

Limestone shabti of the official escort Renseneb



From Abydos, Egypt
13th Dynasty, about 1730-1720 BC

Though buried in their local town, some ancient Egyptians, like Renseneb, had a 'substitute burial' made at Abydos, the town of the god Osiris. These burials would include elements which would be placed within a real tomb, such as shabti figures.

The earliest shabti date to the Middle Kingdom (about 2040-1750 BC). According to directions in the Coffin Texts, shabti figures should be made of wood, but were often made of clay or stone. Some of the figures were inscribed with a spell from the Coffin Texts, by which it would perform tasks on behalf of the tomb owner in the Afterlife. The text on this figure instructs it to 'apply yourself at any moment to cultivate the fields, irrigate the bans, transport sand from east to west'.

The shabti spell could be activated without reading it aloud; its presence in the tomb was sufficient. This may account for the fear that harmful creatures represented as hieroglyphic signs might become real. The hieroglyphs in this inscription that represent living creatures have been deliberately left incomplete. Some of the images, such as the snakes, could be a threat to the dead. Others, including some of the birds, were protective creatures who might leave the tomb, taking with them their protection.

Renseneb holds an ankh sign ('life') in one hand, and in the other a vase that can be read as 'favour'.

G. Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt* (London, The British Museum Press, 1994)

S. Quirke, *Ancient Egyptian religion* (London, The British Museum Press, 1992)

R. Parkinson, *Cracking codes: the Rosetta St* (London, The British Museum Press, 1999)