

Shabti

MU514



What is a shabti?

Shabtis, also known as ushabtis or shawabtis, are small funerary figurines that are frequently attested in the archaeological record, commonly being found within funerary contexts. Shabtis are typically mummiform (a figure shaped as though wrapped in bandages) however they can also take the form of the deceased individual or a figure wearing the dress of daily life.

Due to the variation in shabti forms their function is somewhat ambiguous. Often shabtis functioned as a representation of the deceased enabling the *ka* (soul) to receive offerings. However, it was more common for them to function as a substitute for the deceased acting as a servant in food production in the afterlife. Shabtis therefore are frequently depicted holding agricultural tools such as hoes and mattocks and with baskets or seed bags slung over their shoulders, as can be seen in MU514. The function of shabtis becomes somewhat easier to define from the New Kingdom onwards as they begin to appear in tombs as gangs of servants supervised by an 'overseer'. Typically, one overseer shabti (often depicted in daily dress with one hand to the side and the other holding a whip) supervised ten mummiform servant shabtis. From the Middle Kingdom onwards shabtis are also inscribed with a special formula or 'shabti spell' taken from Chapter 6 of *The Book of the Dead*. Shabtis continued to develop and change throughout the Dynastic period and it is these stylistic changes which can be used to construct a typological sequence and assist with dating.

Shabtis were made from a variety of materials including wax, clay, faience, stone, wood, metal and occasionally glass. From the New Kingdom onwards shabtis were generally made from faience and were mould made. This method of manufacture

facilitated the mass-production of shabtis which became necessary as elite burials during the New Kingdom and later periods often contained hundreds of shabtis, with some tombs containing a shabti for each day of the year. With the increase in the number of shabtis per burial they are often found in shrines, stacked in painted boxes, arranged freestanding near the mummy or placed throughout the tomb.

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