

Mud Shabti Figures **The British Museum**

From Deir el-Bahari, Thebes, Egypt
25th Dynasty, around 680 BC



When *shabti* figures were first placed in tombs, in the Middle Kingdom (about 2040-1750 BC), they were carefully crafted and provided with their own coffins. It was usual to include only one in each tomb, primarily to act as substitutes for the body of the deceased. The *shabti* of the New Kingdom (about 1550-1070 BC) were usually made of stone, faience or wood. They were inscribed with the name of the owner and the spell to activate them. Larger numbers were included in tombs from the late New Kingdom (for example, that of Henutmehyt, also in The British Museum). From the Third Intermediate Period (about 1070-661 BC) they were divided into gangs so that there was a worker for every day of the year, with an overseer for every week.

Some *shabti* of the later Third Intermediate Period were perhaps the crudest ever made. The figures, only a few centimetres high, were mass-produced in mud using moulds. Their basic features were reduced to a simple mummyiform shape, with little or no additional modelling. On some examples it is possible to make out traces of the crossed hoes typically carried by these figures, but there is no trace of any inscription. Many hundreds were included in the tombs, usually in specially made boxes.

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