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A RECYCLED STICK SHABTI IN IPSWICH MUSEUM, ENGLAND

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Among the Egyptian objects in the Ipswich Museum, Suffolk is a crudely fashioned wooden statuette – almost certainly a shabti – that bears two quite different sets of inscriptions, one written in hieratic and another in more regular hieroglyphs. Its history can only be guessed, but there is good reason to believe that it was made sometime in the late 17th or early 18th Dynasty and then re-used very much later, as the following investigation will attempt to show.

Measuring 28.9 cm high, 6.9 cm (max) wide, and 7.3 cm in depth the statuette bears the accession number R.1992.89.40 (fig. 1)¹. Regrettably, the museum's object register provides no information about its provenance or the route by which it entered the collection. Many objects in the museum did come from excavations of the Egypt Exploration Fund and British School of Archaeology in Egypt, but no link with either has been found for R.1992.89.40².

The statuette represents a rudimentary mummiform figure fashioned by an adze or chisel from a single piece of wood with coarse strokes that has produced a multi-faceted surface which displays little or no smoothing. No painted decoration is visible other than traces of a black substance, pitch or resin perhaps, thinly covering much of the surface, most prominently on the back. The figure was once wrapped from head to foot in linen, fragments of which still adhere firmly to its surface in several places (see fig. 1). The species of timber has yet to be scientifically identified, but from its fairly pale yellowy colour and grain pattern it resembles one of the native Egyptian trees, perhaps sycamore fig or tamarisk³.

¹ I am indebted to Margaret Serpico, who first documented this object as part of the Accessing Virtual Egypt website project, for taking the images used in this article and for providing me with registration details of the object prior to my visit to the Ipswich Museum. The images published here are courtesy of Ipswich Borough Council Museums and Galleries; I would also like to thank Sally Dummer for her assistance during my visit to the museum.

² Information provided by M. Serpico.

³ Used almost exclusively for coffins and at least some wooden shabtis at Thebes during the late Second Intermediate Period. No comprehensive scientific study of wooden shabtis has been undertaken (see discussion with references in: P. WHELAN, *Mere Scraps of Rough Wood? 17th-18th Dynasty Stick Shabtis in the Petrie Museum and other Collections*, London 2007, p. 25), though it seems likely that they would be the same woods as were used for Theban coffins of the 17th and early 18th Dynasties, for which see: W.V. DAVIES, «Ancient Egyptian Timber Imports. An Analysis of Wooden Coffins in the British Museum», in W.V. DAVIES, L. SCHOFIELD (eds.), *Egypt, the Aegean and the Levant - Interconnections in the Second Millennium*



Fig. 1 - Ipswich Museum R.1992.89.40.

Three vertical columns of cursive hieroglyphs boldly written in black pigment extend down the front and sides of the figure; one on either side extend from the head to just above the feet and a central column starts at the waist and finishes at the point where the projection of the feet begins. The lower part of this central inscription is faded and the traces cannot be read. Six horizontal lines of faded/worn hieratic inscription, again in black, partly masked in places by patches of linen run across the chest and just above the central column.

Despite the lack of a firm provenance, the statuette displays several distinctive characteristics of the so-called Theban stick shabtis of the late 17th and early 18th Dynasties which have been recovered in large numbers from documented excavations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and also through the antiquities trade⁴. Firstly, the same method has been

BC, London 1995, pp. 147-148; A. GRIMM, S. SCHOSKE, *Im Zeichen des Mondes. Ägypten zu Beginn des Neuen Reiches*, Munich 1999, p. 27; K. EREMIN, E. GORING, B. MANLEY, C. CARTWRIGHT, «A 17th Dynasty Egyptian Queen in Edinburgh?», *KMT* 11, 3 (2000), p. 37.

⁴ For a discussion of this type of shabti see: P. WHELAN, *Mere Scraps of Rough Wood?* Also *ibid.*, pp. 1-22 for details of the documented excavations and pp. 48-51 for evidence of stick shabtis acquired on the antiquities market.

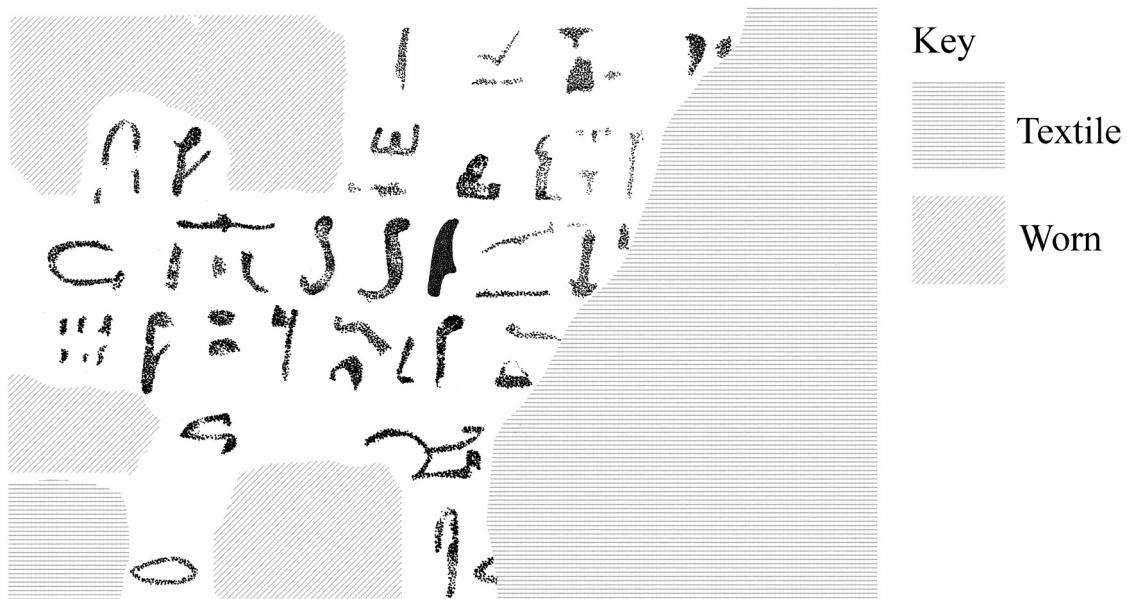


Fig. 2 - Hand copy of the hieratic inscription on Ipswich Museum R.1992.89.40.

used to shape the body; a triangular wedge of wood removed from the upper half creates the swell of the chest and an undercut forms the neck and chin. Another wedge removed from the lower half forms the taper of the legs and the undefined stub of the feet. The triangular shape of the face, simply achieved with three bold cuts, is also one of the most frequently found on stick shabtis⁵. The height of the figure, while on the large size, can be compared to a few stick shabtis⁶. Secondly, the figure's linen wrappings are a characteristic of many stick shabtis, presumably symbolising the actual bandaging/shroud of the deceased; even the application of resin/bitumen is not unknown for stick shabtis and/or their miniature coffins⁷. Thirdly and perhaps most significantly, are the horizontal lines of hieratic inscription. It is relatively rare to find shabtis of wood, or indeed of any material, with hieratic inscriptions; of those that are known only Theban stick shabtis share the other specific characteristics with Ipswich R.1992.89.40⁸. The exposed portions of the text are too faded to be absolutely certain of their content, but given their context and from a few sign groups that can be fairly confidently identified (see fig. 2 and below) it seems that here is a version of the shabti spell.

⁵ Style «C» in a typology established for eleven of the most frequently repeated stick shabti head styles, in P. WHELAN, *Mere Scraps of Rough Wood?*, pp. 38-39, fig. 23.

⁶ CG 47916, P. NEWBERRY, *Funerary Statuettes and Model Sarcophagi, Catalogue général des Antiquités égyptiennes du musée du Caire Nos.46530-48575*, Cairo 1930-1957, p. 269, pl. IV, VII; Petrie Museum UC 40211 - 26.2 cm, P. WHELAN, *Mere Scraps of Rough Wood?*, pp. 116-117.

⁷ P. WHELAN, *Mere Scraps of Rough Wood?*, pp. 36-37.

⁸ Besides the Theban stick variety, the largest homogenous group of wooden shabtis dates to the 19th Dynasty and comes from Sedment (W.M.F. PETRIE, G. BRUNTON, *Sedment II*, BSAE 35, London 1924, pls. LXXVII-LXXVIII). These are similarly crude, but their overall body styling and decoration is noticeably different to stick shabtis.

The inscription's position written only on the upper half of the figure would be rather unusual for most shabtis, but is not at all uncommon for stick shabtis⁹ on which the spell, offering formula and/or short dedication is often confined to the top half of the figure, leaving the lower half untouched¹⁰.

The Inscriptions

Horizontal lines:

- 1) [.....] *i* [.....]
- 2) [.....š3w3] *bty*¹ [*i*] *pn* [.....] *is* (?)² [...]
- 3) [.....]³ *im m s* ⁴ *r* [.....]
- 4) [.....] *imntt i3btt* (?)⁵
- 5) [.....] *hnt*⁶ [...](š)^c(y) (?)⁷
- 6) [.....] ? *s*⁸ [...] *r* [.....]

Notes to transliteration:

1) These few signs could be final part of the word «shabti» followed by the demonstrative pronoun (*i*)*pn*, «these shabtis». Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine if «*shawabty*» – the version of the name most common to stick shabtis – is the spelling here. The position of this sign group in the second line would indicate that there was a preliminary element to the composition (which probably included the name of the owner) preceding the start of the shabti spell proper.

2) This could be the partially preserved writing of the particle *ist* «now», opening the sentence *ist h w sdb(w) im m s ...*, «Now, indeed obstacles are implanted (against me) therewith – as a man...», which would fit with the suggested interpretation of certain signs on the following line (see next two notes). However, the obstacle clause is not usually expected on stick shabtis (for the variations of the spell on stick shabtis see: H. Schneider, *Shabtis* I, pp. 83-92) and it may be a slightly corrupted version of *r irt k3(wt) nb(wt) irr(w)t im m hrt ntr s* «to do the works which are wont to be done there in the God's land, as a man...» (*ibid.*, p. 88), where the phrase «God's land» (*hrt ntr*) is missing. Since many variants are known for the spell on stick shabtis, it is also possible that this is yet another variant which includes the obstacle clause found on other early 18th Dynasty shabtis (not stick type) (for examples: *ibid.* pp. 96-100).

3) The remains of two tall signs followed by two horizontal may belong to the word *sdb(w)* «obstacles» which would fit with the following sign groups and appears in the earliest versions of the shabti spell (*ibid.*, p. 83 and 145).

⁹ For example: P. WHELAN, *Mere Scraps of Rough Wood?*, p. 74 (Petrie Museum UC 40180); 112 (Petrie Museum UC 40208); 114-115 (Petrie Museum UC 40210); 119-120 (Petrie Museum UC 40212-40213); 127 (Fitzwilliam Museum E.79-1955).

¹⁰ This particular text position is not indicated in Hans Schneider's otherwise comprehensive chart; the closest parallel published by him is a stick shabti, see: H.D. SCHNEIDER, *Shabtis - An Introduction to the History of Ancient Egyptian Funerary Statuettes with A Catalogue of the Collection of Shabtis in the National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden* I-III, Leiden 1977, vol. III, fig. 18 1a. This publication also includes the most comprehensive study of the shabti spell and its variants (I, pp. 49-158).

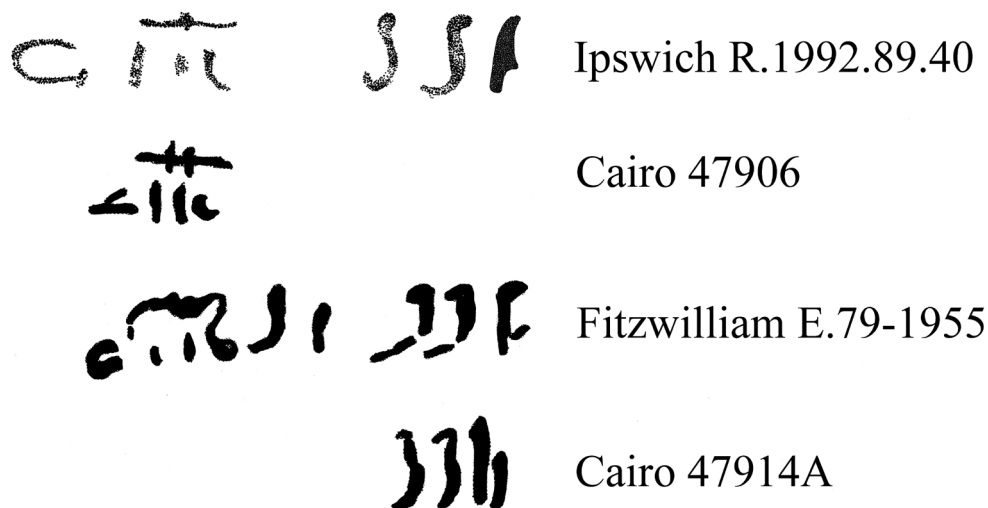


Fig. 3 - Palaeographic comparisons of the phrase *im m s r*.

4) The clearest group of signs *im m s* are most likely from the clause(s) mentioned in note 2 and their location within the body of inscription is also in keeping with where one would generally expect them to be in shabti spells. Close palaeographic parallels for the writing of these two sign groups can be found on stick shabtis (fig. 3) for example Cairo 47906 and 47914A (P. Newberry, *Funerary Statuettes and Model Sarcophagi*, p. 265, pls. II, V and p. 268 pls. II, VI respectively); Fitzwilliam Museum E.79-1955 (P. Whelan, *Mere Scraps of Rough Wood?* pp. 127-128). Furthermore, the *r* sign following this group may be from the phrase *r hrt.f* «at his duties» which usually follows *im m s*.

5) The interpretation of signs here is tentatively proposed as «*imntt*» «west» and «*i3btt*» «east»; both would be a logical contextual fit in the latter half of the spell; unfortunately, the preceding group of signs are too faint and uncertain to corroborate this suggestion.

6) This unclear sign(s) may represent the arms and oar (D33) and water (N35) writing *hnt* «transport by boat».

7) The arm sign (D36) here fits with the expected word *s'y* «sand».

8) The final line partially preserves only three signs, the first of which is incomplete. The two clearer signs, *s* and *r*, may be part of a closing dedication common to stick shabtis, *s'nh rn.fNN* «who makes his name live». This dedication was usually made by the brother or sister of the deceased whose name precedes it, and possibly therefore the incompletely preserved sign is the seated man determinative from this name.

Most of the interpretations proposed above hinge upon the only clearly preserved group of signs *im m s* in line 3, but this in itself is enough to be certain that the text is a version of the shabti spell and no reason to doubt that it dates to the late 17th or early 18th Dynasty. The two better preserved hieroglyphic inscriptions are quite a different matter.

Both vertical columns:

- 1) *3sir ntr nfr in imn* [.....]
- 2) *sš (?)ⁱ n m3^ct n t (?) dhwtj (?) nb hr (?)ⁱⁱ 3sir w^cbⁱⁱⁱ n ^c im3hy*
- 3) Same as line 2

Notes to transliteration:

i) The clearly written sign on the left may be understood as a curious version of the scribe sign (Gardiner Y3) or as an equally peculiar seated man determinative (A1) accompanied by the bolt of cloth (S29); the latter sign could indicate that it belongs to the «s» ending of a name, the rest of which is written in the now obscured lower part of the central column.

ii) This whole section makes little sense and even the ibis bird of the proposed determinative for *dhwtj* is not certain.

iii) This sign vaguely resembles the combined mace and cobra sign (T5) «*hd*» or a version of the combined leg and water pot (D60) «*w^cb*», «pure» (this is more suitable given the signs following it, though if this is the D60 sign the water is pouring in the wrong direction!).

Translation:

- 1) The Osiris, good god, by Amun^a [.....]
- 2) The «scribe of truth»^b of (?) Thoth (?) lord under Osiris, pure of hand, the venerated (one)^c
- 3) Same as line 2

Notes to translation:

a) The Osiris title on shabtis is followed by the name and titles of the deceased, but one would not expect to find the «good god» element between. The position of Amun following «God (epithet) + *in*» implies that it is part of a name or title (for an example of a rare shabti formula with «*3sir in TN*» preceded by «Osiris» see: H.D. Schneider, *Shabtis* I, p. 130 and 135).

b) Although uncommon, the title «scribe of truth» is attested in Theban tomb 131 (E. Dziobek, *Die Gräber des Vezirs User-Amun Theben Nr. 61 & 131*, AV 84, p. 71).

c) This epithet on shabtis is extremely uncommon after the Middle Kingdom (H.D. Schneider, *Shabtis* I, p. 62).

Conclusion

The recycling of shabtis in the pharaonic period is certainly a well attested phenomenon with one of the most blatant usurpations being the conversion of a wooden statuette of Ramesses II into an Osiris figure in the Third Intermediate Period¹¹. But while elements of the vertical text are not entirely nonsensical, overall there are too many orthographic and grammatical peculiarities to believe this to be a genuine ancient text. One could make a case

¹¹ D.A. ASTON, «Two Osiris Figures of the Third Intermediate Period», *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 77 (1991), pp. 95-107. For shabti re-use in the Ptolemaic Period, G. MASPERO, «Une variété de figurines funéraires inconnue jusq' à présent», *Annales du Service des antiquités de l'Égypte* IX (1908), pp. 285-286.

for the usurpation having occurred in the Ptolemaic or Roman Period when the accuracy of an inscription on a shabti was perhaps less important and sometimes was even written with pseudo-hieroglyphs¹². However, in this instance I believe the re-use of Ipswich R.1992.89.40 occurred in the modern era and the hieroglyphic inscription added by an antiquities seller, possibly in Luxor, who composed it from various words and phrases taken from other inscribed objects/monuments accessible to him in order to enhance an otherwise crude object bearing a faded hieratic text. The addition of more recognisable hieroglyphic inscriptions, albeit not entirely accurate, would have increased the shabti's appeal to a wider range of potential customers. In this scenario, one would imagine that many other stick shabtis were similarly enhanced, but Ipswich R.1992.89.40 is so far a rare, if not unique, example of this practice; most stick shabtis sold by locals at Thebes during the late nineteenth century were left untouched and were undoubtedly quite popular to western collectors. Indeed, the vast majority of examples in the largest single collection of stick shabtis – that formed by Flinders Petrie and now in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology London – were purchased at Thebes¹³.

In conclusion, Ipswich R.1992.89.40 can confidently be added to the already considerable corpus of late 17th - early 18th Dynasty Theban stick shabtis and though we may not know the name of its original owner or the provenance, we have evidence of an interesting, and so far unique, aspect of its more recent history.

¹² H.D. SCHNEIDER, *Shabtis I*, pp. 348-349.

¹³ W.M.F. PETRIE, *Shabtis, illustrated by the Egyptian Collection in University College, London. With a Catalogue of Figures from Many Other Sources*, BSAE 57 London 1935, p. 3.

