Rc-Shabti Article

Uschebtis

Chaouabtis

Shabtis: also ushebtis or shawabtis. The word is ancient Egyptian, and may derive from Egyptian Swb 'stick' originally, perhaps reinterpreted as from Egyptian wSb 'answer', 'respond' in the first millennium BC. Shabtis are small figures of adult male or female form inscribed with a special formula to be recited ([Shabti formula](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/burialcustoms/shabtispell.html)), or figures representing the function expressed in that spell, namely, to carry out heavy manual tasks on behalf of a person in the afterlife. In the New Kingdom (about 1550-1069 BC) and Late Period (about 1550 - 332 BC) these figures were carved in stone or wood or formed in [faience](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/faience/index.html). From the neck down the body was usually in the form of a [mummy](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/mummy/index.html), but at the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty there are also shabtis in daily life dress. Shabtis were usually represented with tools in their hands - baskets, mattocks and hoes. The number of shabtis in a standard elite burial grew over time, from one in the Eighteenth Dynasty, to several in the Nineteenth Dynasty, to one for every day of the year by the Third Intermediate Period. In the early Third Intermediate Period (about 1069-850 BC), there was a special form of shabti with one hand to the side, the other holding a whip. These are 'overseers' to keep control of a set of ten: a typical elite burial would then have thirty-six overseers to keep control of the three hundred and sixty-five ordinary workers. In the Late Period the numbers remained in the hundreds, but the 'overseer' type was no longer used.

*A shabti was an ancient Egyptian funerary figure that both represented the deceased in his or her funerary status and substituted for the deceased in a mummiform shape in order to provide the labor for its master or mistress in the afterlife so that they would not have to be physically burdened. A shabti was expected to present itself on behalf of its master or mistress saying,*

*“I shall do it, here I am,” and after the Middle Kingdom this formulaic incantation, that is known from the Coffin*

*Texts and the Book of the Dead, was actually inscribed on the shabti lest it forget its mission! By the time of the New Kingdom shabtis were dressed in the garb of daily life, emphasizing their primary duty was manual labor. Towards the end of the New Kingdom, the sheer number of shabtis that were placed with burials grew considerably and by the Late Period shabtis had become quasi-slaves of the deceased in the afterlife.*

If confined to statuettes belonging to the tomb equipment (Schlögl 1985: 896), Osirian statuettes buried elsewhere are not to be classified as shabtis (Hayes 1959: 230). But it is difficult to deny, as a rule, votive figurines from various other sacred places the status of sha(wa)btis, several of them being designated as such (see, for example, fig. 1 right). Pumpenmeier (1998) called attention to extra-sepulchral shabti-depositories. The oldest occurrence of the word so far dates from an 11th Dynasty tomb, where *SAbty* is a designation for a member of the household bringing fowl (Budge 1911: pl. 51). On coffins of the Middle Kingdom, the spelling *SAbtyw* is found, seemingly a plural (de Buck *CT VI*: 1a and 2a), but constructed as a singular (Schneider 1977, Vol. 1: 136 - 137). The etymology of the word has been much discussed. There might be a connection with words for food, like *SAbw*, *SAbt*, *Sbw*, *Sbt* (Erman and Grapow *WB IV*: 410, 2.4, 437, 6.10 - 11). An interpretation based upon *SAbt*, “corvée” (Speleers 1923: 88 - 93), turned out to be untenable (Erman and Grapow *Belegstellen WB IV*: 410, 4). Schneider (1977, Vol. 1: 136 - 137) argues for a derivation from *Sbd*, a Semitic loanword meaning “stick,” “staff” (Erman and Grapow *WB IV*: 442, 13). In the 17th Dynasty, the variant spelling *shawabti* turned up (*SAwAbty* or *Swbty*, in case of group-writing). This designation has been connected with the word *shawab*, “persea tree” (Hayes 1953: 326). A shawabti, therefore, would be a “statuette made of persea wood.” However, shabtis of persea wood are virtually absent, as Petrie (1935: 5) already observed. What is more, the rubric of CT Spell 472 stipulates: “to be recited over a statue of the master as he was on earth, made of tamarisk (*jsr*) or zizyphus wood (*nbs*) and placed <in> the chapel of the glorified spirit” (de Buck *CT VI*: 2i - k). Here, too, shawabti may be derived from *Sbd* (Schneider 1977, Vol. 1: 138). During the late New Kingdom, the word *shebti* (*Sbty*) is found, apparently a derivation of the verb *Sbj*, “to replace” (Erman and Grapow *WB IV*: 436, 12: “eine Person ersetzen = an deren Stelle treten”). A shebti, therefore, is a “substitute” for the deceased. Whereas shabti remained in use, the word shawabti gave way to another spelling. From the 21st Dynasty onwards, we usually read *ushebti.* The new expression is obviously a folk-etymology: an ushebti (*wSbty*) was understood as an “answerer” (*wSb*). In the 21st Dynasty, the word occasionally occurred with an extension: *ter-ushebti*. The prefix “*tr*-” (allegedly from *Tnr*, Erman and Grapow *WB V*: 382 - 383; Schneider 1977, Vol. I: 328) qualifies the ushebti as being “diligent.” *Meaning* Shabtis originated from the tomb imagery of the Old Kingdom (Morenz 1975). Their meaning is ambiguous. A shabti represented the deceased, functioning as a vehicle for the *ka*-soul in order to receive offerings. And a shabti substituted the deceased, functioning as a servant involved in food production. Dedication of shabtis by relatives or servants was not unusual in the 2nd millennium BCE. In the 18th Dynasty, these statuettes could also be granted “as a favor by the king.” Since the end of the New Kingdom, the ambiguity was solved in that the individual shabti disappeared in gangs of slaves, supervised by overseer (*reis*) shabtis. Background of the shabti-concept was the need for food that had to be produced in the realm of the dead as well as on earth. Just as the pharaoh imposed conscripted agricultural labor, so did the gods in the hereafter. High officials tried to escape these obligations by a king’s decree (*wD nsw*). In a similar way, dignified deceased persons resorted to an exonerative text, an incantation that was not only recited but, since the Middle Kingdom, written down as well. The purpose of these texts was to avert the burden of menial labor in the hereafter from the deceased to a personal substitute, eventually to masses of slaves. Activities, however, like plowing, sowing, and reaping were commonly accepted in the iconographical repertoire (Spell 110 of the *Book of the Dead* in tombs or on papyri). But the issue here was not menial labor that the deceased was obliged to do. Here it was about an aspect of the blissful life in the Field of Offerings to which the deceased willingly committed himself. Therefore, no shabtis appear in this context (Gesellensetter 2002: 129 note 333 and 148); for the same reason these substitutes were not wanted for eating, drinking, and having sex. The ancient idea of a *ka*-statue representing the owner survived in the dedication of socalled “stick”-shabtis by relatives on the occasion of funerary celebrations in or near tomb-chapels (Whelan 2007: 45 - 47; Willems 2009: 518) and in the votive use of shabtis put in sacred places (Stewart 1995: 10 - 12). In this way the deceased remained present to relatives and stayed in the vicinity of important divine rulers like Osiris (Abydos), Sokar (Saqqara, Giza), and Apis (Serapeum) in whose offering rituals he could partake. *Development* Precursors of the shabtis date from the First Intermediate Period: tiny figures of wax or clay showing the human body as on earth, with legs together and arms by their side. Wrapped in linen, they were placed in little rectangular coffins (Hayes 1953: 326 - 327). The first mummiform statuettes appeared in the 12th and 13th Dynasties (Bourriau 1988). Name and titles occurred occasionally, a (simple) shabti text just in a few cases. Although the rubric of the shabti spell refersto a statue of the master “as he was on earth,” we see the deceased in a *sah*-status (fig. 2), a dignity acquired after mummification. Originally these figurines seemed to represent the deceased person, although the idea of substitution by a servant existed already. After the Middle Kingdom, the shabti phenomenon faded into the background, but it recurred in the 17th Dynasty at Thebes. Most of these shabtis are crudely cut wooden statuettes, so-called “stick”-shabtis (Whelan 2007), placed in little coffins and often inscribed with a short text (fig. 3 left). They have usually been found outside the tombchamber. From the New Kingdom onwards, shabtis generally show an inarticulate body, from which only the head (with wig) protrudes. Often the hands are visible, especially when they hold tools or other attributes. In general, the size varies between a few centimeters and c. 50 cm. One of the largest known statuettes is the shabti of Khebeny (fig. 4), measuring 58.5 cm. Shabtis of Amenhotep III in the Louvre Museum even surpass this giant, one of them measuring 67 cm (Ziegler and Bovot 2006: 102). Royal shabtis are generally marked by regalia like crowns and *nemes*-headdresses. An iconographical novelty that came into being in the New Kingdom gave shabtis their characteristic appearance: the statuettes were carved or painted with agricultural tools like hoes, picks, and bags, but also yokes with waterpots and brick molds (fig. 5 right). Such implements were occasionally added separately as models (fig. 6 inset). Shabtis also grasp attributes like *ankh*-signs, *djed*- and *tit*amulets (fig. 1 left), *hes*-vases (Moje 2008), scepters, and pieces of cloth*.* Occasionally they even embrace a *ba*-bird (fig. 1 right), an image recalling the vignette of Spell 89 of the *Book of the Dead* (Loeben 1987). Special figures have been found, such as animal-headed shabtis (especially from Apis burials at Saqqara), pairs of shabtis, shabtis reclining on biers, and kneeling shabtis grinding corn. After Amarna, a new type appeared, showing the deceased not as a mummy but in the then fashionable clothing (fig. 1). Towards the end of the New Kingdom, the number of shabtis per burial grew considerably, whereas their size decreased proportionally. The so-called “peg”-shabtis (*à contours perdus*) also date from this period (fig. 3 right). The increase in number caused mass production in molds. On the conceptual side, the development was even more drastic, which is reflected in terminology. A *ushebti* is no longer a familiar servant, but an indifferent slave (*Hm*) who has “to answer” (*wSb*) to summons. A slight metathesis in spelling (*Swbty* > *wSbty*) reflects a considerable change in status. When personal ties fade, responsibility wanes. This may have led to the creation of overseer (*reis*) shabtis from Dynasties 20 - 25, clad in daily dress and carrying whips to stress their authority (fig. 5 left). The rare expression *tr*-*wSbty* from the 21st Dynasty may confirm this development. For shabtis, being diligent was no longer a matter of course. In an oracular decree, Amun declares that he will see to it that the *terushebtis* perform their duties for Neskhons. Because it is for her exemption that they were bought (Černỳ 1942, Part 1: 105 - 118). A receipt from the 22nd Dynasty mentions the delivery of no less than 401 ushebtis, “male and female slaves” (*Hmw*, *Hmwt*), 365 workers (one for each day), and 36 overseers (Edwards 1971). It has been suggested that the payment not only compensated the manufacturer but also covered the “wages” of the ushebtis (Taylor 2001: 116; Warburton 1984 – 1985: 345 – 355, 2007: 175 – 179). This view has persistently been contested by Poole (2005: 165 – 170, 2010: 83 – 87). Male and female ushebti-slaves also figure in Spell 166 of the *Chapitres Supplémentaires* (Pleyte 1881, Vol. 2: 58 - 59, Vol. 3: pls. 121 - 123). Since they were bought, they should perform their duties at the right time instead of the deceased whenever he is remembered (Černỳ 1942, Part 2: 118 - 133). Shabtis of this (Third Intermediate) period generally wear a *seshed*band around their head (fig. 6). The general decline in craftsmanship was countered by the rulers of the 25th Dynasty. Kushite statuettes are rather thickset figures (fig. 7). Large stone shabtis even recurred. In the Saite renaissance, a new standard was developed displaying a characteristic feature of ancient statuary: the dorsal pillar (fig. 8), which could be inscribed with the so-called “Saitic formula” (see below). Overseer shabtis cannot be distinguished any longer. Text-versions, too, recalled the past. They resumed the structure of the Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts (Schneider 1977, Vol. 1: 78, 154 - 155). The shabti stands on a pedestal (sometimes *maat*-shaped). The hands grasp two hoes or a hoe and a pick, as well as the rope of a basket hung over the left shoulder (fig. 8). The face displays a “Greek” smile and is adorned with the long Osirian beard, even in the case of women. Individual shabtis can be male or female (mainly marked by the wig, sometimes also by dress or breasts), according to the persons in question. Sexual differentiation among the depersonalized shabtis of the Late Period reflects the general composition of personnel. From the Persian Period onwards, texts also appeared in a T-shaped arrangement (fig. 8 right: horizontal line over a vertical column). *Formulae* Schneider (1977, Vol. I: 81 - 82) distinguishes between seven versions of the spell, each with several variants. The oldest version, CT Spell 472, has been found on two coffins from Deir el-Bersha. The text is a compilation of two variants, concluded by a single rubric (cited above) and introduced (at least in B2L) by a single title, “Spell for causing a shabti to do work for his master in the realm of the dead” (de Buck *CT VI*: 1a). The first variant fell into disuse, the second underwent several adaptations, but had a comeback in the Late Period due to renaissancistic tendencies. In the *Book of the Dead*, the spell occurs occasionally, either separately (Spell 6 of the *Book of the Dead*) or as part of the captions concerning the burial chamber (Spell 151 Ai of the *Book of the Dead*). In the papyrus of Nu, we read: Spell for causing a shawabti to do work in the realm of the dead. To be recited by N: “O these shawabtis, if one counts off the Osiris N to do any work that should be done there in the realm of the dead, and he, indeed, is to obey there in order to act like a man at his duties, then one is counting off in respect of you, at any time on which one should serve, be it tilling the fields, irrigating the riparian lands, transporting by boat the sand of the West (and) of the East, ‘I shall do it, here I am,’ you shall say.” (Spell 6 of the *Book of the Dead*; Lapp 1997: pl. 62). The idiomatic use of *Hwj sDb*, “to obey” (instead of the usual translation “to implant an obstacle”), has been suggested by Heerma van Voss in a Dutch translation of the text on a shabti in a museum in Leeuwarden (Heerma van Voss 1987: 4; further references in Van der Molen 2000: 592). The interpretation of “sand” is quite mysterious (Heerma van Voss 1963). It might be sand from the desert blown over the arable fields that should be removed (Petrie 1935: 10), or material for building dykes around the fields (Schneider 1977, Vol. 1: 59), or some type of fertilizer (Hornung 1979: 48) comparable to the *sebakh* (Barguet 1967: 42) used by present-day *fellahin*. The wording of the spell illustrates that the owner is not playing the part of a landlord demanding statute labor, but that he himself is subject to conscription, for which he is seeking substitution (Bonnet 1952: 849 - 850). From the 17th Dynasty onwards, the spell appeared more regularly on shabtis themselves (e.g., fig. 4). Only a few simple versions are found earlier. During the Middle Kingdom, the inscriptions, if any, were limited to the name (and titles) of the deceased, sometimes introduced by a *hetep di nesut* formula. This offering formula gave way to the introduction *sHD* (Osiris) N, “illuminating (the Osiris) N” or “the illuminated (Osiris) N,” found on most statuettes (Schneider1977, Vol. 1: 128). A variant text has been found on statuettes from Abydos: the “Amenhotep III formula.” Characteristic is the address to the gods at the side of Osiris. They should pronounce the owner’s name in order to secure his share of the evening meals and the offerings at the *Wag*-festival. Principal object of the so-called “Khamuas formula” is the wish to see the sun disk and adore the sun in life. This recalls older formulae under Akhenaten (Martin 1986). Most private shabtis of this period, however, provide the conventional wording. In the “town-god formula” the divinity in question is implored to stand behind the deceased. This is represented iconographically by a dorsal pillar, the *benben* or sun pillar being a manifestation of the town-god. The formula already occurred in the 18th Dynasty, but is often found on the dorsal pillar of Saitic shabtis*.* That is why the “town-god formula” is also known as “Saitic formula.” On the whole, most shabtis display a very short text, often no more than *sHD* plus name. *Material and Manufacture* From the 12th Dynasty to the end of the New Kingdom, statuettes were made of wood, but not exclusively. With the exception of the Second Intermediate Period, there were also stone and faience shabtis. Stone shabtis recurred under the Kushite rulers, whereas the ever popular faience remained in use into the Ptolemaic Period. Other materials were pottery, clay, glass, and bronze. Stone and wooden shabtis were individually cut and carved. Faience figurines were made in molds, after which further details were applied. The finishing touch determined most of the quality. Typical for faience statuettes is their glaze. The shabtis found by thousands in the Deir el-Bahri Caches (Aubert 1998; Janes 2002: xxii - xxv) are renowned for their deep blue glaze. The majority of the Late Period shabtis is green (fig. 8). The value of shabtis was dependent on Figure 9. Shabti of Amenemope/Ipuy next to anthropoid model coffin with inscribed mummy bandages (Nut spell). Wood. Height 18 cm (shabti) and 21 cm (coffin). From Thebes (?). Dynasty 18/19. Leiden, National Museum of Antiquities L.IX.10. Typology 3.1.1.5. material and quality. According to ostracon IFAO 764, the price for 40 shabtis was one *deben* (Janssen 1975: 243). The low price might be an argument for the obtainability of shabtis even for the poor (Poole 1999: 109; contra Schneider 1977, Vol. 1: 9: “Shabtis for the poor never existed”). However, the entire ostracon deals with decoration prices only (Cooney 2007: 32). The “bill of sale for a set of ushabtis” (Edwards 1971) does not mention a price, unfortunately. *Storage* Mass production also influenced the storage of shabtis. In the Middle and New Kingdom, individual shabtis were placed, like mummies, in miniature coffins (fig. 9) or, like divine images, in little shrines with vaulted lids. Originally the coffins were rectangular, later *rishi*-shaped and anthropoid. In the Ramesside Period, shabtis were also stored in pottery jars locked with jackal-headed lids (to be distinguished from Duamutef canopic jars). With the increase in number of shabtis per burial, they were stored in multiple shrines and eventually stacked in painted boxes (fig. 10; Aston 1994). Shabtis have also been found freestanding near the mummy, in holes, or arrayed elsewhere in or in the vicinity of the tomb. They have also been dug out from depositories at other sacrosanct places (Pumpenmeier 1998). From ostracon Turin 57387 may be inferred that shabti box and shabtis were bought together (Cooney 2007: 32). *Typology* In his study on the Leiden shabtis, Schneider (1977, Vol. II: Chapter IV, pp. 22 - 24: Arrangement of the Catalogue) established a general typology starting with an indication of period, material, and iconography (see table 2), followed by a sequence number of the Leiden Collection. Further information is classified in section and type codes, such as class (Cl.), wigs (W), hand positions (H), implements (I), bags and baskets (B), attributes (A), text position (Tp), and version of the shabti spell (V). Finally, specific data about the object are given. In view of digitalization, a new typology is being developed (see *Bibliographic Notes*).

**Period -- Material -- Iconography**

1 Middle Kingdom 1 wood 0 royal persons

2 Second Intermediate Period 2 stone 1 private persons, mummiform, name

mentioned

3 New Kingdom 3 faience 2 private persons, mummiform, name

illegible

4 Third Intermediate Period 4 glass 3 private persons, mummiform,

anonymous

5 Late - Ptolemaic Period 5 pottery 4 private persons, mummiform,

uninscribed

6 mud 5 private persons, dress of daily life,

name mentioned

7 bronze 6 private persons, dress of daily life,

name illegible

8 others 7 private persons, dress of daily life,

anonymous

Table 2. Main lines of a general typology of shabtis as developed by Schneider (1977).

*Bibliographic Notes*

So many shabtis, so many shabti publications! In 1952 Hans Bonnet gave an outstanding

summary of the previous and current theories. An update appeared in the *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*

(Schlögl 1985). In the meantime, Jacques and Liliane Aubert had published an extensive book on

shabtis (Aubert and Aubert 1974).

Fundamental, is the study by Hans Schneider (1977). Apart from substantial historical and religio-historical research, he developed a typology (Schneider 1977, Vol. 1: chapter IV) in order to make elaborate and repetitive descriptions of the

abundant material superfluous. He submitted the collection of the National Museum of

Antiquities in Leiden to this procedure (Schneider 1977, Vol. 2: passim) and made it manageable

by means of key pages with outlines of the various types (Schneider 1977, Vol. 3; adopted in Janes

2002: 227 - 249).

The building of databases and the use of the Internet required an adaptive

approach. An international working-group developed a new typology (“grille de saisie”) and

established a shabti-database: *Base Internationale des Shaouabtis (BIS).* From 1987 to 2007, Jean-Luc

Chappaz, member of the working-group, published a very useful Annual Index of shabti figures

in the Genevan *Bulletin de la Société d’Egyptologie.* The digital continuation of this work (*la base sehedj*)

as well as the shabti database just mentioned can be found at the website of the Société

d’Egyptologie, Genève.

In the series *Corpus Antiquitatum Aegyptiacarum*, several shabti collections

were made accessible, e.g., the shabti collections in the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam

(Van Haarlem 1990), the Etnografisk Museum in Oslo (Naguib 1985), the Kunsthistorisches

Museum in Vienna (Reiser-Haslauer 1990, 1992), and museums in the Rhine-Main region

(Schlick-Nolte and von Droste zu Hülshoff 1984). Schlögl (2000) published the collections in

Kraków. The collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris has been described by Aubert and

Aubert (2005). Apart from the collection of the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire in Geneva, Chappaz

(1984) also brought specimens from private collections to light. So did Janes (2002), Schlögl and

Brodbeck (1990), as well as Schlögl and Meves-Schlögl (1993). Shabtis have been studied from

different angles: stick shabtis (Whelan 2007; Willems 2009), royal shabtis (Bovot 2003, Clayton

1972), shabtis from the world of Amenhotep III (Kozloff and Bryan 1992, Chapter X: 305 - 330),

shabtis from the Amarna Period (Martin 1986), shabtis from Deir el-Medina (Valbelle 1972), and

shabtis from the Caches of Deir el-Bahri (Aubert 1998). Excellent overviews appeared in the

Shire Egyptology series (Stewart 1995) and in a chapter devoted to “Funerary Figurines” in *Death*

*and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt* by John Taylor (2001).

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