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KUSHITE SHABTIS WITH BASKET ON THE HEAD: AN INNOVATION FROM THE ROYAL BURIALS OF KUSH. NEW EVIDENCE FROM SOME EGYPTIAN COLLECTIONS IN ITALY

Funerary statuettes as part of the burial equipment have not only a magical purpose, but even a practical one, addressed to the deceased, in the afterlife.

In Nubia they had been imported by the Egyptian colons since the Middle Kingdom, as substitute of the owner and then as assistant for the *corvée* in the fields of the estates, in the beyond. Placing shabtis inside the tomb became customary in the Sudan almost for the Egyptian-Egyptianized elite and the middle-upper classes certainly until the end of the New Kingdom. Since withdrawal of the Pharaonic troops and then the *long silent interlude*,¹ no evidence of these figurines has been signalled, even in the secondary burials dating back to a post New Kingdom phase, frequently found attested in Lower Nubia² and rarely in Upper Nubia, in particular in the Napata region.³

During the Third Intermediate Period in Egypt the number of shabtis increased conspicuously, with sets of 401 items (365 servants in group of 10, everyone under the leadership of one of the 36 *reis*, namely the supervisors); in fact D. Aston remarks, that *the exact number was rarely attained in practice*,⁴ and their estimate is often affected by plundering.

In this period funerary figurines became de-personalized, having male and female attributes, and even considered as mere personal objects, simple tools to be activated to serve their owner in the afterlife. The material employed is largely faience.

The worker is always in a mummiform body, while the overseer, becoming in use only from the late New Kingdom (XXth Dynasty) until the Late Period (early XXVIth Dynasty), is dressed in a daily attire. The former is equipped with implements and he wears around his head a roughly marked fillet. The latter grasps a whip or a pair of whips and he has got a fillet around the forehead too.

During the XXVth Dynasty (coinciding with the early phase of Napatan Period in Nubia), some changes took place concerning these funerary objects. In the Sudan, the practice of placing shabtis in the burial became an exclusive prerogative of the royal family as no trace of their presence has ever been found in the elite or in the middle-upper classes' tombs, so far. Moreover, they increased in size, reaching up to 52cm high (Taharqa's stone shabtis) and in the VIIth century the use of stone (serpentinite, limestone, calcite, magnesite)⁵ to forge funerary statuettes reappeared as archaizing revival of Middle and New Kingdom models, but it was limited to Taharqa's and Senkamanisken's specimens, at least in the Sudan.

On the contrary, in the Theban region royal divine adoratrices (Amenirdis and Shepenupet II) started the practice of using stone and they influenced and caused their stewards and members of their family to adopt this material for sculpting funerary statuettes. The result was a vivid realism with a portrait-like appearance of the items, enriched by archaic forms included in the chapters of the *Book of the Dead* engraved on the surface.

Kushite shabtis were classified in the 1950s by D. Dunham in the second volumes of the series *The Royal cemeteries of Kush*,⁶ unfortunately without any exhaustive analysis. Then, the same author dealt with them in a short article where again no detailed conclusions were drawn.⁷

1 We quote the intriguing expression used by Török 2009: 285-309, to design the period between the end of the Pharaonic Empire in Nubia and the beginning of the XXVth/Napatan Dynasty.

2 The practice of reopening an already used tomb (probably owned by ancestors) and burying the dead within is common both in Egypt and in the Sudan during the 1st millennium B. C. See Strudwick 2010: 251-261 for explanation of the phenomenon in the Theban region.

In the Sudan several burials are recognized between the 1st and the 3rd Cataract. For a list of the sites see Williams 1990: 31-41.

3 This funerary practice is recorded at the necropolis of Sanam, Lohwasser 2010: 92 and at Hillat el Arab, Vincetelli-Liverani 2006.

4 2009: 356.

5 Haynes et al. 2009: 30-39.

6 1955: figg. 197-199, 253-255 (drawings), 256-264 (hieroglyphic inscriptions), pl. CXL-CXLI (photos).

7 1951: 40-48.

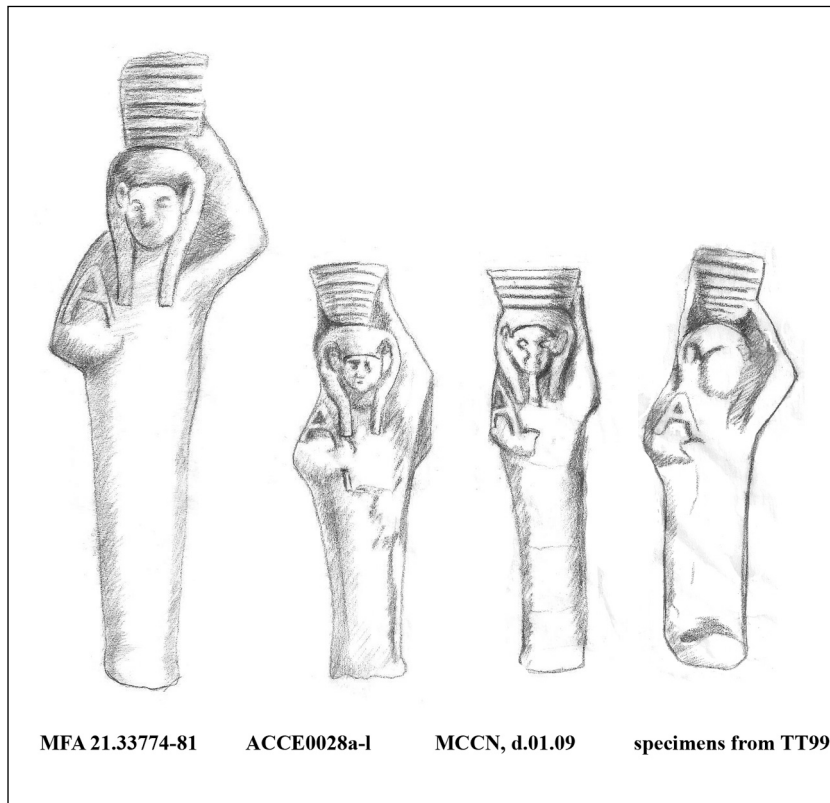


Fig. 1: Drawing of the whole series of the shabtis with basket over the head (sketched by S. Musso).

In the present paper, we would like to focus on one type coming from Dunham's typology that it has been underestimated until now. We think some remarks should be done on the base of recent discoveries during fieldwork and in more or less unknown collections of Egyptian antiquities. According to the Dunham's classification proposed in 1950, the objects of our study do correspond to the types III.7.f and VI.7.f (fig. 1)⁸.

They consist of a small size figurine, made in faience or rarely in terracotta, in all cases half moulded with a flat back with neither decoration nor inscription. The headdress is a tripartite wig, ears are large, the face does not show any physical details but it seems rather a stylised representation, common in all the specimens we have studied. It is rarely enriched by a small beard rendered in the same way of the face. The long mummified dress does not show any part of the body. The right arm is placed on the breast and the right hand grasps a hoe; the left arm is stretched up to the head and the left hand is carrying a tapered basket. Sometimes it is the opposite.

The first evidence of these finds comes from the royal necropolis of El Kurru (fig. 2). Reisner found them in completely plundered burials of three royal

wives interred in their pyramids, on the northern extremity of this cemetery, beyond the Wadi North, far from the core of the necropolis itself.

Unfortunately, the three royal ladies who occupied Ku. 62, Ku. 71 and Ku. 72 remain anonymous as no trace of their name has been found within the burial. The first two women lived and have been interred under Shabaka's reign while the last one passed away when Shabataka was ruler.

In Ku. 62 only 7 specimens (19-4-146) have been discovered in the funerary chamber⁹, in Ku. 71 at least 13 pieces (19-4-201)¹⁰, of a similar mould, but it is not the same as the first ones¹¹, and finally 7 pieces in Ku. 72 (19-4-202), identical to those ones in Ku. 71 as if they are made from the same mould¹². Their are about between 3 up to 8cm high by

1,5/2cm thick and are made in faience. It is relevant the slightly transversal position of the face in a few pieces, a particularly realistic trait which has never been remarked among the Egyptian shabtis.

In 1996 more archaeological evidence has been found in secondary shaft burials sunk in the New Kingdom tomb of Senneferi (TT99) at Sheikh Abd el Gurna, in the Theban region¹³ (fig. 3).

A set of 2 pieces were uncovered from later shafts, they confirmed the reoccupation of this elite burial during the Third Intermediate Period as other finds of the same epoch can prove. In fact, the date of this phase well fits into that one of the El Kurru tombs: a fragment of a mummy bandage belonging to the priest of Amon Wedjahor mentions the royal titles of Pharaoh Shabaka under whom he lived. Moreover, an openwork coffin (mummy cage type) belonged to Niw, sister of the priest of Amon of Gempaaton

⁹ Dunham 1950: 100, pl. XLVI.D 2/1-2.

¹⁰ 19-4-201c=MFA 21.13774, 21.13775, 21.13776, 21.13777, 21.13778, 21.13779, 21.13780, 21.13781 (only two are complete items, now stored at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). We would like to express our gratitude to R. Freed and L. Berman to allow us the permission to watch these items in person in the storerooms of this museum.

¹¹ Dunham 1950: 102, pl. XLVI.E 2.

¹² Dunham 1950: 104, pl. XLVI.A 2.

¹³ Strudwick 2000: 241-266.

⁸ 1955: fig. 199, 255.

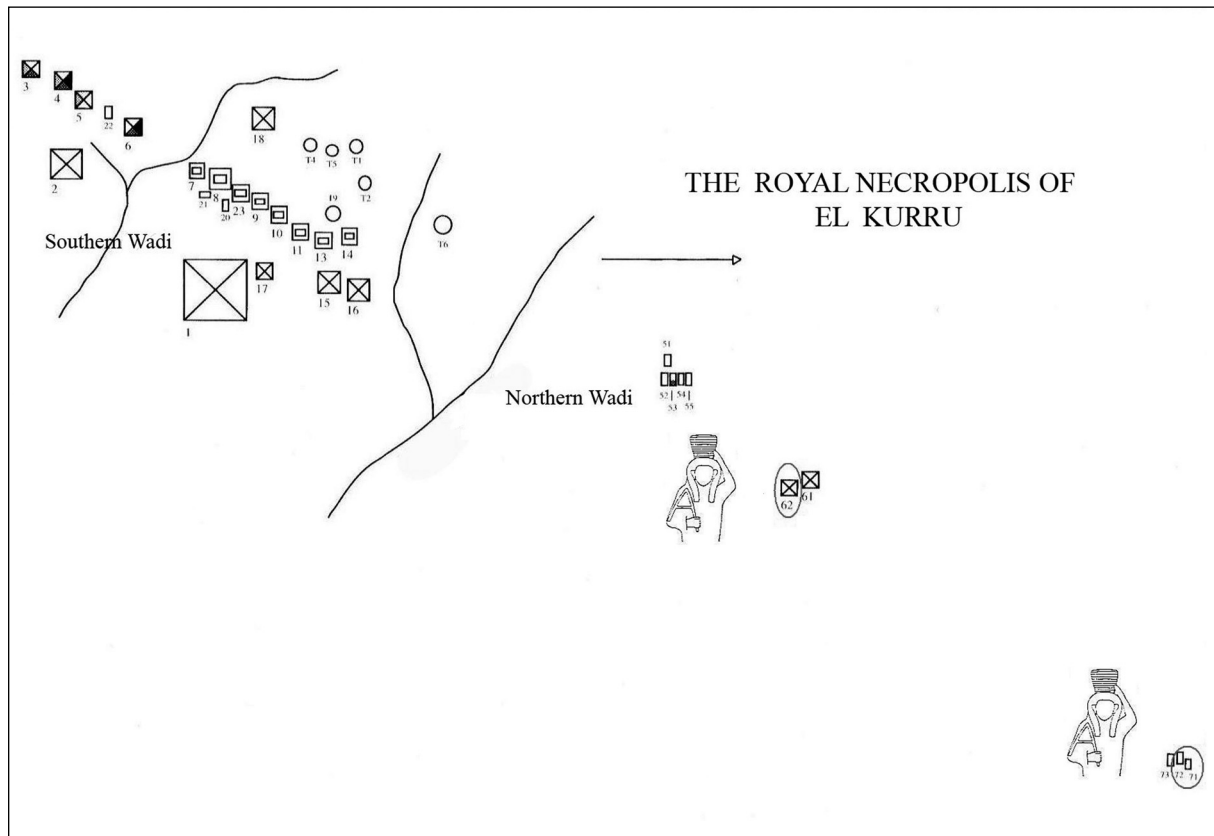


Fig. 2: Local spot of the tombs with basket shtabti, an adaptation after Lohwasser 2001.

(Kawa), Padiamon, shows a Kushite style scene. The female deceased is accompanied by Isis in front of Atum and she is wearing a typical Napatan skull cap which solves any doubt about her origin. It seems likely that the terracotta shtabti have been produced for her¹⁴, as they seem to be a funerary item designed for high society women.

However, the TT99 statuettes differ from the Nubian ones for the material used for moulding them, i. e. terracotta instead of faience as well as for the shape and the rendering of the basket at the top of the head, which seems more hemispherical rather than a tapered one and in the round. A vivid blue colour covered their rough surface, nowadays quite worn out to such an extent that it is impossible to distinguish their human traits. In addition, the lower part of the Theban shtabti present a concave surface with a sort of bulge which is not found among the El Kurru examples.

The present authors have been working at the publishing of the Egyptian collection owned by the *Accademia dei Concordi* in Rovigo (Italy) since 2008. It was a real surprise to find among more than 500 artefacts a small group of 12 shtabti (access numbers:

¹⁴ We agree with J. Budka's conclusion. Budka 2010: 505.

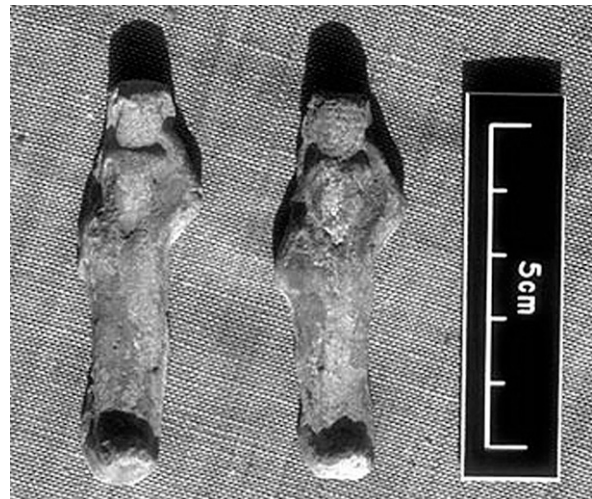


Fig. 3: terracotta blue painted shtabti from TT99, Sheikh abd el Gurna (after <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/tt99/finds/shabti1.html>).

from ACCE0028a to ACCE0028l)¹⁵ of which we have recognized the importance since the beginning (fig. 4). They differed from the other “standard”

¹⁵ ACCE is the acronym for *Accademia dei Concordi, Collezione Egizia* followed by the number given by the writers to the artifact. The previous study of the Rovigo antiquities was published by C. Dolzani in 1969, but it was only a partial catalogue of the whole Egyptian collection.



Fig. 4: terracotta figurines from the Rovigo collection, ACCE0028a to ACCE0028l.

Egyptian statuettes ascribed either to New Kingdom or to the Late Period owned by the Rovigo institute¹⁶ and - as far as we know - they represent the largest and most complete series after that of the royal necropolis. Rovigo specimens are slightly smaller than the El Kurru ones, and they are in terracotta. They were made from the same mould and some traces of a pale blue colour over the surface of a few items may suggest an original brushing, nowadays almost lost.

Unfortunately, we are not able to infer for certainty the real provenance of these artefacts, as the Rovigo academy does not have evidence of any record related to the donor nor to the site from which they came from. However, if they arrived in Rovigo between 1878 and 1879, they probably belonged to the Pantellini's donation of ancient Egyptian artefacts¹⁷ which filled four wooden cases and they

were sent from the port of Alexandria (Egypt) to the director of the academy in order to create a prestigious museum in the hearth of the city. As for the two mummies on display in the Egyptian gallery they may come from somewhere in Thebes, maybe in Sheikh Abd el Gurna. Otherwise, G. Miani,¹⁸ a Rovigo explorer gave to the *accademia* an indefinite number of antiquities brought from his travels in Egypt and in the Sudan. There in the late 19th century he was looking for the sources of the Nile on behalf of the French Society of Geography and he lived among some Sudanese nomadic tribes at the end of his life.

Even if it is a mere hypothesis, we cannot discard the idea that other royal tombs may have contained other statuettes of this type. Thus, Miani bought somehow the terracotta statuettes which could be coming from a modern plundering, but anyway before Reisner's excavation at the royal necropolis in 1916-1918, as already in the past the burials had been disturbed by *sebbhakhins*. However, no trace of the same mould of the Rovigo type has been detected from the Napata region even if these moulds are more similar to the royal ones.

Recently, two other extraordinary pieces have been detected belonging to a small and almost unknown collection of Egyptian objects owned by the public library "Lino Penati" in Cernusco sul Naviglio, in the hinterland of Milan (fig. 5).¹⁹ They consist of a complete piece, MCCN, d.01.09, (the foot section, broken in the past, has been stuck in modern times) and another one, missing the lower part, MCCN, d.01.10, in pale green faience. Again, a tripartite wig surrounds the corroded face with large ears. These items were made in faience and have the same aspect and pose of the previous models mentioned above. Furthermore, the basket has a truncated shape with horizontal incisions to render vegetal fibers. They exceptionally show a real male attribute, clearly absent among the other shabtis of this type: the royal beard which makes the Cernusco models quite unique.

We are not able to determine the place of provenance as records available are not enough so far, such to support for certainty either a Nubian or an Egyptian production. What we know for sure is the date ascribed to the Kushite Kingdom of Shabaka and

16 For an outline of the most representative shabtis in the Rovigo museum: Musso-Petacchi 2009: 79, 85. Musso-Petacchi 2011b: 83-92.

17 The hotelkeeper of Italian origins lived in Egypt working also for the Khédivé I. Pashà. For his brief biography: Musso-Petacchi 2011a: 106-107.

18 Musso-Petacchi 2009: 84.


19 The previous editor seems he did not recognized the Kushite origin of these items, therefore he had underestimated the extraordinary uniqueness of the bearded models, a clear variant of types III.7.f and VI.7.f of Dunham's classification. See Tiradritti 2001: 15.



Fig. 5: MCCN, d.01.09 & MCCN, d.01.10, Cernusco sul Naviglio, Biblioteca “Lino Penati” (after Tiradritti 2001, p. 15, n°7 & 8).

Shabataka as the El-Kurru items well fit into the same epoch of the Theban ones.

About the Napatan culture T. Kendall²⁰ says: “*in their search for religious and cultural purity, the Napatan kings developed a keen interest in all ancient Egyptian ideals, rituals, and traditions... and tried to revive, even reinvent them...*”.

We are deeply convinced that what we quoted above can be applied as well to the use and the conception of shabtis in the Napatan period, at least for its initial phase. In fact, types III 7.f and VI 7.f look like  (Gardiner sign list: A9), even if they represent a sitting man and not a standing man. This determinative is generally flanking verbs or words related to the concept of activity, as the case of *k3t* (=work) or *f3i* (=to bring). For this reason it seems likely that these statuettes have a fine theological value, they may visually represent what in general is written on the frontal surface, a passage of Chapter 6 of the *Book of the Dead*: “*be careful at any time to work there, to plough in the fields, to fill the channels with water, to carry sand from West to East...*”.

We hope that in the near future other specimens will be brought to light from archaeological sites, so that we will be able to understand why they are so rare and seemingly meant for royal (in Sudan) and

elitist (in Egypt) women and not for men. Besides, we could also define the chronological span in which they became in use as an experimentation to visually represent a part of such a funerary text.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Klassifikation kuschitischer Uschebtis von Dunham (1955) ist eine erste Typologie der in den königlichen Friedhöfen von El Kurru und Nuri gefundenen Figuren, die jedoch bisher ohne tiefere Analyse

blieb. In diesem Artikel werden die Typen III.7.f und VI.7.f genauer untersucht, die sich durch einen Korb auf dem Kopf auszeichnen. Diese wurden in El Kurru entdeckt. Einige wenige Uschebtis dieses Typs sind auch in zeitgleichen Gräbern Ägyptens gefunden worden (Theben), sie unterscheiden sich jedoch durch das Material (Terrakotta anstelle von Fayence) und Details in der Form des Korbes.

In der ägyptischen Sammlung der Accademia dei Concordi in Rovigo (Italien) sind zwölf Uschebtis mit Korb auf dem Kopf vorhanden. Sie sind aus Terrakotta und etwas kleiner als die Uschebtis aus El Kurru. Leider ist keine Provenienz dokumentiert, aufgrund der Geschichte der Sammlung in Rovigo ist sowohl eine Herkunft aus Theben als auch aus dem Sudan möglich. Ebenfalls ohne Provenienz sind die beiden in der Sammlung der Bibliothek Lino Penati in Cernusco sul Naviglio (nahe Mailand) bewahrten Uschebtis mit Korb auf dem Kopf, der eindeutig zu erkennende Königsbart unterscheidet sie aber von den in Ägypten gefundenen Modellen.

Durch die Funde in El Kurru und in Theben können die Uschebtis mit Korb auf dem Kopf in die Zeit der 25. Dynastie datiert werden.

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