



1-31-1997

New and Old Light on Shawabtis from Mesoamerica

John Gee
Yale University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Gee, John (1997) "New and Old Light on Shawabtis from Mesoamerica," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol6/iss1/6>

This Notes and Communications is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Notes and Communications: New and Old Light on Shawabtis from Mesoamerica

Author(s) John Gee

Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/1 (1997): 64-69.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract Two Egyptian shawabti-figurines, reputedly discovered in Acajutla, El Salvador, in 1914, are likely forgeries. Had they been authentic, they might have helped to establish cultural contact between Egypt and Mesoamerica.

explanations for the scatter of the sections of Luke, the English words of the KJV from the other five tested New Testament authors show a clear and nonambiguous author clustering. Only two explanations are proposed for this clustering: (1) a consistent major shifting by the translators occurring with each unique pattern of the New Testament text or (2) a major underlying itself and was the KJV text. The explanation for the area of the



Conclusion
From our vocabulary-richness for differentiation attribution studies, the difference in vocabulary richness may not imply the use of other styles. On the other hand, word-pattern ratios to have relatively power. Author-Attribution would seem to be a very useful method for detecting differences, especially in texts of questionable authorship. In light of our findings, the fact that writings attributed to different

Figure 1. Two Egyptian figurines, discovered in Acajutla, El Salvador, in the 1920s. Photograph courtesy John L. Sorenson.

and his account of the translation process. This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that translated writings attributed to different New Testament authors also show similar vocabulary richness but display distinct frequencies of noncontextual words and word-pattern ratios.

NOTES AND COMMUNICATIONS

New and Old Light on Shawabtis from Mesoamerica

John Gee

In 1992, FARMS republished a notice about two inscribed Egyptian shawabti-figurines (also called *ushabtis*)¹ from Acajutla, Sonsonate, El Salvador (fig. 1).² Because the figurines would prove cultural contact between Egypt and Mesoamerica, the article suggested that “these figurines may be very important indeed.”³ A note appended to the article remarked that this report “still calls for further information.”⁴ That further information is the focus of this note.

Originally published in 1940 by Mariano Cuevas, the shawabtis were discovered in 1914 three meters below the surface, on the property of the Reverend Senior Velloso, archbishop of El Salvador, near Acajutla, Sonsonate, El Salvador.⁵

My thanks go to John L. Sorenson for making his files on the figurines available and to Michael P. Lyon for preparing the accompanying figures.

¹ The two forms are common through scholarly and popular literature. The Egyptians used both *šwbti* and *wšbti*.

² “Two Figurines from the Belleza and Sanchez Collection,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 18–9. This was based on the FARMS update for January 1984.

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Mariano Cuevas, *Historia de la Nacion Mexicana* (Mexico: Talleres Tipograficos Modelo, 1940), 14, 16.

The FARMS article announcing the two figurines warned that “premature enthusiasm ought to be avoided.”⁶ Some of the reasons were given in the article itself: (1) “More text may be inscribed on the backs.”⁷ (2) The poor quality of the photographs made it very difficult to read the texts, and thus “detailed photos are necessary for closer study.”⁸ (3) Though the figurines were found in Acajutla, “they were not examined in place by archaeologists,” and thus “we cannot be certain where they first surfaced.”⁹ Other cautionary statements were made by John Sorenson when he discussed the figurines at a conference on transoceanic contact:

The most convincing type of cultural parallel would be, ideally, something discrete, concrete, and visible, like two patently Egyptian statuettes that purportedly “come from three meters in depth at the eastern benches of Acajutla,” El Salvador (and are now [1971] in the Museo Nacional “David J. Guzman,” San Salvador). If one could locate and accept without question a number of such evidences, at least the bare-bones historical problem of intercontinental contacts might be simplified. (Yet even if the statuettes—or a Roman figurine—could be proved ancient and authentic, we would probably be unable to connect them in any meaningful way with the process of Mesoamerican cultural growth.) But of course items like these have so often proved elusive, unreliable, faked or with such other disabilities as evidence that they must be ignored for practical purposes.¹⁰

Robert Smith also sounded a similar caution in a private communication to Sorenson; he informed him that although “both these

6 “Two Figurines from the Belleza and Sanchez Collection,” 19.

7 Ibid., 18.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 19.

10 John L. Sorenson, “The Significance of an Apparent Relationship between the Ancient Near East and Mesoamerica,” in *Man across the Sea: Problems of Pre-Colombian Contacts*, ed. Carroll L. Riley et al. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 223.

figurines are supposed to have been excavated at or near Acajutla (Sonsonate), El Salvador, from several meters below the surface” they could have been either “imported anciently, made in Mesoamerica, or ‘planted’ at the site (in the manner of the Piltdown hoax).”¹¹

All these warnings and cautions have proved well-founded as the figurines assuredly are not authentic Egyptian artifacts but forgeries. The reasons for declaring the objects forgeries may be summarized as follows:

1. The hairline on the figurines, rather than falling in parallel lines encircling the face (fig. 2a) or radiating out from the top of the head or a central part as on genuine examples (fig. 2b), streams out from the forehead like a *nemes*-headdress (fig. 2c).¹²

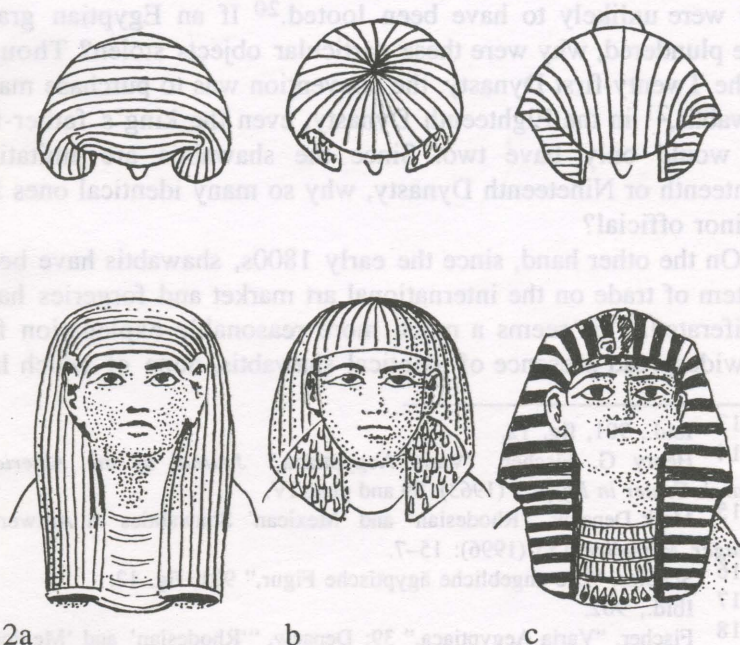


Figure 2. A comparison of typical hairstyles.

¹¹ Robert F. Smith, private communication to John L. Sorenson, 1 October 1976, courtesy John L. Sorenson.

¹² Heinrich Schäfer, “Die angebliche ägyptische Figur aus Rhodesia,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 38 (1906): 899–901.

2. Perhaps most telling are the other examples of such forgeries published by Heinrich Schäfer,¹³ Henry Fischer,¹⁴ and Mark Depauw.¹⁵ These three forgeries (together with the Acajutla figurine on the left of fig. 1) are not just similar, but identical, with exactly the same form, flaws, and inscription, indicating they were made from the same mold. Schäfer's shawabti was exposed as a forgery for the first reason eight years before the Acajutla examples were supposedly discovered.¹⁶ Schäfer considered these examples to have originated in a workshop in Cairo or Alexandria,¹⁷ but the provenance of the two published by Fischer and Depauw has always been listed as Mexico.¹⁸ Was the same official buried in El Salvador, Mexico, and Egypt?

Shawabtis were found by the time of the Eighteenth Dynasty in all but the poorest burials,¹⁹ but unless the figurines were metal they were unlikely to have been looted.²⁰ If an Egyptian grave were plundered, why were these particular objects stolen? Though by the Twenty-first Dynasty, the convention was to purchase many shawabtis,²¹ in the Eighteenth Dynasty, even the king's father-in-law would only have two. Since the shawabtis are imitation Eighteenth or Nineteenth Dynasty, why so many identical ones for a minor official?

On the other hand, since the early 1800s, shawabtis have been an item of trade on the international art market and forgeries have proliferated. This seems a much more reasonable explanation for the widespread presence of identical shawabtis, none of which has

¹³ Ibid., 901, fig. 12.

¹⁴ Henry G. Fischer, "Varia Aegyptiaca," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 2 (1963): 39 and plate IV.

¹⁵ Mark Depauw, "'Rhodesian' and 'Mexican' Shawabties in Antwerp," *Göttinger Miszellen* 155 (1996): 15-7.

¹⁶ Schäfer, "Die angebliche ägyptische Figur," 901, fig. 12.

¹⁷ Ibid., 902.

¹⁸ Fischer, "Varia Aegyptiaca," 39; Depauw, "'Rhodesian' and 'Mexican' Shawabties," 15-7.

¹⁹ Stuart Tyson Smith, "Intact Tombs of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Dynasties from Thebes and the New Kingdom Burial System," *Mitteilungen der deutschen archäologischen Instituts Kairo* 48 (1992): 199-200.

²⁰ Ibid., 200 n. 10; T. Eric Peet, *The Great Tomb-Robberies of the Twentieth Egyptian Dynasty* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930).

²¹ I. E. S. Edwards, "Bill of Sale for a Set of Ushabtis," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 57 (1971): 120-4.

a proven archaeological provenance. Physical tests might also prove the objects a forgery, but this is impossible, since the Acajutla shawabtis have now been stolen.²²

While the news that the figurines are forgeries might strike some as disappointing, it is important that only real evidence be used in discussing the Book of Mormon. Mormons—who are still suffering from Hofmann forgeries serving as the basis for books about the origins of Mormonism²³—of all people, should insist on eliminating forged evidence from the discussion.²⁴

²² In a personal communication with John L. Sorenson in April 1997, Romeo Hristov, a scholar in Mexico, reported that the artifacts are not available for current examination because they disappeared in a burglary from the home where they were stored.

²³ John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), xiii, says that the “White Salamander Letter” forged by Mark Hofmann provided the initial impetus to write his book. He cites it as evidence in his book (*ibid.*, 364 n. 17) and concludes the book with the same salamander letter (*ibid.*, 299–305). More insidious is the way in which Hofmann forgeries become evidence by being cited from secondhand sources.

²⁴ For a survey of forgeries in LDS history, see Richard E. Turley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 1–23.