



Statuette of Imhotep, in bronze

On display

Title/Description: Statuette of Imhotep, in bronze

Born: 0650 BC - 0350 BC

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Bronze

Measurements: h. 160 x w. 30 x d. 110 mm

Inscription: 'May Imhotep, the eldest son of Ptah, grant life [to] Tchahapimu'; 'Imhotep the eldest son of Ptah'

Accession Number: 322

Historic Period: Late Period (c. 650-350 BC), 7th century BC, 4th century BC

Production Place: Africa, Egypt

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

The wise priest was an important figure in ancient Egyptian literature and in community life. Some of these highly educated and influential men became so renowned that they were remembered long after their deaths and even worshipped as if they were gods. Imhotep was one of these deified priests, and this statuette shows him in the conventional pose and dress of his status. He wears a long skirt, a beaded collar, and sits on a chair that is shaped like a shrine, with his feet resting on a box-like footstool. On his lap, he holds open a papyrus scroll as if reading a sacred text. A row of hieroglyphs on the scroll in fact give his own name: 'Imhotep, the eldest son of Ptah', who was the god of artists, craftspeople, and creation. Gilding on the eyes indicates Imhotep's own deified status, and other parts of the statuette may have been gilded, too.

Like his divine father, Imhotep was associated with Saqqara, southwest of modern Cairo and south of the famous pyramids of Giza. Saqqara had its own pyramid, the so-called Step Pyramid where King Djoser was buried (c. 2600 BC). Imhotep is sometimes described as the architect of the Step Pyramid, but there is no evidence from the time of Djoser to link Imhotep to this monument, nor is it known where Imhotep himself was buried. However, Saqqara is home to a vast expanse of tombs and temples from every period of Egyptian history, including the Late Period from which this statuette dates. Bronze statuettes of gods, goddesses, sacred animals and priest-figures like Imhotep, were made and deposited as offerings at temples, perhaps to accompany a prayer or thank the gods for answering one. Archaeologists have found thousands of these statuettes at Saqqara and other sites.

The votive function of this Imhotep statuette is clear from hieroglyphic inscriptions on the front legs of the chair, which name the man who donated it: 'May Imhotep, the eldest son of Ptah, grant life to Tchahapimu'. Since Imhotep was considered an expert in the practice of medicine and magic, as

well as the arts and crafts, the wish for 'life' may be a request for healing or a general prayer for the well-being of Tchahapimu. Two tangs on the underside of the statuette allowed it to fit into a wooden base, where further prayers may have been added before the statuette was deposited in a temple - a messenger in metalwork sent from this world to the realm of the divine.

Christina Riggs, August 2021

Further Reading

Marsha Hill, *Gifts for the Gods: Images from Egyptian Temples* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007)

Steven Hooper, ed., *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol III, Pre-Columbian, Asian, Egyptian and European Antiquities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 336-37 (cat. 261).

Paul Nicholson, 'A hoard of votive bronzes from the Sacred Animal Necropolis at Saqqara', *British Academy Review* no. 8 (2017), open access link:

<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publishing/review/8/hoard-votive-bronzes-sacred-animal-necropolis-north-saqqara/>

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett on 15th August 1960.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
