

## THE DOMAIN OF SEMERKHET

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Clay sealings from various types of containers form one of the major find categories among the surviving Early Dynastic objects. The impressions on the sealings inform us about several aspects of the early administration. They are, in many cases, the only evidence for some institutions. Since most of the sealings were found in necropoleis, they tend to focus on mortuary cults.

During the First Dynasty, some of the institutions responsible for supplying grave goods were mortuary foundations, their names written within an oval frame, and usually translated as “domains” (e.g., Wilkinson 1999: 119-123) or “*Wirtschaftsanlagen*” (e.g., Helck 1987: 204-205). Beginning with Djer, each king seems to have founded his own domain, which delivered goods not only to his tomb at Abydos, but also to those of some of the higher officials at Saqqara and, less often, at other sites.

Despite their relative abundance, there are many impediments to reading these documents. The inscriptions mentioning these domains are impressed on various types of sealings, which were made most often from *taffla*. The temper added to this clay-like material, such as shell, fibres and other particles, often makes a reading of the impressed inscriptions difficult. In addition, the seal may have been applied to the clay when it was either too wet or too dry so that the impression itself was not clear from the outset. Impressions made in an imprecise way may result in an inscription that displays broader or narrower signs or omits part of the seal. A type of clay sealing that was smaller than the actual cylinder seal made it impossible to impress the complete inscription onto it so that the top and/or bottom are sometimes missing. Reconstructing an original seal depends, therefore, on the quality of the existing impression, its preservation and the type of sealing onto which it was impressed.

Seal impressions are quite numerous at Umm el-Qa’ab, however, the tomb of Semerkhet (tomb U) at Umm el-Qa’ab is an exception. Peter Kaplony (1963: 142) was able to identify only 17 sealings as coming

from that tomb.<sup>1</sup> Only one seal from the tomb excavated by Petrie mentions a domain,<sup>2</sup> and this domain name, until recently, was known only from this single sealing (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> This sealing shows the serekh of the king, a *hrp* sign and within an oval the domain name. The upper sign inside the oval frame is clearly a bird, which can be identified as a falcon. In the lower part of the oval is a broad flat sign, most probable the *h.t* sign (see below). For the sign in the middle, Kaplony, in his *Abbildungenverzeichnis*, quotes a commentary on this particular seal impression by Winifred Needler who examined it for him: “The middle sign in the oval might be a hand holding something; it is definitely less symmetrical than in Petrie’s drawing, but does not look like *dsr* sign.” (Kaplony 1963: 1126). Nevertheless, Kaplony suggested a reading of the name of Semerkhet’s domain as “*hr.w-dsr-h.t (?)*”. In this, he was followed, among others, by Helck (1987: 193) and Wilkinson (1999: 121, who omits the question mark).

Before the present re-excavation by the German Institute of Archaeology in Cairo (DAI), the tombs at Umm el-Qa’ab had already been

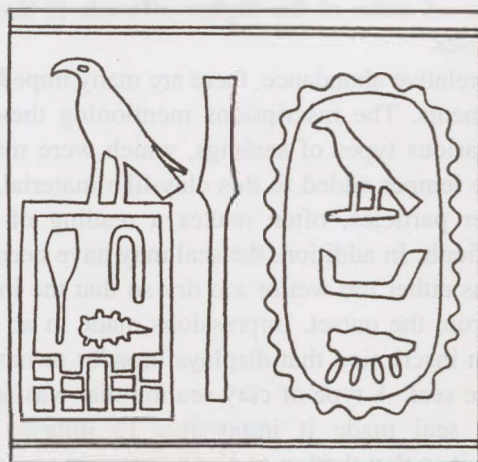


Fig. 1. Seal Kaplony 1963: fig. 253 (scale 1:1)

<sup>1</sup> The re-excavation of this tomb by the German Institute of Archaeology in Cairo has not yet changed this picture, see Dreyer *et al.* 2000: 119-122. The practice of mentioning the domain on the storage jars themselves might be responsible for this exceptional finding (Kaplony 1963: 142).

<sup>2</sup> Kaplony 1963: fig. 253 = Petrie 1900: pl. XXVIII.76.

<sup>3</sup> Royal Ontario Museum Toronto 2305.

excavated several times, beginning in the Middle Kingdom with building activities for the cult of Osiris. So it is not surprising that objects are found in or close to tombs other than those in which they were originally deposited. During the excavation of the tomb of Qa'a by the DAI several seal impressions of Semerkhet, Qa'a's predecessor, were found. Among them was a complete bag sealing (Ab K 1806),<sup>4</sup> which was found in the sand under a layer of mud south of chamber Q-S1 (Fig. 2). Its base displays the usual impressions of fibres and strings left by the bag to which the sealing had been applied. On the upper side are several impressions from the same seal.

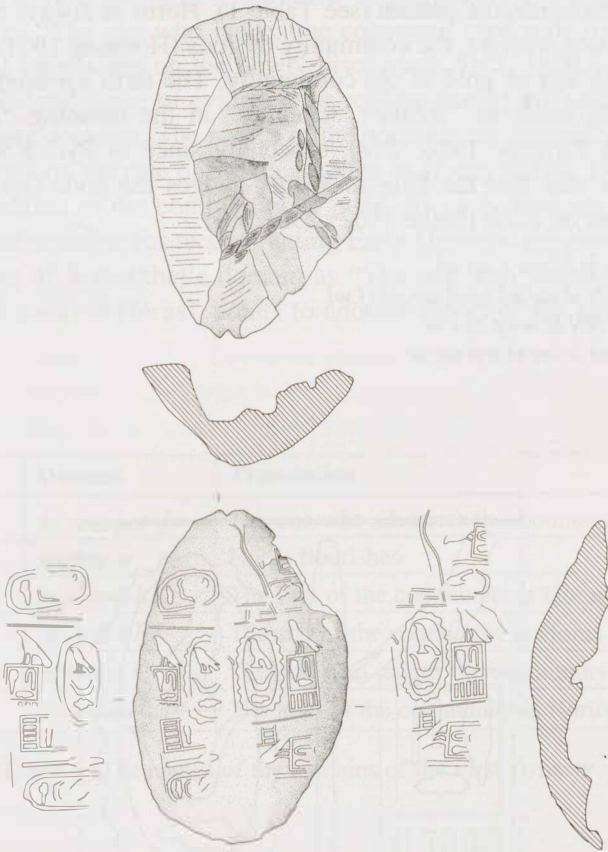


Fig. 2. Bag sealing Ab K 1806 (scale 1:2)

<sup>4</sup> Type B1T (Engel & Müller 2000: 39), height 5.3 cm, width 17 cm, thickness 10.9 cm, taffla (10YR 7/6-6/4): Engel 1997: 430-421, fig. 215.

The inscription is similar to the example excavated by Petrie discussed above. It shows the sequence of Semerkhet's serekh, the *hrp* sign and the oval frame containing the name of the domain. While the measurements of both seals seem to be fairly identical, the palace facade panelling of Petrie's seal is much more elaborate than that of the new example. It is therefore possible that both are variants of the same seal inscription. Unlike Petrie's sealing, the new one shows the sign in the middle of the oval much more clearly. It resembles Gardiner sign F13, which is read *wp*. The complete inscription of the seal would therefore read: *hr.w-šmr-ḥ.t hrp hr.w-wp-ḥ.t* (Fig. 3).

Since the reign of Den, the names of the domains of the First Dynasty follow a recognizable pattern (see Table 1). Horus is always mentioned in connection with *ḥ.t*, the community of gods (Hornung 1971: 217). He is the first, star or gold of the community. The term *wp* might here be used in its sense as "trennen, scheiden" in the meaning "to judge" (Erman & Grapow 1926: 298), especially since in Pyr. § 952 (Spell 476), it is said that the king as Weneg judges the gods (*wp ntr.w*) in heaven and on earth (Sethe 1962: 238-239):

*ḥ mṯn ḥr.ḥ 'rrw.t wr.wt*  
*mtr NN n ntr.wi ḥpwḥ wr.wi 's.wi*  
*n n.t NN iš wng sš r'w*  
*rmn p.t š: šm tš wp ntr.w*

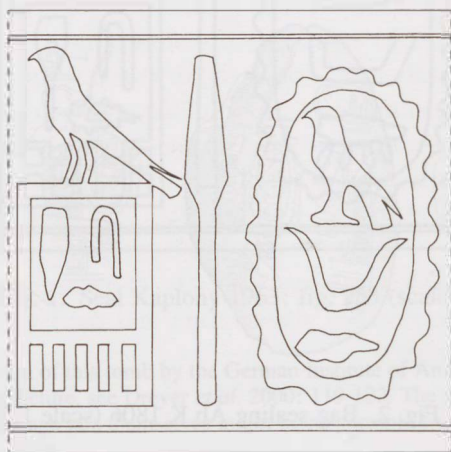


Fig. 3. Tentative reconstruction of seal on Ab K 1806 (scale 1:1)

O, keeper of the way, Warden of the Great Portal,  
bear witness concerning NN to these two great and mighty gods,  
because NN is Weneg, son of Ra,  
who supports the sky, who guides the earth and judges the gods.

In Pyr. § 797 (Spell 437) the earth (t3) says to the king:

*wꜣꜥk nꜣr.w t3šꜥk ꜣꜣ.wt*  
*imꜣ.tw šꜣm.wi m š: 3ꜣꜥk ꜣn wꜣ.n inꜣw*

... may you judge the gods, may you divide the bows  
between the two powers in this your spiritualized state which Anubis com-  
manded.

According to both references, the name of Semerkhet's domain can be translated as "The one who judges the community (of gods) is Horus."

The seal impression on the newly discovered Ab K 1806 provides a small but helpful piece of evidence for reading one of the names of the First Dynasty domains. The names of the domains are generally taken to be statements on the role of the (dead) king as Horus (Helck 1987: 205) and his position in the community of gods. As such, they are valuable pieces of information for reconstructing Early Dynastic religious beliefs. The reading of Semerkhet's domain as "The one who judges the community (of gods) is Horus" points to another aspect of the king among the gods.

King	Domain	Translation
Djer	<i>ꜣr.w-š: ꜣnt-ꜣw</i>	The one who advances the mountain is Horus
'Serpent'	<i>w3ꜣ-ꜣr.w</i>	Horus flourishes
Den	<i>ꜣr.w-tp.ꜣ-ꜣ.t</i>	The first of the community is Horus
Adjib	<i>ꜣr.w-šꜣ3-ꜣ.t</i>	The star of the community is Horus
Semerkhet	<i>ꜣr.w-wꜣ-ꜣ.t</i>	The one who judges the community is Horus
Qa'a	<i>ꜣr.w-nbw-ꜣ.t</i>	The gold of the community is Horus

Table 1. The names of the domains of the First Dynasty

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