

Seals and seal impressions from Hierakonpolis

Inscribed seals and seal impressions give insights into the administration forming the backbone of the Egyptian state. **Richard Bussmann** explores the potential of the early Old Kingdom seals from Hierakonpolis for investigating the establishment of royal power in a local context.

Hierakonpolis has been recognised as a central place of state formation in Egypt ever since the Narmer palette was discovered in 1898. This artefact is one of the earliest representations of kingship in Egypt and quickly became a key piece for understanding the Egyptian state. However, research over the last few decades has shown that state formation must be understood within the wider context of early Egyptian society and requires a substantial theorising of the objectives of and approaches to investigating early states. Arising from this a greater emphasis is now placed on the question of what the state does rather than what it is, and the growing body of archaeological evidence suggests that the process of state formation was embedded in various local communities in very different ways.

The analysis of the seals and seal impressions from Hierakonpolis contributes to the exploration of these overall questions. Most of the material was excavated by James E Quibell and Frederick Green in 1898 and 1899 in the town area of Hierakonpolis. The map they produced (*Hierakonpolis*, Part II, pl.LXXIII) shows the position of structures at the site. To some extent this allows the seals to be related to their original findspot. However, the exact provenance of the seals within the town is often difficult to define. Barbara Adams was able to reconstruct the archaeological context of many finds from Hierakonpolis on the basis of Green's excavation notes, now kept in Cambridge. She combined information on the location of find contexts given in the notes with find context numbers written on the objects. Unfortunately, the context numbers of the seals were not written on them and have often been lost. In many cases only Green's drawings and notes on the lids of the wooden boxes in which the seals were stored give a clue to the original findspot. Therefore, all the information on the context



The lid of the wooden box in which the sealing Z 46008 (see photographs on p.18) was kept by the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Cambridge, including the find context number 'H.168', a sketch of the text, and the former accession number 'LE 82'

Sealing with name of King Sekhemkhet (Z 46135)



of objects relies heavily on the care excavators and museums took with documentation and record keeping.

Today, the majority of the corpus forms part of the collection of the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, to which it has been transferred from the former Faculty of Oriental Studies. The collection comprises nearly 350 mud sealings that were originally applied to door knobs, papyrus documents, wooden boxes, vases and bags. They bear impressions of cylinder seals, inscribed examples of which were also excavated at Hierakonpolis. The excavators published some fifty impressions and dated them to the early Old Kingdom because the corpus included the royal names of Djoser, Khaba and Sneferu. A previously unpublished sealing seems to be inscribed with the Horus name of King Sekhemkhet, adding to the list of Third Dynasty kings attested at Hierakonpolis. However, later American excavations brought to light a seal impression of King Qaa, suggesting that parts of the sealing corpus might date back to the First Dynasty.

While Green restricted publication of the material to the hieroglyphic impressions, the reverse sides of the sealings allow the object sealed to be reconstructed. The round topped Djoser sealing had been applied on the strings wrapped around a papyrus and is the only example of this sealing type identified in the corpus to date. The official title written between the impression of Djoser's Horus name Netjerikhet is difficult to read but the sealing itself is evidence for the early use of papyrus documents in the royal administration of provincial Egypt. It shows that provincial administration could



Papyrus roll sealing with Horus name of King Djoser (Z 45960)





Door sealing with the title 'scribe' (Z 46008)

have made use of lists, tables and accounts, and was set up within the broader scope of record keeping – that is beyond sealing – positive evidence for which is otherwise lost. The sealing corpus from Elephantine Island has revealed that people other than those related immediately to the royal administration were sealing papyri as early as the Second Dynasty. Large-scale record-keeping seems, therefore, to have been carried out at a local level already in this early period.

Non-royal inscriptions abound in the corpus from Hierakonpolis and are evidence for provincial officials in local administration. One was a 'scribe' whose name seems to include that of the god Anubis. His sealing (above) shows, on the reverse side, impressions of a wooden peg with a string wrapped around it, and an uneven surface. It was probably placed on a peg in a plastered mud-brick wall connected with a string to a door: the scribe might have been in charge of controlling access to an archive of administrative documents sealed behind the door.

Many officials have titles typical of the Early Dynastic Period and the early Old Kingdom, such as *mjtr* and *hbnj*, who performed a variety of functions. One of them sealed the knot of a cord applied around a container. His name, which reads 'The king is great', suggests that

he was one of the few local officials with some sort of connection to the crown. Another person who sealed a basket was called Neferu and may not have had any title at all. These examples demonstrate that local administration included a wide social range of persons who are not mentioned in other written sources, such as the inscriptions in elite mastabas.



Knot sealing with private name 'The king is great' (Z 46992/1)



Basket sealing with the private name 'Neferu' (Z 46011)

Mud seal with imitations of hieroglyphs (Z 15676)



Not all the seal impressions from Hierakonpolis display the standardised forms and uses of hieroglyphs of later texts. It seems, for example, as if writing was being imitated on a mud seal found in a vase maker's workshop. The fact that an inscription had been imitated points to the exclusive status of writing within the settlement. Another sealing (below) that was applied on some vegetable fibres includes a representation of the offering table scene. Contrary to previous interpretations, the sealing proves that this elite icon was not only displayed on seals used as amulets in burial contexts but also for administrative purposes. Some of the sealing patterns, similar in style to those from the predynastic cemetery U at Abydos, are completely composed of figurative designs (as illustrated on p.19) comparable with the sealing evidence from the late Old and Middle Kingdoms. Some scholars have argued that these patterns could not have been used within a depersonalised network of communication but can only have functioned in a face-to-face community with a limited number of seal-bearers. Similarly, the actual texts, although mostly readable, may have been used as images rather than writing, having been identified rather than necessarily read. It seems important from these few remarks to model the development of writing, which is often automatically linked to the emergence of the state and administration, within a broader understanding of the use of media in early Egypt.

The absence of royal names of the Second Dynasty on the sealings from Hierakonpolis stands in contrast to the situation at Elephantine Island. Although conclusions must be drawn carefully given that the collection of sealings from Hierakonpolis is smaller, this difference reveals that administration may have been present to varying degrees at different sites and different periods. Administration may not have been a stable and constant



Sealing displaying the offering table scene (Z 46033)





*Sealing displaying
a figurative design
(Z 46133)*

system that ran
automatically
once it had

been set up. Instead, it may be interpreted as a flexible practice adapted to temporary needs resulting in chronological peaks and geographical gaps which may be reflected in the archaeological record of any specific ancient site.

This approach draws attention to the local history of Hierakonpolis. Current fieldwork in the Wadi Abu el-Suffian and the adjacent desert strip helps with the reconstruction of the predynastic settlement and cemeteries which reflect the development of social hierarchies at the site. The transition from the Predynastic to the Early Dynastic Period marks the heyday of Hierakonpolis with an unrivalled amount of monumental and artistically excellent votive objects offered in the temple. Apart from Khasekhem(wy) only a few Early Dynastic kings left traces at Hierakonpolis and the site seems to have declined into a provincial town in the early Old Kingdom until kings began again to erect statues and stelae in the temple area at the end of the Old Kingdom.

Interestingly, however, the sealings provide evidence of a vibrant community in the settlement during the early Old Kingdom undermining a king-centred reconstruction of the history of the site. The reconstruction of archaeological contexts is especially important in this respect and the bulk of the seals can be shown to come from the settlement area rather than from the temple, which is associated with earlier material. The pottery and stone vessels found in the same contexts as the sealings also suggest that parts of the town proper are younger than the temple area.

The history of Hierakonpolis is still a matter for research. On the one hand, the local history has to be set in the context of regional development, including the rise of Elkab as the centre of the third Upper Egyptian nome and the large-scale transformation of settlement patterns in Egypt. On the other hand, current excavations in the desert strip, work in the temple and town area, augering to reconstruct the ancient landscape, and study of the digging diaries and objects in museums need to be merged into a more coherent picture within which the true potential of the sealings as a historical source can be explored. This will be the focus of future investigations.

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