

“The Origins and Development of Non-Written Administrative Technologies in the Ancient Near East”

Lucy E. Bennison-Chapman

During the Neolithic, small geometric-shaped *clay objects* appear across the Near East. It is commonly assumed that from their inception, these *clay objects* acted as mnemonic accounting “tokens”, invented specifically for this purpose, with the meaning held in their shape and size remaining constant throughout millennia. Recent research demonstrates these commonly held pre-conceptions are largely unsubstantiated for much of the Neolithic period. Likewise, “tokens” were not replaced by the cuneiform texts which emerge in late 4th millennium BC. Instead, clay objects continue to be used into the 1st millennium BC, as evidenced at sites including Abu Salabikh (ED III), Tell Brak (Akkadian levels), Tell Tayinat (1st millennium BC) and Assur (Middle Assyrian levels). It is unquestionable that after writing became widespread, tokens continued for millennia, to be indispensable accounting tools in the urban centres of Mesopotamia. One did not replace the other. Rather, writing and tokens must have performed similar yet not identical roles in the complex accounting practices of early urban sites of the Near East.

This paper investigates how clay objects might have been used as tokens alongside seals, sealings and other administrative tools at two discrete villages at Tell Sabi Abyad (north Syria) c. 6,000 BC. It then traces the continued use of tokens as administrative tools in the literate, urban societies of the Early Historic period up until the 1st millennium BC, investigating how tokens complemented written records, bullae and sealing practices.