

Early Shabti Figure in a Model Coffin **The British Museum**

From the tomb of Kawit, Deir el-Bahari, Thebes, Egypt
11th Dynasty, reign of Mentuhotep II, around 2020 BC



This is one of the earliest known *shabti* figures. These figures were intended to work on behalf of the deceased in the Afterlife. They may have developed from the servant figures associated with the provision of offerings, common in wealthy tombs of the Middle Kingdom (about 2040-1750 BC).

The figure is crudely made of wax rather than the stone and faience common in later times. Wax was regarded as a protective substance, and also had links with the sun. These early *shabti* figures were also made of mud. They were wrapped in linen and placed in model coffins. The figures were not inscribed, but their resemblance to mummies suggest that they were intended to be substitutes for the physical body. Later *shabti* figures are inscribed with extracts from Chapter 6 of the *Book of the Dead*, the funerary text which was used from the New Kingdom (about 1550-1070 BC) to act as a guide to reaching the Afterlife. This spell compelled the *shabti* figure to stand in when the tomb owner was called upon to do his or her share of work in the 'Field of Reeds', where the deceased would live for eternity.

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

J.H. Taylor, *Death and Afterlife in ancient* (London, The British Museum Press, 2001)