New and Old Light on Shawabtis from Mesoamerica

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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 Mesoameria.
Figure 1. Two Egyptian figurines, discovered in Acajutla, El Salvador, in the 1920s. Photograph courtesy John L. Sorenson.
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) from Acajutla, Sonsonate, El Salvador (fig. 1). Because the figurines would prove cultural contact between Egypt and Mesoamerica, the article suggested that "these figurines may be very important indeed." A note appended to the article remarked that this report "still calls for further information." 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.

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.

The Egyptians used both šwbti and wšbti.

1 The two forms are common through scholarly and popular literature.

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." Some of the reasons were given in the article itself: (1) "More text may be inscribed on the backs." (2) The poor quality of the photographs made it very difficult to read the texts, and thus "detailed photos are necessary for closer study." (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." 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.

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.
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)."\textsuperscript{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 \textit{nemes}-headdress (fig. 2c).\textsuperscript{12}

![Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c showing typical hairstyles.](image)

Figure 2. A comparison of typical hairstyles.

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

2. Perhaps most telling are the other examples of such forgeries published by Heinrich Schäfer,\textsuperscript{13} Henry Fischer,\textsuperscript{14} and Mark Depauw.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{16} Schäfer considered these examples to have originated in a workshop in Cairo or Alexandria,\textsuperscript{17} but the provenance of the two published by Fischer and Depauw has always been listed as Mexico.\textsuperscript{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,\textsuperscript{19} but unless the figurines were metal they were unlikely to have been looted.\textsuperscript{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,\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 901, fig. 12.
\textsuperscript{14} Henry G. Fischer, “Varia Aegyptiaca,” \textit{Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt} 2 (1963): 39 and plate IV.
\textsuperscript{16} Schäfer, “Die angebliche ägyptische Figur,” 901, fig. 12.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 902.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 200 n. 10; T. Eric Peet, \textit{The Great Tomb-Robberies of the Twentieth Egyptian Dynasty} (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930).
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.\footnote{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 Mormonism\footnote{23}—of all people, should insist on eliminating forged evidence from the discussion.\footnote{24}

\footnote{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.}

\footnote{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.}

\footnote{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.}