

# Shabtis: Information Pack

## Overview

In the afterlife, the deceased needed – and wanted – all the things that they had enjoyed during their life, whether food, clothes, etc. However, all of these goods needed to be produced and the deceased did not want to spend all their time in the afterlife working. Instead, they made sure their tombs were equipped with figures who would do this work for them. In the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2050–1550 BC), wooden models of people undertaking a range of activities served this purpose. After this date, tomb owners instead used shabtis – small figures in the shape of a mummy that would carry out a whole range of menial tasks. Ideally, a complete set would have one worker per day (365) plus overseer shabtis (36) – amounting to over 400 figures in total!



## Spell 6: Book of the Dead

In order to bring the shabti to life, a spell was written on the figures – this could be painted or carved on the figure. The spell in question is referred to as Spell 6 from the Book of the Dead (see 'Book of the Dead: Information Pack'), which reads:

*O Shabti, If 'the deceased' be summoned*

*To do any work which has to be done in the realm of the dead*

*To make arable the fields,*

*to irrigate the land,*

*or to convey sand from East to West;*

*"Here I Am", you shall say, "I Shall Do It"*

Not all shabtis had this spell, some only had the title and name of their owner.



## Materials and Variety

### Materials

Shabtis could be made in a range of materials. The most common material is faience\*, normally in blue or green. But they could also be made from stone, pottery, wood, etc.

The shabti on the left is made of faience with incised hieroglyphs, the one on the right is wooden with painted decoration and text.

### Quality

A huge range of quality is found in shabtis, depending on what the tomb owner (the deceased) could afford. Some items are intricately carved, others are crudely formed and unevenly shaped – so that they're hardly recognizable. The quality didn't matter – they all worked the same in the afterlife!



## Faience: What is it?

Faience is a non-clay ceramic material, which gets its name as a result of confusion with a similar material from Faenza, Italy. The raw materials are sand, lime, and soda, mixed into a dough and shaped. The glaze is either applied to the surface before firing (like pottery) or added into the mixture. In the latter case, the minerals effloresce to the surface and fuse to form a glaze.



## Examples of Shabtis in UK Museums

The huge numbers of shabtis produced in ancient Egypt means that most museum collections have them, and objects can be found on the online catalogues of many museums, e.g.:

**British Museum:** <https://www.britishmuseum.org/research.aspx>

**Liverpool World Museum:** <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/wml/collections/antiquities/ancient-egypt/>

**Petrie Museum, London:** <http://petriecat.museums.ucl.ac.uk>

## Possible Points for Exploration

### Agriculture

The most common task that shabtis would have had to undertake were agricultural, to make sure that the deceased had enough to eat. Tomb scenes often show farming scenes (see below) – note that the tomb shows the deceased working, but these duties would actually be done by shabtis in the afterlife. This topic can lead to discussions on food and the importance of the harvest in Egypt, and how it was all controlled by the flooding of the Nile Valley.

