 816–819; pl. lv); English translation from Diego Espinel's Spanish translation (2006: 121)



Transliteration $iw\ i^3(w)w\ sh\bar{t}p.n(=i)\ hr\ imnt(y)t\ i3bt(y)t\ n(y)t\ w3w3t\ r\ int\ tzt\ n(y)\ m\bar{s}^c\{t\}$
 $m\ h\bar{t}p$

Translation The $i^3(w)w$ whom I had pacified were on both the western and the eastern banks of Wawat to bring my troop of soldiers back safely.

Locating the $i^3(w)w$ within Wawat (a territory in Nubia) supports reading them as a specific foreign population rather than as Egyptians or Egyptianized Nubians; if that were intended, one would expect $nhsyw\ h\bar{t}pw$ ('pacified Nubians') rather than $i^3(w)w$.

Eichler (1993:192) likewise questions identifying $i^3(w)w$ as interpreters, given their recurrent presence in desert contexts: if the term meant 'interpreter,' why would so many be needed in sparsely inhabited, logistics-oriented zones? He therefore doubts the existence of a professional interpreter category and instead considers them as intermediaries or logistical personnel whose roles cannot be reduced to linguistic mediation.

These criticisms do not dismantle Bell's model, but they do highlight the risk of imposing modern occupational labels (e.g., 'interpreter') on semantically fluid ancient terms. Across inscriptions, $i^3(w)$ appears less as a uniform social or ethnic identity than as a context-dependent relational designation. Its frequent pairing

with both Egyptians and Nubians points to a tripartite social logic shaped more by functional and sociolinguistic positioning than by rigid ethnic classification.

2.2 Military functions

2.2.1 Overseers of mercenaries? New interpretative proposals

Although Faulkner (1953) first linked the *iʿ3(w)w* to the military sphere, Goedicke (1960, 1966) developed the main critique of Gardiner's rendering of *iʿ3(w)* as 'interpreter,' rejecting the equivalence between 'foreign-language speaker' and 'interpreter.' He read *iʿ3(w)w* as 'foreigners,' identified by their language, with *imyw-r3 iʿ3(w)w* supervising these groups, who were probably integrated as state military contingents.

A key pillar of Goedicke's critique is that *iʿ3(w)* denotes a collective (probably non-Egyptian) rather than a function. He cites Sabni's inscription (Excerpt (1)), where *iʿ3(w)* appears alongside *rmt* and *nhs(y)*, and argues that all three share the collective classifier () so each names a human group. A later, more reliable copy (Edel et al. 2008: pl. 9), however, shows the classifier's  sign with a feather , which was typical of foreign groups and inapplicable to *rmtw* (Egyptians). Given its position immediately after *nhs(y)*, this suggests that the classifier qualifies *nhs(y)* alone, complicating Goedicke's (and Bell's and Uchida's) claim that it marks all three.

Goedicke (1960: 62) argued that, in the Old Kingdom, there were no attestations of *iʿ3(w)* as a standalone title, only compounds such as *hrp iʿ3(w)w*, *shd iʿ3(w)w*, *imy-ht iʿ3(w)w* and, especially, *imy-r3 iʿ3(w)w*. If *iʿ3(w)* denoted a common occupation such as interpreter, occasional base-title mentions would be expected; however, a hierarchy comprising supervisors but without any recorded subordinates is problematic. Subsequent discoveries of *iʿ3(w)w* without compounds in the Eastern Desert qualify this objection (Diego Espinel 2014: 41).

Goedicke (1960: 62) notes that at Tomas (south of Aswan) up to eight *imy-r3 iʿ3(w)w* are attested to (Weigall 1907), which sits uneasily with the idea that they supervised interpreters, since one supervisor would presumably suffice per expedition. It is, however, very likely that these inscriptions were not contemporaneous with one another.

For the title *hrp iʿ3(w)w*, Goedicke (1960: 62) records four Old Kingdom holders: Kahif (mastaba G 2136; G stands for Giza), Kanefer (G 2150), his son Kasewedja (G 5340), and possibly Iydjefa (G 1313), dated to the late Fourth–Fifth dynasties. In at least two cases (Kanefer, Iydjefa) co-occurring military titles point to the command or supervision of organized groups rather than linguistic mediation.

The title *imy-r3 i3(w)w* is far more frequent and is the main indicator for assessing functions linked to *i3(w)*. According to Goedicke (1960: 62), its earliest mention is a graffito at Wadi Maghara under Djedkare Izezi (Fifth Dynasty; ca. 2365–2322), with most examples dating from the Sixth Dynasty. Attestations cluster in the contexts of state expeditions, border zones and frontier garrisons. Goedicke identifies three geographic clusters: (1) outside Egypt (Sinai and Lower Nubia) linked to expeditions; (2) Elephantine, the key southern outpost where the title forms part of local officials' repertoires; and (3) the Memphite region (e.g., Saqqara) and the Dahshur Decree of Pepy I. This decree lists *imyw-r3 i3(w)w* among the addressees and, alongside *nhsww htpw*, states that the *imyw-r3 i3(w)w* are in charge of the foreigners of Medja, Yam and Irtjet (Nubian regions); this implies the supervision of foreign groups integrated into the state system.

The geographic pattern places *imyw-r3 i3(w)w* wherever Egypt projected extraterritorial power, prompting Goedicke to respond with a distinctly military reading. He argues that *nhsww htpw* were southern mercenary troops employed by the state, while the *imy-r3 i3(w)w* were the officers commanding or supervising them (Goedicke 1960: 64). This also explains the scarcity of named *i3(w)w* compared to their many supervisors: *i3(w)* could have been a technical term for a corps of foreign units in the Egyptian army whose nominal responsibility was the *imy-r3 i3(w)w*.

2.2.2 Structural role in the military hierarchy

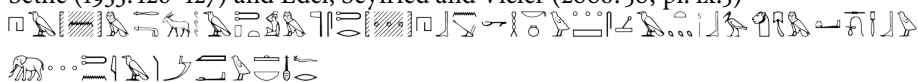
A strong indicator of the *i3(w)w*'s military integration is the internal hierarchy visible in their superiors' titulary. Bell (1976: 56) lists, in descending order: *hrp i3(w)w /imy-r3 i3(w)w* ('director' or 'supervisor'), *shd i3(w)w* ('inspector'), *imyh i3(w)w* ('deputy') and *hry-^c i3(w)w* ('assistant'). This graded sequence implies a tiered organization and a degree of professionalization in the military apparatus. Chronologically, *hrp i3(w)w* seems to have been confined to a phase before Djedkare Izezi; no holders overlap with *imy-r3 i3(w)w* (Goedicke 1960: 62).

Apart from hierarchy, the *i3(w)* corps appears to have been tied to structural army functions. Eichler's (1993: 192, 197) prosopographic and epigraphic study portrays the *i3(w)w* as Nubian auxiliary troops integrated into expeditionary personnel with paramilitary duties in logistics and escort, not merely as companions on expeditions. Their incorporation was consolidated in the Fifth Dynasty (especially under Sahure) and reached full integration in the Sixth (Eichler 1993: 197). They also performed administrative tasks, signaling their assimilation into state structures. This institutionalization is reflected in burial places at the Residence (e.g., Giza, Abu Rawash), which seems to indicate links to the center of power beyond foreign origin (Eichler 1993: 197).

The title *imy-r3 iʕ3(w)w* is key evidence of the *iʕ3(w)ws*' military integration. Its appearance in high-level documents, especially Pepy I's Dahshur Decree protecting Snefru's funerary city, shows that these supervisors were embedded in the army's organization. The decree explicitly addresses the *imyw-r3 iʕ3(w)w* of Medja, Yam and Irtjet together with Uni, the commander of campaigns against the nomads. As Uchida (1983: 4) notes, this links the office directly to major campaigns and ties it to Nubian recruitment zones.

The nature of the recruits is also noteworthy. The decree mentions *nhsww htpw*, "pacified Nubians" (Uchida 1983: 4), which is consistently marked with an armed-person classifier (a simplified version of the sign ) indicating soldiers who were integrated into Egyptian ranks rather than merely supervised foreigners. To exemplify this, Uchida (1983: 10) cites Harkhuf's tomb at Qubbet el-Hawa: as governor under Merenre I and Pepy II (Sixth Dynasty; ca. 2227–2217 and 2216–2153 respectively), he led four expeditions to Nubia aimed at trade, political alliance-building and paving the way for Egyptian expansion; on the third, he returned from Yam to the Egyptian royal palace with a contingent of soldiers who were not merely escorts but soldiers integrated into Egypt's standing forces (Excerpt (3)).

Excerpt (3) Fragment of Harkhuf's inscription (lines 4–8). Hieroglyphic text after Sethe (1933: 126–127) and Edel, Seyfried and Vieler (2008: 50; pl. ix.5)



Transliteration *h3[.n=i] m ʕ3 300 3tp{t}(.w) m sntr hbn hknw šs3t b3 mzw3 3bw tni3 m3ʕw nb nfr*

[...]

*ihr m33 hq3 irtt z3tw w3w3t nh[t] ʕš[3] tzt n(y)t im3 h3[.t(i)] hnʕ(=i) wn.in
[hq3] pn hr zbt(=i) hr rdit n(=i) k3w ʕnhwt hr sšm[t] n(=i) w3wt [n(yw)]t
tzw t(yw)t irtt n iqr rs [tp] [ir.n(=i)] [r] smr [i]m[y]-r[3] iʕ3(w)w nb h3b
r im3 dr-b3h*

Translation I descended with 300 donkeys loaded with incense, ebony, *hekenu*-oil, *shesat*-plants, panther skins, elephant tusks, throwsticks and all sorts of beautiful products.

[...]

Thereupon the ruler of Irtjet, Zatju and Wawat saw how strong and

numerous the troops of Yam were, who had come down with me to the Residence, together with the army that had been dispatched with me. This ruler escorted me, presented me with bulls and goats, and guided me along the hill-paths of Irtjet, on account of the exceptional vigilance I displayed, greater than that of any companion or overseer of $i^3(w)w$ previously sent to Yam.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that the $i^3(w)w$ were integrated as foreign troops, organized hierarchically under officials such as the $imy-r3 i^3(w)w$. Their roles in expeditions and logistics point to their institutionalization, demonstrating both tactical utility and strategic value in the military apparatus.

2.2.3 Leadership, recruitment and supervision of foreign troops

Pepynakht, also known as Heqaib, offers clear evidence of $imyw-r3 i^3(w)w$ in warfare. As nomarch of the First Nome of Upper Egypt bordering Nubia and holder of the title, he records in his Qubbet el-Hawa tomb two expeditions to Nubia under Pepy II (ca. 2216–2153): the first of these was explicitly military, undertaken by royal order to devastate Wawat and Irtjet (Excerpt (4)).

Excerpt (4) Fragment of Pepynakht Heqaib's inscription (lines 4–5). Hieroglyphic text after Sethe (1933: 133) and Edel, Seyfried and Vieler (2008: 682–689; pll.

xxxiii–xxxiv)



Transliteration $iw h3b.n w(i) \{n\} hm n(=i) nb (=i) r hb3 [wdb] w3w3t irtt iw ir.n(=i) r hzt nb(=i) sm3.n(=i) t\{r\}[nw] im 3 msw hq3 (i)m(y)-r(3) snw(t) iqrw$

Translation The majesty of my lord sent me to devastate the riverbank of Wawat and Irtjet. I acted to my lord's satisfaction after slaying a great number of them, as well as the ruler's children and the excellent overseers of Nubian troops.

Unlike missions led by other $imyw-r3 i^3(w)w$ (e.g., Harkhuf), which were typically centered on mediation, Pepynakht's appears to have been belligerent from the outset. Uchida (1983: 10–11) treats it as an exception and proposes an economic background tied to commercial rivalries with Wawat, Irtjet and Satju. It is also relevant that Pepynakht was governor of Elephantine: he may have commanded the expedition in that capacity rather than strictly as $imy-r3 i^3(w)w$.

Pepynakht's singularity emerges when compared to other $imy-r3 i^3(w)w$, notably Harkhuf: his missions, though escorted through potentially hostile zones, were not deliberately military. This contrast suggests the office's functions varied

considerably and that recourse to violence was contingent upon circumstances and political directives rather than upon fixed protocol.

As for the division of responsibilities in the Sixth Dynasty army, Faulkner (1953: 34) argued that generals led expeditions to Sinai, whereas those to Nubia and the southern oases fell to specialists in desert crossings and conflict, identified with *imyw-r3 i3(w)w* (rendered by Faulkner as “caravan-leaders”), who were habitual residents near the Nubian frontier. Their selection reflected knowledge of terrain, routes and populations rather than superior rank. Faulkner (1953: 35) also suggested that these officers undertook the initial recruitment of foreign troops, subsequently transferring the contingents to Egyptian commanders of higher rank.

One function attributed to the *imyw-r3 i3(w)w* was that of mediating the recruitment, organization and supervision of foreign contingents, especially Nubians. The autobiography of Uni (also spelled Weni) offers key evidence. He was a high-ranking official who rose under Teti (Sixth Dynasty; 2305–2279) and Pepy I (Sixth Dynasty; 2276–2228) to become commander-in-chief of the army and governor of Upper Egypt. He himself held the title *imy-r3 i3(w)w*. In his tomb inscription, Uni reports commanding a mixed force of Egyptians, Nubians (*nḥsyw*) and people from  *t3-tmḥw* (‘Land of the Temehu,’ a Libyan tribe) against Asiatic groups (Excerpt (5)).

Excerpt (5) Fragment of Uni’s inscription (lines 13–14). Hieroglyphic text after Sethe (1933: 101)



Transliteration *ḥsf.n ḥm=f ḥt n 3mw ḥr(y)w-š ir.n ḥm=f mšꜥ n(=i) 30000 ʕ33w [...] m ḥn(w) sdrw m irꜥt m nḥs(y)w (m) md3 nḥs(y)w (m) im3 nḥs(y)w m w3w3t nḥs(y)w m k33w nḥs(y) m t3-tmḥw*

Translation His Majesty acted against the Asiatic Sand-dwellers; he assembled for me an army of many tens of thousands [...] from Khen-sedjeru, from Irjet, from the Nubians of Medjay, the Nubians of Yam, the Nubians of Wawat, the Nubians of Kaau and from the land of Tjemeh.

As Bell (1976: 68) notes, Uni’s account indicates that *imyw-r3 i3(w)w* were not only managers of cross-border contact but were also active in recruiting, organizing and commanding foreign contingents, particularly those of Nubian origin.

These mentions must be situated within the broader framework of recruitment in the Old Kingdom. Faulkner (1953: 35) describes a three-tier army: a small standing force (probably elite conscripts), local militias mobilized in emergencies

and led by regional notables, and general levies. He argues that Nubian auxiliaries formed the core of the standing army, indicating some professionalization and stability.

2.3 Administrative functions

2.3.1 Presence in central and provincial administrative structures

The linkage between $i^3(w)w$ and $nhsyw \text{ } htpw$ ('pacified Nubians') has been argued by several authors (Bell 1976; Goedicke 1960; Uchida 1983). If this is correct, then pacified Nubians should appear within Old Kingdom administrative structures. Bell documents, at Giza, Nubians identified by the ethnonym $nhsy$ serving high officials of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties: Meri ( $nhs[y]$ $\dot{s}ms[w]$, 'the Nubian follower') and Seneb ( $nhs[y]$ $sd3wt[y]$, 'the Nubian treasurer') serving Nisutnefer (mastaba G 4970), and the Nubian Heretjesi ( $nhs[y]$ $hrtst$) for Seshathetep (G 5150). Another case is the high official Niankhkhnum (G 8983), whose mastaba at Giza records the title  $nhs[yw]$ [nyw] pr^{-3} ; 'inspector of the Nubians of the Great House'). Bell (1976: 70) suggested that this may be a variant of $shd \text{ } i^3(w)w$, which reinforces the link between $nhsyw \text{ } htpw$ and $i^3(w)w$. At Kom el-Khamaseen (a necropolis near Saqqara), the title $imy-r3 \text{ } i^3(w)w$ is attested to for an anonymous high official (Cervelló Autuori & Díaz de Cerio 2006). Its appearance near the court is exceptional: overseers of $i^3(w)w$ rarely belonged to the senior ranks of the central administration. This points to primarily peripheral activity; if interpreting was among their tasks, it was probably performed in the field, not at court.

Eichler (1993:197) dates the emergence of the $i^3(w)w$ to the mid-Fifth Dynasty, linking it to expeditions for raw-material extraction and frontier-route control. The $imy-r3 \text{ } i^3(w)w$ were part of a territorially based logistical-administrative network. Unlike rankless $i^3(w)w$, which were scarcely visible in expeditions, the $imyw-r3 \text{ } i^3(w)w$ are systematically attested to, indicating their installation within the expeditionary hierarchy (Eichler 1993:192). Shifting from central to provincial structures, the necropolis of Qubbet el-Hawa is key to tracing the institutional evolution of $imy-r3 \text{ } i^3(w)w$ in the provinces. Its concentration there, especially that from Merenre (Sixth Dynasty; ca. 2227–2217), highlights a frontier-administration role. Martinet (2019: 505–506) identifies $imy-r3 \text{ } i^3(w)w$ and  $imy-r3 \text{ } h3swt$ ('overseer of foreign lands') as characteristic, though not exclusive, titles of Elephantine governors. Diego Espinel (forthcoming: 19–20) notes that these $imyw-r3 \text{ } i^3(w)w$ often exercised regional management comparable to that of governors, despite their lacking canonical nomarch titles; the honorific  appears only rarely ($h3ty^{-c}$; is often translated as 'count,' although its

precise meaning is uncertain). He also proposes continuity with the earlier title  (*imy-r3 3bw*; ‘overseer of Elephantine’) of the Third–Fourth dynasties as authorities of the First Cataract.

Martinet (2019: 504–505) has reconstructed a three-tier hierarchy for the Elephantine *imyw-r3 i3(w)w*:

- Upper: individuals with the title *h3ty-ʿ*, positioned at the apex as the administrative authority with broad jurisdiction.
- Middle: individuals with the titles  (*smr wʿty*; ‘sole companion’) and  (*hry-hbt*; ‘lector priest’) with administrative responsibilities and cultic participation.
- Lower: individuals bearing only the title  (*šps nswt*; ‘noble of the king’), which was indicative of early career status or limited functions in the administration.

Martinet’s model reframes the office as a frontier institution tailored to a province and crucial to controlling the south and managing relations with Nubia. Through this lens, it is worth examining how the *imy-r3 i3(w)w* interacted with other high provincial magistracies (most notably  *hry-tp 3 n[y] nswt*; ‘great overlord of the king’) that are also attested to in the Elephantine corpus.

According to Martinet (2019: 500–501), the title *hry-tp 3 n(y) nswt*, held by Sabni II (QH 35e; QH stands for Qubbet el-Hawa) and Iysema/Setka (QH 110), answered the need for a royal delegate with territorial jurisdiction who assumed provincial leadership at the end of the Sixth Dynasty. It is linked to the *imy-r3 i3(w)w*, since both appear in the titulary of the Elephantine officials involved in expeditions. The hierarchy, however, is ambiguous: in theory, *hry-tp 3 n(y) nswt* should outrank *imy-r3 i3(w)w*; but the epigraphy suggests the opposite, as holders of the former reach only *smr wʿty*, whereas some *imyw-r3 i3(w)w* bear the appellation *h3ty-ʿ*. Several *imyw-r3 i3(w)w* also held the title *imy-r3 h3swt* (‘overseer of foreign lands’), managing as they did commercial contacts with Lower Nubia from Elephantine (Martinet 2019: 505).

This center–province articulation appears in the regular trips of high officials to the capital to report and receive honors. This mobility reflects political–administrative reciprocity: the state granted titles and prestige in exchange for the effective management of sensitive frontiers such as that of the south. As Martinet notes (2019: 501), expeditions based in Elephantine benefited both the central state and the province.

2.3.2 *Liaison with foreign regions: Diplomacy, trade and Egyptianization*

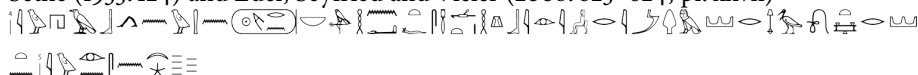
From the Sixth Dynasty onwards, the title *imy-r3 i3(w)w* was closely tied to the border and peripheral zones of the Nile Valley. Inscriptions from Nubia, Sinai and Wadi el-Hudi indicate that they played a significant role in Egypt's foreign relations and in managing contact with non-Egyptian populations.

Nubia is the region in which the title appears most frequently; the activity of *imyw-r3 i3(w)w* there is repeatedly attested to under Pepy I and his successors (Uchida 1983: 1–2). The association is not exclusive to Nubia, however: *i3(w)* is also attested to in the Eastern Desert and Sinai (Diego Espinel 2006: 120).

Drawing on Middle Kingdom evidence applicable to the Old Kingdom, Alù (2024: 36–37) argues that in southern Sinai and Wadi el-Hudi the presence of *i3(w)w* and their supervisors signals diplomatic and cultural-economic mediation rather than subjugation, supported by the absence of war narratives and inscriptions describing institutionalized interaction and exchanges of goods.

Diplomatic contact is reflected in two recurrent verbs: $\text{𓏏} \text{𓏏}$ *wb3* ('to open' external routes) and $\text{𓏏} \text{𓏏}$ *shtp* ('to pacify' or 'satisfy' foreign peoples). Uchida (1983) examines both. Harkhuf's inscription (governor of Elephantine and *imy-r3 i3[w]w* in the Sixth Dynasty), alludes to the opening of the road to Yam (Excerpt (6)).

Excerpt (6) Fragment of Harkhuf's inscription (lines 4–5). Hieroglyphic text after Sethe (1933: 124) and Edel, Seyfried and Vieler (2008: 623–624; pl. xxvii)



Transliteration *iw h3b.n w(i) hm n(y) mry-n-r nb(=i) hn it(=i) smr wty hr(y)-hb iri r im3 r wb3 w3t r h3st tn iw ir.n(=i) s(t) n 3bd 7*

Translation His Majesty Merenre, my lord, dispatched me together with my father, Iri, sole companion and lector-priest, to Yam to open the road to that foreign land. I accomplished this in seven months.

Yoyotte (1953), in a somewhat speculative interpretation, argues that when *wb3* takes a toponym as a direct object, it signals exploration or institutionalized contact with that region, casting the *imy-r3 i3(w)w* as agents of diplomatic expansion.

The verb *shtp* occupies a central place in the sources. In Harkhuf's third expedition to Yam, the account describes his diplomatic action towards a local chief marching against the Temehu (Libyan tribes of Egypt's Western Desert) aimed at political stability and Egypt's economic interests abroad (Excerpt (7)).

Excerpt (7) Fragment of Harkhuf's inscription (lines 11–14). Hieroglyphic text after Sethe (1933: 125–126) and Edel, Seyfried and Vieler (2008: 623–624; pl. xxvii)



Transliteration *gm.n(=i) ḥq3 im3 šm r=f r t3 tmḥ(w) r ḥw(t) tmḥ r qḥ imnt(y) n(y) pt*
iw(=i) pr.k(w) m-s3=f r t3-tmḥ(w) štp.n(=i) sw r wn=f ḥr dw3 ntrw
nb(w) n itw

Translation I learned that, for his part, the ruler of Yam had gone to the land of the Temehu to smite the Temehu to the western corner of the sky. I set out after him to the land of the Temehu. I satisfied him and, consequently, he praised every god on behalf of the [Egyptian] sovereign.

This pattern recurs elsewhere. In Sabni, son of Mekhu's biography (himself an *imy-r3 i3[w]w*) the expedition to recover his father's body notes that he brought Egyptian goods to *štp* ("satisfy") foreign polities, securing the return of the body and property from Nubia. Likewise, in Pepynakht Heqaib's second expedition, he reports on having pacified foreign countries (Excerpt (8)).

Excerpt (8) Fragment of Pepynakht Heqaib's inscription (lines 6–9). Hieroglyphic text after Sethe (1933: 134) and Edel, Seyfried and Vieler (2008: 682–689; pl.

xxxiii–xxxiv)



Transliteration *mḥ nb(=i) ib=f im(=i) m wpt nb(t) ḥ3bt.n[=f] w(i) im=s iw gr ḥ3b.n w(i)*
ḥm n(y) nb(=i) r štp ḥ3swt (i)ptn iw ir.n(=i) r ḥzt nb(=i) r mnḥ r ḥt
nb(t) iw in.n(=i) ḥq3wy n(y) ḥ3swt (i)ptn n ḥnw m ḥtpw iw3w wndw ḥnhw
3ḥ(w) m[-]=sn n ḥnw ḥnḥ msw ḥq3 (i)m(ywy)-r(3) šnw nt(y)w ḥnḥ=sn

Translation My lord trusted his heart in me in every mission on which he sent me. The majesty of my lord also sent me to pacify these foreign lands. I did all things according to every satisfaction of my lord. I brought the two rulers of these foreign countries to the Residence with offerings (live oxen and short-horned cattle useful for the Residence) and the sons of the ruler and two commanders of Nubian troops that were with them.

The outcome was the peaceful transfer to Egypt of two rulers with their cattle, one or several sons and two overseers of Nubian troops. The absence of references to violence suggests that *štp* entailed negotiation that led to tribute or alliance rather than military subjugation. The economic dimension of the *imy-r3 i3(w)w* appears in biographies linking the office to expeditions for acquiring exotic prod-

ucts and managing their accumulation, transport and transfer within state redistributive networks. After his third expedition to Yam, Harkhuf reports returning with 300 donkeys loaded with raw materials of high ritual, medicinal, funerary or ornamental value (Excerpt (3)). Even so, part of these tasks may reflect his responsibilities as governor of Elephantine rather than the specific exercise of the title *imy-r3 i3(w)w*.

The economic function of the *imy-r3 i3(w)w* rested on procuring strategic goods via compensation and negotiation. Their effectiveness hinged on securing routes and resources and on cultivating ties with local agents. The evidence depicts an administrative office in which commercial and logistical competencies were inseparable from diplomacy. Beyond their diplomatic and economic roles, the *imyw-r3 i3(w)w* were involved in Egyptianization processes, especially in Nubia. Sabni II's inscription indicates that, after being *shṭp*-ed, a group of *i3(w)w* helped to protect and assist Egyptian workers sent to Wawat to build a boat (Excerpt (2)).

Although the details are sparse, they probably facilitated resources, routes or security in hostile areas. The co-operation was reciprocal: any compensation managed by the *imyw-r3 i3(w)w* generated loyalty and utility. According to Bell (1976: 67), the concentration of references to foreigners labelled *i3(w)* in Aswan, Lower Nubia and southern Upper Egypt points to Egyptianized Nubians having been integrated into state structures and active in performing administrative, commercial or logistical tasks.

Burials also reflect Egyptianization: Bell (1976: 67–68) notes officials linked to the *i3(w)w* interred at Giza, Saqqara, Dahshur and Abu Rawash. While this distribution does not, in itself, imply colonies at all these sites, Bell points specifically to Dahshur as a Nubian colony under direct Egyptian supervision, possibly administered by *imyw-r3 i3(w)w* for the purposes of control and acculturation.

2.3.3 *Facilitators of mobility, surveillance and circulation in liminal zones*

The *imyw-r3 i3(w)w* played a key role in opening and maintaining frontier routes. A marker of this function is the verb *wb3*, attested to in their inscriptions. Whereas this marker is usually translated as 'to open' (i.e., 'explore'), some scholars, such as Kadish (1966: 28), prefer 'to patrol,' which emphasizes surveillance along established routes rather than initial exploration.

Rock inscriptions from the Eastern Desert and other epigraphic evidence show *imyw-r3 i3(w)w* facilitating mobility and securing routes in arid regions. In inscription MLo5 at Wadi Mueilha (a mining region in the Central-Eastern Desert of Egypt), the *imy-r3 i3(w)w* Senenu is said to have dug a well with the *smntyw* (; 'prospector') of the Panopolite nome (Rothe et al. 2008: 352–353) – infrastructure that enabled expeditions. Such actions indicate

an operational network in which supervisors coordinated with desert specialists, repeatedly linked to *smntyw* – which suggests that some *iʕ3(w)w* also undertook prospecting and guiding functions.

Iconographic sources broaden the roles of *imyw-r3 iʕ3(w)w* and *iʕ3(w)w* in the desert to include territorial surveillance. For instance, Alù (2024: 38) cites an early Eleventh Dynasty graffito on the Thebes–Western Desert route: an armed guard, perhaps a Nubian, with a dog, beside a hieratic inscription that includes the title *imy-r3 iʕ3(w)w* (Darnell 2002: 145), reinforcing their protection or defence role. Also in this vein, Diego Espinel (forthcoming: 51) proposes the *iʕ3(w)w* as being non-Egyptian groups analogous to medieval or modern Bedouins who were integrated as specialized state agents. Rather than mere linguistic intermediaries, they undertook cross-border contact, territorial control and route protection.

3. Discussion

The following discussion responds to the four research questions outlined in the Introduction, drawing as it does on the evidence reviewed to synthesize key findings and assess their implications.

Regarding the first research question, the literature identifies five main evidence types for titles compounded with *iʕ3(w)* in the Old Kingdom: (1) autobiographical inscriptions from provincial tombs (e.g., Harkhuf, Sabni, Pepynakht), which are generally well dated and useful for linking titulary to actions, although self-laudatory; (2) graffiti from mining or frontier zones (Sinai and Wadi Maghara; Wadi el-Hudi), which are brief and often hard to date, but which confirm *iʕ3(w)w* participation in state operations; (3) reliefs, notably the naval scenes in Sahure's mortuary temple, which are rich iconographically but textually sparse and therefore open to divergent readings; (4) decrees or administrative documents, especially the Dahshur Decree, which list *imyw-r3 iʕ3(w)w* among royal addressees and link them to *nḥsyw ḥtpw*; and (5) funerary titulary on mastabas and stelae at Giza, Abu Rawash, Saqqara, and especially Qubbet el-Hawa, whose concentration of *imyw-r3 iʕ3(w)w* underscores frontier functions.

Regarding the second question, the attributed functions cluster in three inter-related domains: (1) interlinguistic mediation, that is, interpreting broadly conceived and mediation by hybrid actors, often Egyptianized foreigners of Nubian origin; (2) military roles, such as supervising and recruiting foreign troops (especially Nubians), escorting and protecting expeditions and in some cases commanding units in frontier zones; and (3) administrative and economic tasks, such as frontier administration, control of routes and strategic resources, and participation in expeditions to acquire and redistribute goods within state logistical

networks. The literature portrays titles compounded with $i^3(w)$ as being multi-functional. The tripartite scheme used here is heuristic, not mutually exclusive: in practice, functions overlapped and a single holder could combine linguistic mediation, military leadership and administrative management.

The third research question examined the remaining gaps, contradictions and methodological matters. Despite substantial scholarship in this realm, the state of research still shows limitations that prevent a full understanding of the nature and functions of titles compounded with $i^3(w)$. Individuals designated solely as $i^3(w)$ are scarcely visible; composite titulary predominates, skewing the sample towards upper ranks and obscuring the group's social base. Fragmentary epigraphy (uncertain readings, weak context) and the absence of a unified critical corpus compound the problem. Additional difficulties include the function-versus-ethnicity debate, spatial delimitation (Nubia vs Wadi Hammamat or Sinai) and attribution: because holders often bear other military or administrative titles, actions may be misassigned to $i^3(w)$ rather than to the rest of the titulary.

Methodologically, scholarship often projects modern categories ('interpreter,' 'mercenary,' 'diplomat') onto an ancient framework that lacked such clear-cut divisions; analytical labels are also treated as watertight when they are in fact complementary. Titles compounded with $i^3(w)$ are better considered as instruments with which to manage liminality and alterity (ethnic, cultural, linguistic, spatial, economic) domains that overlap and demand polyvalent profiles. Another ontological issue remains: Is $i^3(w)$ (a) a strict title, (b) an ethnonym or (c) a functional or collective designator that becomes titular only when combined with hierarchical generics (*imy-r3*, *shd*, *hrp*, etc.)?

The fourth research question asked whether the Egyptological literature substantiates the common claim in Translation and Interpreting Studies that a profession of interpreter existed in the Old Kingdom. The persistent link between $i^3(w)$ and 'interpreter' stems largely from Gardiner's (1915) philological proposal that the $i^3(w)w$ were interpreters or dragomans – an influential view that was subsequently widely questioned. Yet Gardiner merits contextualization: in 1915 interpreting had not yet undergone the professionalization that has shaped today's profession, a process which began in the 1920s and became consolidated with the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials and the UN's adoption of simultaneous interpreting in 1947 (Baigorri Jalón 2015). Therefore, when Goedicke (1960) and others claimed Gardiner's proposal to be an anachronism, they may have overlooked the fact that his notion of 'interpreter' differed markedly from theirs and might have been a better fit with Old Kingdom realities. From this standpoint, reading $i^3(w)$ as 'dragoman' is not strictly a translation equivalent (given its temporal, geographic and cultural specificity) but plausibly captures the functions these agents performed.

At the same time, later studies rightly caution against reading *iʕ3(w)* as interpreter *sensu stricto*. The epigraphic record offers no unambiguous, explicit attestations of interpreting as a discrete, named activity; instead, it shows actors operating at the intersection of language, culture, administration and politics. Many *iʕ3(w)* were probably bilingual or versed in foreign idioms, but their remit extended beyond interpreting to logistics, diplomacy and control. As Alù (2024) and Diego Espinel (forthcoming) argue, these figures were defined by managing what was foreign (people, goods and spaces) rather than by a single purely linguistic skill set.

In the light of this, the term ‘interpreter’ is misleadingly precise. It implies a well-defined professional identity, whereas the evidence points to functional fluidity in the Old Kingdom.

This perspective aligns with current debates in the historiography of translation and interpreting about profession versus function, especially in historical settings. As Hermans (2022) and Pym (1998) have noted, ‘translator’ and ‘interpreter’ are historically conditioned categories, not timeless essences. Rather than asking whether the *iʕ3(w)* were interpreters in a modern institutionalized sense, it is more productive to examine the kinds of mediation they performed, how those functions were embedded in sociopolitical contexts and how their status responded to the state’s changing needs. Hermans (2022) emphasizes that translation was practiced and conceptualized differently in the past, urging us to reflect critically on our conceptual tools; the aim is not to find precursors of today’s professions but to uncover alternative practices and institutions that unsettle presentist assumptions. Similarly, Pym (1998) warned against projecting mono-professionalism onto historical actors: most translators occupied fluid roles, combining translation with diplomatic, commercial, military or literary activities. Narrow labels risk erasing this polyvalence, particularly in the case of the *iʕ3(w)*, whose activities spanned multiple domains and probably reflected flexible situational functions rather than stable professional identities.

In line with this perspective, Delisle (1977), in his study of early interpreting in colonial Canada, stressed that the need for linguistic mediation arises immediately in multilingual encounters, yet the individuals who performed it were rarely defined by interpreting alone. Rather, they typically combined mediation with other functions (commercial brokerage, diplomacy, guiding or exploration) and often did not practice interpreting full time, which complicates any attempt to treat ‘interpreter’ as a stable occupational identity in such contexts. Delisle and Woodsworth (2012) likewise highlight the fact that, historically, interpreting is structurally less visible than written translation because it is oral and ephemeral: it leaves fewer durable traces and is frequently documented only incidentally through written records. It is therefore unsurprising that interpreters often appear

in the sources as multifunctional agents rather than as members of a bounded profession. Even where relatively explicit early evidence exists, Delisle and Woodsworth (2012) note that it tends to embed mediation within wider institutional and political tasks.

Accordingly, *iʕ3(w)w* were not interpreters by profession but agents whose communicative, logistical and diplomatic capacities were deployed flexibly. Interpreting may have been among their skills, but it did not define them. The challenge is less one of identifying a profession than of reconstructing a relational category shaped by context, need and institutional logic.

4. Concluding remarks

This article reassessed the evidence on titles compounded with *iʕ3(w)* in Ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom, arguing they did not denote fixed professions ('interpreter,' 'soldier,' 'diplomat') but multifunctional frontier agents within a flexible, state-driven apparatus of intercultural governance. Instead of than discrete occupational categories, the functions attached to *iʕ3(w)w* (linguistic mediation, military coordination, administrative service) overlapped in response to the practical exigencies of expeditions and borderlands. The sources indicate that *iʕ3(w)w* worked not in narrowly defined offices but across a spectrum of tasks central to Egypt's engagement with its southern and eastern peripheries.

The article also revisited and critically reframed the hypothesis that in the Old Kingdom *iʕ3(w)* should be translated as 'interpreter.' Although widely contested, it cannot be dismissed outright: Gardiner's (1915) intuition probably captured a key aspect of the *iʕ3(w)w*'s role, even if 'interpreter' in its modern sense is anachronistic. The debates surveyed reflect the broader tensions between function and profession and between modern disciplinary taxonomies and ancient socio-political categories.

What emerges from this analysis is a call for caution in applying rigid or modern occupational labels to ancient roles. The category *iʕ3(w)* functioned not as a stable profession but as a fluid designation for agents managing contact with the linguistic, territorial, cultural and political Other. This fluidity reflects pragmatic governance in which relational competencies mattered more than fixed offices. For historians of translation and interpreting the case shows how mediation functions can precede but never crystallize into formal professions and also how retrospective classifications can obscure this flexibility. It invites a reconsideration of what counts as translation or interpreting in premodern contexts and closer attention to the social and institutional ecologies in which such roles emerged.

This study is not without its limitations. First, because of its scope and length, this article does not attempt to be an exhaustive inventory of attestations; it prioritizes the evidence that was most probative for the historiographical argument, leaving aside documents that might nuance the hypotheses advanced here. Second, the analysis is restricted to the Old Kingdom; no diachronic comparison with later periods (New Kingdom, Late Period, Greco-Roman) is offered, which limits our ability to trace the semantic, institutional or functional evolution of titles that have been compounded with $i^3(w)$. Third, the article does not provide a dedicated philological–paleographic study of the lexeme $i^3(w)$ and its hieroglyphic writing (especially the hieroglyphic sign S25 $\sqrt{\square}$), including (1) its iconographic referent, (2) orthographic variants and chronology and (3) the diachronic graphical or phonological development of the lexeme. Finally, there is no comparative analysis with contemporaneous Ancient Near Eastern polities (e.g., Mesopotamia).

To move beyond the current interpretive impasse, future research should integrate broader comparative frameworks and interdisciplinary tools. A contextualized prosopography of individuals bearing $i^3(w)$ -compounded titles in the Old Kingdom would clarify patterns of title usage, career trajectories, geographic distribution and administrative embedding; it would also provide a firmer empirical basis for assessing the sociopolitical functions of such individuals.

Ultimately, the case of the $i^3(w)w$ throws light upon both the workings of the Old Kingdom frontier administration and the methodological challenges of reconstructing premodern categories of mediation. It underscores the need for historiographical sensitivity, theoretical pluralism and context-aware analyses that move beyond presentist frameworks while remaining grounded in empirical rigor.

Funding

Open Access publication of this article was funded through a Transformative Agreement with Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Dr. Josep Cervelló Autori and Dr. Andrés Diego Espinel for their thoughtful suggestions on earlier drafts and for insightful discussions on the interpretation and function of the titles treated here.

References

- doi Alù, C. (2024). Specialisti di viaggi nel deserto: Gli *ḫ3.ww* e i *nw.w*, intermediari e guide per le spedizioni minerarie faraoniche. In G. Miniaci, C. Greco, P. del Vesco, M. Mancini & C. Alù. (Eds.), *Egypt in ancient and modern tales, travels and explorations: Studies presented to Marilina Betrò*. Pisa: Pisa University Press, 35–42.
- doi Arumí Ribas, M. (2017). The fuzzy boundary between the roles of interpreter and mediator in the public services in Catalonia: Analysis of interviews and interpreter-mediated interactions in the health and educational context. *Across Languages and Cultures* 18 (2), 195–218.
- Baigorri Jalón, J. (2015). The history of the interpreting profession. In H. Mikkelsen & R. Jourdenais (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of interpreting*. London: Routledge, 11–24.
- Bell, L. D. (1976). Interpreters and Egyptianized Nubians in Ancient Egyptian foreign policy: Aspects of the history of Egypt and Nubia. PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.
- Borchardt, L. (1913). *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Šazḥu-Re' II: Die Wandbilder: Abbildungsblätter*. Vol. 2. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs.
- Cervelló Autuori, J. & Díaz de Cerio, M. (2006). A new Old Kingdom *imy r ʿ(3w)* from the Memphite region: Results from a survey at a site in the South Saqqara Desert. *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte* 80, 85–96.
- Darnell, J. C. (2002). Opening the narrow doors of the desert: Discoveries of the Theban Desert Road Survey. In R. Friedman (Ed.), *Egypt and Nubia: Gifts of the desert*. London: British Museum, 132–155.
- doi Delisle, J. (1977). Les pionniers de l'interprétation au Canada. *Meta* 22 (1), 5–14.
- doi Delisle, J. & Woodsworth, J. (2012). *Translators through history*. Revised edition. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Diego Espinel, A. (2006). *Etnicidad y territorio en el Egipto del Reino Antiguo*. Bellaterra: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.
- Diego Espinel, A. (2014). Surveyors, guides and other officials in the Egyptian and Nubian deserts. *Revue d'Égyptologie* 65, 29–48.
- Diego Espinel, A. (forthcoming). Contact management with non-Egyptian areas in the Old Kingdom: The overseers of the foreign regions and other related titles.
- Eichler, E. (1993). *Untersuchungen zum Expeditionswesen des ägyptischen Alten Reiches*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Falbo, C. (2016). Going back to Ancient Egypt: Were the princes of Elephantine really 'overseers of dragomans'? *The Interpreters' Newsletter* 21, 109–114.
- doi Faulkner, R. O. (1953). Egyptian military organization. *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 39, 32–47.
- Fischer, H. G. (1964). *Inscriptions from Coptite Nome: Dynasties VI–XI*. Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum.
- Gardiner, A. H. (1915). The Egyptian word for “dragoman”. *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 37, 117–125.
- Goedicke, H. (1960). The title  in the Old Kingdom. *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 46, 60–64.

- Goedicke, H. (1966). An additional note on 'ꜥ' 'foreigner'. *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 52, 172–174.
- Guo, T. (2020). History of interpreting. In M. Baker & G. Saldanha (Eds.), *Routledge encyclopedia of translation studies*. Third edition. London: Routledge, 237–241.
- Hermann, A. (1956). Dolmetschen im Altertum. In K. Thieme, A. Hermann & E. Glässer, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Dolmetschens*. Munich: Isar Verlag, 25–59.
-  Hermans, T. (2022). *Translation and history*. London: Routledge.
-  Hornung, E., Krauss, R. & Warburton, D.A. (2006). *Ancient Egyptian chronology*. Leiden: Brill.
-  Kadish, G.E. (1966). Old Kingdom Egyptian activity in Nubia: Some reconsiderations. *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 52, 23–33.
-  Kurz, I. 1985. The rock tombs of the Princes of Elephantine: Earliest references to interpretation in Pharaonic Egypt. *Babel* 31 (4), 213–218.
-  Lung, R. (2009). Perceptions of translating/interpreting in first-century China. *Interpreting* 11 (2), 119–136.
-  Martinet, É. (2019). *L'administration provinciale sous l'Ancien Empire égyptien. Vol. 1. Analyse*. Boston: Brill.
-  Muñoz Martín, R. & Olalla-Soler, C. (2021). Where does it hurt? Learning from the parallels between medicine and cognitive translation & interpreting studies. In S.L. Halverson & Á. Marín García (Eds.), *Contesting epistemologies in cognitive translation and interpreting studies*. New York: Routledge, 193–220.
- Peet, E. (1915). A further note on the Egyptian word for “dragoman”. *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 37, 224.
-  Pöchhacker, F. (2008). Interpreting and mediation. In C. Valero-Garcés & A. Martin (Eds.), *Crossing borders in community interpreting*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 9–26.
- Pym, A. (1998). *Method in translation history*. London: Routledge.
-  Read, F.W. (1917). The sense of the word    . *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 13, 141–144.
- Rothe, R.D., Miller, W.K. & Rapp, G.R. (2008). *Pharaonic inscriptions from the Southern Eastern Desert of Egypt*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
-  Ruiz Rosendo, L. & Persaud, C. (2016). Interpreters and interpreting in conflict zones and scenarios: A historical perspective. *Linguistica Antverpiensia, New Series — Themes in Translation Studies* 15, 1–35.
- Sethe, K. (1933). *Urkunden des Alten Reichs. Urkunden des ägyptischen Altertums*. Vol. 1. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs.
- Spiegelberg, W. (1893). *Varia. Recueil de travaux relatifs à la philologie et à l'archéologie égyptiennes et assyriennes* 14, 39–43.
- Stähle, J. (2009). *Vom Übersetzen zum Simultandolmetschen: Handwerk und Kunst des zweitältesten Gewerbes der Welt*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner.
-  Taibi, M. (2022). Intercultural mediation in translation and interpreting studies. In D. Busch (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of intercultural mediation*. New York: Routledge, 399–407.
- Uchida, S. (1983). ヌビアにおける *imy-r iꜥꜣww* — エジプト第6王朝のヌビア政策 —. *オリエンツ* 26 (1), 1–18.



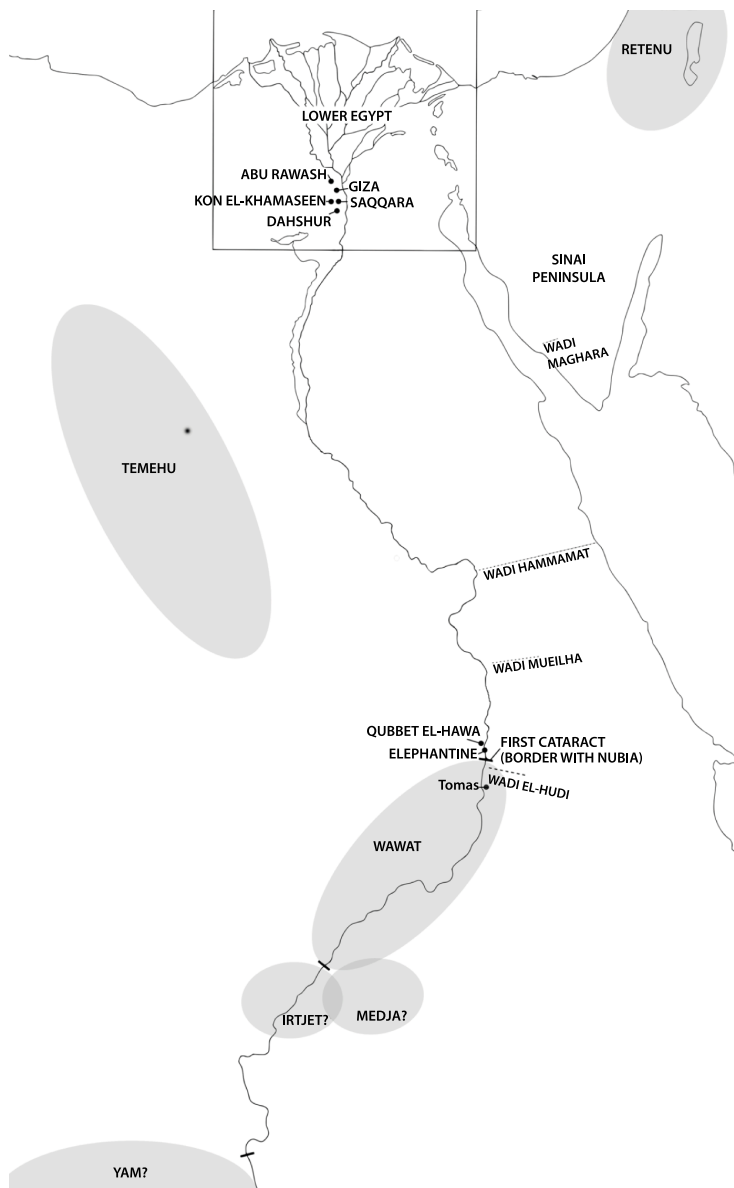
Weigall, A. E. P. B. (1907). *A report on the antiquities of Lower Nubia (the First Cataract to the Sudan frontier) and their condition in 1906–7*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yoyotte, J. (1953). Pour une localisation du pays de Iam. *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 52, 173–178.

Appendix 1. Chronology of Ancient Egypt’s Old Kingdom
(adapted from Hornung et al. 2006: 490–491)

Dyn. 4	ca. 2543–2436 ⁺²⁵
Snofru	2543–2510 ⁺²⁵
Khufu (Cheops)	2509–2483 ⁺²⁵
Radjedef/Djedefre	2482–2475 ⁺²⁵
Bikheris	2474–2473 ⁺²⁵
Khafre (Khephren Rakhaef)	2472–2448 ⁺²⁵
Menkaure (Mycerinus)	2447–2442 ⁺²⁵
Shepseskaf	2441–2436 ⁺²⁵
Dynasty 5	ca. 2435–2306 ⁺²⁵
Userkaf	2435–2429 ⁺²⁵
Sahure	2428–2416 ⁺²⁵
Neferirkare Kakai	2415–2405 ⁺²⁵
Raneferef/Neferefre	2404 ⁺²⁵
Shepseskare Izi	2403 ⁺²⁵
Neuserre Ini	2402–2374 ⁺²⁵
Menkauhor	2373–2366 ⁺²⁵
Djedkare Izezi	2365–2322 ⁺²⁵
Unis	2321–2306 ⁺²⁵
Dynasty 6	ca. 2305–2118 ⁺²⁵
Teti	2305–2279 ⁺²⁵
Userkare	?–?
Pepy I Meryre	2276–2228 ⁺²⁵
Nemtyemzaef Merenre	2227–2217 ⁺²⁵
Pepy II Neferkare	2216–2153 ⁺²⁵
Nemtyemzaef II	2152 ⁺²⁵
Dynasty 8	ca. 2150–2118 ⁺²⁵
Neferkaure	2126–2113 ⁺²⁵
Neferkauhor	2122–2120 ⁺²⁵
Neferirkare	2119–2218 ⁺²⁵

Appendix 2. Map of Egyptian and Nubian toponyms mentioned in this article



The exact locations of Irtjet, Medja and Yam are uncertain. The grey-shaded areas indicate possible regions inhabited by these groups.

Address for correspondence

Christian Olalla-Soler
Departament de Traducció i d'Interpretació i d'Estudis de l'Àsia Oriental
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Edifici K, Campus UAB s/n, Plaça del Coneixement
08193 Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès)
Spain
Christian.Olalla@uab.cat

Biographical note

Christian Olalla-Soler is an associate professor in the Department of Translation and Interpreting & East Asian Studies at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. He holds a PhD in Translation and Intercultural Studies (2017) and an MA in Egyptology (2025). His research focuses on cognitive aspects of translation and interpreting, metascience in Translation and Interpreting Studies and, more recently, the intersection of Egyptology and Translation Studies, with a particular interest in the history of interpreting and the translation of Ancient Egyptian texts.

Publication history

Date received: 4 September 2025
Date accepted: 15 December 2025
Published online: 22 January 2026