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# Shabtis

Little figures for the Egyptian Afterlife  
A small introduction

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# Shabtis



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# Introduction

The short introduction to the topic of the shabtis is based on a presentation from the year 2003. The small figurines are very popular, but are often misunderstood as servant figures. In popular understanding they are integral part of an Egyptian funeral equipment like coffins, canopic jars and the mummy itself [1-3]. But they appear later than many other vital funerary equipment: they are only known from the Middle Kingdom onwards and only became really popular and widespread in the New Kingdom. Some shabtis presented in this booklet, were from famous kings and other members of the elite, and their mummies are also preserved [4]. In the case of Tutankhamun, particularly high quality shabtis serve to identify the persons on the murals in his tomb. This was done only recently in a study by Nicholas Reeves [5]. On the other side of the quality scale are the shabtis found in tomb QV 66, which according to the inscription belonged to the famous Queen Nefertari [6,7]. They would be of such poor quality if they were not archaeologically documented, but would come from the art trade without pedigree, that experts would probably regard them as fakes...

The shabtis are also popular tourist 'kitsch' as copies with very different handicraft quality, which the travellers like to take home as a memory of the Nile valley. Likewise, imitation shabtis are also sold in museum shops. Such tourist shabtis can cause unexpected outcomings: In 2018, an alleged cultural property scandal in Switzerland has put the shabtis in the spotlight again. It became apparent that basic knowledge of how to judge shabtis can also be important for authorities.

At the request of the Egyptian authorities, the Swiss federal police confiscated 26 allegedly antique objects and expropriated their owners. The deputy director of the Federal Office of Culture (BAK), Yves Fischer, wanted to make a media spectacle out of it and so he went to the press. The printed cultural objects triggered more than just a shake of the head from experts, but a protest. The Federal Office was accused of having fallen for the cheapest tourist junk. The objects had thus been illegally confiscated by the state.

Under pressure, the federal authorities had to admit that they had acted without ever consulting an expert on Egyptian objects [8,9].

The motivation of the Egyptian authorities is also incomprehensible. The Egyptians should have noticed even more that they are cheap copies for tourists, which are sold on the streets in Egypt. Embarrassing for Switzerland - but a good reason to finally make the work of that time generally accessible.

At this point a note for tourists: **Do not buy antique objects**, this is illegal and severely punishable. If you buy (legal) copies, have the copy confirmed in writing in a document, take a photograph of it and send it to yourself by e-mail. In case the customs authorities let the documents disappear to construct a legal case...

# **Name and looks of a Shabti**

The name shabti is only one of several names. In German the name Uschebti is in use, derived from the Egyptian verb "Ushab", to answer [10]. The figures in the afterlife were those who had to respond to the work duties of the dead.

Another term is shawabti, derived from shawab, the Egyptian word for wood of the perseae-tree. This is because the earliest shabtis were made of wood.

They are small figurines, between about 10 and 25 cm in size. There are also very large shabtis, but they are scarce. As material serve different materials: wax, wood, stone, faience also precious metals. The shabti depicts an image of the owner, usually as mummy but the head uncovered. Often the shabti carries agricultural tools for canal cleaning, one of the main tasks in the Afterlife.

Rarer are shabtis in the costume of the living, furthermore there are 'Rais-shabtis', overseer-shabtis who drive the other shabtis to work (partly with the whip - A vivid picture of the work motivation in ancient Egypt).

# Origins and development of the Shabtis

The little mummy-shaped figures made their first appearance in the Middle Kingdom, around 2000 BC, and were simple, stick-like figures representing the owner of the tomb [10]. It is suspected, that they were derived from servant figurines or Ka-statues already known before. The earliest shabtis were wrapped with linen like a mummy and put in miniature coffins.

At the beginning they originally may have served another purpose: They were miniature effigies of the deceased and could serve as emergency replacement body if the mummy should be destroyed. The Ba-soul could manifest also in a statue. This interpretation of the early shabtis is supported by the fact that they did not carry any agricultural tools. During the Middle Kingdom, the shabtis are only known from private tombs.

It is assumed that the shabtis were produced in workshops that belonged to temples or palaces. The shabtis were partly produced on stock, because the name of the owner was not registered with some pieces. They were also exported to neighbouring countries [10].

At the beginning of the New Kingdom, the first royal shabtis are known, carrying the symbols of the Pharaoh: Sceptres and crowns, as well as the Uraeus-snake at the forehead. Also, the Nemes-head-cloth is popular for shabtis. The shabtis of the 17th dynasty are often made of wood, with flat and unmodelled bodies but often very large feet [10].

The 18th dynasty is of particular importance for the stylistic development; They now have the mummy-shaped form and were produced in more precious materials. Now the shabtis often carry the name of the owner. This fact caused some debate among experts: Is the name a sign, that the figure is the replacement-body of the tomb owner or does the name constitute the ownership?

The change already may have started in the 12th dynasty (Middle Kingdom) with the appearance of the inscription that later will become spell no. 6 of the Book of the Dead in the New Kingdom.

The spell clearly defines, that the shabti is the replacement for the dead in the afterlife, performing unwanted labour duties.

Some shabtis carry a sacrifice formula instead of spell no. 6. In such cases they never carry any agricultural tools.

During the 18th dynasty, some special shabtis were developed: double-shabtis, shabtis on a mummy-bed and even shabtis without a head are known.

They also developed into a popular gift. Thus, the Pharaoh donated shabtis to deserving dignitaries or vice versa.

Also, the holy Apis bull received shabtis, which are also mummiform, but carry a bull head.

There are male and female shabtis, and both can be found in the same funeral.

Shabtis should not be confused with servant figures, which are also given into the tombs. The servant figures serve the tomb owner in the afterlife. The shabtis serve the Gods who call the dead to labour, thus serving in place of the owner.

The peak of quality was reached in the mid-to-late 18th dynasty in the time of Amenhotep III, Akhenaton and Tutankhamun [10].

The work performance of the shabtis seems to have decreased in the 19th dynasty, because around this time we