**Accounting for change? Symbols and information management in the later prehistory of northern Mesopotamia**

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When sealing practices and the use of tokens emerge in the late Neolithic of northern Mesopotamia, I would argue that they should be seen in the wider contemporary context of accelerating symbolic complexity, information storage and non-verbal communication. While this is particularly visible in the investment in the spectacular range of decorated pottery from the late 7th millennium cal BC onwards, it may well also have been reflected in a range of less well attested decorative technologies such as textiles, basketry and bodily adornment as well as new ways of articulating relationships and marking place. Seals and sealings might be seen as having as much to do with identity management and relationship curation as with commodity control.

This is also a landscape that probably also saw a significant increasing in social encounters and interaction – to borrow a phrase that has been used in the context of early urban centres, an increase in energized crowding, albeit at a much lower level of intensity. The response to a changing world that saw increased investment in symbolism, along with storage and communication, doesn't necessarily reflect a continuity with later practices millennia later. There is danger of retrospective explanation in our archaeological reasoning that links observations at particular points in the archaeological record with an over-arching evolutionary narrative. Instead, explanations need to be sought within the late Neolithic of northern Mesopotamia, as a context in which innovative practices could flourish. This behaviour, like the material culture it generated, didn't form a single system but probably had several local variants. In the longer term, those practices had the potential to create new affordances that might later be exploited in ways that might, or might not be, similar but were almost certainly distinct.