

Shabtis—Servants in the Afterlife

In Ancient Egypt Shabtis were also called shawabti, ushabti or ushebty, all literally meaning “answerer”. In essence they were small statues placed in the tomb of a mummified person that was believed would assist the deceased in the afterlife by performing the menial labour tasks that the deceased would not like to do. Each would have a spell written on it to assist the figure to come to life as a servant for the deceased at the aid of Osiris the god of the underworld. It would read something like this: “O Shabtis, if the deceased is called upon to do any of the work required there in the necropolis at any time... you shall say, ‘here I am, I will do it’”.

It was after the late period around 747BC that the more common use of Ushabtis (meaning “answerer”) was used. Their tasks were that of food production, tilling of the fields, irrigation and clearing sand from East and West. In the early New Kingdom they were equipped with model hoes and baskets whereas later they carried the tools. Especially avoided by the deceased was the task of *corvee* or cleaning the canals.

In the Old and Middle kingdoms they were thought to provide the food and drinks required to survive in the afterlife. They were usually buried either singularly or maybe in pairs in a miniature coffin, even wrapped like the deceased.

However in the New Kingdom the Shabtis became an essential funerary item, its purpose intensifying. The deceased wanted nothing to do with menial tasks in the afterlife and so the Shabtis rose to a position of importance. One was included for each day (365) and 36 overseers being one for each group of 10 workers. One king even had 1277 shabtis in his tomb. Tutankhamen's tomb held 413 Shabtis with an extra 12 as monthly overseers. The overseers were modelled carrying whips to enforce the required amount of labour for the deceased. The overseers were sometimes in human form while the workers were in mummiform style.

Shabtis played a role in the funerary rites of Ancient Egypt for over 2000 years, with a wide range of designs and materials being used. They were small, being 10-30cm in height, shaped like a mummy, with facial features. Early ones were inscribed with the deceased's name whereas later ones with the spell to bring them to life in the afterlife. The earlier ones had little ornamentation whereas later ones held implements for using to perform their duties.

The shabtis are an important component of artefact and archaeological history in an aid to studying the lifestyles of Egypt. One could observe their farming methods, period dress, social status and wealth all from the style changes over time.

On some occasions the Shabtis were stored in a Shabtis box on which could even be engraved the line of descent of the deceased. This use of boxes to store the Shabtis was thought to derive from the earlier miniature coffin styles.

The earliest were made of wood, and then later replaced with *faience*. *Faience* was a brightly coloured glazed earthenware, which could easily be made in moulds and then painted. It had to be fired at over 1000 degrees and then sand glazed and coloured with cobalt for a blue colour or malachite for a green colour. Later other materials were used, such as wax, stone (steatite, alabaster, limestone), earthenware (mud, clay, terracotta), bronze, ebony or even glass.



With the 19th and 20th Dynasties of the Ramesside period a change from the basic mummy-form shape to a more lifelike shape took place. There were many variations to the positions of the arms, most common being crossed across the chest holding tools or carrying a sack. The practise of embellishing the walls of their tombs with religious symbols, ceremonies, prayers and spells for the dead written in hieroglyphs became known as the *pyramid texts* from the 5th Dynasty on. From the Middle Kingdom on these texts were written on the inside and outside of their coffins and naturally became known as *coffin texts*. However in the New Kingdom the texts were no longer written on the walls nor the coffins but on papyrus scrolls.



Shabtis from the tomb of Tutankhamen.

Bibliography
"Archaeological Diggings" Magazine Vols 11 & 12
Ancient Egypt by Lorna Oakes and Lucia Gahlin