

EGYPTIAN USHABTIU.

THE QUAIN'T SOLUTION OF AN OLD PROBLEM.

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THERE is a strange fascination in tracing the developments of civilizations other than our own. Perhaps in nothing do we discover the civilization of a people so much as in the treatment of their dead. There is a development in this treatment as in other things and we see the evolution of the life, thought and hopes of the people as we examine their cemeteries and their funeral rituals. What would our knowledge of ancient Egypt amount to were it not for the fact that the Egyptians so carefully buried their dead? Those gigantic pyramids are but tombs built in cemeteries stretching over miles. The great sphinx was regarded as the guardian of the tomb of its maker Khafra, of the fourth dynasty, and over the cemetery at Gizeh. But at this time we are not dealing either with the cemeteries or tombs, but rather with the small figures found in the tombs called ushabtiu.

What are the ushabtiu? *Ushabtiu* (singular, *ushabti*) was the name given by the Egyptians to the figures made of stone, wood, clay, alabaster, granite, bronze, painted and gilded limestone, and glazed faience, representing the god Osiris made in form of a mummy at times, but most often in the form of a workman. While the majority bear the strictly Osirian form, yet there are other forms, due, no doubt, to the skill of the maker seeking a fresh outlet. At times the figure is represented as mummified with only the head and face appearing. Some show the hands at liberty. Some are made bearing the crook and flail or flagellum (Fig. 1a), the hoe and the seed-bag, the latter being carried over the shoulder or held by the hand in front of the body (Fig. 1b).

The latter form, a specimen of which is in the collection of the

writer, has led to various discussions, it being argued that the supposed bag was simply another form of the overseer's apron. This cannot be held, for the bag is sharply defined as is also the left hand holding the bag up to the chest. One unique specimen, also in the writers collection, has a large bag slung across the back from shoulder to shoulder (Fig. 1c), no doubt to "bear the sand from east to west" as mentioned in the "*Book of the Dead*."

Rarely a figure will be found with the hands pendant holding the emblem of the tree trunk of Osiris and the buckle of Isis.

On some of the ushabtiu were written chapters of the Book of the Dead, e. g., on the one represented in Fig. 2 Chapter IV can be read on the back and front, while another has it cut into the sides. On another inscription dealing particularly with the functions of the ushabtiu can be read: "In the event of my being condemned to spread *scbakh* on the fields in the Tuat, or to fill the water-courses with water from the river, or to reap the harvest, such work shall be performed for me by thee, and no obstacle shall be put in thy way." Below this are the words the ushabti was supposed to say. "Verily I am here, wheresoever thou mayest speak." Not only do we find inscriptions but also mythological figures, e. g., Isis with outstretched wings is a common figure. Osiris and Set are also seen.

While dealing with this part of the topic it is perhaps well to add that as time passed the distinctively human association gave place to other forms. Wiedemann gives a description of one purchased by him at Luxor which had the head of a falcon wearing a large wig, and also holding a hoe in each hand. Another has the head of a bull.¹ These, no doubt, were buried with falcons, the Apis bull, and also with the sacred ram.

It was a rule of the ritual to place at least one ushabti with each mummy, though no rule was laid down to limit the final number a mummy could have. Generally as many ushabtiu were placed in the tomb as the individual had servants in life. In the tomb of Seti I seven hundred were found, while at the present time there is, in the British Museum, a box containing one hundred and forty-nine, taken from the tomb of one called Ankh-f-en-Khensu.

When the ushabtiu were placed in such large quantities special boxes were made to hold them, the boxes being made of clay or wood richly painted, at times depicting scenes in the other world. We give a description of one in the British Museum: "Small, brightly painted wooden sepulchral box. On one side is a figure

¹ *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Arch.*, June, 1911.

of the deceased Apu, who held the office of 'incense thrower,' burning incense before Osiris, and on the other side we see the goddess Nut, who appears from out of a sycamore tree, pouring out celestial water upon the hands of the wife of the deceased and upon a human-headed hawk, the emblem of her soul."²

The ushabti figures are not uniform in size. The writer has some an inch and a quarter long, others from three to seven inches, while many are considerably larger. Perhaps the commonest are



e *b* *a* *c* *d*

Fig. 1. USHABTIU IN THE WRITER'S COLLECTION.

made of wood, and these are found in the tombs of all periods from the eleventh dynasty. Blue, green and red faience figures are found during the period between the eighteenth and twenty-sixth dynasties. During the nineteenth dynasty the figures are represented wearing the garments which the people wore for whose benefit they were made. At the time of the twenty-sixth dynasty we find them mounted upon a square pedestal and having a rectangular upright plinth at the back of the figure.

² Guide to the Third and Fourth Egyptian Rooms, British Museum, Budge.

Being workers it will, perhaps, be assumed by some that they all represented males, but this is not so. One large specimen in the writer's collection, made of crude clay and poorly baked, proves itself to be a female for it has long hair down the back reaching to the waist, while yet another (Fig. 1d), a beautifully glazed specimen, has long, black hair hanging down the back and over the shoulders, and is represented holding a seed-bag with the right hand. This latter detail appears to be a distinct mark of the female figure for in each case of long hair being shown on the figure the right hand holds the bag or some other object, whereas we noticed in the male figure the hand most prominent was the left. The overseer, male or female, is distinguished from the workers by the apron projecting from the front of the body, representing the linen apron of the ancient Egyptian master. One "overseer" figure in the writer's collection (Fig. 1a) not only has the apron but has also the elbows projecting from the sides as if the hands were resting on the hips,—a characteristic attitude of a man leisurely surveying the work of those under him. Such, in brief, is a description of these interesting ushabti figures.

But what were they for? is the question asked by those who see them in the cases of our museums. To answer this question, we must go back to the days before the ushabtiu were first made and inquire into primitive customs. Go back as far as we are able and we find that men have believed in their survival after death. We are not asking any questions at this time regarding the origin of this belief but we are going to take it as we find it.

Now this idea of survival after death has been one of the greatest factors in the life and thought of the world. No people held to the idea as did the Egyptians. The whole of every-day life was lived under its influence. In the historic period men made great preparations for the life after death. They chose the site of their tomb and superintended while it was cut out of the rock and while the interior was decorated. Here the man's mummy was placed, and here dwelt his Ka while ever his mummy lasted. Here his soul kept continually returning like a restless traveler.

The Egyptian called his tomb an "Eternal House," his house was but an inn. The tomb included the private rooms of the soul, closed to the relatives as soon as the funeral was over, and reception rooms for the Double or Ka, where priests and friends brought their gifts and offered the prayers for the sustenance of the Ka. We must not forget that the Egyptian regarded the other world as very similar to this. In the fields of Aalu he would watch the waving grain, and count his cattle, and superintend his estate as he had done in

life. On the walls of his tomb were painted many scenes wherein were depicted the life of the other world. Here we see the deceased



Fig. 2. USHABTI OF REMSENT, XIIIth DYNASTY FROM ABYDOS.
(Figures 2, 3 and 4 are here reproduced by kind permission of Mrs. M. N. Buckman.)

drawn in colossal size, sitting down and watching his workmen while they work the shadoof, or sow the fields, or reap the grain.

In other drawings we see him sitting in state being waited upon by numerous servants while dancers and singers perform before him. In the other drawings we see him in the open, joining in the chase, snaring birds or piercing fish. Everything he used in life was needed after death and so in the tombs we find clothes, food, weapons, furniture and pottery, and the ushabti. The origin of the ushabti is found in this belief.

The idea that the dead needed after death all they used in life can be found to have existed among all ancient peoples, but only the Egyptians carried out the idea so elaborately.

Petrie, while excavating the royal tombs at Abydos, found that at the death of a king his domestic servants were slain and buried with him so that they could wait upon him in the next life. This was not confined to the time of the first dynasty, for we find Maspero, in describing a tomb of the later period, writing: "A series of mysterious episodes, which can be traced in the finished portion of the hypogeum of a noble of Aphroditopolis the Little, relates to human sacrifice. The victims may be seen carried on a sledge, then strangled, and perhaps afterwards burned with the oxen, the cakes and other votive offerings in a fire lighted opposite the tomb. Was it an actual fact or merely an imaginary episode? It is certain that in early times the throats of the princes' or nobles' favorites were cut on the day of the funeral so that they might serve their master in the House of Eternity as they had in his earthly house. . . . It is possible that relatives, more grieved than others, wished to bestow on him they mourned the satisfaction of taking away with him to the next world the souls of the slaves who had actually been killed."

Maspero believes that the Egypt of the Thotmes and the Ramesides was still too close to barbarism for that practice to have entirely disappeared in their time. How long this horrible custom prevailed we have no means of knowing, and neither can we say when the ushabtiu were first used, though we know that from the time of the eleventh dynasty they were common. Now the ushabti is primarily the survival of this rite. When the Egyptian gave up the rite something had to be substituted for the actual domestic in order to fulfil the ritual, and so we find these models of domestics. But while this is the primary idea attaching to the ushabtiu it does not exhaust the full idea of the Egyptians.

Referring again to the belief in immortality held by the Egyptians we have to remember that man was not to them the simple being he is to the modern physiologist or psychologist. To them

man was very complex, consisting of a body, a soul, an intelligence, a shadow, a name, a heart, a husk or mummy and a Ka. At death these were separated until the resurrection, though the Ka dwelt near the mummy in the tomb and the soul frequently visited both. We need not at this time enter into any discussion as to the nature of the Ka, for scholars are not as yet agreed as to its meaning. What does interest us is the fact that the Egyptian believed it absolutely essential for the eternal well-being of the deceased that the Ka should have a body provided for it. Not only was he concerned about his tomb, but he must also have in a special room in his tomb a statue, or number of statues, carved exactly like himself. If he had a deformity it was faithfully reproduced. An ugly dwarf was carved with all his ugliness. Sometimes as many as twenty statues, all exactly alike, have been found in one tomb. And what perhaps will sound strangest of all is that these statues were hidden away in sealed chambers without inlet or outlet, and that, the relatives hoped, for ever.

Why was this done? These were not to commemorate the dead, but were extra bodies for the Ka. If the mummy was destroyed the Ka could take up his abode in one of these extra bodies, the bodies being made so like the man that the Ka would not feel uncomfortable in the new body. It was this desire to carve the likeness so exactly which brought the art of portrait statuary in Egypt to such perfection.

What bearing has this upon our discussion? This, that the ushabtiu are reduced serdab figures or Ka-statues. This was the idea of Dr. Birch some years ago, and also of Borchardt. W. L. Nash writes: "These figures have nothing about them to show that they were intended to be servants in the next world, or that they were anything else than figures of the dead man himself." But the one idea does not shut out the other. If they were "figures of the dead man himself" and nothing else why the crook and flail or the seed-bag? The presence of these proves the combination of the two ideas. Out of this another question arises. Is it possible that the Egyptians had another idea dominating their minds?

Granting that the ushabtiu found in mummied form are reduced serdab, or Ka, statues, were these with the implements the Ka statues of the servants? Just as the master had his Ka statues in order to ensure his future so also the servant must have his statue, and my belief is that the typical ushabti is none other than the body for the Ka of the servant.

A varying etymology has been suggested to explain the word

ushabti. It has been commonly attributed to a word meaning "to answer," hence they were called ushabtiu, meaning "answerers" or "respondents." The figures were placed in the coffin of the deceased so that they could accompany him to the judgment seat of Osiris who, after the weighing of the heart, assigned each indi-



Fig. 3. USHABTI OF OVERSEER ARI.
749 B. C.



Fig. 4. USHABTI OF HORUTA.
Found by Petrie.

vidual its task. Instead of performing the task himself the deceased spoke certain words which, if correctly spoken, caused the ushabti to have power to perform the task appointed. On the ushabti of Horuta (Fig. 4), the finding of which by Petrie is one of the romances of archeology, we read, "Make to shine the Osiris (the deceased) the prophet of Neith, the priest Horuta, born of

Nesdet true of voice. He saith: 'O you ushabti figures, if this Osiris the prophet of Neith, the priest Horuta. . . be judged worthy to perform in the under-world all the work which is done there,— behold! for you opposition is there set aside. As a man far from his possessions, I am here, and I say to you: May you be adjudged always to perform the labors, such as to cultivate the fields, to fill the canals with water, to carry the sand from the east to the west. I am here and I call you.'” The figures are represented as saying “Here am I ready when thou callest.”

This is now questioned by Prof. E. Mahler.³ Instead of accepting the rendering “answerers” he would, after examining a number of texts, translate “the called for,” and hence would call the ushabti “the nourisher, he who provides food for nourishment,” from the verb *ʿwsb*, meaning “to eat or to nourish.” W. M. Müller in a note to Professor Mahler writes: “We have been accustomed to call the sepulchral figures, the ‘answerers,’ by the name ushabti, and this seems to have been the late Egyptian etymology. But we can see from the different versions of Chapter VI in the ‘Book of the Dead’ that the most ancient mode of writing the word is a hybrid form for *ʿwsb*, which is unsuitable. I suggest calling them ‘nourishers,’ i. e., those whose duty it is to supply the daily meals for the dead.”⁴ This is perhaps more particularly seen in certain figures found by Naville while excavating the eleventh dynasty temple of Deir el-Bahari during 1907, than in the usual ushabti (see Fig. 5). Here we find model granaries, bakeries and breweries. The models of the bakers and brewers are among the most interesting we have seen.

But let Naville describe his own find:

“The chief objects are a granary of the usual kind, and a model bakery and brewery of unusual type. The granary has, as usual, its small wooden men ascending the stairs with sacks of grain. . . while a scribe, seated in the court below, keeps tally. In the other model, which measures 31 inches by 18, we see a line of women hard at work grinding the grain with rollers. . . A line of squatting men, facing the corn grinders, sifts the grain through sieves. Back to back with them are the bakers, squatting in front of their tall black ovens, and a line of brewers placing the bread in red vats to ferment in order to make beer. A *reis* stands, thong-stick in hand, overseeing the work. . . These models, which are al-

³ *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archeology*, May, 1912.

⁴ *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archeology*, June, 1912. See also an article by Paul Pierret in the *Proceedings*, Nov. 1912.



Fig. 5. "NOURISHERS." USHABTI FOUND BY NAVILLE.
In writer's collection.

ways found in the tombs of this age, were placed in them with the idea that they would turn into ghostly granaries, bakeries, and slaves, to serve the dead in the next world. It is the same idea as that of the ushabti or 'answerer,' who, when the dead man is set to do any of the labours which are to be done in the tomb world. . . . answers, 'Here am I when ye call'. . . . These little wooden bakers, brewers, and grain bearers are in fact all of them ushabtis."⁵

A somewhat lengthy quotation from the article by Professor Mahler well sums up the discussion. "And so this etymology is in complete agreement with the meaning of these statuettes and their outward attributes, the ploughing tools in their hands, and the seed-bag on their backs.

"The Egyptian was, in the oldest epoch of his history known to us, convinced that with death a second life of man begins; that death does not mean a complete decease, but only a transition to another form of life of eternal duration. The consequence of this was, that this second life was imagined on the model of the life on earth, and that the 'house of eternity' was furnished with all the comfort that made the earthly home agreeable, and that, when this was proved unattainable, they tried to realize it at least in picture, in decorating the walls of the grave with all sorts of painted representations of the different scenes of earthly life, for through the magic power of the 'Ka,' everything represented in the picture was able to attain reality. As they wanted to represent this new life as real life. . . . to this abode was brought all sorts of foods and drinks. Usually this was the task imposed on the nearest relations; but as they were themselves mortal, they had to see that everybody was able to provide for himself in the other world. And so the task of these small statuettes—which were nothing else but portraits of the deceased, and therefore bore his name—was to do the field work which was necessary for providing the victuals. They were the 'nourishers,' or those who by their labor had to provide food for the deceased."

The ancient Egyptian had not the modern worry over the servant problem, or if he had it in this life he had none in the next, for the ushabti solved the problem. A crude idea? Looked at from our standpoint it is, and yet a witness to the hope still dominating the life of the cultured master and servant of the twentieth century,—the hope of immortality.

⁵The *XIth Dynasty Temple at Deir el-Bahari*, Vol. 1.