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Photographer: André Longchamp

Shabti of pharaoh Siptah  
FGA-ARCH-EG-0406  
New Kingdom, Dynasty 19, reign of pharaoh Siptah (about 1193-1187 B.C)  
Travertine (alabaster)  
21.6 cm in height

**GEOGRAPHICAL ORIGIN**

Egypt, Western Thebes, Valley of the Kings, KV 47

**PROVENANCE**

Theodore Davis, discovered by him in 1912 in the Tomb of Pharaoh Siptah (KV 47) in Western Thebes, the Valley of the Kings  
American private collection, by descent  
Antiquarium, Ltd., New York, 1992  
Sotheby's [New York], *Antiquities*, 08.12.2010, lot n° 75.

**PREVIOUS PUBLICATIONS**

BURTON, H. and WINLOCK, H.E., « The late Theodore M. Davis's excavations at Thebes in 1912-13. The excavation of the rear corridors and sepulchral chamber of the tomb of King Siptah », *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n° 11 (1), 1916, p. 13-18  
Sotheby's [New York], *Antiquities*, 08.12.2010, lot n° 75.

### INTRIGUE AT THE COURT OF PHARAOH SIPTAH

Upon the death from natural causes of Pharaoh Sety II of Dynasty XIX (about 1193 B.C.), Siptah, his successor, a teenager who suffered from a deformed left leg revealed by a forensic examination of his mummy, was installed as pharaoh under the supervision of Queen Tawesret acting as his regent.<sup>1</sup> The Chancellor Bey attempted to manipulate the monarchy behind the scenes.<sup>2</sup> These machinations of Bey resulted in his assassination as reported by Paser, one of the officials in charge of the craftsmen working on the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings.<sup>3</sup> Siptah died within the following year and was presumably buried<sup>4</sup> in Tomb 47<sup>5</sup> of the Valley of the Kings, the excavation of which began on 18 December 1905<sup>6</sup> and resumed in 1912 and 1913.<sup>7</sup> Among the funerary objects associated with the burial of Pharaoh Siptah were a number of funerary statuettes,<sup>8</sup> termed shabtis. Shabtis, together with amulets and scarabs, are statistically among the three most numerous types of ancient Egyptian works of art to have survived from antiquity.

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### SHABTIS-A DEFINITION

Mummiform funerary statuettes are generally labeled shabtis, although their Egyptian name evolved over time.<sup>9</sup> Each of the earliest examples, which date to the Middle Kingdom (about 2000-1800 BC), was called a *shabti*, literally, “stick,” because it was literally made from a roughly shaped piece of wood that looks like a modern stick. From the Second Intermediate Period (about 1800-1500 BC) the ancient Egyptian word used was *shawabti*, perhaps derived from the Egyptian noun for the wood of the persea tree. Spells associated with shabtis from this period often specify that they should be made of wood,<sup>10</sup> but in practice shabtis were crafted from almost every imaginable type of material including various types of stone, faience, wax, and even mud.<sup>11</sup> Although shabti continued to be employed as the ancient Egyptian noun for such statuettes, another noun, *shebti*, “substitute,” was introduced during the late New Kingdom (about 1200-1000 B.C.). The fourth name for these funerary statuettes, introduced during the Late Period (after 650 BC), was *ushabti*, “the one who answers.” As a result, there is no agreement about the spelling of the name of these objects, which varies from author to author and from modern language to modern language. For the sake of convenience, we have elected to call such figures shabtis.

### SHABTIS-THEIR FUNCTION

The first reliable indication of the function of a shabti occurs during the course of Dynasty XVIII (about 1550-1291 BC) when these figures are associated with special tasks represented by the agricultural tools they hold, generally hoes and baskets, and with particular religious texts such as Chapter 6 of the so-called *Book of the Dead*.<sup>12</sup> The significance of those implements and spells derived from the ancient Egyptian belief that aspects of people’s daily lives would be replicated in the hereafter. One of the recurring practices to which they were exposed in life was the *corvée*,<sup>13</sup> a French term adopted by Egyptologists, to define the practice by which ancient Egyptians could be periodically drafted to perform compulsory labor on public works projects, as the title of one of these spells makes explicit: *A spell for causing a shabti to do work for his master in the Hereafter*.<sup>14</sup> The shabti was believed to magically come to life in order to serve as a surrogate for the deceased so that the shabti could *perform any unpleasant task imposed upon the deceased*, including the enigmatic task of *ferrying sand from the east to the west and vice-versa*.<sup>15</sup> The purpose of moving that sand remains inexplicable but may be related to keeping the irrigation canals free from blockages in order to insure a sufficient supply of water to irrigate the land, assuring Egypt’s agricultural prosperity. Such imagined obligatory, forced labor in the hereafter was so distasteful that the deceased was often interred with a work force of 365 shabtis, one for every day of the Egyptian calendar year. Nevertheless, it would appear that even the shabtis were reluctant to show up for work. Consequently, they in turn were often accompanied by 36 shabtis designed as foremen to guard against absenteeism. Pharaoh himself was not exempt from the conscription in the hereafter. Pharaoh Sety I of Dynasty 19 (about 1289-1278 B.C.) doubly ensured that he would not have to serve, as the reported seven hundred shabtis found in his tomb so eloquently attest!<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dodson 2000, p. 139-141.

<sup>2</sup> Dodson 2000, p. 139-140.

<sup>3</sup> Grandet 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Dodson 2000, p.140.

<sup>5</sup> Porter and Moss 1964, p. .558, 47 and 564-565.

<sup>6</sup> Maspero 1908, p. 11-15.

<sup>7</sup> Burton and Winlock, 1916; and Hayes 1959, p. 356.

<sup>8</sup> Burton and Winlock 1916; and Aubert and Aubert 1974, p. 115-116.

<sup>9</sup> Stewart 1995, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Stewart 1995, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Stewart 1995, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Shaw and Nicholson 1995, p. 266.

<sup>14</sup> Stewart 1995, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> Stewart 1995, p. .

<sup>16</sup> Shaw and Nicholson 1995, p. 266.

### THE SHABTI OF PHARAOH SIPTAH

When cleared by Theodore Davis in 1912 the lower chamber of pharaoh Siptah's tomb yielded a handsome cartouche-shaped sarcophagus of red granite and a considerable quantity of funerary and other objects, including numerous shabtis inscribed for that pharaoh, some complete and others in quite a fragmentary state.<sup>17</sup> The shabtis, in travertine (alabaster) inscribed for pharaoh Siptah, are modeled with restraint in broad planes with little or no linear incision for detail. The lower torso and legs are columnar-like with a slight projection for the feet. The arms are folded across the upper torso and the cordiformed face, framed by a uraeus-fronted, unadorned nemes-headress exhibits painted eyebrows, eyes, and mouth. All are inscribed with a single column of hieroglyphs down the front, and either five or, as in this example in the collections of the Fondation, four horizontal lines around the lower torso and legs, which can be transliterated and translated as follows:

sHd wsir nsw Ax-nra stp n-a mAa-xrw  
Dd.f: i Sbtyw <iptn> <ir>ipt (*sic*).tw.(i) ir Hsb  
tw.(i) r ir(t) kAt nbt irr(t) m Xrt-nTr r srwd sxwt  
r smHy wDbw r Xn(t) Sa  
jAbtt r imnt iry.(i) mky(*sic*) kA

Instructions of the Osiris, pharaoh Akhenre-Setepenre, justified. He says: O ye shabtis! If I am counted, if I am reckoned in order to do any work which is done in the Necropolis, in order to cultivate the fields, in order to irrigate the riverbanks, in order to carry sand of the East to the West, I will do it! Behold, thus I will say.

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<sup>17</sup> Burton and Winlock 1916.