

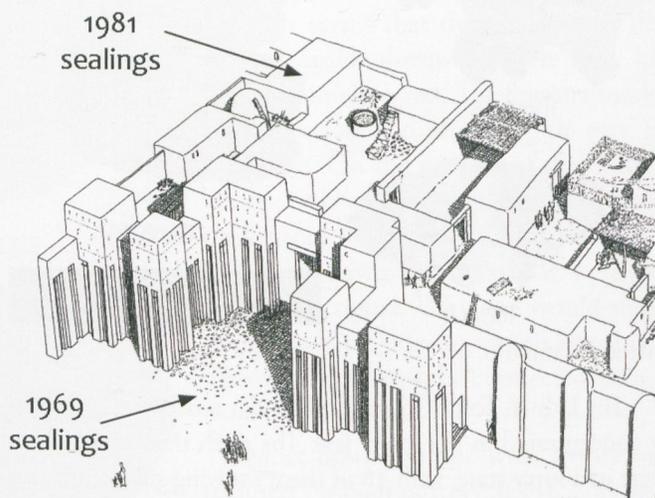
Sealings from the Palace at Hierakonpolis

—Richard Bussmann, University College London

The Kom, or town mound, in the flood plain at Nekhen/Hierakonpolis is justly famous for its temple, where the Narmer Palette and Main Deposit were found, but it also contains the only example of niched brick architecture known in a non-mortuary context. This is the so-called niched façade palace. It was discovered in 1969 and investigated further in 1981 and 1988, yet it remains enigmatic. At present, study of the archives and excavated finds remains the primary source for gaining more information about it. Among the items discovered there by Walter Fairservis and Michael Hoffman are about a dozen Early Dynastic seal impressions. Today, most are kept in the antiquities magazine at Elkab and during the 2014 season I had the opportunity to examine them. Although fragmented, the sealings offer insight into the material context of administration and what a ‘palace’ might have been in early Egypt.

In 1981, a group of seven sealings was found in one of the palace rooms. One seal inscription shows the serekh and name of Qa’a, the last king of the First Dynasty, juxtaposed with the title of a royal official, probably to be read *imi-khenet* or ‘chamberlain’. The royal name might suggest that the palace was in use during the reign of Qa’a; however, dating with the help of seal inscriptions is complex. The cylinder seal may have continued to be used after Qa’a’s reign, or the clay sealing opened only later; once broken, the fragments could have been mixed and discarded with even later material. Given these caveats and the limited contextual evidence, it is probably safer to date the palace and its many phases to the Early Dynastic through early Old Kingdom.

The other seal inscriptions do not refer to the king and the seals probably belonged to local officials. One of them is an excellent example of a so-called peg sealing. It shows the impression of a peg, a cord wound around it, and the wall holding it. The cord connected the peg with a door. The sealing was applied onto the cord and prevented the door



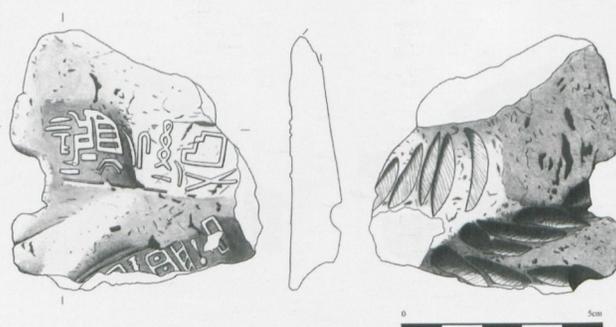
Palace: Sealing find spots on an artist's reconstruction of the niched-façade palace at Hierakonpolis (after Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*, 2006).

from being opened unnoticed. The sealing pattern includes an individual seated in front of a pile of offerings. It was argued in the past that cylinder seals with this motif were used only as amulets in burial contexts, with the offering table scene symbolically guaranteeing funerary provisions. The sealing presented here belongs to a growing body of evidence that these seals were employed in actual administrative practices.

A third impression shows a vertical standard on the left, followed by a ram. The standard represents the goddess Neith; the ram is the hieroglyph of the god Khnum. Both are probably parts of personal names, as compound names with Neith and Khnum were especially popular during the Early Dynastic period. The reverse side is uneven and has a bulb in the centre, suggesting that the sealing clay was squeezed directly into the mouth of a vessel before the cylinder seal was rolled over it.



Sealing of King Qa'a.



Peg sealing with offering table scene.

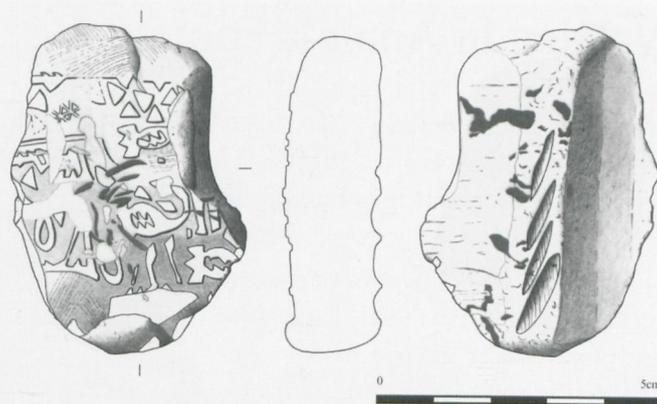


Sealings from the palace.

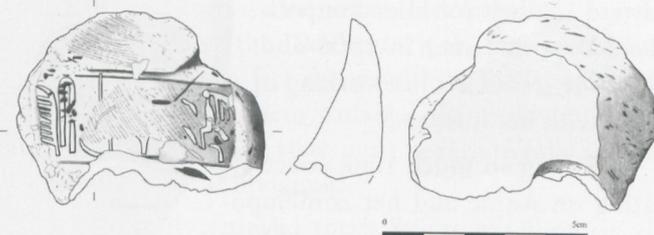
Another group of four sealings was found in 1969 near the niched gateway of the palace. One of them, previously unpublished, is again a peg sealing whose impression includes an offering table scene. The seated individual is rendered differently from the sealing found in 1981, so a different seal and probably also a different official were involved. Given the find location, it is tempting to suggest that the sealing once locked the door to the palace, but we cannot be sure.

A different type of locking system is evident from a sealing excavated in 1978 near the north-eastern gate of the temple enclosure wall. The impressions on the back reflect a horizontal door bolt (turned at a right angle on the illustration), a wooden door wing, and a cord running over the bolt. The locking mechanism can be reconstructed from doors and bolts excavated from various settlements and cemeteries. The bolt was held in place by a cramp on the door and slid into a cavity in the wall when the door was opened. In order to lock the door, the bolt was pulled out of the wall with the help of a cord running through a hole in the bolt's outer end. The sealing was then pressed onto the bolt, the cord and the door wing. The sealing pattern is difficult to decipher because the surface is partially eroded and the seal was rolled three times over the clay, producing overlapping impressions. Contrary to what one might assume, it may well be that legibility was not needed, nor was the seal impression intended to identify the responsible official. Rather, eyewitnesses at the sealing procedure could report who sealed the door.

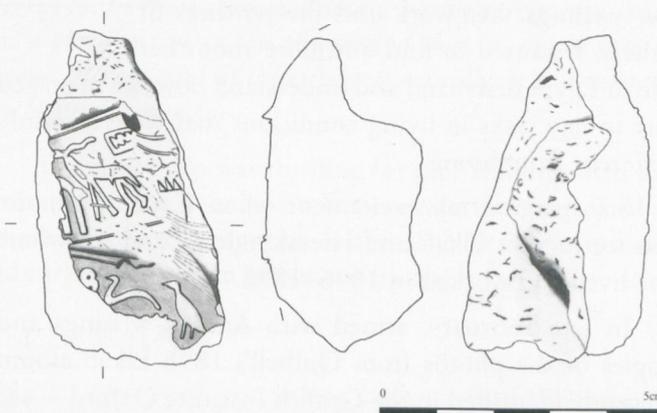
The low number of sealings discovered in the palace and by the British expedition in 1897–99 (see *Nekhen News* 25) stands in contrast to recently excavated sites such as the fort on Elephantine island, the residence of the provincial



Peg sealing from the northeast gate of the temple enclosure.



Sealing with offering table scene from the niched gateway.



Jar sealing with Neith and Khnum.

governors at Balat in Dakhla, the settlement of the pyramid workmen at Giza, and the pyramid town of Sesostriis III at Abydos South, where upwards of 10,000 sealings have been found. Whether the palace of Hierakonpolis would yield similar numbers if re-excavated, is difficult to say. Judging from current evidence, this palace does not seem to have been much of a centre for the distribution of goods, but maybe it had different and changing functions over time. Of course, we won't really know until we have a chance to explore this tantalizing palace once more. ♀