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SHABTI FIGURES AH46



These small figurines in the shape of mummies were often placed in the tombs of the dead. They were made from a variety of materials including stone, wood, pottery and even mud. The earliest ones date from the Middle Kingdom (c. 2040-1750 BC). Their meaning probably changed over time, however from the New kingdom onwards they are thought to have been designed to act as servants for the dead person. It was believed that everyone, even pharaohs, had to help with agricultural duties such as ploughing, sowing and reaping crops in the Afterlife. However these statues, known as *shabtis* or *ushabtis,* meaning 'answerer' were thought to be able to undertake this work on behalf of the deceased. Some of them hold tools for farming in their hands such as hoes, picks or baskets. Indeed a basket can be seen painted on the back of the coarsest one. Examples are also sometimes decorated with the name of the dead person, or have a magic spell carved or painted onto the body of the statue.The

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spell is usually from the Egyptian Book Of The Dead, a collection of spells to help the spirits of the dead pass through the Underworld. It commands the shabti figure to come to life and do the work that the owner asks of it.

In some tombs in the later period 365 shabtis were placed inside, one to do work on every day of the year. Sometimes overseer figures were also included to instruct the other shabtis. They can be told apart from the others as they often carry whips and are usually shown in normal dress, rather than as a mummy. Typically one overseer was included for each group of ten workers. How many shabtis and overseers would you expect to get in a complete set?

