

FAIENCE USHABTI: THE PURPOSE AND RELIGION OF THE EGYPTIAN USHABTI

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*1ST PLACE
DUNHAM BIBLE MUSEUM*

Between the magnificent architecture of the pyramids, the god-like authority of the pharaohs, and the perplexity of their prehistoric religions the world of ancient Egypt has become a place filled with intriguing mysteries. Expedition after expedition led by courageous men and women brought many of these secrets to light, and in the course of doing this, have also brought many artifacts to museums as well. One such artifact finds its current resting place in the Dunham Bible Museum at Houston Baptist University. Piece 06.21 from the Gerald and Nancy Bodey Collection is an ancient Egyptian ushabti from the 26th Dynasty. A ushabti is a type of ancient Egyptian grave good which was buried in the tomb for use in the afterlife. The informational plaque found in the display case simply says, "Faience ushabti (a funeral piece), 663-525 B.C." The dates listed coincide with the 26th dynasty almost exactly (Dodson/Hilton, 242). This small plaque opens the door to the large ancient mysteries of Egypt and begins the conversation between this modern world and that culture which passed on many centuries ago. Truly, the Bodey Ushabti is an authentic ancient Egyptian grave good which serves to illuminate the culture and religion of that time.

Before an examination of the deeper historical context of the Ushabti, it is proper that its observable physical condition be studied first. The Bodey Ushabti is a typical example indicative of similar artifacts. Like most of the others, it is a human body in a position similar to that of a mummy. Its height is around five to six inches tall while its width is close to an inch and a half at its shoulders, although it does get significantly slimmer towards the feet. The feet themselves run into a rectangular base leading into a back pillar which runs up the entirety of the figure's body up to the neck. The head is covered by a lappet wig, "so called because the hair was divided in two lappets in the front with the remainder at the back" (Stewart, 35). Facial features, while not very detailed, are clearly visible in addition to a beard. Moving down to the torso, the Bodey Ushabti has his arms crossed across his chest with farming and agriculture tools in both of his hands in addition to a bag thrown over his left shoulder. Below his waist there are writings done in a "T-shape" pattern going across the waist and down the entirety of the legs. The figure itself is constructed out of a man-made synthetic material called faience. The process of ancient Egyptian faience making is described succinctly by Harry Stewart in his book, *Egyptian Shabtis*, where he writes that they are made out of "a core of granular quartz or sand, fused with an alkaline binding agent such as natron or plant ash. On firing, the sodium component in the binder concentrated in the surface to produce a glaze. Various colours of glaze were achieved by applying a powdered frit containing copper and other compounds before firing" (Stewart, 42). This process was relatively easy to mass produce and thus there are many faience ushabtis from ancient Egyptian civilization. Due to its construction the Bodey Ushabti has a faded blue-green hue with a glass-like texture and the distinctive glaze finish common of Egyptian faience artifacts.

The first examples of figures being buried with a person date back to the 9th and 11th dynasties of Egyptian rulers. However, they “gave no indication of their purpose,” meaning that “it is possible that at this stage they were intended simply to preserve the image of the deceased” (Stewart, 14). By the 12th dynasty the specific purpose was made clear by certain texts and they were first called “shabtis” which was to become “ushabtis” later. The illuminating text, now called the Shabti Spell, “which was cut or written on a figure from the 12th dynasty onwards, explains quite clearly the purpose which they were intended to serve, for in it the figure is called upon, in the name of the deceased person written upon it, to perform whatsoever labours he might be adjudged to do in the Other World” (*Osiris & the Egyptian Resurrection*, 216). The religious meaning behind the ushabtis became apparent, but this will be discussed later. Throughout the next several dynasties they went through many different constructions, but aside from the change in materials they stayed basically the same. By the 18th dynasty they were becoming more detailed with religious and agricultural objects being put in their hands. While there were several diversions in form after that, by the 21st dynasty the mass production of ushabtis was increasing and, “styles again became more uniform” (Stewart, 23). The following period of time was filled with national division and strife thus causing little development of any notable degree until the 25th and 26th dynasties. The reunification of Egypt during the 25th dynasty specifically “brought about a nostalgic return to the artistic manners of earlier times” (Stewart, 28). It was also during this time that the back pillar was added to the ushabtis. The 27th dynasty introduced several innovations, the most notable of these being the popularization of the inscription being in a T-shape. This is where one line goes across the body while another line goes down the leg thus forming the letter. These, however, were the last new changes and ushabtis took on the same general form, that being a mummy-like body, T-shape writing, back pillar, and square base. The only important differences were the size and quality of the artifacts.

As stated earlier, the writings on the ushabtis connect them to the broader religion of the afterlife held by the Egyptians. The spell itself says that if the deceased is called to do any type of work after death by the god of the dead, Osiris, the ushabti will instead go and do the work on the deceased behalf. Osiris is a very interesting god in ancient Egyptian religion who easily could have his own paper, but in brief, “He represented to man the idea of a man who was both god and man, and he typified to the Egyptians of all ages the being who by reason of his sufferings and death as a man could sympathize with them in their own sickness and death” (*Egyptian Ideas of the Afterlife*, 59). It was the hope of the Egyptians that through piousness in life and a proper burial they would be resurrected by Osiris and given eternal life (*Egyptian Ideas of the Afterlife*, 61). Because of this, “Egyptian burial rites were based upon this legend [the story of Osiris' sufferings]” (Mackenzie, 24). However, it was the ushabti's responsibility to allow the deceased to spend that time in leisure.

In conclusion the Bodey Ushabti does seem to be a wonderful example of the typical grave good of the 26th dynasty with a singular exception. The puzzling thing about this artifact is that its inscription is in the T-shape which only came into popularity in the 27th dynasty. This raises concerns over the accuracy of the plaque. The artifact may actually be from the following dynasty, but of course nothing is conclusive. Aside from this one mystery which could use further examination, the artifact is a beautiful example of mystery hidden in plain sight. The Bodey Ushabti offers a fascinating path to a world now long forgotten by the overcharging favors of fortune.

Works Cited

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