

Administration Without Writing

—Richard Bussmann, University College London, UK

Hierakonpolis is a hot spot for the study of Egypt's development from prehistory to early civilization. The invention of writing played a major role in this process, but it is not well understood. It is often assumed that writing facilitated the emergence of the bureaucracy necessary to run a large territorial state. The primary evidence for writing in the early stages of Pharaonic history is seal inscriptions. Until a few decades ago, the royal tombs of Abydos and the great mastabas at Saqqara provided the most substantial body of material. Excavations over the past thirty years have increased the evidence available for administrative activities in settlements and these finds display a greater diversity. At Hierakonpolis, Quibell and Green discovered several clay sealings in the Early Dynastic temple and town area at Nekhen in 1897–99. Among the unpublished items now housed in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, are a few whose 'inscriptions' are, in fact, mere pictorial patterns, which challenge simple notions of administration as a ruling machine based entirely on writing.

The clay sealings from Nekhen are pieces of mud originally attached to door bolts, vessels, knots, and other objects. The inscriptions were produced by rolling a cylinder



Z 46133.3: clay bulla of man between lines.

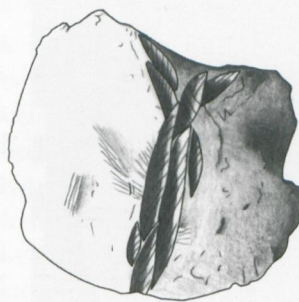
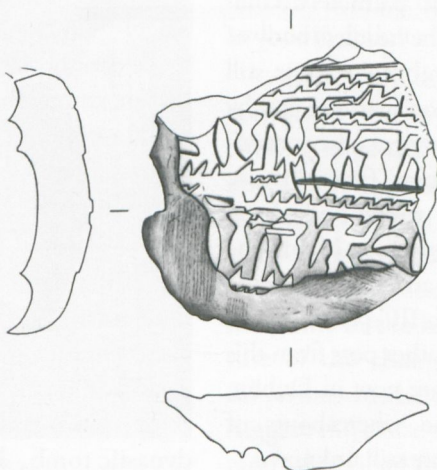


Z 46133.2: clay sealing of seated man.

seal over the surface of the still moist clay before it dried. The first example, oval in shape, is a completely preserved bulla, probably enclosing a knot of the string whose impressions can be seen at the sides. What kind of object the string was attached to is not clear. The seal was rolled five times over the surface resulting in overlapping 'inscriptions' involving a human figure flanked by wavy lines on all faces of the bulla.

On another sealing, a seated man is depicted probably facing a pile of offerings. This interpretation is based on the prevalence of offering table scenes on Early Dynastic cylinder seals and it is backed up by two further sealings from the site. One shows a walking man with what looks like a number of pots arranged between jagged lines. The other, much more fragmentary, shows a seated man and woman in poses that resemble offering table scenes in later periods.

It remains to be explored how the iconography of these seals fits into wider visual developments of the period. What is striking, however, is that these 'inscriptions' do not represent phonetic writing. They do not provide names and titles of officials or refer to specific institutions, which one might expect in an administrative context. Instead,



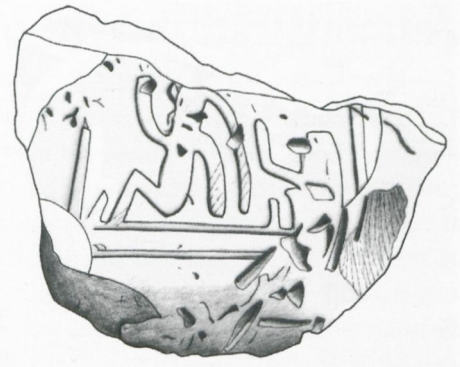
Z 46132.2: clay sealing of man with pots.

they demonstrate that sealing and writing are two different things. Certainly, rolling a seal over a piece of mud does not require any writing skills. Further, it should also be noted that in later periods of Egyptian history, the use of writing on seals is actually an exception rather than the rule. In many ways, sealing patterns are much closer to visual than to written culture. This raises the question of whether other Early Dynastic seal inscriptions, which are perfectly readable like their Old Kingdom successors, are in reality a reflection of the more important power of hieroglyphs as a visual tool rather than only as a system for recording the spoken word. As a consequence, one should perhaps view cylinder seals as objects of visual display rather than an attempt by royal bureaucrats to implement an administrative master plan.

Re-examination of older material in various museum collections still yields exciting food for thought. This does not come as a surprise to *Nekhen News* readers. Articles in this and previous volumes amply demonstrate the wealth

of unpublished objects in collections throughout the world. Their full potential, however, can only be revealed as fresh fieldwork illuminates the archaeological contexts so poorly recorded during earlier excavations. Clearly, there is plenty of work still to be done both in and out of Egypt. 🐛

Photos by Richard Bussmann, courtesy Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. Drawings by Richard Bussmann and Christina von Elm.



Z 46135.6: clay sealing of man and woman.

